

‘These mutual lessons of nation to nation’ The International Philanthropic Congresses of 1856, 1857 and 1862

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What can be more instructive, more fruitful, than these enquiries, this exchange of information, these mutual lessons of nation to nation, and these eloquent facts gathered from the very lips of the most distinguished, the most competent, the most truthful men? Is not this the commencement of a profound reform, and of a new progress in the relations of governments and of people?

These are the words of Charles Rogier, the former Belgian Minister of the Interior, in his opening address at a *Congrès international de Bienfaisance* in Brussels in 1856. As the first of three, this International Philanthropic Congress forms the starting point for this lecture. As I am researching the organization and financing of the system of public assistance and private relief in Belgium in the 19th century I wondered about the aims, the importance and the impact of this and two related congresses.

1 Introduction: antecedents and context

1.1 Origin of the congresses

The origin of the International Philanthropic Congress is to be traced to a suggestion first made at the Penitentiary Congress, held in Frankfurt in 1846. Prison inspectors and directors, government officials and other specialists in penal matters met there to discuss prison reforms. With delegates from Belgium, England, France, Germany and some other countries they looked for a truly international panel to exchange ideas and views. For years they were traveling around the world to explore prison experiences elsewhere. Edouard Ducpétiaux for instance (who will play an important part in our story) visited England, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and France in the 1830’s and 1840’s. Some historians defined this phenomenon aptly as *tourisme pénitentiaire* (penitentiary tourism). After this first wave of inquiring foreign experiences it became time for the next step. International congresses offered the opportunity to stage a debate and interchange ideas more efficiently. So they assembled in 1846 in Frankfurt and 1847 in Brussels.

These men were not only interested in penal affairs as such. They situated criminality in a much broader, social and economic, context and took a considerable interest in welfare policy. So it was not that surprisingly they considered themselves philanthropists who cared for society and the indigent masses.

A member of the 1847 congress said:

Thanks to this assembly of men already accustomed to the study and practice of benevolence, and representing almost all civilized lands, the moment is come for establishing amongst different nations an interchange of ideas, of labours, and of charitable precepts for multiplying reports and other communications between men who are everywhere occupied for the welfare of those who labour and suffer – for submitting to a comparative study and searching scrutiny all questions touching the relief of misery, and for seeking their solution, not in vain and barren theories, but in tangible action and practical knowledge; in short, to apply to Charity what has been successfully done for Science and Industry, and which now renders locomotion rapid and correspondence easy, and makes light and experience of all available for the moral and physical amelioration of the laboring and suffering classes of every land.

With this explicit belief in progress (railroads and telegraphs changing the world drastically) the idea rooted to found an international association. The carrying out was confided to several members of the congress. The revolution wave of 1848 throughout the European continent threw a spanner in the works and postponed the initiative. But soon the suggestion revived. It came up in repeatedly in the International Congress of Agriculture and Political Economy held in 1848, the Hygienic and Statistical Congresses also held in Brussels the following years. In the 1853 conference the desire was unanimously expressed of uniting, in a general congress, all those who in different countries were occupied with questions relating to the physical, the moral, and the intellectual improvement of the working classes, and the relief of the indigent.

This proposal was put into practice by the *Société d'économie charitable*, which arranged an International Charity Conference, held in Paris in July 1855. The moving force behind the organization, social catholic viscount Armand de Melun, seized the opportunity of the World Fair to gather philanthropists interested in interchanging experiences. There it was fully agreed that such meetings should take place periodically. Accordingly a Congress was held at Brussels in September 1856.

1.2 International congresses in the 1850's

As stated, the congresses were a new stage in the development of international relations and networks. Up till the 1870's there were only a few meetings a year (see diagram 1). From 1871 onwards the number of such conferences multiplied, with a fast increasing diversity of themes.

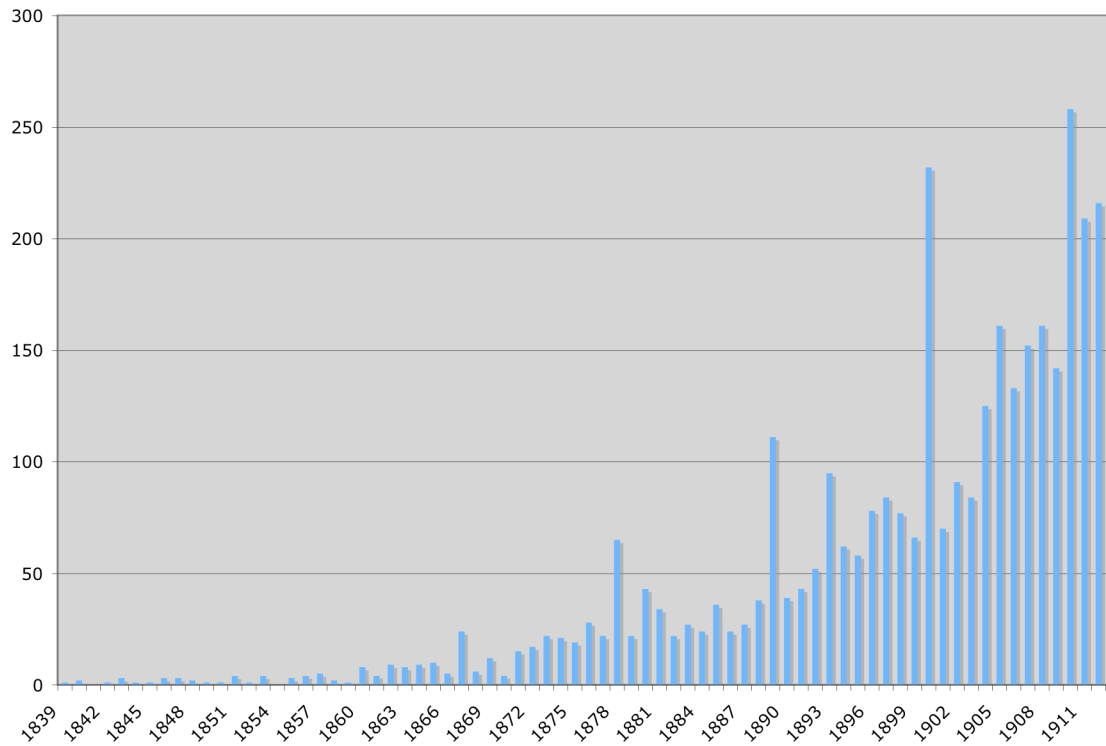


Diagram 1: 75 years of international congresses (1839-1913), number of congresses

So, the 1856 Brussels Congress was organized at the eve of the congress era.

Brussels was in the middle of the 19th century an important centre for international meetings (as showed in the table 1). This was not only due to the geographical location and reachableness. Also the neutral position of Belgium and the liberties guaranteed by a liberal constitution contributed to the attraction.

Year	Congress
1847	International Congress of Economists
	International Penitentiary Congress
1848	International Peace Congress
	International Congress of Agriculture
1852	International Health Congress
1853	International Congress of Meteorology at Sea
	International Statistics Congress
1856	International Philanthropic Congress
	International Congress of Customs Duties Reform
	International Congress of Homeopathic Medicine
1857	International Ophthalmomogy Congress
1858	International Congress of Literary and Artistic Property
1860	International Brewing Congress
1862	International Congress of the Association for the Promotion of Social Sciences

Table 1: Brussels as a capital of congresses (1847-1862)

2 Organization and attendants

2.1 Organization

The congresses were organized by a small group of people. One of the key figures was Edouard Ducpétiaux, the general inspector of prisons and public assistance institutions in Belgium. He was the moving force behind the first congress in Brussels. As the secretary of the three congresses he was responsible for the invitations, the overall administration and the compilation and publication of the *comptes rendus* (the reports). A few months after each congress he presented two bulky volumes of several hundred pages: one with the texts of the lectures, the section reports and the discussions, interventions and proposals; and one with a selection of the papers submitted to the secretariat.

2.2 Who attended the Congresses?

Numbers

The congress volumes for Brussels and Frankfurt contain accurate list of those who registered for the meeting, with an indication whether they were also present on the sessions (diagram 2). As the London Congress coincided with the Congress of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Sciences, and many persons interested were involved in both conferences, the registration of those present at the Philanthropic Congress went haywire. The registration lists were not adequately signed. So we have no precise idea of how many were actually present at this congress.

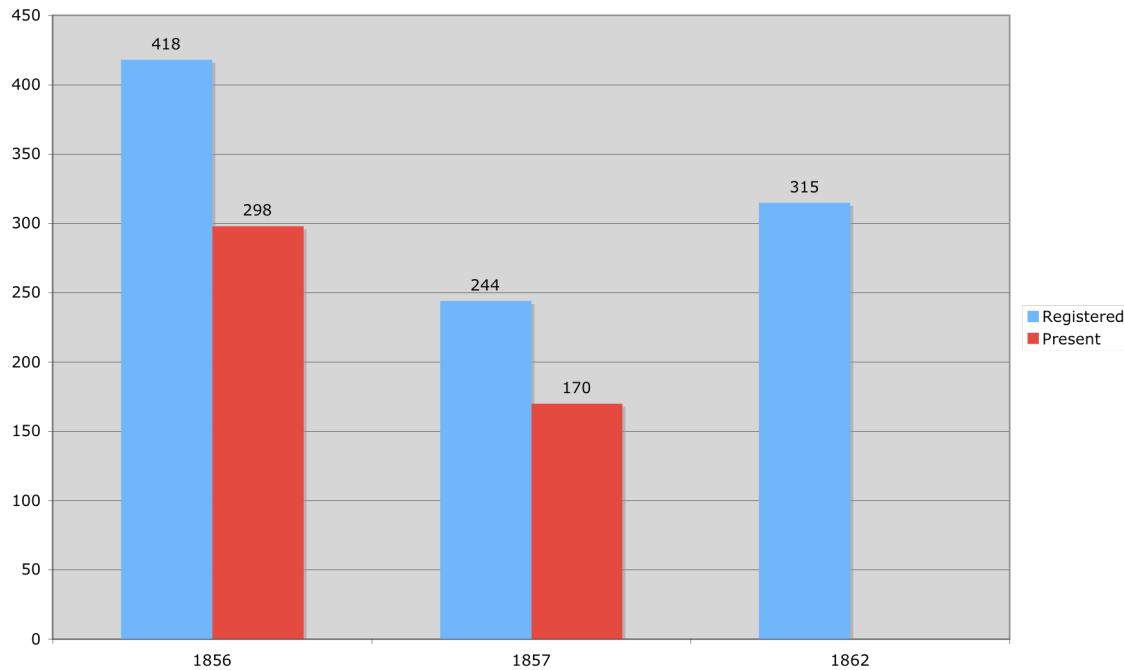


Diagram 2: Number of registrations and persons present (1856, 1857, 1862)

Geographical origin (table 2 and 3)

The Brussels Congress was a success with 418 registrations and 298 participants. Thus, more than 71% was in fact attending the meeting. Logically the the greater part was coming from Belgium, and especially Brussels. Three quarters of the Belgian delegation lived and worked in the capital. As you can see on the overview there was a colourful group of 17 nations represented, including a Brazilian senator and an American diplomat. The neighbouring countries headed the list. Quite the same happened in 1857 in Frankfurt. Although there were considerable less registrations (244) almost 70% showed up. Only 44% of the German delegation was a resident of Frankfurt. Again 17 nations were represented. In London in 1862 the number of registered persons increased again up to 315. Eyewitnesses reported however that a great many of them remained absent or passed by. The World Fair and the other Congress

seemed to offer tempting alternatives. Nevertheless 19 nations were involved. With Australia, Canada and India the Congress profited from the network of the British Empire to globalize further.

	Brussels	%	Frankfurt	%
Austria	2	0,7	2	1,2
Belgium	177	59,4	14	8,2
Brussels	133	44,6		
Brazil	2	0,7	1	0,6
Denmark	4	1,3	1	0,6
France	21	7,0	9	5,3
Germany	15	5,0	105	61,8
Frankfurt			59	34,7
Great Britain	29	9,7	9	5,3
Italy	4	1,3	3	1,8
Norway	1	0,3	1	0,6
Poland	6	2,0	2	1,2
Portugal	0	0,0	1	0,6
Russia	3	1,0	2	1,2
Spain	1	0,3	1	0,6
Sweden	6	2,0	2	1,2
Switzerland	9	3,0	5	2,9
The Netherlands	17	5,7	12	7,1
Turkey	0	0	0	0,0
United States	1	0,3	0	0
Total	298		170	

Table 2: Geographical origin of participants, presence, 1856 and 1857

	Brussels	%	Frankfurt	%	London	%
Australia					2	0,6
Austria	3	0,7	4	1,6	3	1,0
Belgium	231	55,3	24	9,8	16	5,1
Brussels	155	37,1				
Brazil	3	0,7	1	0,4	0	0
Canada					1	0,3
Denmark	5	1,2	1	0,4	2	0,6
France	45	10,8	19	7,8	38	12,1
Germany	26	6,2	135	55,3	14	4,4
Frankfurt			59	24,2		
Great Britain	45	10,8	13	5,3	204	64,8
London					129	41,0
India	0	0	0	0	1	0,3
Italy	6	1,4	12	4,9	4	1,3
The Netherlands	17	4,1	12	4,9	2	0,6
Norway	2	0,5	2	0,8	1	0,3
Poland	6	1,4	3	1,2	1	0,3
Portugal	1	0,2	1	0,4	2	0,6
Russia	3	0,7	2	0,8	3	1,0
Spain	2	0,5	1	0,4	8	2,5
Sweden	8	1,9	3	1,2	2	0,6
Switzerland	14	3,3	10	4,1	8	2,5
Turkey	0	0	1	0,4	0	0
United States	1	0,2	0	0	3	1,0
Total	418		244		315	

Table 3: Geographical origin of participants, registrations of 1856, 1857 and 1862

Delegates

Although most of the attendants came as individuals, some were announced as delegates from governments (8 in 1856, 10 in 1857 and 5 in 1862), from savant or scientific societies, from philanthropic associations or institutions.

In 1856 apart from Belgium, also Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Spain and the kingdom of Saxony sent officials. They were in 1857 joined by representatives from the government of Bavaria and Portugal.

Professional background

Based on the available indications in the registration lists we tried to get an image of the professional background of those registered (table 4). Again for London the registration failed somewhat, so it is far more difficult to draw conclusions.

For the Brussels Congress for less than a quarter of the persons registered there is no profession noted. For the Frankfurt Congress is that even less: 10%. These men presented themselves often as a member of a prestigious society or academy, without further indication of their means of income.

When analysing the global picture the dominance of highly educated, well-off to wealthy men is obvious. The greater part of them was professionally directly involved in the themes of the congress: the administration officials and welfare institutions, the magistrates and lawyers, the physicians or architects. Just as the politicians the persons of independent means had an interest in the preservation of the social order, and thus the control over social tensions and dangers. A remarkable group of participants came from an academic background, with university professors from Louvain, Ghent, Liège, Brussels (Belgium), Utrecht (Holland), Heidelberg, Berlin, Königsberg, Graetz, Erlangen (Germany), Vienna (Austria), Padoua (Italy), Christiana (Norway) and even from Dorpat (in the Baltic provinces of Russia, nowadays Estonia).

Field	Profession	Brussels, 1856			Frankfurt, 1857		
			%	%		%	%
Court	Member of a court	5	1,2	1,2	2	0,8	0,8
Politics	High councillor	8	1,9	11,2	9	3,7	13,5
	Minister	1	0,2		0	0,0	
	Member of parliament	18	4,3		17	7,0	
	Member of a county council	9	2,2		2	0,8	
	Member of a local council	11	2,6		5	2,0	
Diplomacy		4	1,0	1,0	9	3,7	3,7
Army		9	2,2	2,2	0	0,0	0,0
Administration		61	14,6	14,6	22	9,0	9,0
(Welfare) Institutions		14	3,3	3,3	21	8,6	8,6
Clergy		2	0,5	0,5	14	5,7	5,7
Science	University	41	9,8	23,9	26	10,7	22,5
	Medicine (practitioner)	48	11,5		23	9,4	
	Architect or engineer	11	2,6		6	2,5	
Law	Magistrate	10	2,4	9,6	9	3,7	10,2
	Jurist (lawyer, solicitor, public notary)	30	7,2		16	6,6	
Press	Journalist, writer, publisher, printer	16	3,8	3,8	9	3,7	3,7
Economy	Manufacturer, trader, banker	11	2,6	6,2	21	8,6	11,9
	Owners, person of independent means	15	3,6		8	3,3	
Unknown		94	22,5	22,5	25	10,2	10,2
Total		418	100	100	244	100	100

Table 4: Professional background of registered participants (1856, 1857)

In 1862 the London registration list mentioned only in less than 25% a profession. Carelessly recorded or something else? London had a very characteristic composition of public: nobility and gentry accounted for 40% of the registrations (table 5). Less prominent, but in striking contrast with Brussels was the presence of the clergy. Even more remarkable seemed the reference to women. In London suddenly almost 20% of the public were women. 60% of them were married and came along with their husband, 15% accompanied as daughters their parents, 25% was unmarried.

	Brussels, 1856	Frankfurt, 1857	London, 1862
Nobility	35	21	126
Clergy	4	14	21
Army	6	0	6
Woman	2	0	56

Table 5: Social status of registered participants (1856, 1857, 1862)

An active public?

To which extent the public took the opportunity to intervene? (see table 6) Measured to the number of speakers, a quarter towards a third of the public had something to say. Through calculating the active contributions to the congresses we can see a fundamental change in the organization of the meetings. Diagram 3 shows that Brussels and London were almost the opposite in procedure. Whereas in Brussels discussions almost disturbed the smooth running of the activities, seemed London rigid and overregulated: more one-off interventions and 59 lectures in 5 days (compared to Brussels: 34 in 6 days). No wonder the public in London was tempted to other attractions.

	Brussels, 1856		Frankfurt, 1857		London, 1862	
	Present: 298	%	Present: 170	%	Registered: 315	%
Once	25	8,4	24	14,1	50	15,9
Several times	48	16,1	25	14,7	21	6,7
Number of speakers	73	24,5	49	28,8	71	22,5
Lectures	34		16		59	
Published paper	33		34		27	

Table 6: Contributions to the congresses (1856, 1857, 1862)

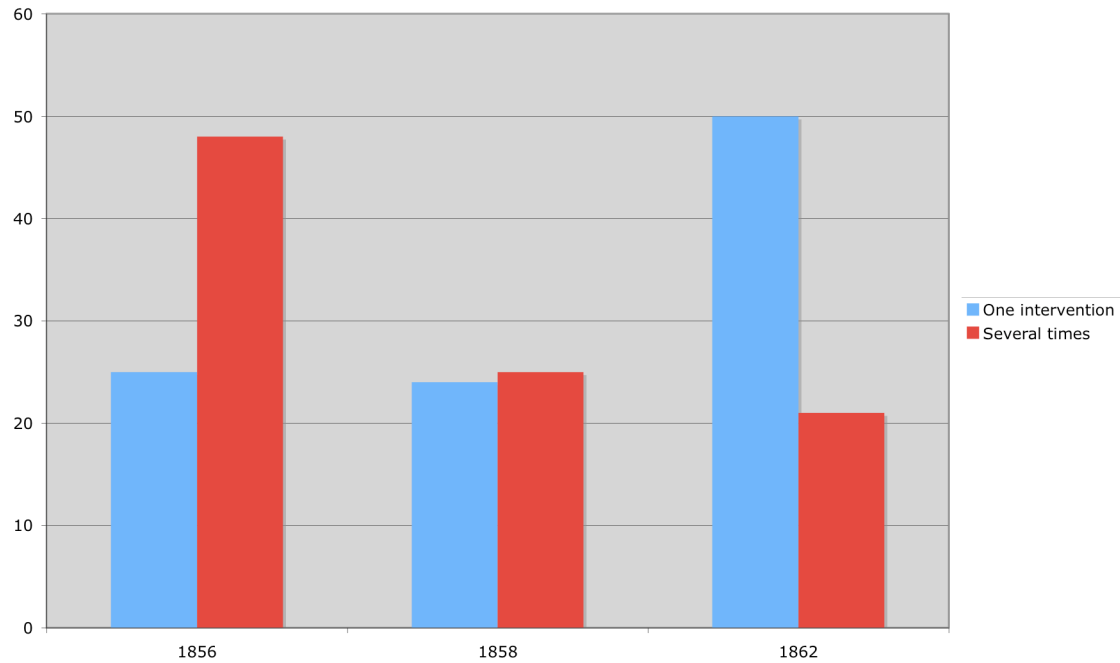


Diagram 3: Interventions on the congresses (1856, 1857, 1862)

A loyal public?

The congresses had a predominantly occasional public: 90% of the people registered only once (table 7). Just 20 men were able to attend all three meetings: the die-hards of the founding committee.

Registered once		%	Registered twice		%	Registered three times	
Brussels	330	42,9	Brussels-Frankfurt	53	72,6	Brussels-Frankfurt-London	20
Frankfurt	165	21,4	Frankfurt-London	6	8,2		
London	275	35,7	Brussels-London	14	19,2		
Total	770	100		73	100		20

Table 7: Registrations (1856, 1857, 1862)

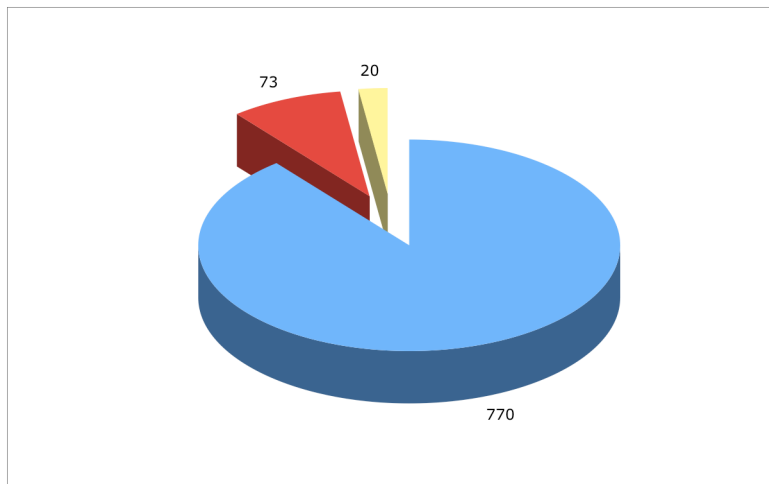


Diagram 4: Registrations (1856, 1857, 1862)

3 Programme and main themes

3.1 Brussels, September 1856

The 1856 Congress was held in the public hall of the Palace of the Academies (seat of the Royal Academy of Sciences and Fine Arts). As the chairman pointed out, the congress would deal with the first chapter of the code of philanthropy, namely questions relating to material life. That was imperative in the eyes of the organizers, in view of the alimentary or food crisis of the late 1840's.

So the programme provided for three sections:

- Section 1 on *Alimentary substances in their relation to agriculture* (how could improvement to agricultural methods increase the productivity of the land?);
- Section 2 on *Alimentary substances in their relation to political and charitable economy*, with special attention for four themes
 1. *The encouragement and the creation of a spirit of forethought and saving among workmen, and the institutions intended to favour and create such a spirit*
 2. *the creation and organization of institutions and societies for lowering the price of articles of food, for facilitating their acquisition by the poorer classes, and for the prevention of fraude in their quality, weight and measure*
 3. *the means of preventing the inordinate increase of population, and especially the regular and permanent organization of emigration*
 4. *the question of the abuse of strong drinks, regarded in the double light of the loss of nutritive substances employed in their manufacture, and their influence on the health and morality of the working-classes*
- Section 3 on *Alimentary substances viewed in their relationship to scientific and industrial operations* studying processes and inventions adapted to facilitate and bring to perfection manual labour, and to prevent accidents as well as the improvement of the dwellings, furniture, and clothes of the working-classes.

Every morning there was a separate consideration of these subjects in the sections, or a committee. In the afternoons followed a plenary session, with lectures on the policy towards the food crisis in different countries, reports of the sections and general discussion.

Some of the participants complained that this was more a *Congrès des subsistances* than a *Congrès de bienfaisance*. They asked to focus, and instead of a too economic approach study assistance and charity. The organizing committee took that to heart in the following congress.

3.2 Frankfurt, 14-18 September 1857

The congress in 1857 was held in the town hall of Frankfurt, in the *Kaisersaal*, the hall of the Roman Emperors, adorned with full-length portraits of 46 German emperors and kings (who reigned from the 10th to the 18th century).

In his opening speech, chairman von Betmann-Hollweg sketched three main problems in society: the impoverishment of the masses, the demoralization of the lower classes and the terrifying increase in crime. In view of these three questions the congress installed three corresponding sections:

- Section 1 on *Charity or Philanthropy*, discussing 1. *the objects and limits of public relief; the establishment by law of poorhouses for the indigent; 2. the co-operation of employers in the improvement of the condition of their workpeople; the connecting of philanthropic and provident institutions with industrial and agricultural establishments; international conventions relative to industrial works; 3. the position of domestic servants; means of improving the condition and of providing for the future prospects of servants of both sexes; 4. special guardianship of poor children; of those who are abandoned, vicious, or morally neglected; patronage of apprentices; 5. means of remedying the abuses of strong drinks, and of arresting the progress of intemperance;*
- Section 2 on *Education*, studying 1. *the means of encouraging, improving, and extending popular instruction and education; compulsory attendance at schools; 2. infant education; creches or public nurseries; schools for infants, or children's gardens (Kinder Gärten); 3. organization of elementary, industrial and agricultural instruction;*
- Section 3 on *Prison Reform*, focussed on 1. *the solitary system; the conditions to which it ought to be subjected, and the limits to which its application should be restricted; 2. the provisional or conditional liberation; supplementary detention; 3. reformatories, and special establishments for the education and the reform of young delinquents, mendicants, and vagabonds, and vicious, abandoned, or morally neglected children.*

At the end of the conference, it was decided that, for the future, a more restricted programme should be adopted, one which could be compassed within the limited period devoted to the meetings of the congress. Many participants also asked to get more time in preparing the meeting. In that order, it was decided the Congress should not assemble in 1858, but in London in 1859.

3.3 London, 9-13 June 1862

The next congress took place three years later than foreseen. This time the prestigious Burlington House was used as the meeting place. The famous philanthropist the earl of Shaftesbury got the honour of presiding the congress. In his opening speech, he defined this international meeting of benevolent men with the intention *to form themselves into a kind of Œcumenic Council .. for the ends of practical philanthropy ...*

As asked in Frankfurt the programma was restricted. Apart from the traditional reports on the welfare situation in various countries, the congress tackled two questions:

- Is it acceptable that the State has the power to remove morally abandoned children from their parents and provide education, and, if necessary, their maintenance?
- Is it acceptable to make municipal schools compulsory, and if so, how and within which limits this obligation should be defined?

3.4 Overview of the three congresses

Despite some of the discussions, on the basis principles of the philanthropic mission most of the participants on the congresses were kindred spirits:

- there was a general agreement that a marked line should be drawn between ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ misery; in regard to the latter, the relief of the necessitous and the suffering poor was an obligatory duty;
- in order to deal with social problems only a structural, preventive approach was defensible; giving alms and distributing charity could have a reverse effect, by encouraging idleness, destroying frugality, and breaking down all self-respect;
- crucial in the philanthropic ideology was the concept of responsibility; through education (formal instruction, guidance as well as contact with good practices) people had to learn providence and temperance; only then they would be in to opportunity to help themselves fully;
- the role of the state or the authorities caused controversy between advocates of a facilitating policy (creating the conditions for expanding private action) and an interventionist policy (developing public services and control in extraordinary situations); nevertheless everyone agreed on two points: the state had to guarantee the liberty of its citizens and had to defend and maintain the social, economic and political order;

- philanthropists had to direct their investigations mainly to the discovery and the practical application of the best preventive measures; knowledge without application was sterile, action without considering the consequences could cause more harm than good. That's why an interchange of experiences and ideas became so important.

4 Towards an international organization

The congress held in Brussels decided that it was desirable that the International Philanthropic Congress should become a permanent institution. On the second congress in Frankfurt the statutes were compiled and unanimously adopted. In the preparation they received already the signature of more than 100 adherents, belonging to more than 20 different countries.

4.1 Aims

The objects of the International Philanthropic Association (*Association internationale de bienfaisance*) were logically in agreement with the intentions of the Philanthropic congresses:

- 1. to place in relationship persons who in different countries interest themselves in the improvement of the condition of the working and indigent classes;*
- 2. to form a kind of bond between the institutions and associations of a philanthropic, provident and reformatory character as well as those relating to popular education, which bond would afford the means of contributing to their mutual enlightenment and assistance in case of need;*
- 3. to establish a permanent exchange of information, of official documents, of reports and of publications, between the members of the association and between the countries associated (also indicated as the International Correspondence);*
- 4. to make known and to recommend useful projects and institutions; to verify the experiments and experiences as well as to encourage those works which are in their nature interesting to the Association, and likely to exercise a useful influence on society in general.*

4.2 Methods of working

The Association would be operated by a central agency (provisionally fixed in Brussels) and directed by a council composed of members of different countries. In each country auxiliary agencies would place themselves in relation with the philanthropic and provident societies and institutions of public utility. So it should become possible to design an extended network throughout the world.

The central agency promised to publish in French every six months, or oftener if necessary, a bulletin, containing a list and, as far as possible, a summary analysis of the publications, reports and documents relating to the objects of the Association.

4.3 Problems

The International Philanthropic Association never really functioned. And after 1862 a fourth International Congress (although planned in Berlin in 1863, together with the International Statistics Congress, which took place by the way) was not organized.

What had happened?

Several hypotheses are possible

- the organization of the congresses took a lot of time and energy of a small group of people such as Edouard Ducpétiaux; it was impossible for them to carry on like this; without an Association the Congresses couldn't survive;
- on the 1862 congress the organizational committee referred to and pleaded for a cooperation with the international Association for the Promotion of the Social Sciences: the chairman observed that "many of the subjects we have to consider are nearly akin to theirs as to be almost inseparable from them"; moreover, many of the members of the Philanthropic Association were already or would be soon member of the other Association; so a fusion, with respect for a certain autonomy, seemed defensible; it is most likely that this proposal caused in fact the end of the Philanthropic Congresses; other simply took over;
- the European context and the tensions between several countries in the 1860's (against the background of the genesis of the German Empire) didn't contribute in a positive way;
- by the end of the 1860's some of the key figures were deceased (such as Ducpétiaux in 1868).

5 Conclusion: importance and impact

These international philanthropic congresses were important in different respects:

- they formed *assemblées européennes*, European assemblies, long before there was talk of the European community;
- people came to ‘learn and teach’, as someone said; this is an important medium in the diffusion of knowledge and above all experiences;
- the congresses formed meeting points where members of various religious communions and political obediences could debate with kindred spirits on common concerns; this confrontation of views and opinions could be seen as a laboratory of ideas;
- the concept of a *libre échange des idées* (free interchange of ideas) was defended by analogy with the liberal free trade doctrine;
- the presence of official delegates of governments and respectable societies had without any doubt a not to underestimate impact on their policy or lobby work.

This is to be proven by more research.

In a critical sense we see that these congresses were limited to a select group of privileged people, who had the fortune to travel Europe and attend such a conferences. Members of the working class, let alone indigents, were completely absent and their voice wasn’t heard. They still had a long way to go.

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