

Playing with Greece. Pierre de Coubertin and the Motherland of Humanities and Olympics

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Back to biography as itinerary

Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) is a controversial character and actor in modern history.¹ On the one hand, his friends and disciples along with certain “hagiographers”, including IOC (International Olympic Committee) members and Presidents, have resurrected him as an iconic humanist.² On the other hand, there is a whole literature that condemns him as “the great priest of the religion of sport” and assimilates olympism to fascism.³ Indeed, Pierre de Coubertin deserves far better than mere hagiography or black legend.⁴ New light has come from America with the Belle Époque historian Eugen Weber (1970) who depicted de Coubertin as a fin-de-siècle aristocrat.⁵ The psycho-sociologist and biographer John J. MacAloon (1981) has emphasized his prowess and patronage.⁶ From Germany Dietrich R. Quanz (1993) has connected him with pacifist liberals.⁷ More recently Stefan Wassong (2000) has thrown light on his America experience.⁸ French historians have remained much more circumspect, probably because Pierre de Coubertin was remote

¹ P. Clastres, « Pierre de Coubertin », in M. Attali et J. Saint-Martin (eds.), *Dictionnaire culturel du sport*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2010, p. 441-445 and C. Koulouri, ‘The Inside View of an Outsider: Greek Scholarship on the History of the Olympic Games’, *Journal of Sport History* XXXII, 2 (2005), p. 217-228.

² M.-T. Eyquem, *Pierre de Coubertin. L'épopée olympique*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1966 and Y.-P. Boulongne, *La vie et l'œuvre pédagogique de Pierre de Coubertin, 1863-1937*, Ottawa, Léméac, 1975.

³ J.-M. Brohm, *Le mythe olympique*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1981.

⁴ P. Clastres (eds.), *Pierre de Coubertin. Mémoires de jeunesse*, Paris, Nouveau Monde éditions, 2008, p. 5-18.

⁵ E. Weber, ‘Pierre de Coubertin and the Introduction of Organized Sport in France’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, V, 2 (1970), p. 3-26.

⁶ J.J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol. Pierre de Coubertin and The Origins of the Modern Olympic Games*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

⁷ D.R. Quanz, ‘Civic Pacifism and Sports-Based Internationalism Framework for the Founding of the International Olympic Committee’, *Olympika. The International Journal of Olympic Studies* II, 1993, p. 1-23.

⁸ S. Wassong, *Pierre de Coubertin's American Studies and Their Importance for the Analysis of His Early Educational Campaign*, Würzburg, Ergon Verlag, 2002.

from the Third Republic and appears to them too elitist and anglo-maniac, but also because they have long treated sport history as a minor field.⁹

Meanwhile French historians have returned to overlooked events, and subjects, taking account of Pierre Bourdieu's "biographical illusion" thesis.¹⁰ The genre of biography radically changed during the eighties and nineties, and moved from the traditional novelist's art to a more problematical method, shifting from heroic age to hermeneutical era.¹¹ Biography thus ceased to be a linear narrative from womb to tomb or a psychological and subject-centred interpretation. The new approach to biography takes into account the multiplicity of identities, the posterity of ideas and the cultural heritage. This method also enables a comparison of individuals from similar social and cultural environments. Even so, the "rénovateur des jeux olympiques" requires a distinctive biographical approach that explains the pace of his ideas.¹²

The problem with Pierre de Coubertin is that he himself forged the legend of his life by publishing successive versions of the history of the revival of the Olympic Games and olympism. These accounts highlight the obstacles he faced all along his life, his ploys, his stubborn, blind determination, and confirm his commitment and unshakeable Olympic faith. He belongs to that rare breed of men who consider they can weigh on the destinies of the world. He was presumptuous enough to believe in the two-fold capacity of the Olympic Games to advance peace while serving the cause of nations. Like a demiurge, he liberated forces he could not control, particularly nationalisms that were exacerbated as early as 1896 in the Athens Olympic stadium. The French context and the biographical backdrop should be kept in mind in order to reconsider the case of the rebirth of the Olympic idea and Olympic Games. De Coubertin was just twenty-five years old when he proposed the reform of French lycées by introducing sports on their curriculum, and twenty-nine years old when he conceived the idea of reviving the Olympic Games. It is necessary to go back to his first texts.¹³ His manuscripts – conferences, textbooks and personal letters – have also been too neglected, as well as his youthful memoirs just recently published.¹⁴ For example his call for the revival of the Olympics on 25 November 1892 appears like a last-minute idea. If de Coubertin's relations with Greece were passionate and violent, fraught with reciprocal admiration and painful rifts, the examination of his philhellenism underlines not only its indisputable depth but also and most

⁹ P. Tétart, « Les historiens et l'histoire du sport », in P. Tétart (eds.), *Histoire du sport en France de la Libération à nos jours*, Paris, Vuibert, 2007, p. 393-442.

¹⁰ P. Nora, 'Le retour de l'événement', in J. Le Goff and P. Nora (eds.), *Faire de l'histoire. Nouveaux problèmes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, p. 285-308 and P. Bourdieu, 'L'illusion biographique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1986.

¹¹ F. Dosse, *Le pari biographique. Ecrire une vie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005.

¹² F. Dosse, *La marche des idées*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

¹³ N. Müller, O. Schantz, *Bibliographie des œuvres de Pierre de Coubertin*, Lausanne, CIPC, 1991 and N. Müller (eds.), *Pierre de Coubertin. Textes choisis*, Zürich-Hildesheim-New York, Weidmann, 3 tomes, 1986.

¹⁴ P. Clastres, 'Entre diaspora et intimité, les papiers Pierre de Coubertin', in F. Bosman, P. Clastres and P. Dietschy (eds.), *Le Sport : de l'archive à l'histoire*, Besançon, Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2006, p. 231-243 and P. Clastres, *Pierre de Coubertin. Mémoires de jeunesse*, *op. cit.*

importantly its belatedness: athletic Greece is a late discovery for de Coubertin. The compromise he had to reach with Demetrios Bikelas during the Congress at the Sorbonne in June 1894 also deserves to be recalled: the games meant to be held in Paris in 1900 were preceded by a first revival in Athens in 1896. From that moment until the Paris conference of Arts and Letters in 1906, just at the time of the intermediary games or meso-Olympics, de Coubertin had to mount a vigorous resistance to the attempt by the Greek monarchy to perpetuate the modern Olympics in Athens.

The renaissance of Olympics: A last-minute idea

On 25 November 1892, for the 5th anniversary of the Union of French Societies of Athletic Sports (USFSA in French), the General Secretary Pierre de Coubertin first proposed the reinstatement of the Olympic Games. Others previously had had similar plans, but he was the first really to sense the process of globalization of sport that was taking place. Yet this idea came to him almost at the last minute and the first leaders of French sports were scarcely interested in the issue of olympism. However, this young French baron was not disheartened, so infatuated was he with liberal pacifism and the idea of education by means of sports. In June 1894, he took the opportunity of the world gathering of amateur sport representatives in Paris to secure almost surreptitiously approval of his idea.¹⁵ His idea became reality, but much too soon. The first modern Games did not take place in Paris in 1900 simultaneously with the Universal Exhibition as he later claimed, but in Athens in 1896.¹⁶

Two conclusions for one speech

As is confirmed by the rediscovered manuscript of his 1892 speech, de Coubertin had not initially thought of proposing the reinstatement of the Games.¹⁷ He had had in mind merely to call for the development of sport in French secondary education and at university level, when an idea that came from Rome led him to cross out his first conclusion. A fortnight earlier, in fact, at the Congress for Peace, the President of the International Students Alliance, Hodgson Pratt, had evoked the idea of athletic meetings between foreign students as one of the items of his program for an International Union of Universities. His colleague, the French senator Frédéric Passy, had aroused the assembly when he affirmed that the competitions would serve

¹⁵ P. Clastres, 'La refondation des Jeux olympiques au Congrès de Paris (1894) : initiative privée, transnationalisme sportif, diplomatie des États', *Relations internationales*, n° 111, automne 2002, p. 327-345.

¹⁶ P. de Coubertin, 'Le rétablissement des Jeux olympiques', *La Revue de Paris*, 15 avril 1894, p. 170-184.

¹⁷ F. d'Amat, *Le Manifeste olympique*, Lausanne: éditions du Grand Pont, 1994, p. 39-41.

as “the pacific meeting point of nations”.¹⁸ On his 1892 manuscript Pierre de Coubertin changed his first idea of a union between sport and the French university to the promotion of international peace through sports. But instead of limiting the participation solely to students as proposed to the Rome delegates, he thought of assembling the best athletes on the planet: the best amateur sportsmen. Above all, he gave a name to these international athletic meetings which he borrowed from antiquity: the Olympic Games.

A pacifist and liberal declaration

Taking a deep breath, he declared to his USFSA colleagues who had so far paid him no attention: “There are some people you call utopians when they tell you that wars are bound to vanish and you are not totally wrong, but others believe that the occasions for wars will eventually disappear and to my mind this is not a utopia. It is clear and obvious that the telegraph, the railway, the telephone, the passionate research in the field of science, congresses, world fairs did more for peace than all the treaties and all the diplomatic conventions. Well, I do hope that athletics will do even more. Those who saw 30,000 people run under the rain to attend a football game will not regard this as an exaggeration. Let us export rowers, runners, fencers: this is the free trade of the future, and the day when it is part of the mores of old Europe the cause for peace will receive a powerful and new support. This is enough to encourage your humble servant to think now of the second half of this program. He hopes you will give him a hand as you have helped him so far, and with you he will be allowed to go on and build this grand and beneficial enterprise, on a basis true to the conditions of modern life: the reinstatement of the Olympic Games”.¹⁹

The missing link: the Congresses for Peace in Paris and Rome

It is obvious here that de Coubertin’s main inspiration was not the reference to the truce of antiquity – he knew nothing of it then – but only the pacifism of liberals.²⁰ The liberal pacifism elaborated by jurists as well as Anglo-Saxon, Dutch and Scandinavian philosophers should be distinguished from the leftist pacifism described here by de Coubertin as “utopia”; it is not simply a question of dreaming of a world without wars, as the socialists encouraged, but to elaborate an international code based on the principles of arbitration between nations, to educate the peoples by teaching them history which is not restricted to the dry enumeration of the names of battles but which accounts for the progress of mankind, and to favour cross-border economic and cultural exchanges. Thanks to the intervention of his mentor Jules Simon, the French Premier between 1876 and 1877, Pierre de Coubertin had met pacifist liberals during their Paris Congress in the summer of 1889 and later he was to

¹⁸ Lausanne, Olympic Museum, IOC Historical Archives, Présidents/ Pierre de Coubertin, Correspondance : Frédéric Passy to Pierre de Coubertin, 4 avril 1894

¹⁹ F. d’Amat, *Le Manifeste olympique*, Lausanne, éditions du Grand Pont, 1994, p. 57-58.

²⁰ V. Grossi, *Le Pacifisme européen (1889-1914)*, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1994.

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ask for their patronage for the 1894 Congress which ended with the reinstatement of the Olympic Games.²¹ A quarter of the fifty honorary members were liberal pacifists: the deputies Bonghi, Count Fisogni for Italy, Feldhaus for the German Reich, Frédéric Bajer for Denmark, Balfour for England, Henri Lafontaine for Belgium, Alexandre Hegedius for Hungary, as well as Hodgson Pratt, President of the International Students Alliance, Élie Ducommun, President of the International Bureau for Peace, baron de Suttner, and the prominent French supporters Ernest Lavisse, Joseph Reinach and Frédéric Passy.

Athletic Greece: a late discovery for Pierre de Coubertin

As a young man from the élite classes, Pierre de Coubertin could not ignore the ancient roots of civilization. He was educated in the cult of the Kings of Rome, whom his mother preferred to Republican consuls, emperors and Athenian Democrats.²² But through Father Caron who taught him humanities he discovered history and the seminal philosophy texts.²³ Conversely, Jesuit priests must have disliked the odes of Pindarus, the poet, dedicated to successful athletes in Delphos or Olympia.

First indifference, then opposition to the Olympic Games

If he really had in mind the old games of antiquity, de Coubertin did not at first grant them much importance. In a previously unpublished text that dates back to 1887, he claimed without further ado: “There is in rowing [quoted in English in the French text] something of that enthusiasm of the Olympic Games of Antique Greece, revived by the athletes of modern England.”²⁴ At this time he seems to have derided the idea of reinstating the Olympic Games. In October 1888, for example, he laughed at a plan worked out by his close adversary Paschal Grousset: “The national league of physical education keeps very busy, it wages war, with ideas redolent of the Olympic Games and visions of formal events at the foot of the Eiffel Tower where the Head of State crowns the heads of young athletes with the wreaths of laurel.”²⁵ Lastly, what influence should be accorded to the Dominican priest Didon who was present at the very beginning of de Coubertin’s conversion to sport in 1892? This relative of de Coubertin’s father liked to recall their “Olympic walks” and the athletic competitions

²¹ D.R. Quanz, *op. cit.*

²² P. Clastres (eds), *Pierre de Coubertin. Mémoires de jeunesse, op. cit.*, p. 37-38.

²³ P. Clastres (eds), *Pierre de Coubertin. Mémoires de jeunesse, op. cit.*, p. 68-70.

²⁴ Présidents/Pierre de Coubertin, Cahiers de cours (Gabriel Demombynes), “Rowing” (9 p.), cote 99 408, IOC Historical Archives, Olympic Museum, Lausanne

²⁵ P. de Coubertin, *L’Education anglaise en France*, Paris, Hachette, 1889, p. 205.

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between students when the young de Coubertin attended the Rondeau seminary near Grenoble.²⁶

An Olympic Zeitgeist

The researchers who have contributed to the demonstration that this general trend of thought about olympism had existed since the 19th century are legion.²⁷ An Olympic *Zeitgeist* certainly existed in philhellenic Europe, which had a strong influence on de Coubertin. In October 1890, he paid a visit to the President of the Olympian Society, Dr Brookes, who since 1852 had organized yearly competitions, both literary and athletic, together with equestrian events copied on medieval chivalry, for his fellow citizens of Much Wenloch, a small town in rural Wales. An attempt to make this festival a general event for all British sportsmen, and promoted as the “National Olympian Games”, actually took place in 1866 in London, but nothing followed. In those days, de Coubertin did not yet see himself as the person who would revive the Olympic Games since he noted down: “No need for us then to recall memories of Old Greece and to look into the past for encouragement. We loved sport for itself”.²⁸ From Dr. Brookes he also heard of the existence of the Olympic Games that the Greek patriot Zappas had organised in 1859. But these Olympiads were meant solely for Greek participants and only took place erratically in 1870, 1875, 1877, 1889, 1891 and 1893.²⁹ De Coubertin was not attracted to these Welsh or Greek versions of the games, since he refused to imitate antiquity and only favoured noble arts (fencing, riding) and sports that originated from England in the 19th century with their own established regulations such as rowing, boxing, running, football-rugby, tennis and yachting.

Since 1821, the national renaissance of Greece to the detriment of the Ottoman Empire had strongly nourished the imagination of romantics including the English poet Byron and the French painter Delacroix. Ancient Greece was also increasingly well known because of the archaeological competition taking place between the western nations. The great sanctuaries and their stadiums had been re-discovered during the excavations carried out by the German Ernst Curtius in Olympia (1875-1881) and the French school in Delphos (1891).³⁰ German and French historians vied with each other to promote their preferred ancient model: aristocratic and martial

²⁶ A. Arvin-Bérod, *Et Didon créa la devise des jeux olympiques. Ou l'histoire oubliée des jeux olympiques du Rondeau (Grenoble 1832-1852)*, Echirolles, Sciriolus, 1994.

²⁷ C. Koulouri, ‘Rewriting the history of the Olympic Games’, in C. Koulouri (eds), *Athens, Olympic city, 1896-1906*, Athens, IOA, 2004, p. 13-53.

²⁸ P. de Coubertin, ‘Les Jeux Olympiques à Much Wenlock. Une page de l'histoire de l'athlétisme’, *La Revue athlétique*, 25 décembre 1890, p. 705-713.

²⁹ K. Georgiadis, *Olympic Revival. The Revival of the Olympic Games in Modern Times*, Athens, Ekdotike Athenon, 2003, p. 14-63

³⁰ J.-M. Delaunay, ‘La recherche archéologique, une manifestation de puissance ? L'archéologie et les archéologues au cœur des relations internationales contemporaines. L'École française d'Athènes, un haut-lieu du nationalisme français ?’, in R. Étienne, *Les politiques de l'archéologie du milieu du XIX^e siècle à l'orée du XXI^e siècle*, Athènes, EFA, 2000.

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Sparta for the German partisans of Prussia, democratic and commerce-oriented Athens for the defenders of the French Third Republic.

The superiority of the Athenian Gymnasium over the Olympic Games

At the time when he delivered his revival speech (25 November 1892) de Coubertin apparently knew little about the Olympic Games of Antiquity. On the other hand, he admired the education given in the Greek gymnasia. Indeed, in the account he gave of the Olympic revival organized by Dr. Brookes in October 1890 at Much Wenlock, no trace of athletic reminiscences is to be found. An explanation may be suggested by the fact that “antiquity was not sufficient for Dr. Brookes who borrowed from the Middle Ages some of its chivalric customs”.³¹ The absence of any reference to the Olympic Games is however more surprising in the speech he delivered on 11 April 1891 to the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Paris on “athletism, its role and its history”.³² Continuing in the field of athletism the quarrel between French and German historians over the best political system, de Coubertin denounced the style of gymnastics practiced in Sparta, “the city of exaggerations which drove physical education to the most drastic and ruthless selection”, and praised the merits of the Athenian gymnasium where “philosophers teach a young, energetic youth full of muscles and intellectual acumen”.

He discovered in *La Revue athlétique* – which he had directed since 1890 – the importance that Greeks and Romans attached to the formation of body and soul, as set out in the scholarly chronicles on “Gymnastics for the Ancients” by George Strehly, a graduate of the *École normale supérieure* and an acrobat. This professor of humanities in the renowned preparatory school Louis Le Grand in Paris relentlessly defended the merits of physical exercise, while violently condemning “athletic gymnastics” which sought to produce persons of an extraordinary strength to fight for the prizes and crowns in the Olympic Games. “Without any practical utility, without even caring about the balance of organic functions, it sought to develop muscular force in an abnormal way and make it fit for specific exercises for which the most glorious awards were bestowed during national festivals in Greece. Of course, athletic gymnastics were cultivated by a very restricted number of adepts, and this for several reasons. First, it was of no use for the routine needs of life: it was a luxury art, only fit to entertain spectators. Next it required from those who practiced it particular aptitudes that nature only grants to a very small number of persons: to devote yourself to it, you needed beforehand a great amount of muscular force. Lastly, its adepts were submitted to a very drastic diet, that very few had the patience to accept, and which because of its exclusivist principles and its intensity eventually proved to be detrimental to health”.³³

³¹ P. de Coubertin, ‘Les Jeux Olympiques à Much Wenlock’, *op. cit.*

³² P. de Coubertin, ‘L’Athlétisme, son rôle, son histoire’, *La Revue athlétique*, 25 avril 1891, p. 193-207.

³³ G. Strehly, ‘La gymnastique chez les Anciens’, *La Revue athlétique*, 25 avril 1890, p. 209-210 and P. Clastres, ‘*La Revue athlétique* de Pierre de Coubertin (1890-1891): une revue sportive et libérale,

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In this period when his Olympic idea was being elaborated, de Coubertin also drew inspiration from the article “Year 448 BC”, published by Georges Bourdon in May 1891. As Georges Strehly had done, Bourdon lavishly praised the education young Calicles received in the Lyceum as early as six, while at the same time quoting with approval Plato: “The object of education is to give the body the strength it must have, giving to the soul the perfection it is susceptible of reaching.”³⁴ As for the Olympia festival that the child attended when he was four, it would play an auxiliary part as an initiation to life, along with the manoeuvring of galleys in the Piraeus.

The constrained alliance of Coubertin with Bikelas

The sportsmen of France, Europe, and the New World had now to be convinced that sport could help the cause of peace and that to this effect the Olympic Games must be revived. But the outcome was far from certain, if we consider that de Coubertin was not at this time influential and his status slight.³⁵ At the end of 1892, he was still nothing but the general secretary of the budding federation of amateur sportsmen in France and a frequent essayist, trying to launch athletic school associations in gazettes. He managed to establish only a few contacts within European and American university amateur sport milieus. This is the reason why he had to act behind the scenes, backstage of the International Congress. This Congress, organized for the “study and propagation of the principles of amateur sports”, convened in June 1894 at the initiative of his USFSA colleagues. His function as general secretary of the Congress allowed him to issue invitations, and to strengthen his links with international societies. It allowed him to organize the schedule of workshops and impose his choice of lecturers. Above all, it enabled him surreptitiously to have an eighth item added to the order of the day: the principle of the revival of the antique games, “on the basis and consistent with the requisites of modern life”.

An Olympic Commission deserted by Anglo-Saxon delegates

Wardens of the temple of sport, the Anglo-Saxons paid no heed to the second commission for the revival of the games.³⁶ Indeed, they would remain suspicious for a long time of modern Olympics which they saw as an epiphenomenon, an anachronism, and as something very French. The five British delegates, the twenty

patriotique et coloniale’, in F. Carpentier (eds), *Le Sport est-il encore éducatif ?*, Rouen, Publications de l’université de Rouen, 2004, p. 33-49.

³⁴ G. Bourdon, ‘L’an 448 avant JC’, *La Revue athlétique*, 25 mai 1891, p. 270.

³⁵ S. Brownell, ‘The View from Greece: Questioning Eurocentrism in the History of the Olympic Games’, *Journal of Sport History* XXXII, 2 (2005), p. 203-216.

³⁶ Procès-verbaux de la « commission olympique », Congrès de Paris, juin 1894, Comité international des jeux olympiques, IOC Historical Archives, Olympic Museum, Lausanne

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French delegates, acted as one group within the first commission (twenty-nine members at all) representing the disciplines that professionalism threatened most: cycling (twelve members), athletic sports (seven members), and nautical sports (five members). De Coubertin was in fact fortunate that the delegates did not seem much interested in his Olympic scheme.³⁷ For it enabled him to manoeuvre skilfully in the second commission which, deserted by the Anglo-Saxon delegates, comprised twelve French and six university student gymnasts from the Nordic, Oriental and Mediterranean margins of Europe. However, he had to confront the representatives of the Bagatelle Polo Club in Paris who wanted the first Olympiad to be held in London, and above all a last-minute guest, Demetrios Bikelas, who represented Greece.³⁸

The three Sorbonne compromises

A few days before the Sorbonne Congress, Bikelas, a person well accepted in diplomatic and Parisian literary circles, received two intriguing documents at his home address: a diploma naming him as a member of the Panhellenic Gymnastic Society, presided by the crown Prince Constantin and a memorandum to be read to the participants calling “all the civilized peoples who claim to have roots in antique Greece to participate in the revived games”. He was totally incompetent in the field of sport, as he later acknowledged, but he managed to sweep the stakes. He was first elected by acclamation as president of the Olympic Commission, then he rallied all the participants by suggesting that the revived Games should first take place in Athens rather than in Paris. Lastly, he became the first President of the International Committee of the Olympic Games, the predecessor of the IOC. De Coubertin had difficulty negotiating further arrangements with Bikelas. A first Olympiad would take place in Athens in 1896, before the Games de Coubertin wanted to hold in Paris in 1900. The schedule of the competitions itself was a clever compromise: an ecumenical formula including all the types of physical education then to be found in the world. Within the Committee, the national origins as well as the athletic and professional careers of the thirteen members reveal a certain balance between nations and sport disciplines.³⁹

“The Olympic Games”: an ecumenical formula

During the whole Sorbonne Congress, de Coubertin, spoke only once, during the closing dinner. He sought to end the criticism levelled at the hegemonic tendencies of sportsmen and at the French ploys. According to him the reference to Athens and the Olympic Games allowed all the members to agree to the different methods of physical

³⁷ P. Clastres, ‘La refondation des Jeux olympiques au congrès de Paris (1894): initiative privée, transnationalisme sportif, diplomatie des États’, *Relations internationales*, n° 111, automne 2002, p. 327-345.

³⁸ K. Georgiadis, *Olympic revival*, *op. cit.*, p. 64-77.

³⁹ P. Clastres, ‘La refondation des Jeux olympiques au Congrès de Paris’, *op. cit.*

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education: military gymnastics he qualified as a training for the defence of the homeland, medical gymnastics he saw as “a quest for physical beauty and health”, and he endorsed the sport he cherished above all: “the healthy inebriation of the blood that is called the joy of living”. He then raised his glass of champagne to “the idea of Olympism which had to go through... the mist of ages before beaming back joyous hopes on the threshold of the 20th century”.⁴⁰

From Olympic Games to Olympism

Between his speech of November 1892 and the Athens Games in the spring of 1896, de Coubertin had to convince his different correspondents, French and foreign, of the opportune use of the Olympic reference. His colleagues of the USFSA needed little convincing: they convened in the spring of 1893 in preparation for the congress on amateurism, in 1894. Yet they paid little attention to his scheme to revive the Olympics.

Amateurism and character building

This is why he reminded them that the only reward for the participants to the Olympic Games would be “a crown of wild olive tree”. It is also the first time that he equated the Olympic Games with amateurism. But he did not forget his first battle in favour of education through sport, paying homage to a particular archetype, “the ancient professional”, “the revered master who forms the youth”, “the educator not only of the body but also of the soul”. A homage he renewed during the banquet at the end of the 1894 Congress, but this time he drew a distinction between education and character: “the ancients knew that man is not composed of two distinct parts, the body and the soul, but of three, the body, the mind, and the character, and that character is shaped not by the mind, but essentially by the body”. Then, he took the opportunity to denounce “the way corporal qualities have been discredited since the Middle Ages”. This was a means for him to denounce with covert words the Jesuits and university scholars who opposed the introduction of sports into boarding schools and grammar schools in France.

IOC manipulated by Pierre de Coubertin with Bikelas absent

Historians have demonstrated that Greece repeatedly sought to keep the Olympic Games in Athens.⁴¹ During the speech delivered on 13 April 1896, on the occasion of

⁴⁰ P. de Coubertin, ‘Congrès international de Paris (discours au banquet de clôture)’, *Les Sports athlétiques*, 30 juin 1894, p. 537.

⁴¹ K. Georgiadis, *Olympic Revival*, *op. cit.*, p. 200-205 and A. Kitroeff, ‘The International Dimension of the Preparations for the Intermediate Olympics’, in C. Koulouri (eds), *Athens, Olympic City, 1896-1906*, Athens, IOA, 2004, p. 377-393.

the royal meal to honour athletes, King George of the Hellenes declared: “This is not adieu, I’ll see you again once more here”, implying that the Games would definitely settle in Greece. American university athletes had supported the plan in an letter published in *The New York Times*. The newspapers *Proïa* and *Acropolis* had orchestrated a press campaign “in order to celebrate, every four years, international athletic sports in Athens”. The minutes of the Athens Congress kept in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne allow the reader to better understand what strategy de Coubertin adopted at the time.⁴² He took advantage of the absence of Bikelas on 6 April to obtain the agreement of the IOC members that the two decisions taken in Paris should be reaffirmed, i.e. to celebrate the Games successively in each capital in the world and to grant the presidency of the committee to the country where the Games would be held. If de Coubertin reached his goal it is probably because he encouraged competition for future Olympiads among the members of the international committee. The candidacies of New York, Berlin and Stockholm for the 1904 Games and the candidacy of Budapest for the third Olympiad were made public. The next day, Bikelas unsuccessfully attempted to have the International Committee reconsider the protocol adopted by the IOC on the grounds that “the press and Athenian opinion had raised the question of the celebration of Olympic Games in the future and their location which was to be definitely Greece”.

The argument of eternal Greece and moral beauty

For his Greek hosts de Coubertin developed a very different series of arguments on “eternal Greece” which he mostly drew from conversations he had had with Demetrios Bikelas and from the work published by Bikelas in 1893 on *Byzantine and Modern Greece*. The lecture he delivered on 16 November 1894 to the literary society *Le Parnasse* in Athens, gave him the occasion to trap the Greek elites on their own ground, that is to say patriotism.⁴³ He did not hesitate to warn them against the dangers of their attachment to the past: “Such is precisely the evil part of it. Your magnificent past is so powerful that it shatters the present time”. The lines drawn between ancient athleticism, the renaissance of Greece at the beginning of the 19th century and the prospect of the next Olympic Games in Athens, threatened to accelerate the process: Greece must be acknowledged by European powers. Those three moments in the history of eternal Greece are to be found in the work Coubertin himself published in 1897 for Hachette publishers. But here he had the occasion to delve deeper into ‘the true meaning’ of the Olympic Games.⁴⁴ To those who “would have wanted to conclude that sport was only a pretence and had in fact only a secondary position”, de Coubertin contended that all the eyes were fixed on the stadium not on the agora. And to explain the sudden appearance of the Olympic

⁴² *Procès-verbaux*, Session d’avril 1896, Comité international des jeux olympiques, IOC Historical Archives, Olympic Museum, Lausanne.

⁴³ P. de Coubertin, ‘Le néo-olympisme. Appel à l’opinion athénienne’, *Le Messager d’Athènes*, 16 novembre 1894, p. 287-288.

⁴⁴ P. de Coubertin, *Souvenirs d’Amérique et de Grèce*, Paris, Hachette, 1897, p. 106-107.

Games, he rejected the simple argument of ‘civism’ or of ‘art’. Military training had no need for the Olympic Games, nor had the education of young men. As for the athlete, he is never “beautiful”: “his ambition and will power are what is admired in him”. From then on, de Coubertin was to see in the Olympic Games “a program of moral beauty”, an “immaterial aesthetics”, which he summed up with a formula he borrowed from Father Didon “*citius, fortius, altius*”.

Conclusion: De Coubertin inventing Olympism

De Coubertin suggested to the Greek King a compromise according to which « Greek Olympiads » or « pan Hellenic competitions » would be celebrated in between the international competitions, to quote his words. But two years after the conflict in which Turkey defeated Greece, article 37 of the 1899 law BXKA stipulated much to the great displeasure of the IOC: “Concerning gymnastics and contests of gymnastics and sports [The Olympic Games Committee] shall be responsible for the continuation every four years of the Olympic Games, held in the year 1896.”⁴⁵ After the lack of success met by the 1900 Paris Games, the Committee headed once more by Prince Constantin took the offensive again, with the support of the German members of the IOC.⁴⁶ Using the opportunity created by the marginality of the Saint Louis Games in 1904, it secured agreement that a resolution should be adopted at the Olympic Congress in Brussels in 1905 whereby the IOC would retain control of the organisation of the international Olympic Games while the Greek Committee pledged to adopt the title of ‘Committee of Athens Olympic Games’ and to organize a special games.⁴⁷ The Hellenic Committee eventually organized the 1906 intermediary Olympic Games, and this very effectively; they were open to all the athletes on the planet, amateur as well as professional.

The letter written by de Coubertin to Prince Constantin during the spring of 1906 shows how Greece made up its own network of participants and marginalized the IOC: “Despite the fact that the programme voted by us in Brussels, as the Hellene Committee wanted it, has since been the object of new discussions that we certainly did not expect, the members of the International Committee have done their best in all countries to keep organizing the success of the Games of Athens. This they did with great abnegation because they were constantly opposed to the commitment taken by Spiros Lambros in the name of the Hellenic Committee to keep them remote from the commissions. Neither Prince A. de Salms in Austria, Count Henry de Baillet-Latour in Belgium, nor Colonel Holbeck in Denmark, Count de Mejerada in Spain, Count Brunetta d’Usseau in Italy, Captain Angell in Norway, Prince Serge Belionelsky and Count de Ribeaupierre in Russia, nor Professor W.M. Sloane in the United States

⁴⁵ C. Koulouri, ‘Rewriting the history of the Olympic Games’, *op cit.*, p. 52.

⁴⁶ A. Drevo, *Les Jeux olympiques oubliés: Paris 1900*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2000.

⁴⁷ A. Kitroeff, ‘The International Dimension of the Preparations for the Intermediate Olympics’, in C. Koulouri (eds), *Athens, Olympic City, 1896-1906*, Athens, IOA, 2004, p. 377-393.

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were asked to form commissions or to preside them or even often to be part of them. As for Dr. Guth who represented Bohemia, his propositions were not even taken into account. These facts reveal such a lapse in their commitment to decisions already taken that it was my duty to make them known directly to Your Highness who assuredly has no knowledge of them.”⁴⁸

To avoid giving legitimacy to this concurrent Olympiad, de Coubertin planned in May 1906 in Paris “a consultative seminar of Arts, Letters and Sports”. If the 1906 committee hoped to take advantage of the problems looming above the Games scheduled for Rome in 1908, de Coubertin forestalled them by hurriedly transferring these Games to London without informing his IOC colleagues. Greece, which was beset by economic and political woes, was unable to organize a large international Olympiad after the one in 1906, although it did not completely abandon its ambitions after the Great War. One must therefore consider de Coubertin’s attempt in 1918 to have the Games permanently established in Switzerland on the banks of Lake Geneva in the context of the attempts by Greece and other nation-states to appropriate the Games for their own purposes.

In the same way, he made the definition of olympism more consistent, lavishly borrowing from the ancient past. But he did so in order the better to fight the progress of professionalism and sport spectacles. Thereby he invented olympism (and not Olympics) as a tradition, in the sense of the word employed by Eric Hobsbawm.⁴⁹ De Coubertin struggled to buttress the internationalization of the Games, yet this did not take him completely away from the Hellenic cause during the interwar years. He travelled again to Greece in 1927 and after his death he left instructions to have his heart buried at Olympia, which reflects his love for classical Greece. That said, his ambitions also betrayed his French patriotism and his desire for a place in history.⁵⁰

L’auteur

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Résumé

Le baron français Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) est universellement connu pour avoir provoqué la rénovation des jeux olympiques à Athènes en 1896. Ce que l’on sait

⁴⁸ Hellenic Olympic Committee Archive: K16 Φ1, Coubertin to Prince Constantin, Paris, 12 février 1906

⁴⁹ E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 1.

⁵⁰ P. Clastres, ‘Homages et controverses’, in P. Clastres, P. Dietschy and S. Laget (eds.), *La France et l’olympisme*, Paris, ADPF, 2004, p. 14-26.

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moins c'est qu'il avait à l'esprit de premiers jeux à Paris pour 1900 dans le cadre de l'Exposition universelle. D'inspiration libéral-pacifiste, son projet s'est heurté à la diplomatie culturelle de la Grèce en la personne de Démétrios Bikélas. Cet article interroge sa connaissance de l'*agôn* classique et minore l'héritage antique par rapport à son inspiration pacifiste et libérale. Matrice culturelle, le philhellénisme des élites occidentales a servi de vecteur à l'invention de la tradition olympique.

Abstract

The French baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) is famous for the revival of the Olympic Games in Athens in 1896. Far less known is the fact that he wanted the first modern Game to take place in Paris in 1900 simultaneously with the Universal Exhibition. But his plan, inspired by liberal and pacifist ideals, was postponed due to the vigorous opposition of the Greek diplomacy and of Démétrios Bikélas. This paper puts into perspective the influence of philhellenism in de Coubertin's projects, compared to liberal and pacifist motives. The cultural philhellenism of the European elites played a role in the invention of the Olympic tradition.

Mots clés : jeux olympiques, légende, philhellénisme, pacifisme libéral, élites.

Key words : Olympic Games, legend, philhellenism, liberal pacifism, elites.

Pour citer l'article : Patrick Clastres, « Playing with Greece. Pierre de Coubertin and the Motherland of Humanities and Olympics », *Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société*, N°12, septembre-décembre 2010, www.histoire-politique.fr