How it all started. Coubertin's journey of inspiration to Olympism

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Summary

This paper follows Baron Pierre de Coubertin's pathway in shaping the discourse of Olympism. By examining the founder's correspondence, publications and personal records, we seek to understand the sources of inspiration, motives and relationships that led him into the revival of the modern Olympic Games. In particular we identify the implications of Coubertin's speech and actions for the ways in which Olympism and Olympic sport were conceptualised in late nineteenth century Europe.

Keywords: Olympism, Coubertin, Olympic Games, Europe

Between nationalism and cosmopolitanism

Pierre de Coubertin, during his life, experienced the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war, and a succession of social changes, as part of the modernisation processes of his era. His native country, France, experienced the victory of democracy, the industrialisation of its economy, the spread of socialist values and establishment of socialist structures, the secularisation of civil society, the absorption of provincial cultures into a strong dominant national culture, the linkage of individualism and nationalism but also the interconnectedness of the world due to an increasing tide of cosmopolitanism [MacAloon 1981]. Pierre de Coubertin thus lived in an era which experienced distinctive dynamic processes and the social, economic and cultural mobility, observing such processes from the privileged perspective of a French aristocratic background. MacAloon emphasises that,

> Genealogy is linked with much larger social interests than simple ancestor reckoning. In most social groups – peoples, classes, castes, movements, and so on – a family tree is not a mere map of blood ties, but an index and icon of the fundamental values which 'blood' represents to that group. [MacAloon 1981: 10–11]

Hoberman (1984) also argues that Coubertin must be understood as a representative of his noble class and an exemplary citizen of the French Third Republic. In this context, Coubertin's values might be seen to a certain extent as a reflection of the conservatism of his class. Interestingly, his desire for success through important endeavours, such as pedagogical reform in France or the Olympic Games, can also be attributed to the high expectations derived from his aristocratic background. In his 1908 memoir *Une Campagne de Vingt-et-un ans,* Coubertin, commenting on his resignation from the military French academy St. Cyr, had said that he wished to change a career and associate his name with a great educational reform. Inspired by Philhellenism and influenced by the rising cosmopolitanism of his era, Coubertin was committed to initiate educational reforms that would 'modernise' the French educational system.

Coubertin, the Social reformist

Coubertin aligned himself with the liberal, republican classicist intellectuals by writing in the journal *La Reforme Sociale* (1883), a combined organ of two organisations, the *Société d'économie sociale* and the *Unions de la paix sociale*, where his first thoughts and expressions about *l' education athlétique* and *la pédagogie sportive* can be found. Both organisations were founded and led by Frédéric Le Play, a sociologist and social philosopher of the mid-nineteenth century who Coubertin admired and many of whose views he shared. Le Play's work had raised much criticism but also received much recognition for its

emphasis on the methods of 'fieldwork' and 'observation' with the modern meaning of the terms in sociological research [MacAloon 1986].

His social philosophy was centred on values of social peace, worker's rights, family, Catholicism and decentralisation. He founded first the *Societé d'économie sociale* that was open to amateur sociologists who wanted to learn his methods. However, after the historical events of 1870–71 (the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune) and the need for an ideological orientation, he founded the *Unions de la paix sociale* and established the journal *La Reforme Sociale*, which had a conservative character and promoted the values of family, Catholicism and social classification. Pierre de Coubertin related strongly to Frédéric Le Play because they both shared a desire to reform French education. Coubertin's biggest ambition in the 1880s was to improve the use of recreation time and introduce sport in schools. Coubertin wrote the following in *La Reforme Sociale* (1888):

> Other ties of even greater significance unite the Committee with the Unions, the goal that it aims to achieve being first and foremost among them. Many a time, Frederic Le Play dwelt on the deplorable tendencies of our current academic regimen, and on the need for immediate reform. We are going to try to achieve one of the points in his program. Were he still alive, we would certainly enjoy his support and assistance. In our view, improved use of recreation time and the spread of sports among school children are but means to an end. We have set our aim higher. The reason we are using these means is that observation and experience have shown that they are effective in giving young people the precious qualities of energy, perseverance, judgment and initiative that, among us, are the prerogative of only a few. Much can be expected of a generation brought up in this way. [Coubertin 1888, 2000: 75]

Frédéric le Play's influence on Coubertin is reflected not only in their common plans for social reform, but also in the use of the methods of 'observation' and 'experience' as reliable measurement tools. In common with Le Play, Coubertin believed that social reform should start from education and the young population of France.

> Social reform must be achieved through education. Our efforts must focus not on adults, but on children, in order to ensure our success. We must give those children qualities of mind that will make them capable of understanding, and qualities of character that will render them capable of performing the transformation in which your illustrious founder saw France's salvation. [Coubertin 1888, 2000: 76]

On July 1, 1888 the *Committee for the Propagation of Physical Education* was founded, the Secretary General being Coubertin, and it aimed at the transformation of French education. In a letter on behalf of the Committee to the members of *Societé d'économie sociale* and *Unions de la paix sociale,* asking for their help in the efforts towards social reform through education, he uses the word 'crusade' to describe their attempts.

> In effect, our work is shielded from any political quarrels. It is purely social, and that is one more consideration for you. We are confident that you will assist us in the crusade that we have undertaken, against a system of education that is so ill suited to the needs of the present day, and that has proven incapable of producing the true citizens that France needs. [Coubertin 1888, 2000: 77]

Their social reform, characterised here as 'apolitical', aimed to change the conditions of the relationship between the individual and the state, giving more rights to individuals and limiting the authority of the state. In a speech in Boston adopting the discourse of both liberal individualism and of traditional conservatism (in a manner redolent of the British Conservative Party's incorporation in the late twentieth century of the neo-liberalism of the New Right and of patrician One Nation Conservatism), Coubertin argues that:

> We want free-minded self-governing men, who will not look upon the State as a baby looks on his mother, who will not be afraid of having to make their own way through life. Such is the work that our Association has pointed out to French teachers as being the most important part of their duty. It involves practically what I call the training for freedom. [Coubertin 1890, 2000: 139]

Coubertin, as a social theorist of the French Third Republic promoted the value of 'freedom', hoping for social peace and harmony. Particularly if seen in their French translation *'liberté'* (freedom) and '*ésprit libre*' (free-minded), they appeal to the values of freedom and democracy, upon which French social structures were established after the French Revolution (1789) [Hoberman 1986]. Coubertin's ideological framework in this period is predominantly and classically republican with an emphasis on the values of 'freedom, God and country'.

> And so I have the right to say, and to repeat, that we expect this transformed education to produce […] active and determined citizens who will adopt as their own the motto of the minister of whom I spoke earlier: citizens who will love God, country, and freedom. [Coubertin 1889b: 68]

Nonetheless, he promotes a more cautious, more flexible form of conservatism that allows changes for the betterment of French society, thus his vision for reform(s). His disappointment with the so far unsuccessful attempts of a social reform is evident below:

> At times I have wondered – and certainly I am not the only one who has asked this question – how it is that the doctrines that form the overall social reform program have not had any clear impact on French society so far. These doctrines were proclaimed by an illustrious man whose name is familiar to everyone. They have been supported by societies whose simple, ingenious machinery makes it easy to propagate them. Now, these doctrines are defended by devoted citizens thoroughly persuaded of their value. What is missing from these doctrines that keeps them from gaining the upper hand and revitalizing the country? The reason is that the doctrines of Frederic Le Play are eminently reasonable, and that they are addressed, when all is said and done, to a people that is not. [Coubertin 1888, 2000: 75]

This statement illustrates a number of themes: Coubertin's disappointment at the humbling of France in the Franco-Prussian war and a yearning for reinstatement of lost international power and influence;, his personal aspiration to attach his name to a pedagogical reform, and the influence on his thinking of the liberal republican classicist Frédéric le Play promoting a successful social reform through education. These factors motivated him to dedicate himself during this period to the project of French educational reform. As part of this project, Coubertin travelled to England, America and Canada in order to gain ideas about how to initiate successfully physical education in schools. However, it was English education that impressed him the most and provided the model on which he wished to develop French educational reform.

Inspired from England, Ireland

The birth of modern sport is credited to England, dating from the middle of the nineteenth century. Although at this time, games and sports were not the exclusive privilege of the British, Britain has been acknowledged as the society that developed them into their current forms. Many of the rules of sport were first codified in nineteenth century England, where their governing bodies were also established [Guttman 1978; Guttmann 1994]. Thus, Coubertin visited the English and Irish schools and universities in order to make observations on their educational efficiency. Using Le Play's method of 'observation', which was still new, Coubertin was willing to discover those qualities of English education that were highly regarded at that time, and then transfer them to the French educational context. He visited many places and compiled his work in a 326-page book entitled *Education en Angleterre*, which was comprised of an introduction and sixteen chapters. He also wrote a large number of articles, many based on the findings of his observations of educational practice [Müller 2000].

A critical formative influence in the evolution of sport in England was exercised by the Greater Public Schools, elite private boarding schools, where team sports were initiated as a means of social control [Toohey and Veal 2000]. Key to this model of sport was the notion of amateurism, that is playing the game for intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards, which reinforced the social distinction between the so-called 'gentleman amateur' and 'professionals' from the lower classes of society who traded on their physical sporting capital [Bourdieu 1989; Gruneau 1993]. As an important component of the curriculum, sport was linked with religion in an attempt to develop 'Muscular Christians'. These individuals, mostly representatives of the privileged classes, supposedly exhibited the positive qualities of both sport and religion, following the ancient Greek ideal, and core concept of Muscular Christianity, that of a 'sound mind in a sound body'. However, the pantheon of gods had been replaced by a Christian monotheism, appealing to a notion of chivalry, which, it was purported, could be traced back to the Middle Ages [Toohey and Veal 2000]. Three elements of English education drew Coubertin's attention: a) the centrality of sport in the curriculum, as based on the concept of body and mind harking back to an English construction of the ancient Greek ideal, b) the 'elastic' relationship between the Church and the State in the domain of education, and c) the English Public School preparation of individuals for maintenance and expansion of the British Empire.

Coubertin has continuously emphasised in his writings the major role that sport played in English education. He noted in *La Reforme Sociale* (1887):

> Gentlemen, I now come to what seems to me the most noteworthy aspect of English education: I mean the role that sports plays in that education. This role is physical, moral, and social, all at the same time. We have a two-fold reason to consider it here, because I believe that, although we may hope for certain reforms in our system, it is only through sports that they can be introduced. [Coubertin 1887, 2000: 114]

It was believed that some of the virtues required for sound, masculine, muscular Christian practice could be learnt through participation in sport. These included qualities such as sportsmanship, leadership, teamwork, the ability to be a good winner and loser, as well as a work ethic. The strong bond between body and mind, the combination and cultivation of both physical and mental qualities were central to an holistic development of individuals. Coubertin wished to reform French education on the basis of this view of physical culture, bound up with a set of values inspired by the Hellenic civilisation and the English Public Schools culture.

> Minds, like bodies, are constantly occupied by that passion which carries them away and subjugates them. This is, I repeat, encouraged as much as pos-

> sible. The English believe in the need for enthusiasm at this age. But they think, too, that it is not easy, even if it is a good thing, to engender in children such enthusiasm for Alexander or Caesar. They must have something more alive, more real. The dust of Olympia is still what stirs their healthy competitive spirit the most, and the most naturally. They gladly pursue honours for which they see grown men proud to compete […] It has been said that the life of the thinker and that of the athlete are utterly opposed. For my part, I have often seen that those who were the leaders in physical exercises were also leaders in their studies. Their excellence in one area gives them a desire to be first in everything. There is nothing like the habit of victory to assure success. [Coubertin 1887: 116]

The focus of French education was on exhausting intellectual readings and 'non-beneficial', 'wasted' recreation time. In relation to French education he argued once, "boredom and weakness, those purveyors of immorality, hold sway pretty much from top to bottom in French education. In the public high schools, add to that the absence of moral instruction and the poor utilisation of holidays, and you have the formula for creating a high school student" [Coubertin 1889a, 2000: 71]. In contrast, the English education, having achieved equilibrium between theory and practice through sport, prepared its pupils for their demanding roles in society.

> If you are familiar with the English, you know that life is untenable for the timid, the weak, and the lazy. In the tumult of existence, such persons are driven back, overwhelmed, and stepped on. They are tossed aside, seen merely as impediments. Nowhere is selection more pitiless. There are two distinct races: the race of men with frank expressions and strong muscles, with a self-assured stride, and the race of weaklings with resigned and humble faces, a vanquished air. Well, what holds true in the world holds true in the schools as well! The weak are tossed aside. The benefits of this education apply only to the strong. [Coubertin 1887, 2000: 119]

One of the foremost and most famous exponents of such educational doctrine was Thomas Arnold, a clergyman and director of Rugby College for fourteen years, from 1828. Arnold transformed the school as an institution by attaching to sport a central role in the curriculum [Müller 2000]. Coubertin began his '21-year campaign' having a vision to transfer to France Arnold's athletic education, the approach Arnold used in order to produce Muscular Christians.

> In a word, one must hurry to create a man, morally and physically, of this child who has bad instincts and passions whose assault he will suffer; he must be given premature muscles and will, what Arnold called "true manliness". Initiative, daring, decisiveness, the habit of self-reliance and of taking responsibility for one's own failures... all these are qualities for which one cannot make up for lost time. It is far more important to cultivate them from early childhood than to strive to inculcate scientific notions in young minds, notions that vanish all too quickly for the very reason that they were placed there too late. [Coubertin 1887, 2000: 115]

Coubertin thought that, if Arnold's athletic education was adopted by the French, it would help France to recover (*rebronzer*) after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian war [MacAloon 1981: 51]. As the representative of the French Minister of Public Instruction at the Physical Training Congress in Boston in late 1889, Coubertin visited North America for the first time. There, Coubertin praised in his lecture the work of Thomas Arnold and revealed that the French Educational Reform Association had been established upon his principles, "the English athletic sport system as understood and explained by the greatest of modern teachers, Thomas Arnold of Rugby [should be adopted]. His principles are the ones on which the French Educational Reform Association was founded last year" [Coubertin 1890: 138].

Guttmann (1992b) and Hoberman (1995) argue that Coubertin was misled by Hughes to think that Thomas Arnold had been a keen advocate of sports. In fact, they suggest that Thomas Arnold was far more interested in boys' moral education than in their physical development. Interestingly, there were two relatively well known books written about Rugby school, *Tom Brown's School Days (1857)* and *The Life and Correspondence of Dr. Arnold (1844)*. The first was a fictional account written by Thomas Hughes, a student not much noticed by Arnold, and the latter was written by Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, who although he came late to Rugby, was promoted to the fifth grade due to his intelligence, bringing him to the attention of Arnold who took him into his inner circle. Thomas Hughes described Arnold as a kind, sensitive, open-minded and benevolent teacher. Nevertheless, MacAloon (1981) argues that Thomas Hughes has possibly romanticised the situation in Rugby school and the distant relationship with the master did not allow him to gain a deeper insight. On the other hand, Stanley, having experienced a closer contact with Arnold, expresses a terrible fear and anxiety about meeting Arnold's high expectations. Therefore, MacAloon (1981) argues, "Coubertin either missed this [i.e. Stanley's perspective], ignored it, or balanced it off against the far healthier portrait of Thomas Hughes, that more ingenuous, airier, and to Coubertin, more kindred soul' (p. 62). As evident in the documents, it seems that Coubertin was aware of Arnold's strict and rigid profile. Nonetheless, he believed that such doctrine, based upon the principle of selection, a core aspect of the popular British ideology of athleticism, was right and fair for the pupils.

> One day, when problems had arisen requiring that several students be expelled, showing discontent in the ranks, before the whole school Arnold spoke these words, which have remained famous and which sum up his whole approach: "It is not necessary that there be 300, 100, or even 50 students here; but it is necessary that there be nothing but Christian Gentlemen". This passage deals with an error in public opinion, then as widespread in England as it is today in France. The public held that secondary schools were institutions intended to correct bad character, a detestable notion that can only serve to make a school into a correctional institution and consequently, a rotten place for the honest children who happen to be there […] This corresponds to a very British idea, that of selection. In the physical order, as in the moral order, it is always the elite that is targeted, because a superior phalanx, though few in number, yields infinitely more than very widespread mediocrity. Thus everything tends to be given to those who already have something, as in the Gospel. [Coubertin 1887, 2000: 107–8]

The 'British' idea of selection, as embodied in the strict Arnoldian doctrine appealed to Coubertin, who envisaged a sound youth for France. Such education could prepare adolescents to become future citizens of a stronger State.

Church relations

The struggle for the French educational system represented the antagonistic side of Church-State relations under the Republic. When the Republic dismantled the clerical monopoly on education, "it declared that education under the state was to be 'lay', or non-sectarian, that is to say not specifically Catholic. The Church chose to interpret neutrality as hostility and branded the new schools as 'godless'" (Hoberman, 1986: 68). Coubertin, a keen supporter of the new policy of the Republic, stated the following:

> One can make an accomplished mind out of a child raised in absolute atheism; but if you manage to make that person an honest man, it comes about through no fault of your own. Whether one is Catholic or Lutheran, Calvinist or Orthodox, religion is not a lesson to be learned, it is an atmosphere to be breathed. That is why government institutions, which necessarily welcome children from different religions, must be day schools and not boarding schools. Other lay, Catholic, Protestant, or even free-thinking institutions should be set up around them. Why not? There must be freedom for all. [Coubertin, 1889c, 2000: 107–8]

In an attempt to relax the Church-State tension and maintain social peace, the government often emphasised and publicly appreciated the role of religion. In similar vein, Coubertin also underlined the importance of religion in education.

> There has been talk of codifying moral instruction... Outside of religion, there is no moral instruction to teach to children. There certainly is such instruction for grown adults, which is merely religion with the label removed. Without that label, however, children scarcely understand it and they do not learn it. I do not know where we will be in a hundred years, but today, it is clear that there is no education without religion, i.e. without the idea of God and without the notion of the life to come. [Coubertin, 1889a 2000: 71]

Nonetheless, Hoberman (1993) argues that Coubertin's 'peculiar religiosity' should not be mistaken for Christianity (p. 38). It was comparable to humanitarian doctrines that did not necessarily embrace the notion of the divine. "I am not one of those", he wrote in a letter, "who thinks humanity can get along without religion. I am taking the word here in its most general sense, not as a belief in a determinate form of divine reality, but as adherence to an ideal of superior life, of the aspiration to perfection" (cited in Hoberman 1986: 41). Besides, his Olympic campaign had often been opposed for its pagan elements that deviated from Christianity. In a sense, Coubertin's religion was ceremony itself, as is evident in the following text about the 1920 Antwerp Olympics from his Olympic Memoirs.

> By holding a public service in the stadium itself, as in Stockholm, before the start of the competitions, we would be forcing the athletes, already grown men, to take part in a religious ceremony that might be displeasing to some. By inviting them, quite outside the Games, to a ceremony in church, we were only associating religion like any other great moral force of mankind with the celebration of the Olympic Games. Then again, it was important that the ceremony should be sufficiently neutral in character to rise above all differences in doctrine. No mass, no priestly address at the altar. [Coubertin 1997k: 474]

Throughout his writings he made many remarks about the Church, some of which were critical. At his most disapproving, he could go so far as to state that "the Churches, entrenched in their opinions as though in fortresses, have always had too great an interest in isolating themselves and in forgetting what they have been" [cited in Hoberman 1986: 41]. In contrast, Coubertin admired the English education for its 'elastic' relationship with religion.

> Nothing could be further from the spirit of English education. Religion plays a large, but separate, part in it. Discipline is understood there as consisting of certain in-house rules of order, no more. What the emi-

> nent Bishop of Orleans finds so essential to French secondary schools, the English dismiss as dangerous and contrary to nature. They reject the regulation of every moment which demands nothing more than obedience – a virtue that, as virtues go, they never seem to have made much of a fuss about, or even to have understood its nature. Two things dominate in the English system, two things that are also means for achieving their ends: freedom and sports. [Coubertin 1887, 2000: 108]

He also suggested that protestant religion allowed more freedom to the individuals,

> Protestant religion [is] a very elastic religion that accommodates the most diverse attitudes. Every child is not necessarily led to first communion, or to the act corresponding to it. So here, there is a conquest for the minister to achieve, what Arnold called "a chess game against Satan". Religious instruction is given every Sunday before the students, whose attention and respectful behaviour is required, at least. In general, dissenters do not show a desire to have their children not attend these sessions. But when they do, their wishes are faithfully respected. [Coubertin 1887, 2000: 113–4]

Interestingly, Coubertin admired Arnold's educational doctrine, which was profoundly religious. Arnold's student Stanley has remarked, "his [i.e. Arnold's] education, in short was not based upon religion, it was religious" (cited in MacAloon 1981: 63). The religious character of Arnold's teaching is apparent in his following letter to a cleric:

> If I do get it (i.e. the headmastership in Rugby), I feel as if I could set to work very heartily, and with God's blessings, I should like to try whether my notions of Christian education are really impracticable, whether our system of public schools has not in it some noble elements, which under the blessing of the Spirit of all holiness and wisdom, might produce fruit even unto life eternal. When I think about it, thus, I really long to take rod in hand. [quoted by MacAloon 1981: 62]

Arnold's teaching could be characterised as conservative and puritan with frequent references to 'monstrous evil', 'vices', 'temptation and corruption' and 'Satan' [cited in MacAloon 1981: 62]. Nonetheless, Coubertin overlooked this and focused his attention on the fact that the English Public schools increasingly prepared their pupils for imperial roles in the Neo-imperial expansion of the late nineteenth century [Mangan and Hickey 2001]. Besides, the pedagogical reform through the introduction of physical activity in schools, the achievement of body and mind equilibrium, and the restriction of Church served a core purpose for Coubertin: the preservation of French domestic social tranquillity and the revitalisation of French society.

Colonial power and the need for a reform

The famous English Public Schools were essentially centred on the ideology of athleticism, which emerged in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. After 1850 the image of the English public schoolboy regained its status in the circles of middle and upper middle class clientele due to innovatory reforms, substantially associated with newly developed athletic fields. The pupils of these schools were prepared for their dynamic roles in British Empire in the late nineteenth century [Mangan and Hickey 2001]. Athleticism was practised, predominantly by the settlers (at least in the early years) throughout the Britain's empire. Horton [2001] argues that the cult of Athleticism coupled with the ideology of Muscular Christianity relentlessly infused the British Games culture into the culture of its colonies. It has even been suggested that "Victorians were determined to civilise the rest of the world, and an integral feature of that process as they understood it was to disseminate the gospel of athleticism which had triumphed so spectacularly at home in the third quarter of the nineteenth century" [cited in Mangan and Hickey 2001: 106]. Coubertin remarks with admiration that physical activity moulded the individuals in Britain and gave them a collective identity.

> Then there are the colonies, that career of expatriation so well suited to the English, who bring their "old England" with them wherever they go. Whether they are "squatters" in New Zealand or planters in America, they are better off for having received such a strong physical and moral education in their schools. Muscles and character are objects of urgent necessity in such circumstances. Although the main cause for our own colonial impotence lies with our deplorable system of succession, it seems to me that education also plays its part. [Coubertin 1887, 2000: 118–9]

Coubertin believed that England owed its strength and colonial power to the ethos of Muscular Christianity and its strong physical culture.

> To the merits of this [English] education we may ascribe a large share in the prodigious and powerful extension of the British Empire in Queen Victoria's reign. It is worthy to note that the beginning of this marvellous progress and development dates from the same time which saw the school reforms of the United Kingdom in 1840. In these reforms physical games and sports hold, we may say, the most prominent place: The muscles are made to do the work of a moral education. It is the application according to modern requirements of one of the most characteristic principles of Grecian civilisation: To make the muscles be chief factor in the work of moral education. In France, on the contrary, physical inertion was

> considered till recent times an indispensable assistant to the perfectioning of intellectual powers. Games were supposed to destroy study. Regarding the development of the character of the youth, the axiom, that a close connection exists between the force of will and the strength of the body never entered anybody's mind. [Coubertin 1896, 2000: 308]

Coubertin's interest in revitalising French society was very strong. It is clear from this text that in physical activity, as practised by the Muscular Christians in England, Coubertin saw a 'tool' for maintaining and expanding imperialistic power. Lucas argues that,

> Baron Pierre de Coubertin was convinced that the sport-centred English public school system of the late 19th century was the rock upon which the vast and majestic British Empire rested. In the recondite scholarship of Dr. Arnold and in the ensuing trend toward manly sport at Rugby and in England, Coubertin saw a catharsis, not only for the English, but also for the Frenchmen and eventually all mankind. [Lucas 1980: 23]

Lucas' point is re-affirmed, when one reads the following text from Coubertin's speech addressed to the *Greek Liberal Club of Lausanne* (1918):

> It was left to the great Englishman Thomas Arnold to take up the Greek work at the point where a hostile fate had interrupted it, and to clothe it in an educational form adapted to modern conditions. The world had forgotten how organised sport can create moral and social strength, and thereby plays a direct part in a nation's destinies; had so far forgotten it that the spread of Arnold's doctrines and example first in England and then throughout the British Empire was an almost unconscious process. Rugby School may thus be truly considered as the starting-point of the British revival. [Coubertin 1918, 2000: 272]

Coubertin has often associated sport with the strengthening of national vigour. He believed that athletics could "be used to strengthen peace or prepare for war" and that the victory of a nation was often due to its athletic virility [Coubertin 1997d, 2000: 322].

> At fixed periods all the other manifestations of national life grouped themselves around a considered athleticism […] Thus when the Persian peril threatened Hellenism between 500 and 449 B.C. unexpected armies and navies barred the way to the ambitions of Darius and Xerxes and the greed of their advisers. There had been hesitation before the massive forces of the adversary; more than one city was inclined to submit to the ultimatum. Athens rose up. Victory proved it right. Now if many centuries later – for history has eloquent turnings and sometimes repeats itself strangely – an English general [Wellington] was able to say that the battle of Waterloo had been won on the playing-fields of Eton, how much more accurate still is it to proclaim that the glory of Marathon and Salamis was forged in the precincts of the Greek Gymnasium. [Coubertin 1918, 2000: 270]

Coubertin was convinced that Thomas Arnold's methods at Rugby School and the British sport ethic taught in their private elite schools had been responsible for Britain's success as a world super power in the nineteenth century, and therefore that it should be exported to France [Guttmann 1992a; Lucas 1980; Toohey and Veal 2000]. Thereafter, one of his major tasks was to persuade the French to introduce physical education in schools based on the classical values of the Greek gymnasium. Coubertin believed that if France would emulate this system, then the nation's former glory days could be revived. In 1919, after the end of the First World War and the victory of the *Entente* Powers, Coubertin argued that France owed to a great extent its regained strength to the educational reforms based on Arnold's model of sport ethic.

> This is the kind of sport [the English sport], which I had in mind thirty years ago when I made a pact with Jules Simon for the reinvigoration of France. The conviction of the septuagenarian philosopher was no less ardent than my own, and events have fulfilled our hopes. A manlier and broader education soon begot results as fruitful as those whose benefits the England of Thomas Arnold had reaped some time before. In vain did Frenchmen blinded by party spirit undertake the sorry task of portraying to the outside world a decadence, which existed only within themselves. History will delineate the rising curve which enabled the Republic to write in forty years the most admirable of colonial epics and to guide youth through the dangers of pacifism and freedom pushed to extreme limits right up to that 1914 mobilisation which will remain one of the finest spectacles which Democracy has given the world. [Coubertin 1918, 2000: 272]

Coubertin speaks with satisfaction about the new situation in France, which is attributed to the new educational system. He refers to his long-term efforts in this direction together with Jules Simon, Minister of Public Instruction from 1870 to 1879 and President of the Committee for the Propagation of Physical Education. Being relieved that France survived the First World War, and most importantly that France appeared stronger than Germany in the post-Franco-Prussian period, Coubertin could not hide his enthusiasm for such results. The value of physical education was emphasised as a principal factor for this national empowerment.

> Recent events have resulted in entirely new circumstances. Sports are on the front lines of the forces that brought about victory. It is to sports that we owe the magnificent innovations that made it possible for

> England and the United States to transport unexpected armies to the theatre of war. It is thanks to them that the valiant Sokols covered their homelands with laurels, even before the borders were set and freedom assured. It is through sports that France, as heroic as in 1870 but infinitely stronger, was able to raise a powerful rampart of muscle against the invasion. After helping train incomparable soldiers, athleticism also helped sustain their zeal and console them in their suffering. They played football, they fenced, and they boxed right up by the front lines and far from them, as well, in the sad prisoners' camps. Public opinion is aware of these things, and appreciates them. Well-deserved enthusiasm will guarantee the value of physical education, and proclaim the triumph of sports. [Coubertin 1919a, 2000: 738]

Conclusion

As evident in his early writings, Coubertin was at first interested in revitalising French society merely from a nationalistic perspective. His patriotism and faith in the Third Republic prevailed, thus his devotion to social cohesion and the need for social reform. However, in an era that witnessed a remarkable proliferation of trans-national movements and organisations for the sake of world peace and reconciliation, Coubertin's international interests transcended his limited nationalist scope. Coubertin's strategy for reconciling his nationalist and internationalist interests was the revival of modern Olympic Games. This constituted both a response to the cosmopolitan trends of his era but also an attempt to promote sport "as the virile formula on which the health of the State can be founded" [Coubertin 1889a: lines 28–29].

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