

Agricultural numbers: the statistics of the International Institute of Agriculture in the Interwar period

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Abstract:

This article examines the statistics produced by the International Institute of Agriculture in connection with the economic conferences that were held under the auspices of the League of Nations in Genoa (1922) and Geneva (1927). Established in 1905 in Rome, the International Institute of Agriculture formed an important institutional framework for the exchange of knowledge on agriculture in the first half of the twentieth century. By examining the Institute's reports and enquiries and the planning for the world census of agriculture (1930), the article argues that the Institute held a particular vision of the relationship between agriculture and industry that differed greatly from the perspective of the Anglophone experts of the League of Nations. It will be shown that whilst the League addressed the issue of famine and food shortages, the Institute focused on stabilizing farmers' income.

There is a growing body of literature on the League of Nations (hereafter LoN) that discusses how the League and other international organizations accumulated expert knowledge on questions of food, famine and agriculture in the 1930s, and how their accumulation of expertise prepared the way for the development programmes of the United Nations' agencies after 1945. Focusing on the League of Nations and its experts, who were mostly drawn from the British Empire, can give a false impression of unanimity around issues that were highly controversial at the time, such as the place agriculture should have in the economy after the devastation of the First World War.¹ This article discusses the emergence of a different approach to the problems of agriculture in the interwar period, namely an agrarianist approach that was based on the belief that agriculturalists all over the world shared common interests that were in

¹ This is the case with Ruth Jachertz and Alexander Nützenadel, 'Coping with hunger? Visions of a global food system, 1930–1960', *J. Global Hist.* 6 (2011) and S. Amrith and P. Clavin, 'Feeding the World: Connecting Europe and Asia, 1930–1945', in M. Hilton and R. Mitter (eds), *Transnationalism and Contemporary Global History (Past and Present, Supplement 8, 2013)*, while Amalia Ribi Forclaz, 'Agriculture, American expertise, and the quest for global data. Leon Estabrook and the First World Agricultural Census of 1930', *J. Global Hist.* 11 (2016), pp. 44–65, rightly focused on the IIA. The role of the League in the economic diplomacy of the interwar period has been the subject in particular of Patricia Clavin, *Securing the world economy. The reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (2013) and ead., *The failure of economic diplomacy* (1996).

competition with the interests of industrialists. In 1920s and 1930s, the International Institute of Agriculture (IIA) tried to give voice to agrarianist ideas in the ‘international civil society’ by creating its own economic expertise in cooperation/competition to the League and the International Labour Organization (ILO).²

Exploring the statistical publications and reports of the IIA produced between the wars allows us to observe the emergence of a global vision of the world as divided between agricultural and industrial nations and the application to the world agricultural economy of ideas of core and periphery. This vision, combined with a strong sense that the international division of labour privileged industrialists and industrial countries whilst the terms of trade were worsening for agriculture, outlived the international organizations of the interwar years. Development theorists, especially the South American structuralists such as the Argentinian Raul Prebisch and his group at the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and Caribbean, made the structural difference between commodity exporters and industrial exporters a cornerstone of their approach to development – an idea that originated, for Prebisch, in the debates of the 1930s. This divide also shaped accounts of the period for a long time, something recent studies in global economy have questioned.³

A study of the emergence of such a vision is of obvious interest for historians of economic doctrines and of statistics, but it is also crucial for historians in general. Given the importance of agricultural issues in the economic diplomacy of the *entre-deux-guerres*, it is essential to know what kinds of information was available to negotiators, policy-makers, and the educated public of the 1920s and 1930s and how it shaped their world view.

I

Established in Rome in 1905 and inaugurated in 1908, the IIA offered the main institutional framework for the exchange of knowledge on agriculture in the first half of the twentieth century. Its activities covered a wide variety of topics, ranging from circulating warnings of plant and animal diseases to the collection of harvest statistics, data on the activity of cooperatives and farm incomes. The collection and publication of statistics, though, had been the most crucial of the tasks assigned to the IIA on its foundation in 1905. Article 9 of the convention signed by Italy and the other member states on 7 June 1905 contains the following:

The institute, confining its operations within an international sphere, shall

a) Collect, study, and publish as promptly as possible statistical, technical, or economic information concerning farming, both vegetable and animal products, the commerce in agricultural products, and the prices prevailing in the various markets.⁴

² On the competition between the LoN and the IIA, see Luciano Tosi, *Alle origini della FAO: Le relazioni tra l'Istituto Internazionale di Agricoltura e la Società delle Nazioni* (At the origins of the FAO: the relationships between the International Institute of Agriculture and the League of Nations) (1989); on the IIA–ILO cooperation, see Ribi Forclaz elsewhere in this issue.

³ Edgar J. Dosman, *The life and times of Raul*

Prebisch, 1901–1986 (2008), p. 38; Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells, ‘Commodity chains in a global economy’, in Emily S. Rosenberg (ed.), *A world connecting, 1870–1945* (2012), p. 686.

⁴ United States of America, *Convention between the United States and other powers for the creation of an International Institute of Agriculture: signed at Rome, 7 June 1905* (1908), p. 8.

The IIA became fully functional only in 1909, and for the few years that preceded the war it published the *Bulletin of agricultural statistics* (after 1914 the *Bulletin of agricultural and commercial statistics*) and the *International yearbook of agricultural statistics*. The Great War did not interrupt the publication, but it heavily affected the reliability of data. The correspondence of the Institute during the war years makes frequent reference to the difficulties encountered in securing official statistical publications.⁵ Even the Italian government – which hosted the IIA and was therefore usually benevolent toward its requests – refused to disclose current data from the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, claiming they were war secrets.⁶

The statistics of the interwar years therefore have a broader significance than those of the pre-War period. The Institute certainly reacted to the competition of the recently founded League of Nations, but it is clear that the leadership of the IIA also saw the growth of an ‘international society’ as a great opportunity to foster its statutory goals: the international promotion of the agricultural classes. The IIA was, from its very foundation, meant to become the voice of the agricultural classes. According to article 9 of the founding *convention*, the Institute should:

Submit to the approval of the governments, if there is occasion for it, measure for the protection of the common interests of the farmers and for the improvement of their condition, after having *utilized all the necessary sources of information*, such as the wishes expressed by the *international or other agricultural congresses or congresses of sciences applied to agriculture, agricultural societies, academies, learned bodies, etc.*⁷

In the context of the ‘agrarianist moment’ that Europe was experiencing with the emergence of peasant parties and ‘ruralist’ conservative regimes, the IIA had the ambition of bringing the point of view of agriculturalists to the international economic conferences that were redrawing economic relationships in the world.⁸ Crucially, despite the stress the League of Nations placed on the neutrality of statistical facts, only business people could provide some of the essential information on topics such as tariffs, agricultural prices, agricultural credit, and other aspects of the business cycle. As it was the case in other sectors of the world economy, providing data to the LoN and IIA became an element in the negotiating strategies of the associations of agriculturalists.

The *Bulletin of agricultural and commercial statistics*, the 1927 publication *Agricultural problems in their international aspect*, the 1928 *Enquête*, and the extremely ambitious First

⁵ FAO, IIA, R3, IIA, Correspondance avec le prof. Laur, Brougg, Union des Paysans Suisses, servant d’intermédiaire entre l’IIA et certains Pays pendant la guerre.

⁶ In a letter to the IIA, Giuseppe Zattini, the head of the Italian Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, claimed that the data were simply not available, despite the update prepared in 1916, FAO, IIA, R3, Tutino, Letter to van Missenhoven, 13 Sept. 1917.

⁷ United States of America, *Convention ... 7 June 1905*, p. 9 (author’s italics).

⁸ I have tried to sketch the meaning of an ‘agrarianist

moment’ for Italian agriculturalists in my ‘The micro-foundations of Italian agrarianism: Italian agricultural economists and Fascism’, *Agricultural Hist.* 91 (2017). An approach to Fascist ruralism can be found in L. Fernández Prieto, J. Pan-Montojo and M. Cabo (eds), *Agriculture in the age of Fascism: authoritarian technocracy and rural modernization, 1922–1945* (2014), while on the importance of agrarianism in different European (especially central European) contexts, see Helga Schultz and Angela Harre (eds), *Bauerngesellschaften auf dem Weg in die Moderne: Agrarismus in Ostmitteleuropa, 1880 bis 1960* (2010).

World Agricultural Census of 1930, are the main documents of this strategy. Consistent with this mission, the IIA involved agricultural associations and their in-house experts in the collection of data meant to prove the different effects of economic downturns on agricultural and industrial groups, with a central concern being the deteriorating terms of trade between agriculture and industry.

The first peculiarity of the statistics of the IIA is that there was such close cooperation. In contrast with the idea expressed by Roser Cussó that ‘international expertise is only made possible by the agreement of the governments ... and by the governments’ active contribution (connections between governments and experts in the committees, authorization to the sharing of statistics by the ministries, etc.), we will demonstrate in this article the active contribution of agrarian organizations.⁹ It is true that the statistics of agricultural yield and output published by the IIA in the *Annuaire de statistique agricole* were based on data published by individual national statistical offices and aggregated figures preliminarily approved by states, but the IIA also published more sophisticated sectorial data and qualitative reports that were made possible by the contribution of non-state actors, especially agricultural associations, university research centres and agricultural banks. Besides state-sanctioned data and international aggregates, therefore, we will stress the presence of *stakeholder data* produced by agriculturalists for agriculturalists which the Institute circulated internationally. It should always be remembered that the interests of the member states did not necessarily coincide with that of the rural elites that governed the associations.¹⁰

The contribution of associations, research centres, and private companies was particularly important for fine-grained sectorial data. How much interwar data on prices, costs and business differed from post-Second World War data on GDP, inflation, and output has not been sufficiently stressed. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the ‘Keynesian revolution’ in statistics was about to begin: the aggregate national data of LoN was its spearhead.¹¹ Reflecting on the change that occurred in the 1940s, the economic historian Walt Whitman Rostow identified the ‘temptation and dilemma’ that faced statisticians after the end of the 1930s:

The temptation has been to plunge in and exploit the data that are easily accessible and capable of organization for purposes of international comparison. The dilemma is that these data do not easily permit statistical analysts, on an international basis, to get hold of sectors and sub-sectors.¹²

Data on national output collected by the IIA from national statistical institutes could be made to fit easily into the developing ‘Keynesian paradigm’. But the Institute was also involved in

⁹ Roser Cussó, ‘The statistical activity of the economic and financial organization of the League of Nations’, *Histoire et Mesure* 27 (2012), p. 114.

¹⁰ Federico D’Onofrio, *Observing agriculture in early twentieth-century Italy* (2016), ch. 5 and ‘Les statistiques agricoles ...’, in Danièle Fraboulet, Clotilde Druelle-Korn, and Pierre Vernus (eds), *Les organisations patronales et la sphère publique* (2013), discusses the concept of *stakeholder statistics*. For a theoretical approach to the problem of the relationship between

producers and the state in agriculture see the introductory paragraph to Jess Gilbert and Carolyn Howe, ‘Beyond “state vs. society”: Theories of the state and New Deal agricultural policies’, *American Sociological Rev.* 56 (1991).

¹¹ I use the term in the way it is employed by J. Adam Tooze, *Statistics and the German state, 1900–1945: the making of modern economic knowledge* (2001), pp. 13f.

¹² Walt W. Rostow, *The stages of economic growth: a non-communist manifesto* (sec. edn, 1971), p. xi–xii.

the investigation of agricultural economic facts, at a very disaggregate level, that did not fit the new paradigm, and for which the role of experts and the contribution of business organizations was crucial.

Hence, the study of the statistics gathered and published by the IIA offers a valuable starting point for the examination of different topics: the role of international organizations and of experts (*techniciens*) within them;¹³ the conflicting expert knowledge held by international organizations on agriculture and food; the experts' approach to the agricultural crisis, with the growing awareness of a latent conflict between agriculturalists and industrialists; the emergence of the world economy as a statistical whole, divided between core and peripheral countries. The following sections are meant to show this by describing how the IIA prepared for the economic conferences of 1922 and 1927; showing the contradictions in the IIA's strategy between its technocratic ambitions and political role; explaining the role of national and international associations of agriculturalists in the collection of data and finally revealing how the data of the IIA contributed to structure perceptions of the world economy, especially after 1929.

II

The involvement of the International Institute for Agriculture in the world economic conferences of 1922, 1927 and 1933 was an important success for its leadership. According to Adam Tooze, the British Prime Minister Lloyd-George proposed the Genoa conference of 1922 in order to relaunch the economies of the war victors by reintegrating the Soviet Union and, above all, Germany into the world economy. The task of restarting the economy after the post-war slump seemed to require the assistance of 'international experts' who would complement the activity of the experts already present in the national delegations.¹⁴ For this reason delegations from the three international organizations of the post-war order, the League of Nations, the ILO and the IIA, attended the conference. The result was 'an unmitigated disaster'.¹⁵

In fact, the International Institute of Agriculture was invited to the Genoa conference as a result of its lobbying.¹⁶ The Italian government, which organized the conference in Genoa, only agreed to invite the IIA at the last moment – which was not surprising given the hasty organization of the conference.¹⁷ Although the conference was scheduled for April 1922, the official invitation only came in March. From the documents in the IIA archive, it is clear that the Italian government was perplexed by the proposal that the IIA should send a delegation to the conference. There were no specifically agricultural questions to be discussed – or so the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs believed. Edoardo Pantano, a veteran of Italian agricultural associations, and President of the IIA, decisively parried this objection in a letter to the Italian Prime Minister, Facta:

¹³ Clavin discusses this term in *Securing the world economy*, p. 15.

¹⁴ The expression 'tecnici internazionali' can be found in FAO, IIA, C1, Anonymous, *Le tre grandi istituzioni internazionali alla conferenza di Genova*.

¹⁵ J. Adam Tooze, *The deluge: the Great War and the remaking of global order, 1916–1931* (2014), p. 428ff.; on

the conference, see Carole Fink, *The Genoa Conference: European diplomacy, 1921–1922* (1993).

¹⁶ FAO, IIA, C3, IIA, *Conference internationale de Gènes*, various letters.

¹⁷ Carole Fink, 'Italy and the Genoa Conference of 1922', *International Hist. Rev.* 8 (1986), pp. 41–55.

The programme of [the conference of] Genoa is the plan of the economic reconstruction of the world. All financial, monetary, banking additions to the economic fabric that will be discussed [at the conference] rest upon the basis of production and exchange of goods. ... Agriculture has a place of the utmost importance in production and exchange.

The presence of the IIA would be helpful for all governments because the Institute possessed 'an experience that no government, and no other institution can equal'.¹⁸ Pantano described the expertise accumulated by the IIA in the eight years it had been publishing data on production, trade, prices of foodstuff, livestock and agricultural commodities alongside information on the legislation concerning agriculture and studies concerning agricultural techniques and technical improvements.

Statistical data clearly had a primary role in answering the kind of questions that Pantano expected the IIA would address in Genoa: the trends in the production of specific crops, the international trade of agricultural commodities, the situation of agricultural credit, and then topics that were contentious matters within many countries, such as agrarian reforms, the intensification of cultivation and so on.

The hopes harboured by the leadership of the IIA were to be largely disappointed. When Umberto Ricci, the chief of the statistical service of the IIA, landed in Genoa together with the rest of the delegation, he discovered that international organizations had only a very small role in the conference, and amongst them, the League of Nations had a clear primacy. The French and the British delegations had no time for Ricci and his collaborators. The whole conference programme depended on the 'London report of experts', where the only reference to agriculture was made in connection with the Russian situation, and in the end, 'political questions completely and continuously overshadowed all others'.¹⁹ The IIA, therefore, fought a defensive battle, with the support of Albert Thomas of the International Labour Organization. The delegation managed to obtain agreement that the IIA would participate in the implementation of those points in the experts' report that concerned import and export duties.²⁰ To his great satisfaction Ricci also managed to block a proposal that the LoN should take over the compilation of all trade statistics. The final compromise made the LoN responsible for world economic statistics 'with the assistance and collaboration of other international organizations'. It fell short of the Institute's initial ambitions, but it was perceived as a significant victory.²¹

As a result, the IIA and the LoN began their painful cooperation and the data on agricultural production and trade that the IIA collected from 61 states began appearing in the League's *Statistical Yearbook*. Thirty-two crops were monitored including colonial and industrial crops such as rubber.²²

The statistical work that preceded the International Economic Conference held in Geneva in 1927 was much more substantial than that undertaken before Genoa and the support of

¹⁸ FAO IIA, C3, Pantano, Letter to Luigi Facta from Rome, 20 Mar. 1922.

¹⁹ Wilson Harris, 'The Genoa Conference', *J. British Institute of International Affairs* 1 (1922), p. 152.

²⁰ The IIA and ILO delegation were both staying at Hotel Mackenzie, as a sign of the 'very best relations'

between Pantano and Thomas, FAO, IIA, C3, Pantano, letter to Poggi from Genoa, 7 Apr. 1922.

²¹ FAO IIA, C3, Ricci, Rapport sur la participation de l'Institut International d'Agriculture à la Conférence Economique Internationale de Gènes.

²² Tosi, *Alle origini della FAO* on such cooperation.

the Italian government for the Institute was more unequivocal as well.²³ Before the actual conference could take place – according to the proposal of the French delegation – the League’s Council asked a ‘Preparatory Committee’ of experts to ‘investigate the economic difficulties which stand in the way of the revival of general prosperity and of ascertaining the best means of overcoming these difficulties and of preventing disputes’, because – this was a widely shared conviction – ‘economic peace will largely contribute to security among nations’.²⁴ In the inaugural speech of the eighth General Assembly of the League of Nations in 1927, the Chilean delegate Enrique Villegas boasted that the ‘*documentación preparatoria*’ (preparatory documentation) prepared by the IIA for the Economic Conference formed a ‘*conjunto de trabajos*’ (set of works) on the world economic situation was ‘so rich and up-to-date that it was rewarded with the unanimous applause of the most competent economists’. Villegas attributed the merit of this success to the participation of different international organizations beside the Secretariat of the League: the ILO, the International Chamber of Commerce and the IIA.²⁵

Although the IIA as such was not invited directly to contribute to the preparatory committee – a cause of disappointment to Giuseppe De Michelis, the IIA president – Carlos Brebbia, agricultural attaché to the Embassy of the Argentinian Republic in Rome and permanent delegate of Argentina to the IIA, was included among its members. It is important to notice that at that time Argentina was not a member of the LoN, but it was one of the key economic actors in the Americas and a crucial exporter of agricultural commodities. Through its membership of the IIA, the Argentinian elite had an unprecedented opportunity to expound in an international forum the point of view of exporters of agricultural commodities. Brebbia managed to nominate Carlo Dragoni, Secretary General of the Institute, among the experts assisting the first commission of the preparatory committee (on agriculture).

The preparatory committee was charged with investigating two topics: the revenue and expenses of agriculturalists. The institute had relatively reliable data on the output of the 32 crops it monitored, but the committee was interested in a broader assessment of the agriculturalists’ revenue:

statistics of production are of primary importance, but by themselves they do not give the whole picture. It is also necessary to estimate values from two points of view: (i) what is the producer obtaining for his produce by reference to other wholesale prices? (ii) what has the consumer to pay by reference to the same standard?²⁶

The experts decided to concentrate on 22 products in eight geographic zones (in addition to the ‘World’ zone), and survey the price of these crops in five originating markets (Buenos

²³ Mussolini directly complained to the League of Nations about the lack of mention of the IIA in the documents that prepared the conference (letter to the League’s secretary general, 4 Dec. 1925, published in L. Sommer, ‘Die Vorgeschichte der Wirtschaftskonferenz (Genf 1927), Anlage’, *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv*, 28 (1928), p. 10.

²⁴ Preparatory Committee for the International Economic Conference, ‘Report on the work of the first session of the committee’, *Official Journal of the League*

of Nations (1926), p. 819.

²⁵ Archivo Nacional de la Administración de la Republica de Chile RR. Exteriores v2637, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores – República de Chile, Memoria de la delegación de Chile a la VIII Asamblea de la Sociedad de las Naciones, pp. 12–13.

²⁶ Preparatory Committee for the International Economic Conference, ‘Report on the work of the first session of the committee’, p. 822.

Aires, Melbourne, Cape Town, Calcutta, New York) and four destination markets (London, Hamburg, Marseille, Kobe).

The investigation of input costs encompassed 'successive links in the chain which connects production on the one hand with ultimate consumption on the other' in four areas:

(a) the costs of production, including questions of rent, fiscal burdens, cost of equipment, interest on capital charges and cost of labour;

(b) producers' organizations and the nature and extent of their effect on markets and prices

(c) the trading costs involved in transit from producer to wholesaler, from wholesaler to retailer and from retailer to ultimate consumer;

(d) the effect and growth of co-operative organizations shortening the marketing process'.

Points (b) and (d) reflect the importance attributed to producers' cooperatives and other organizations such as the Canadian Wheat Pool in lowering the costs of inputs and marketing for small-scale farms. The question raised by point (a) was more complicated and the committee had to rely upon the scanty data available to the IIA and the ILO (for the cost of labour).²⁷

In sum, the expert committee was supposed to frame world agriculture as a budget with gross production (revenue) on one side, and expenses on the other. Was agriculture a profitable business? A tentative answer came with the IIA's first ambitious summary of world agriculture – *Agricultural Problems in their International Aspects* – that it prepared for the conference in Geneva.²⁸ Data on production and prices were routinely published by many governments and, therefore, approximately 60 countries were in a position to provide their data to the IIA. The data on the cost of inputs, however, were more difficult to gather, since the IIA had to rely on a complex infrastructure put in place by national statistical offices and by farmers' associations. Hence, the report included this kind of data only for a handful of countries and only for Germany was the data collected exhaustive.

The IIA report, though, pursued two contradictory goals. This contradiction is characteristic of most agricultural debates ever since. On the one hand, the IIA and LoN were concerned with scarcity: the Russian famine of 1921 sparked the first humanitarian relief effort in the United States and scared the world.²⁹ The foreword to the IIA volume stated that: 'The object is to describe the methods which may be employed for assisting materially and effectively all efforts designed to bring about an advance in the quantity and quality of agricultural production combined with a lowering of prices'.³⁰ On the other hand, the IIA's statutory task was the defence of the agricultural classes. Agriculturalists were obviously interested in keeping agricultural prices relatively high. The IIA report acknowledged that output prices had gone up, but data on input costs revealed that agriculturalists experienced persistent difficulties. Agricultural prices were on a much higher level than in the pre-war period, but their price increase fell short of the price increase of industrial products. Credit was also tight. As a result,

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 822–3.

²⁸ International Institute of Agriculture, *Agricultural problems in their international aspect* (1927).

²⁹ On the American relief effort, see Bertrand M. Patenaude, *The big show in Bololand: the American relief expedition to Soviet Russia in the famine of 1921* (2002).

The archive of the IIA shows the Institute's relative powerlessness when faced with famine, see for instance the pathetic indifference to the Chinese famine of 1921, in FAO, IIA, R8, IIA, Famine en Chine.

³⁰ International Institute of Agriculture, *Agricultural problems*, p. 7.

even if 1925 was a relatively good year for most agriculturalists compared with the heavy losses of the post-war slump, deflationary policies and protectionism were already hurting many countries. This problem was known internationally as the *Preisschere*, the divergence between agricultural and industrial prices.³¹

The report made apparent the existence of imbalances between demand and supply, between agricultural and industrialized countries, by insisting on the diverging trend in prices.³² It also focused on the export or import surplus of the different areas of the world. It was a plastic representation of the contrast between the point of view of producers and the point of view of consumer countries, stressed by Ruth Jachertz and Alexander Nutzenadel.³³ The outcome of the conference reflected these tensions. The agrarian block of the so-called 'European periphery' (Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece) came into conflict with the industrial nations of north-western Europe and their protectionist policies. We will see that the IIA, under the leadership of Giuseppe De Michelis, tried to play this card in its competition with the LoN, presenting itself as the champion of agriculturalists and agricultural nations against the industrial interests vested in the League. As the champion of agriculturalists, the IIA was included in the consultative committee that was to supervise the implementation of the recommendations of the Economic Conference. The committee had 35 members, including representatives of the ILO, the IIA and the International Chamber of Commerce.³⁴

III

In 1924, while the Institute was preparing for Geneva, the IIA leadership began discussing an ambitious project that would enable it to describe the relationships between supply and demand of agricultural commodities and between exporting and importing countries. There were many statisticians and economists working on supply and demand curves and on the estimation of the mutual relationships between prices, supply and demand, in this period, but this problem defied forecasters.³⁵ Concretely the IIA ambition was to survey the entire world's agriculture and provide statisticians with a reliable basis for their estimates of agricultural production. The World Agricultural Census of 1930 was a gigantic effort to coordinate the collection of data on farm size and yields over most of the World and thus provide an indispensable framework for estimates of world production.

Funds came from the International Education Board (IEB) of the Rockefeller foundation. The Rockefeller foundation during the interwar period financed many projects led by European academics and the League of Nations, mostly through the IEB and the (separate) Social Science

³¹ Friederich Aereboe, *Agrarkrisis und Landwirtschaftliche Betriebsorganisation* (1926).

³² International Institute of Agriculture, *Agricultural problems*, p. 7.

³³ Jachertz and Nutzenadel, 'Coping with hunger?', p. 103.

³⁴ Archivo Nacional de la Administración de la Republica de Chile RR. Exteriores v2637, Ministerio de

Relaciones Exteriores - República de Chile, Memoria de la delegación de Chile a la VIII Asamblea de la Sociedad de las Naciones, p. 65.

³⁵ This kind of study was the main field of application for Henry Schultz, *Statistical laws of demand and supply, with special application to sugar* (1928) and culminated with Ragnar Frisch, *Pitfalls in the statistical construction of demand and supply curves* (1933).

Research Council.³⁶ It is important to notice that while the United States was not a member of the League of Nations, it was a member of the IIA, which probably explains why Hobson, the American delegate to the IIA, managed to involve the Department of Agriculture in this project. The IIA's project seemed a perfect fit with the ambitious 'technocratic' agenda that dominated the USA in the 1920s.³⁷ Preparations for the census began in earnest in 1925, when the designated leader of the census, the American Leon M. Estabrook, finally came to Rome.

Estabrook is a significant figure. As an employee of the US Department of Agriculture he had travelled to Argentina and Paraguay (on 'loan' from the department) where he assisted the local governments in setting up offices of agricultural statistics.³⁸ He was therefore an example of that expanding class of American experts who assisted American and European governments with the more or less explicit support of the US government. In the same years, for instance, the so-called Kemmerer commission visited Chile, Ecuador, and Bolivia (and later on Poland, Danzig, and Latvia) to advise governments on financial and monetary issues.³⁹ Agricultural statistics, like public finance, was an exportable practice whose essential institutions could be replicated (albeit with different degrees of perfection) in different countries.

The recognition of these international careers, as Estabrook's own story indicates, was not to be taken for granted. There was no easily recognized international curriculum in the US civil service. Estabrook initially resisted the idea of moving to Rome and when he gave in and moved to Italy, he ceaselessly complained about the food and olive oil. The interaction between the American experts and the Europeans who controlled the IIA proved difficult from the start. Although the IIA was forced to accept American money, they still wanted to run the census according to their own priorities. De Michelis, the president of the IIA since 1925, summoned a Council of Statisticians, which would supervise the project and Estabrook's work. The members of the Council were all Europeans. Alongside the representative of Italy, France, and Britain, the victors of the war, there were three representatives of the agrarian states of central and eastern Europe (a Czech, a Bulgarian, and a Latvian).⁴⁰ The clash between the Europeans and the Americans culminated in December 1925. The British delegate and the Italian statistician Rodolfo Benini had their own forms approved by the IIA permanent assembly instead of Estabrook's whilst the latter was in the USA. It took the Americans' threat to withdraw the funds for the census before Estabrook's plans were reinstated and Benini's discarded.⁴¹

³⁶ On the importance of the SSRC, see Donald Fisher, *Fundamental development of the social sciences: Rockefeller philanthropy and the United States Social Science Research Council* (1993).

³⁷ Nick Cullather, *The hungry world: America's Cold War battle against poverty in Asia* (2011), ch. 1, describes the pervasive role of calories during the Hoover administration.

³⁸ Leon M. Estabrook, *Agricultural survey of South America: Argentina and Paraguay* (1926) testifies of this activity; Estabrook kept extensive records of his missions to Latin America in his unpublished memoirs *Life of an American*, National Agricultural Library, Washington, DC, Estabrook MSS, box 1-3, pp. 1101-1500 of

the original pagination.

³⁹ The Frank W. Fetter Papers in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library document the activity of the commission in Guatemala, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Poland, Latvia, Danzig and China; some details on the setting up Argentina's central bank may be found in Dosman, *Raúl Prebisch*, p. 95.

⁴⁰ FAO IIA D2, Commission internationale pour le recensement agricole, Michelis, Mesures pour la préparation du recensement agricole mondial: note du Président Rome, 10 Dec. 1925. This committee was eventually enlarged to include more countries.

⁴¹ Ribi Forclaz, 'Agriculture' offers a thorough account of this struggle.

As pointed out by Amalia Ribí Forclaz in her article, the main points of dissention between Estabrook and the Italians in the IIA concerned the basic units of the survey. Estabrook did not share the Italians' interest in municipalities and believed that geological and topographical information would have needlessly encumbered data collection. He wanted, instead, to collect data from farms – as it was usual for US and British agricultural statistics – rather than municipalities and he was interested in larger-scale operations rather than very small farms. Moreover, Estabrook maintained that only the most commonly traded crops and large commercial farms should be included in the survey, while most of the Europeans were interested in the socially crucial small-scale producers and in regionally important crops.

Despite the fact that the compromise solution reached in 1926 followed Estabrook's prescriptions, Benini's plan is interesting in that it was much closer to the overall conception and desiderata of the IIA European leadership than the project that Estabrook eventually implemented. Benini's plan for the census reproduced European statistical practices and closely followed the British and Italian approaches to agricultural statistics. The Italian statistician proposed to distinguish two groups of countries. 'Statistically advanced' countries would collect data from individual farmers, asking every farmer great an area he or she had under each crop, what the average productivity of land was, and how much livestock he or she owned. This was, in essence, the British way of gathering agricultural statistics, but it was costly and required a large number of data collectors.⁴² Only a few countries could afford this method.

For all the others, Benini recommended that they follow the Italian example, which he deemed a good middle way. Instead of collecting data by farm, national statistical institutes would draw on data from municipalities or aggregations thereof.⁴³ Municipalities were small enough for local officials to be able to assess the area under crop and the average rates, but still large enough for the IIA to process the returns. Benini expected only 700,000 'fiches' from municipalities covering the entire world.

In Benini's mind municipalities also had another great advantage. The problem of economic statistics was that large-scale administrative divisions imposed artificial borders on a phenomenon, such as agriculture, that depended so much on natural factors and thus defied borders. Benini claimed that beyond artificial administrative borders imposed by humans, 'the "homo sapiens" in the noblest sense of the word, ..., the human being as the real truth-seeker', should be paying attention to the real relationships between production factors and environmental conditions.⁴⁴ Municipalities represented the best compromise between administrative borders and geographical units, a common concern at the time, discussed for instance by the great German statistician Mayr.⁴⁵ What is interesting in Benini's ideas, though, is not

⁴² See for instance, Patrick G. Craigie, 'Memorandum on the methods employed in the collection of the annual agricultural statistics of Great Britain', *Bulletin de l'Institut international de statistique, partie II* (1903).

⁴³ On municipalities in Italian statistics, Giovanni Favero, *Le misure del regno: Direzione di statistica e municipi nell'Italia liberale* (2001).

⁴⁴ FAO, IIA D2, Commission internationale pour le recensement agricole, Benini, Recensement agricole

général 1930: Considérations et propositions, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Mayr had proposed using 'natural regions' rather than administrative divisions. This question is discussed in Émil M. Levasseur, 'La statistique graphique', in *Jubilee Volume of the Statistical Society of London* (1885), and for Italian agricultural statistics in Ghino Valenti, 'Per l'ordinamento della statistica agraria in Italia', *Bollettino Ufficiale del Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio*, II (1907).

the minimal unit (*unité minimale*) of his statistics, but the expectations he had for the 'big picture'. The census would reveal the interconnectedness of the world rather than its division into nation states. For this reason, it seemed important to him that data were not reported by nations but by smaller territorial units. What he expected to find out, then, was the relationship between the different areas of the world in environmental and economic terms. He wanted to verify von Thünen's model in reality. The Prussian economist had stated that returns per unit of land decreased according to the distance from market centres and deduced that agricultural activities would follow a specific geographical patterns with low-intensity activities (such as forestry and meat production) prevailing in remote regions and high-intensity activities (such as dairy and garden farming) prevailing in areas closer to the markets. Benini expected the census to 'describe the areas of influence of the most important urban centres, and how they are characterized by different varieties and intensity [of land use]'. It would then be possible to distinguish between areas that depended on imports and areas that were ready to export:

[to] distinguish, by representing them with coloured cartograms, the regions where the harvest is sufficient to satisfy the needs of the locals from those where harvest are insufficient, and those where there are food surpluses ready for export.

This enabled intervention, namely:

[to] signal those districts where agricultural yields can be improved by applying the most modern means, and those districts where land can be tilled and reclaimed according to the ability of a given area to absorb the natural increase of population or migration flows that could possibly be directed toward it.⁴⁶

Benini thus identified land reclamation and new settlements on underexploited land as the only true way to ensure an increase in food production while creating new sources of revenue to farmers. He did not distinguish the *mise en valeur* of colonial land and the 'internal colonization' of latifundia and reclaimed land. Benini was certainly sensitive to the plans of the Italian government in the motherland and in the colonies, which favoured food self-sufficiency and land reclamation, but it is important to stress that similar ideals inspired the policies of most European countries and their colonies.⁴⁷ Benini's plan seemed to offer a solid statistical basis for controlled trade and migrations between areas of the world with a surplus of production and those with a deficit.

Having successfully reclaimed control of the census programme, Estabrook succeeded in involving an enormous number of countries. He claimed that only Liberia, Persia, Afghanistan, Bolivia, and Paraguay had not joined the project and that the census would cover 98 per cent of the world's population and 92 per cent of the world's surface.⁴⁸ He finally returned to the States

⁴⁶ FAO, IIA D2, Commission internationale pour le recensement agricole, Benini, Recensement agricole général 1930: Considérations et propositions, p. 4: (author's translation).

⁴⁷ For a survey of the impressive spread of internal colonization, see Jan G. Smit, 'Laendliche Neusiedlung in Mitteleuropa vom Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur

Gegenwart als nationalpolitisches Instrument. Ziele, zeitgenoessische Stellungnahmen und Ergebnisse', *Erdkunde* 40 (1986).

⁴⁸ FAO, IIA R15, Correspondance avec le Directeur du Bureau pour le Recensement agricole mondial de 1930, Leon M. Estabrook, *Annual report of the director of the World Agricultural Census 1929, Rome 29 Sept. 1929*, p. 1.

from Rome at the end of 1929 to find that he had been completely sidelined in the hierarchy of the USDA by his former ally, Hobson: a sign of how fragile the career of international experts still was at that time.⁴⁹

Once the preliminary work was done, and everything had been arranged, the IIA statistical office carried out the processing of data for the year 1930 and then supervised the printing process. In the end, only 37 countries and dominions (out of 200 countries and colonies) provided data for publication. The census reinforced the image of a highly differentiated rural world, with some countries dominated by small properties and high yields per hectare and others where large estates and low yields prevailed.⁵⁰

The census was the closest the IIA came to the technocratic spirit that pervaded the League of Nations. It reflected to a great extent the ideals of the early 1920s and the increasing competition between the IIA and the League. The tension between the two institutions, though, together with the growing frustration that the Italian Fascist government felt with the Anglo-French domination of the League, led the IIA (which acted in coordination with Italian diplomats) to differentiate itself from the League by developing in a different direction.⁵¹ In Geneva, at the meetings of the Economic Consultative Committee of the League, De Michelis and the leadership of the Institute tried to reinforce the already existing ties with the representatives of the associations of agriculturalists, such as Ernst Laur and Louis de Vogüé of the Commission Internationale d'Agriculture (CIA), an institution that had played a part in the birth of the IIA, as described by Niccolò Mignemi elsewhere in this issue.

An episode that reveals De Michelis' attitude to the '*burocrazia tecnica*' of the League happened in 1927. Returning to Rome with the impressions he had received from the meetings of the Consultative Economic Committee of the League still vivid, David Ferguson, the chief of the Bureau of Economic and Social Studies of IIA presented a plan for the complete reorganization of his office. He wanted to transform it into a research centre on the business cycle and development. The new Bureau of Economic and Social Studies would publish 'index numbers recording cyclical movements, general price trends, production and consumption, demand and supply, circulation and credit conditions, purchasing power in agriculture and in industry, trade movements' and alongside these figures it would provide 'the economic barometers of agriculture, the influences of temperature and raindrops on agriculture'. For this task, Ferguson wanted to hire 20 new '*redacteurs*' and forecasted '*des dépenses considerables*'. De Michelis and Guido Ruata, the IIA Secretary General, though, did not let Ferguson develop his department towards the statistical elephantiasis that Keynes said characterized the League of Nations.⁵² They were very clear in pointing out that the project was not realistic, not even for the 'technical Bureaucracy of the League on Nations', and in any case it did not respond to the mission of the IIA. The IIA had not been established as a research centre, but as 'a centre for the creation of a world-wide public opinion on issues

⁴⁹ Ribi Forclaz, 'Agriculture', p. 63.

⁵⁰ IIA, *First World Agricultural Census*, vols 1-4, Rome (1939).

⁵¹ FAO IIA, I17, Paulucci di Calboli Barone, Giacomo, *L'attività economica della Società delle Nazioni*.

⁵² J. M. Keynes concluded his review of J. Tinbergen's

volume on the world economic crisis published by the League by warning: 'It is a strange reflection that his book looks likely, as far as 1939 is concerned, to be the principal activity and *raison d'être* of the League of Nations', J. M. Keynes, 'Professor Tinbergen's method', *Economic J.* 49 (1939), p. 568.

concerning agricultural laws and policies that only a unanimous international action can achieve.' Although the IIA was mostly known for its publications – De Michelis claimed – the latter were only means to an end, namely the representation of the interests of agriculturalists.⁵³

IV

De Michelis' plans for the Bureau of Economic and Social Studies differed greatly from Ferguson's proposal for turning the Bureau into a research institution on the business cycle. De Michelis is the crucial figure in this story. After studying Medicine in Lausanne and Law in Geneva, he had been nominated the Italian commissioner for emigration and internal colonization. As such, he worked in close contact with the ILO and was member of the board of ILO between 1920 and 1936. His international experience and contacts combined with his practical experience of managing social change that made him useful to the Italian Fascist regime that came to power in 1922. In 1925 he became president of the IIA (the statutes of the IIA reserved this position for Italians).⁵⁴ An example of De Michelis' approach to the international aspect of agricultural problems is the *Enquête Agricole* that the IIA launched in 1928. This enquiry, just like Ferguson's plan, answered the desiderata of the Consultative Economic Committee of the LoN. The proposal was originally Ferguson's but this time De Michelis approved the plan of the British statistician. The reason probably lay in the different political functions that the enquiry could serve (and in the much smaller cost). For the enquiry, the IIA could rely on a network of newly established organs: the Commission Internationale Permanente des Associations Agricoles (CIPA), the Commission Internationale de Coordination Agricole (CICA), the Conseil International Scientifique Agricole (CISA) and the Comité Economique Agricole (CEAg). In these committees and councils, techno-scientific expertise overlapped with the representation of business interests.

The goal of CIPA was to organize and coordinate, under the umbrella of the IIA, national associations of agriculturalists. It represented, therefore, the most advanced attempt by the IIA at providing representation to the interests of agriculturalists. In this task, the IIA competed with the Commission Internationale d'Agriculture headed by de Vogüé, which emanated from the most conservative organizations of French agriculturalists and landlords, the Société des agriculteurs de France.⁵⁵ Another committee, the CICA, Commission internationale de coordination pour l'agriculture, was created as an external institution that included representatives of the Institute and of the CIA led by de Vogüé.

The Conseil International Scientifique Agricole, in contrast, was a committee of agricultural experts from all over the world chosen by the Institute on the nomination of the national delegates. CISA and CIPA were both involved in the enquiry of 1928, the results of which were

⁵³ FAO, IIA R20, David Ferguson, L'organisation du bureau des études économiques et sociales and Ruata's rebuff.

⁵⁴ Stefano Gallo, *Il Commissariato per le migrazioni e la colonizzazione interna (1930-1940): per una*

storia della politica migratoria del fascismo (2015) on De Michelis as Italian commissioner for emigration.

⁵⁵ On the rue d'Athènes, Pierre Barral, *Les agrariens français de Meline a Pisani* (1968).

presented in October 1929 at the first meeting of another consultative committee of the IIA, the Comité Economique Agricole (CEAg).

The members of the CEAg, in turn, had been chosen from amongst the members of CISA with the specific goal of coordinating the activity of the IIA with that of the LoN.⁵⁶ In his letter to the German *Ministerialdirektor* Gustav Beyer Fehling, De Michelis revealed that he wanted the German Andreas Hermes, the Swiss Ernst Laur, and the French Jules Gautier to represent their respective countries in the CEAg. Hermes, Laur and Gautier present interestingly similar profiles. The three of them had contributed to the documentation of the world economic conference of 1927: they were agricultural experts of international renown and leaders of the agrarian movement in their respective countries. Moreover, Hermes had worked for three years, between 1911 and 1914, for the IIA in the agricultural economics section, and Laur was engaged, alongside de Vogüé, in the CIA. Again, the CEAg combined representation of agricultural interests and technical expertise. But the relationship with the League of Nation complicated the issue and De Michelis rapidly – and unsuccessfully – tried to get rid of both Hermes and Gautier when they expressed their support for the creation of an agricultural committee of the League.⁵⁷

This plethora of committees was partially meant to replicate the inclusive governance of the ILO, which included representatives of trade unions and employers alongside representatives of the member states. As stressed by Mignemi, according the statutes of the IIA, only the member states were officially represented in the permanent committee. The committees of associations and experts (CIPA, CISA and CEAg), therefore, were meant to overcome the lack of a statutory representation of associations.⁵⁸

The *enquête* was intended to record the complaints and desiderata of agriculturalists worldwide. On 14 September 1928, De Michelis wrote that the enquiry would present in Geneva ‘the economic situation of agriculture ... as it is judged by farmers themselves.’⁵⁹ The questions prepared by Ferguson concerned the main crops, the problem of custom duties, the index numbers of agricultural production compared to industrial production, and a general assessment of the economic situation of agriculture. The questionnaire finally asked the associations to suggest remedies for the economic crisis. The CIPA managed to involve associations

⁵⁶ Interestingly, the 18 countries invited to the CEAg were, other than the European great powers, either European agricultural countries (Romania, Latvia, Spain, Denmark) or agricultural countries of the world ‘periphery’ (Australia, Brazil, Canada), FAO, IIA D5, Comité économique agricole, 1928–1935, Michelis, letter to the ministers of Germany, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Spain, France, Great Britain, Italy, Romania, Switzerland, Poland and Latvia, 8 Jan. 1929.

⁵⁷ FAO IIA D5, Comité économique agricole, 1928–1935, Michelis, Letter to Gustav Beyer-Fehling, Rome 4 Feb. 1929 and letters to Beyer-Fehling and Maurice Lesage, 28 June 1929. On Hermes, leader of the Farmers Union of Germany, one of the founder of the Christian Democratic Union and a student of agricultural economy, see Heide Barmeyer, *Andreas Hermes und die*

Organisationen der deutschen Landwirtschaft: Christliche Bauernvereine, Reichslandbund, Grüne Front, Reichsnährstand, 1928–1933 (1971); Hermes was replaced by the Nazis, FAO, IIA D5, Comité économique agricole, 1928–1935, Letter from the Reichminister for food and agriculture to the President of the International Institute of Agriculture, 27 Dec. 1934; on Laur, Werner Baumann, *Bauernstand und Bürgerblock: Ernst Laur und der Schweizerische Bauernverband, 1897–1918* (1993); Jules Gautier was a member of the Conseil d’Etat (sec. de travaux publics) and the president of the National Confederation of Agricultural Associations.

⁵⁸ Constitution of the ILO, art. 3, par. 1.

⁵⁹ FAO, IIA R28, Enquete agricole 1928 (author’s translation).

from 24 countries (Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, the Irish Free State, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Hungary, Austria, Romania, Poland, Latvia, Algeria, Tunisia, South African Union, Canada, Brazil, Dutch East Indies, Philippines, and Germany).

The answers received from these associations and those received from the agricultural experts of the CISA look extremely similar. It was generally lamented that agricultural prices had grown much less than industrial prices and that profits therefore had decreased dramatically, while interest rates were spiking.⁶⁰ The *Preisschere* (price gap) emerged once again as the main cause of the agricultural crisis. The secretary general of the IIA, Brizi, concluded:

We can confirm that the main cause of the adverse economic conditions is that the prices of agricultural products dropped much more decidedly – and therefore became much closer to their pre-war level – than the price of the products that the agricultural classes have to buy.⁶¹

The *enquête* of 1928 and the creation of the CEAg clearly reveal the strategy of De Michelis. The baroque proliferation of committees and councils (CIPA, CICA, CISA, and CEAg) was clearly meant to balance the LoN, which was perceived as too remote from the interests of agriculturalists and agricultural nations. Perhaps at the suggestion of the Italian government, the IIA was creating its own network of experts in order to create a common front of agriculturalists and agricultural countries against the spirit of the League of Nations. But paradoxically this strategy needed the LoN, and it only had a meaning insofar as the consultative organs of the League offered the IIA the necessary audience. The aim was therefore to make the IIA the supplier of agricultural information to the League and prevent the League from developing its own research capacity in the field.

V

The importance of these statistical projects of the IIA, regardless of the specific strategies that they reveal, should not be underestimated. They provided the first framework for understanding the global imbalances in supply and demand. The United Nations FAO, which absorbed the IIA at the end of the 1940s, still carries out agricultural censuses. The IIA reports of the 1920s anticipated many of the topics that dominated the 1930s and beyond: worsening terms of trade for agricultural goods, their oversupply, the rationale for protectionist policies and industrialization, and the resilience of small farms.

And yet, the approach of the IIA differed significantly from the post-World War II experience of the FAO. The initiatives of the IIA needed the support of governments, but they rested on an ideal of engaging with the representatives of the agriculturalists that disappeared almost completely from the intergovernmental practices of the United Nations. The statistical practice of the IIA was shaped by the interests of the associations of agriculturalists. Agricultural

⁶⁰ Giovanni Federico, 'Not Guilty? Agriculture in the 1920s and the Great Depression', *JECHist*. 65 (2005) denies the significance of the *Preisschere* for the general economic crisis of 1929, but believes that credit might have had an effect.

⁶¹ FAO Archive D5 comité économique agricole, 1928-1935, Brizi, IIA, Comité économique agricole, Ière Session, 1-3 Octobre 1929, Enquetes complémentaires sur les conditions générales de l'Agriculture et documentation ordinaire de l'Institut, partie IIème, p. 16.

organizations were indispensable to the collection of micro data on costs and income, and the Institute actively sought the involvement of the agricultural elites of the different member countries. Nevertheless, we would probably mislead if we interpreted the mobilization of the expertise of interest groups by interwar international organizations as the beginning of an international civil society.

Giuseppe De Michelis and Edoardo Pantano wanted to replicate in international organizations ‘the system of brokerage between interest groups, somehow incorporated in a permanent fashion, in the decision-making process of the state’, the system that Charles S. Maier called ‘corporatism’.⁶² The ILO – the relationship between the ILO and the Fascist regime was much better than that between the LoN and Italy before the invasion of Ethiopia – probably represents a precedent for De Michelis’ ideas.⁶³ The ILO, however, had a tripartite structure that was meant to institutionalize class struggle and involved representatives of employers and employees alongside state representatives, while the governance of the IIA completely ignored social conflicts within agriculture.

The kind of corporatist representation of agricultural interests attempted by the leadership of the IIA during the 1920s and early 1930s rested on the conservative mobilization of the agricultural classes that began, with all its ambiguities, in the late nineteenth century. It presupposed a shared interest among the agricultural classes, thus transforming a spatial difference (urban/rural) into an economic difference (industrial/agricultural). Social scientists, especially agricultural economists, were the main proponents of such essentializing discourse.⁶⁴ The denial of internal conflict within agriculture was combined with the pugnacious role that De Michelis envisaged for the IIA as the representative of agricultural producers in the world arena.

Because of its institutional structure and deep ideological tenets, the IIA expressed an understanding of the world agricultural system that contrasted dramatically with the approach eventually developed at the League of Nations by experts from the British Empire. The scientific effort of the technical agencies of the LoN, which would eventually dominate the FAO in the post-war years, focused on famine, nutritional need and the underproduction of food. The IIA insisted instead on the threat of low prices of agricultural commodities for the welfare of farmers.⁶⁵ It was the purchasing power of the farmers that worried the IIA. The two

⁶² Charles S. Maier, *Recasting bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the decade after World War I* (1975), pp. 58off.

⁶³ According to Stefano Gallo, ‘Dictatorship and international organizations. the ILO as a “test ground” for Fascism’, in Sandrine Kott and Joëlle Droux (eds), *Globalizing social rights. the International Labour Organization and beyond* (2013), the ILO remained a site of ideological ‘experimentation’ for socialists, not immune to flirting with Italian corporatist ideology; this was perhaps the case with the Belgian Henri de Man, who would later head a collaborationist government in Belgium, and was one of the candidates for the succession to Thomas, see Michel Brélaz, *Henri de Man: une autre idée du socialisme* (1985), pp. 605ff.

⁶⁴ Pierre Cornu and Jean-Luc Mayaud, ‘Introduction. Le temps retrouvé de l’agrarisme? Réflexion critique sur l’historicité et l’actualité d’un paradigme’, in Pierre Cornu and Jean-Luc Mayaud (eds), *Au nom de la Terre: agrarisme et agrariens, en France et en Europe, du 19e siècle à nos jours: actes du 23e colloque de l’Association des ruralistes français* (2007), p. 14.

⁶⁵ Amrith and Clavin, ‘Feeding the World’, p. 30. The IIA repeatedly reiterated its concern for ‘the reduction in purchasing power, an inevitable result of the fall in agricultural prices’, for instance in its *Memorandum on the World Crisis in relations to the agriculture of the European States, with particular reference to unemployment, 1931*: http://biblio-archiv.unog.ch/Dateien/CouncilMSD/C-323-M-148-1931-VII_EN.pdf

approaches only coincided in projects for intensifying land use and expanding the supply of land to land-hungry farmers.

Moreover, as noticed by Clavin and Amrith in 2013, the defence of the 'agricultural classes' was not politically neutral. The claims of the agricultural classes, whenever they were articulated without reference to class distinctions between owners, tenants, smallholders, etc., were often combined with nationalist arguments against the post-war order established at Versailles and the League. It is not surprising therefore that the relationship between the IIA and League deteriorated so quickly. Paradoxically, though, notwithstanding the fierce battle that the IIA fought to preserve its independence from the LoN, the inclusion of the Institute's data in the League's *Yearbook* was crucial for their dissemination.

Thanks to this inclusion, the Institute's data on production and trade became ubiquitous in discussions of the economic crisis of 1929 and of the agrarian crisis. They contributed to a vision of a global food system according to the geography of production, production costs and exports that remained influential far beyond the existence of the Institute itself. In particular, the IIA data gave rise to a taxonomy of world nations that was repeated by different authors with small differences.⁶⁶ This taxonomy insisted on the existence of an industrial core and of different peripheries: a European periphery consisting of the south, central and eastern Europe, the land-abundant agricultural giants (Argentina, Canada, Australia, Brazil, Russia) and a dependent periphery of famine-ridden countries (China, many African colonies, and, increasingly so, India). As Benini's project made clear, regions where land was abundant and productivity per hectare low, had to be developed and populated with people coming from the over-populated regions of the world.

On the one hand this was a vision from the periphery: it stressed how painful the new world was for agriculturalists and for agricultural countries, and how much they suffered from protectionism and trade unbalances. In this sense, the role of Argentina – a leading country in agricultural production, which was greatly hit by the increasing autarky in the core countries – was remarkable. The economist and central banker Raul Prebisch was, alongside his future friend Carlos Brebbia of the IIA, among the experts who drafted the preparatory document for the World Economic and Monetary Conference held in London in 1933.⁶⁷ In their draft, the experts focused on the problems of the transmission of the cycle from the industrial core to the agricultural periphery. Predominantly agricultural countries suffered from the same *Preisschere* (a widening gap between industrial inputs and agricultural outputs) that affected agriculturalists within nations. Through Prebisch, among others, the taxonomic legacy of the IIA made its way into the development debates of the second half of the twentieth century, and contributed to shape a durable image of the world, sometimes in competition with policies drawing on the expertise of the UN FAO.

On the other hand, though, the vision fostered by the leadership of the IIA and their allies in the organizations of agriculturalists was fraught with contradictions. Statistics alone were

⁶⁶ For instance, Vladimir P. Timoshenko, *World agriculture and the depression* (1933), Mario Bandini, *Agricoltura e crisi* [Agriculture and crisis] (1937).

⁶⁷ Prebisch declared that he met Brebbia during the

preparations for the conference, Julio González del Solar, 'Conversaciones con Raúl Prebisch' (1983) [www.facso.uchile.cl/publicaciones/moebio/25/mallorquin.htm].

not sufficient to regulate the contrasting interests of nations. The contradictions, though, ran deep in the Institute's governance, where the representation of agriculturalists was always subordinate to the prominence of the states. There was no possible united front of agriculturalists and agricultural countries, and the Italian government, for all its support of the IIA initiatives and all its alleged agrarianism, raised custom duties against wheat imports in 1925. Soon after Mussolini launched the battle to increase the domestic production of wheat and reduce the scale of wheat imports. The clearest demonstration of how the agrarianists were unable to coordinate diverging national interests came after the World Economic and Monetary Conference held in London in 1933. In the margin of the conference, the major grain producing countries signed an agreement that established production quotas and tariff coordination, but the agreement was never implemented and the signatories preferred to resort to protectionism and internal price support.

VI

During the interwar years, the IIA, backed by the diplomacy of Italy and of other countries, tried to find a new role for itself in competition with the League of Nations. This strategy needed the LoN as the international arena in which the IIA could advance its agrarianist agenda. The IIA though became quickly irrelevant over the course of the 1930s as its leadership became more radically fascist and, in particular, after Italy left the LoN in 1937.

Theodor Porter has shown how 'the pursuit of objectivity' has been a crucial but controversial driver in the history of the quantification of social facts.⁶⁸ Critical historians have sometimes interpreted the pursuit of objectivity as 'objectifying, technocratic reason'.⁶⁹ The story told in this article shows that objectivity was not a clear-cut criterion for economic expertise in the interwar years. The League distinguished between 'political' and 'technical' affairs, the former referring to the intergovernmental negotiations and the latter to 'objective' expertise. But Clavin stressed the limits and ultimate speciousness of this distinction. Governments, on the one hand, tried to shape League's reports in order to impede criticism of them. The League's institutions, on the other hand, often attempted to 'conceal the political significance of issues it wanted to subject to international examination' by declaring them to be merely technical issues.⁷⁰

As we saw, the IIA reacted to the concealed political agenda of the LoN, with a political agenda of its own, which informed its statistics. Aware that it could not compete with the League in terms of general economic expertise, the IIA came to specialize in methodologically more conservative types of expertise. While still providing up-to-date statistics of production and trade, it deliberately rejected the opportunity to develop its capability in the analysis of the business cycle – an essential area of expertise for the League. In terms of economic analysis, the *Bulletin of agricultural and commercial statistics* of the IIA never advanced beyond some very rough descriptive treatment of the data. Under the guidance of De Michelis, the IIA decided, instead, to focus on a different task, which combined technical expertise and an openly

⁶⁸ Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in numbers: the pursuit of objectivity in science and public life* (1995).

⁶⁹ Tooze, *Statistics and the German state*, p. 285.

⁷⁰ Clavin, *Securing the world economy*, p. 15.

political stance, blurring the distinction between 'technical' and 'political'. To De Michelis, the *enquête* of 1928, which summarized the point of view of the associations of agriculturalists, was more important for the IIA than economic analysis. Posing as the representative of agrarian interests required different criteria of 'objectivity.'

The League of Nations contributed to shaping the world institutions that came into existence after the Second War World largely because of the ability of its economic and financial experts to be innovative and scientifically challenging. Hindered by a narrow conception of its mission, the old Institute rapidly sank into oblivion in the post-War world and it was superseded, both in institutional and policy terms, by the FAO.