

Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937): A Proponent of Sporting Masculinity

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Charles Pierre Fredy, Baron de Coubertin (in a photograph from about 1894) was born on New Year's Day 1863 at 17.00 at 20 Rue Oudinot in the VII^{ème} arrondissement of Paris.

Below: The Avenue Pierre de Coubertin is in the south of Paris in the XIII^{ème} arrondissement. Since 1994 the headquarters of the Comité National Olympique Sportif Français (CNOSF) has been there.



Pierre de Fredy, Baron de Coubertin, was born on 1 January 1863 in Paris and died on 2 September 1937 in Geneva, after devoting decades to the development of the Olympic Movement. Almost everything has been said about his life, his work, his ideas and his legacy. Almost everything has been studied concerning the influence of Great Britain and North America on the development of his thoughts. Almost everything has been discussed concerning the contradictions and ambiguities of his actions and personality: a pacifist, humanist, and democratic and social reformer. He was also a colonialist, racist, elitist and misogynist individual.

Now, 150 years after the birth of Coubertin, we are given the opportunity to reconsider one of the stimulating crossing points of all these issues: his role as "passeur". Or, to place this essay within the orientation of cultural history, as "cultural conveyor", working for a sporting masculinity that had, as yet, been only lightly disseminated beyond the Anglo-Saxon world. Gender studies have now amply demonstrated that masculinity is constructed throughout one's whole life, according to the main experiences lived under the influence of the social categories, and ethnic and religious circles to which the individual belongs. The life of the one who

revived the Olympic Games may, therefore, be revisited in the light of models of masculinity that he gradually built and disseminated through sport.

Coubertin's childhood and adolescence must be addressed first. At the age when primary socialization constructs the marks of masculinity and femininity, the family environment played a key role, both in Paris where the young Pierre spent most of his time, and at the Castle of Mirville where he stayed for two and a half months each year. Heir to an ancient noble family, which counted many individuals at high levels in the Royal State Administration, his parental models were more oriented towards culture than the military or world of business, where a man of his class was expected to flourish. His father, Louis de Fredy de Coubertin, was a painter who broke with the traditional figures of aristocratic masculinity. His mother, Marie-Marcelle Gigault de Crisenoy, was a woman of great culture who loved to write and play the piano. In an environment where a man follows a military, colonial, commercial or political career, Pierre de Coubertin turned away from all these potential commitments to follow the professional artistic path traced by his father.

His secondary socialization, developed within the rigor of the Saint-Ignace Jesuit School in Paris from 1874 to 1881, changed nothing. Although he had been accepted at the Military School of Saint-Cyr, he decided not to go – choosing instead to attend the École Libre des Sciences Politiques. In 1888, when he was put forward for the position of deputy of Mirville and was elected to its city council without having stood for election, he turned his back on a political career. He showed no interest in law either, despite pressure from his parents.

His professional success, which contributes also to the construction of masculine identity, thus took another direction and was strongly influenced by the British and American models of education that he discovered during study visits in the 1880s. Realizing the potential of sports competitions, Coubertin became a social reformer, implementing the paternalistic and pacifist ideals of Frédéric Le Play, whose influence over him was immense. For Coubertin, indeed, the development of the Olympic Movement was the institutional and ideological consequence of his beliefs on the benefits

of sport education. Yet sport, as experienced in British public schools, contributed primarily to the construction of masculinity among the young élites, as shown so brilliantly by James Mangan¹. It served only as a tool to build young and virile male conquerors, confident and sure of themselves, adding noble souls to bodies that were accustomed to exceeding their limits.

The establishment in 1894 of an Olympic institution at the Congress of the Sorbonne, and the first Games in Athens two years later, were channels (among others) through which the sport phenomenon spread and, along with it, the values of the British élite. By becoming a proponent of sporting ideals, Coubertin helped disseminate a model of masculinity that was specific to England's middle and upper classes – first throughout France and then, through the international visibility later achieved by the Olympic Games, throughout the Western world and beyond. Coubertin himself subscribed to this process of constructing manliness through sport, yet did not use the main English sporting educational models (outdoor team sports). He preferred instead to conserve the values of competition and asceticism of training. Although he tried various sports, it was in pistol shooting that he achieved his best performances and was seven times national champion. Shooting was also a symbolic activity in terms of masculinity, given its close relationship with war and its martial heritage.

In the period prior to the First World War, forty-year old Coubertin became an activist engaged in Olympism. His commitment did, of course, have much to do with his opinions on sport, although his tenacity to keep the Olympic institution afloat after its semi-failure of Paris in 1900 may not be entirely separated from the necessity to be successful. Given that he had not adopted the expected career path for a representative of republican aristocracy, Coubertin should at least have responded positively to the natural social summons of building a family through marriage and children.

In 1895, he married Marie Rothan, the daughter of a Protestant diplomat. They had two children, Jacques, in 1896, and Renée, in 1902. His wife suffered from instability and his children from serious psychological disorders, all incompatible with the image of a successful family that constituted one of the marks of the socially accepted norms among male élites.

The success of the Olympic Movement and its influence on society therefore remained, for Coubertin, one of the few ways to consolidate his position as a man. Institutional success was all the more important, since France gave him no sign of recognition and during the war, in 1914, even refused to send him to the Western Front despite his request. It is true that the Baron was then 51 years old, at the time the same age as France's average life expectancy. After the war and then an elderly man, he felt

betrayed by his country which was then undergoing a masculinity crisis. In 1922, he decided to settle in Lausanne. A year earlier he had taken a step back from the Olympic Movement by accepting that an Executive Committee be set up. And then, in 1925, he left the IOC Presidency.



The first stamps to feature Coubertin's image were issued by Haiti in 1939. They also depicted the Olympic rings in colour, another first. Through the three stamps it was hoped to finance the building of a modern stadium in Port-au-Prince. Immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War the series was however a flop. Of 350,000 printed, only six per cent were sold. They are all the more valuable today. This block is from the collection of the late Juan Antonio Samaranch, the former IOC President who bequeathed his collection to the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

These well-known biographical elements explain why Olympism may have played a symbolic role for Coubertin in the construction of his own gender identity. Being institutionally and ideologically responsible for the movement, his own masculinity was at stake. Hence, no doubt, the misogynistic positions that surrounded the early decades of his work. For Coubertin, the Olympic Games remained fundamentally a male affair. A few months before the end of his life, he continued to write that "The only true Olympic hero, as I said, is the male adult. Thus, neither women nor sports teams."²

This masculine ideal was defined in full compliance with the codes in use within the circles of the bourgeoisie and enlightened republican aristocracy, in which the renovator of the Games circulated. Coubertinian masculinity reflected well the characteristics of a white, urban, Christian, heterosexual and conquering social élite – if not in martial terms, at least in economic and imperialistic ones. It was built through diverse, but preferably individual, physical experiences (rescue, defence, locomotion), as shown by his remarks on sport education for young people, his views on *gymnastique utilitaire* or even his sustained enthusiasm for a sport which he imposed as part of the Olympic programme: the modern pentathlon.³ This

On 10th April 1915, in the middle of the First World War, Coubertin signed an agreement at the Town Hall in Lausanne, transferring the headquarters of the IOC to neutral Switzerland. At the same time he temporarily gave up his presidency. During the war he was represented by one of his closest colleagues, the Swiss Godefroy de Blonay (to the right in the photo).



masculinity was opposed to the more collective and less combative forms of rural and worker masculinities, sharing little more than normative heterosexuality and masculine utilitarianism with them.

In addition, although Coubertin was opposed to the Anthropological Games in St. Louis, the ideal masculinity that promoted Olympism was then barely compatible with non-Western alternatives. Is it not a coincidence that the first athlete to be disqualified for professionalism in the history of the Olympic Games was a Native-American Indian, Jim Thorpe, a double Olympic champion in the decathlon and pentathlon⁴ and, as such, the ideal model of a man in the eyes of those who promoted Olympism. Most certainly an apparent paradox when remembering that many participants, in fencing and shooting for example, were far from complying with the rules of amateurism!

Coubertin's concept of femininity was logically symmetric with his perception of men and masculinity. He made it particularly clear in his *Notes sur l'Éducation publique*, where he stated as a principle that "the role of women remains what it has always been: she is above all the man's companion, the future mother of the family, and she must be educated in view of this immutable perspective".⁵ Admittedly, there was nothing too surprising in such a vision which confined women to the domestic sphere and turned them towards the dual role of wife and mother. Such discourses were to be found in the dominant fringe of physicians and scientists who "rationally" justified that women should remain in a subordinated position. They were also in close affiliation to a part of the education community that considered education for girls inappropriate under the pretext, precisely, that girls did not possess the intellectual and physical

capacity for it. They were finally in line with the main discourses on physical activity for women in the fields of sports and gymnastics.

But what was still an only lightly questioned norm in late nineteenth Century France was already no longer as hegemonic a mere few years later. In both the United States and England, for instance, women had access, albeit not without great difficulty, to professional positions from which they had been banned a few decades earlier. Corsets were progressively condemned by the daughters of those women for whom wearing them was still part of everyday life. Participation in sport slowly grew among women of the élite.⁶ The orthodox models of bourgeois femininity had already been challenged before the Great War and were then strongly impacted by the war itself.

Coubertin, however, refused to see these changes. It was all he could do to admit that, in the case of behaviours he disapproved of but could not prohibit, it would be appropriate to reduce their visibility. Once again, in 1935, he stated: "I personally do not approve of women's participation in public competitions, which does not mean that they must abstain from practicing a great number of sports, provided they do not make a public spectacle of themselves. In the Olympic Games, just as in former tournaments, their primary role should be to crown the victors."⁷

The political equivalent of this symbolic refusal could be found within the Olympic institution itself. There, the issue of gender relations may be usefully analyzed in terms of power relationships between men and women, relationships that are reflected in both the positions each of them held within decision-making institutions (IOC, NOC) and, more pragmatically, in access to the most visible area of sport: the Olympic Games.

On the first point, it is clear that during this period Olympic institutions, and all other places where decisions were made, remained tightly closed for women. As a reflection of domination over women within the political sphere of the very same Western societies that presided over the future of Olympism, this situation resulted in the emergence of a rival movement a quarter of a century after Coubertin's renovation of the modern Games: that of Alice Milliat and the Fédération Internationale du Sport Féminin. It was a federation with solely feminine governance, and which mirrored the sexual division of sport in quite radical terms.⁸ Although women's participation had already been featured on the agenda of the Olympic Congress in Brussels in 1905, Coubertin succeeded in postponing the issue to a "more appropriate" time, thus expressing his hostile reluctance to negotiate the indisputable.

On the second point, which also reflected the gender hierarchy within the Olympic Movement, women

represented less than 5% of all participants in the Games until 1924, and their participation was restricted to activities having the greatest social acceptability, while in other early sporting nations, they practiced many more disciplines and took part in competitions. Restricting the Olympic programme in this way was at odds with the reality of women's sport during the *Belle Époque*.

Over and beyond this statement, three processes came together to combine their effects. The first concerned the refusal for women to participate in the Olympic Games, under various official pretexts ranging from the additional cost for the organisation to missed deadlines. A second mechanism of marginalization, visible in the early programmes, confined women to demonstration events rather than real competitions, i.e. with a different status that clearly hierarchised men and women's participation.

In addition, whether for competitions or demonstrations, the organisers, and the IOC itself, worked at times in the realm of oblivion when writing Official Reports, since they failed to identify certain female competitors whose presence was confirmed by other sources. According to Ana Maria Miragaya's detailed work, IOC official sources indicate that 112 women took part in the Olympics before World War I, whereas other sources actually give a figure four times higher: 416!⁹

Restricted participation in the Olympic programme, refused access to the Games, participation in demonstrations rather than competitions, and memory lapses, were all signs of discrimination against women. The few women who succeeded in forcing the stadium gates were, moreover, still too many or too visible for Coubertin, who throughout his whole life remained hostile to "female Olympics" because he believed the Games should remain a symbol of masculinity. And since mixed competitions would inevitably lead to victory for the men, the only solution was to separate events and even Olympics. For him, however, a female Olympiad would be "impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and, we are not afraid to add, incorrect (...). This is not our idea of the Olympic Games, where we feel we have sought and must continue to seek the realisation of the following: the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art as a setting and female applause as a reward".¹⁰

Coubertin defined himself as an internationalist and open to the Anglo-Saxon world. From a gender perspective, however, he was, in fact, shaped by the traditional French culture in which he had grown up. Educated in the light of the traditional views on gender relations which characterized the liberal aristocracy throughout the French Third Republic, he never really expanded his horizons on the role of women, thus neglecting the considerable progress that



After his 70th birthday, which curiously was celebrated in June 1932 in the Aula of the University of Lausanne, Coubertin moved to Geneva, where he rented the "Melrose" guesthouse at the Park La Grange. On Thursday 2nd September 1937 a gendarme called Grandchamp was called to a bench in the park near the gardener's house, where he found Coubertin sitting, his eyes open. He was already dead. The gendarme noted the time of death as half past two in the afternoon.

had occurred in the US and UK in this regard. In many ways, a visionary in education, he remained extremely conservative in terms of gender socialization. And in the irony of history, when considering the relationships between Olympism and gender, Pierre de Coubertin, in 1937, was laid to rest in the cemetery of Bois-de-Vaux, Lausanne, a mere few metres from the burial place, thirty-four years later, of "Coco" Chanel, the famous fashion designer who revolutionized and freed the silhouettes of women through clothing and suntan, drawing her inspiration largely from sport." ■

- 1 Mangan, James A., *'Manufactured' Masculinity. Making Imperial Manliness, Morality and Militarism*, London, Routledge, 2011.
- 2 Coubertin, Pierre de, in: *Le Journal*, Paris, 27 August 1936
- 3 Ibid., *L'éducation des adolescents au XXe siècle*, Paris, Alcan, 1905; Coubertin, Pierre de, *La gymnastique utilitaire. Sauvetage-Défense-Locomotion*, Paris, Félix Alcan Éditeur, 1906. On modern pentathlon and masculinity, see Heck Sandra, *Modern Pentathlon and World War I – When Athletes and Soldiers Meet to Practise Martial Manliness*, in: *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 28, n° 3-4, March 2011, pp. 410-428
- 4 Delsahut, Fabrice, *Les hommes libres et l'Olympe*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004.
- 5 Coubertin, Pierre de, *L'éducation des femmes*, in: *Notes sur l'Éducation publique*, Paris, Hachette, 1901, pp. 297-310.
- 6 Mangan, James A. & Park, Roberta (eds.), *From 'Fair Sex' to Feminism. Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Eras*, London, Frank Cass, 1987.
- 7 Coubertin, Pierre de, in: *Sport suisse*, 7 August 1935
- 8 Leigh, Mary H., Bonin, Thérèse M., *The Pioneering Role of Madame Alice Milliat and the F.S.F.I.*, in: *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 4, n° 1, 1977, pp. 72-83; Drevon André, *Alice Milliat. La Pasionaria du sport féminin*, Paris, Vuibert, 2005.
- 9 Miragaya, Ana Maria, *The Process of Inclusion of Women in the Olympic Games*, PhD dissertation, Gama Filho, Rio de Janeiro, 2006, p. 178.
- 10 Coubertin, Pierre de, *Les femmes aux Jeux olympiques*, in: *Revue olympique*, July 1912, n° 79, pp. 109-111.
- 11 Gidel, Henry, *Coco Chanel*, Paris, J'ailu, 2002.