



## Paul Otlet and the International Sociology of Intellectual Work

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On the occasion of a world congress in 1910 in Brussels Paul Otlet, Henri La Fontaine and Cyrille Van Overbergh founded the Union of International Associations (UIA), an umbrella organization of international non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations. The UIA posed the problem of the coordination of and cooperation between these international organizations. Paul Otlet described the organizational principle of international organizations in direct opposition to that of the nation-states: whereas the nation-states represented a group of interests according to a territorial and ethnic basis, the international organizations represented the interests of professional, economic and scientific groups. The great task of the future was, according to Otlet, to realize a world constitution between the power of the nation-states and of the international organizations. A new balance was to be found between the administration of the territory within the national boundaries and the administration of the emerging international networks that transcended these boundaries.

In several schemas and organigrams, Otlet expressed how he envisioned a confederative structure of social international relations, and how the national and international structures of social organizations could be brought in conformity with one another. The most well known schema of Otlet is that of a network of international organizations, centralized around a coordinating international centre. But besides this schema, other less known schemas drawn by Otlet, give us insight in his 'international sociology'. In these schemas, society is structured as a 'body' or as 'a topology' of functions. These schemas remind of the conception of the 'hyperorganism' of Herbert Spencer, but a closer study reveals a more diverse ramification of Otlet's sociology. Starting from these schemas, this paper will try to retrace Otlet's sociological conception of the UAI. His conception will be compared to other sociological models proposed by scientists and sociologists with whose ideas Otlet was acquainted: Ernest Solvay, René Worms, Hector Denis, Guillaume De Greef, Henri Fayol, Wilhelm Ostwald, H.G Wells, and Jacques Novicow.

### **Biography**

Wouter Van Acker is a doctoral researcher at the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of Ghent University. He graduated from Ghent University (Belgium) as a civil engineer-architect in 2004. In his last year he studied at the TU Berlin, where he wrote his Master's thesis on the brick sculptures of the Danish artist Per Kirkeby. His research examines the work of Paul Otlet (1868-1944) in exploring the analogy between the organization of space and the organization of knowledge. He is especially interested in the many schematic and diagrammatic representations that Otlet used to visualize the complexity of the space in which information is organized, disseminated and exploited. Otlet's visualizations about his ideas of the universe of knowledge, the network of scholarly organizations, the universal encyclopaedia, the world city and municipal administration will be used to show that knowledge is fundamentally about spatial organization.

Among recent publications are : " Een geografie van de informatienetwerken in de stedelijke beweging. Het informatiemodel van Paul Otlet (1868-1944) voor de Union Internationale des Villes." *Stadsgeschiedenis*, 3(2) 2008, pp. 122-142; "Pantopia in Utopia: The World City of Paul Otlet," In B. Vanderlinden (Ed.), *Brussels Biennial*. Köln: Walther König, 2008 pp. 242-245; "Seeing the Network for the Trees of Knowledge: Paul Otlet's (1868-1944) Universal Network of Documentation," In F. Hackney, J. Glynne & V. Minton (Eds.), *Networks of Design. Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society (UK)*, University College Falmouth, 3-6 September. Boca Raton: Universal Publishers, 2009 pp. 397-404.