Pierre de Coubertin’s “Civilizing Mission”

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze Coubertin’s concepts of “civilization” and “race,” in order better to understand the anthropological foundations of his Olympism in general and to show that this Olympism has been a part of his “civilizing mission.” His efforts for educational reform in France, his fervent philhellenism, his enthusiasm for the colonial endeavor, his engagements for popular education were all part of his “great work” of keeping social and international peace and of “uplifting mankind.” He considered the “civilized part” of mankind threatened by moral and physical degeneration, while he saw the rest still in a state of “primitive” and inferior civilization. In his publications, we can reveal an ambiguous, racist period from 1900 to the end of the First World War, with many racist statements claiming the innate inferiority of non-whites on the one hand and on the other hand statements considering the educability of “races” other than the white race. The Olympic Games, which brought together the finest youth of the whole world every four years, symbolized for Coubertin an eternal spring of humankind, the eternal striving to better humanity. In Coubertin’s mind, peoples at the stage of “half-savages” were not ready yet for this noble and elitist meeting. Also their games were not serious enough to be included in the Olympic Games that were to accomplish the athletic part of the civilizing mission. Today, the Olympic Games, as a legacy of the civilizing mission, still promote Western or westernized sports exclusively, even though they claim to be a universal movement.

The St. Louis Games did feature some original approaches. The “star attraction,” so to speak, was incontestably what the Americans called, in their picturesque language, the “anthropological day,” a day that lasted forty-eight hours, in fact. In the course of these singular athletic meets, competitions were held in the Stadium pitting the Sioux against Patagonians, the Cocopas of Mexico and the Moro of the Philippines, the Ainu of Japan, the Pygmies of Africa, the Syrians, and the Turks—the latter not flattered, no doubt, at being included in such company. All these men competed in the usual civilized contests, foot races, rope climbing, shot put and javelin throwing, jumping, and archery. Nowhere else but in America would anyone have dared to put such a thing in the program of an Olympiad. But for the Americans, all is permitted. Their youthful enthusiasm certainly enjoyed the indulgence of the shades of the great Greek ancestors, if, by chance, they happened to be wandering by at that moment among the amused throng.
Five years later, in another article entitled “An Olympiad in the Far East,” Coubertin gave a somewhat different perception of these Anthropological Days. As this article was concerned with Asia, he focused on the Asian participants of these Days and instead of the Turks and the Syrians he considered the Asians not to be flattered by the presence of the other “barbarian” participants:

During the competitions of the Third Olympiad, held in St. Louis in 1904, one or more days were reserved for performances by Asians. The Americans clearly see themselves as athletic preceptors in the Far East. The day-long festivities in St. Louis were hardly flattering for the people in that part of the world. These descendants of such ancient and refined civilizations were called on to compare with representatives of peoples scarcely refined out of their original barbarianism. This was a mistake.3

Coubertin’s commentaries can be interpreted and have been interpreted in different ways.4 At a first glance, one could argue that Coubertin was offended by the fact that separate competitions were organized for “exotic people” during a festival which claimed to bring together athletes from all over the world. But if we take a closer look we see that he established a ranking of the different ethnical groups, and expressed his disapproval of the fact that people from “refined civilizations” were obliged to compete with people from almost barbarian origins, with the latter including Native Americans and pygmies from Africa. Coubertin clearly associates cultural difference with inferiority. Are these statements about the “Anthropological Days” not an expression of Coubertin’s racist attitude? Does he not practise a “culture-coded form” of racism when ranking people according to their different cultural origins?5

In the following section, I will analyze Coubertin’s concept of “race,” in order to better understand the anthropological foundations of his Olympism. Coubertin considered himself a “rallié,” somebody who joined the Republicans after having been a Monarchist. But, even within the Republicans, “racial thought” was common at the end of the 19th century in France. A “racial paradigm” construed by scientists, which was largely vulgarized in popular literature and accepted by a great majority of the society, characterized the French Republic from 1860 to 1930.6 There were exceptions to the republican principle of equality: There were “brothers and subjects” who were equal but not exactly equal.7 Some republicans like Alexis de Tocqueville or Jules Ferry tried to argue that human rights should not be applied systematically to all races, and that such an application should depend on the circumstances.8 It is very unlikely that this racial paradigm of the Third French Republic was without influence on Coubertin.

Coubertin and the Race Issue in the United States

The first time Coubertin raised the racial issue was in his early writings when he described his travel experiences in North America. During his comparative educational studies in the USA he witnessed the racial segregation in the South and called it “shameful distinctions.”9 Traveling on the train, during his visit to Florida, he was shocked by the humiliating treatment of a clean and well-dressed African-American lady who was asked by the conductor to leave the seats reserved for white people. He explained the condition of the African-Americans as a result of slavery which “causes them to still be submissive to their former masters” and considered that “it would take time to bring back the sense of equality to the former and the latter.”10

Hopefully the new generation would change this situation. He was astonished at the potential of the African-American students who in school “learn marvelously and show that they are talented.”11 He was sure that they would soon catch up with their white comrades.

In these early writings, Coubertin showed empathy and sympathy for the African Americans. The distinctions he made were based on social class and not on “race.” He preferred well-educated mid-
dle class African-Americans to some white, lower-class people. He found that these students were “sympathetic, more sympathetic than these dirty and drunken beings who [were] sitting sometimes next to [him] in the American trains.”

In 1903, his attitudes toward African-Americans had undergone a radical change. “Despite the progress made by the less advanced of the two races,” he considered that the differences between white and black were still “shocking.” In his opinion, neither the expatriation of the African-American to Liberia, as some suggested, nor the “absorption” by mixing both groups were viable answers to resolve the racial problems in the USA. The first solution would not be realistic, he argues, as these people were born in the USA and would come back further or later anyway. The second solution is from his point of view too risky. Who could guarantee that “the qualities of the superior race would overcome the faults of the inferior race” He thinks “…as you neither can get rid of the negroes nor absorb them, there is no other solution than to tolerate them.” In his fear of mixing “inferior” and “superior” races, Coubertin joins the ideology of Gobineau, a French novelist who published with his “Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines” (“An Essay on the Inequality of Human Races”) one of the most influential racialist theory in the 19th century. In a more literary than scientific way, Gobineau tried to explain the “degeneration” of empires as a result of interbreeding of distinct races.

Coubertin’s Colonial and Racial Attitude

We can find probably the most evidence and the most seminal texts concerning Coubertin’s attitude towards the racial issue in his writings on colonialism. He was a fervent advocate of the colonial enterprise. In one of his unpublished memoirs, he wrote: “From the first day on I was a fanatic colonialist, a fact which provoked the indignation of my friends from the monarchist party.” Coubertin regarded loyal and legitimate international competition, the “healthy international emulation” in sports, industry, science and culture—and if necessary in war—as a playing or battle field for nations to strengthen their national body, their race.

Colonialism was for him part of this universal competition between the great civilized nations, and Coubertin was eager to see France take part in this competition and keep pace with the great leading nations. He celebrated French colonialism and the French Republic which was able “to write in 40 years the most admirable story of colonialism.” He was a close friend of the famous Maréchal Louis Hubert Lyautey, a convinced royalist and pious catholic with progressive social ideas, who in Morocco tried to realize a French protectorate with “a human face.” Influenced by his professor Paul Leroy-Beaulieu and the colonial ideas of Jules Ferry, Coubertin believed that colonial activities reflected the grandeur and the power of a nation. He was an ardent defender of French colonialism, which to him was part of the efforts to rebuild a strong and splendid France after the disaster of 1870/71, according to his motto “rebronzer la France.”

There are many factors which could explain colonialism and many theories have been developed to do so, but we will limit our focus to Coubertin’s perspective. One function of imperialism was, according to Hannah Arendt, that of healing the inner wounds of a nation, which was after 1870 certainly an important reason for the great French colonial adventure abroad. It contributed to building up the self-esteem of the French nation; it was a therapy for the French, especially for the French bourgeoisie, who were traumatized by the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. But at the same time colonialism was a great enterprise of civilization: colonialism as mission of civilization (mission civilisatrice). John L. O’Sullivan’s conception of “Manifest Destiny” in the United States of America, Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” in the United Kingdom, and in France the “Mission Civilisatrice” served as a leitmotif and god-given or natural vocation to imperialism. The French mission of civiliza-
tion was a mixture of Christian missionary vocation and the legacy of the Great French Revolution, which aimed to bring enlightenment and well-being to the whole world. On the background of this lofty ideal, the brutal and inhuman colonial reality became compatible with the republican principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity. Thanks to the French maternal assistance and caring, and if necessary severity, the inferior colonial subject should, as final objective, become part of the enlightened humanity and attain the status of a French citoyen. This is the humanitarian justification of French colonialism, but in reality the Republic generated a double and ambiguous discourse. The metropolitan policy claiming and trying to realize the Republican ideals was quite different from the colonial policy, which was characterized by domination of the indigenous subjects, by consolidation of differences, and by racial hierarchies.

During the second half of the 19th century a strong colonial culture emerged in France. Media, literature, and expositions constructed the right to colonize. In Europe as in the USA, the display of “savages,” which later became “indigenous” as part of the colonial empire, served to legitimize the civilizing mission by showing who was civilized and who had to be civilized.

During the 1900 Universal Exhibition, which hosted the second Olympic Games, the place assigned to colonies was more important than ever. The organizers’ objective was to persuade spectators of the necessity and the usefulness of colonial activities by a “politics of exhibiting.” The colonial section was a huge propaganda show, justifying and documenting the civilizing mission. While displayed objects and documents highlighted the benefits of colonial activities, indigenous art work, regarded as hideous, fortified the sentiment of superiority of the civilizers.

From the point of view of the Olympic movement, the 1900 Olympic Games were a “mediocre affaire.” Coubertin, who wanted to organize in 1900 splendid Games in the cultural capital of the world, his home town Paris, was disappointed by the way these Games were ultimately diluted in the Exhibition. Coubertin imagined that in Paris: “the crowds would have the competitions and the festivities of the Exhibition, while we [the IOC] would organize Games for the elite—the elite among athletes, who would be few in number but composed of the greatest champions of the world; the elite among spectators, men and women in society, diplomats, professors, generals, and members of the Institute.”

Neither in Paris nor in St. Louis would Coubertin’s wishes come true. The Paris as well as most of the St. Louis competitions lacked high standards. In addition, the participation of “uncivilized” tribes, which were not even at the level of sporting apprenticeship, in the St. Louis Games, must have been a great affront to Coubertin’s elitist and selective conception of the Games.

At the end of the nineteenth century, two different discourses can be distinguished within the French Republicans. There were those who believed in the equality of human races, and considered indigenous people to be “educable” and able to reach—in the long term—the same level of the civilization as the French citoyens.

But in accordance with the growing racist discourse of contemporary science many Republicans—like Jules Ferry—were convinced that racial differences were unchangeable. In their opinion other “races” could “be ameliorated” by long term education, but would never reach the level of their French “model.”

Until the First World War, Coubertin’s position varied between both republican attitudes. In his travel notes on his experiences in the USA, he expresses his belief in the potential of Black Americans to catch up with White Americans. In various reviews after 1900, he published pro-colonialist arguments which are clearly racist as he draws attention to the innate and definitive inferiority of some races, while at the same time he published declarations which considered racial differences and hierarchies to be ephemeral.
One of his harshest racist statements can be found in the *Chronique de France*, published in 1902, where he refers to the results of the 1900 Congress of Sociology of Colonialism. He states that this congress had definitely eradicated “the theories about the equality of races and of absolute progress, which had been disseminated by the Revolution and which have been guilty of so many errors and faults.”

In the same year he published another racist statement which regarded a group of African people as innate and definitely inferior. While describing the natives of South-Africa he argues that “these blacks are mediocre workers.” According to Coubertin, there is no hope for great change as “you can ameliorate them as you can improve the soil, but only in a restricted proportion; you will reduce the idleness of the former and the infertility of the latter, but you will never make them disappear.”

Whereas in other publications he seems to believe in the educability and potential of indigenous peoples to attain European cultural standards, here he clearly points out the definitive racial gap. At the same time he reproduces here the common colonial discourse which identified certain racially constructed categories of people as natural working class with more or less efficient productivity.

One year before, in a 1901 issue of *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, he obviously establishes a hierarchy between the colonizing and the colonized races, but he considers that education could raise the latter to the standards of the former: “Another theory, that of equal rights for all human races, leads to a policy contrary to any colonial progress. Without including in even the most lenient form of servitude, not to speak of slavery, the superior race is justified in refusing to extend several privileges of civilized life to the lower one. A fair treatment, justice to all, and special protection to the natives against the possible cruelties and encroachments of their rulers are enough, in many cases. Of course, it the duty of the latter to try and raise the lower race to their own standard; but such an educational work is very slow, and to hasten it is simply to injure it and, at the same time, to hinder colonization and weary those who are busy at it.”

One year later, inspired by a piece of theatre of François de Curel, and drawing on the conclusions of the Congress of Colonial Sociology, he argues in favor of a progressive Europeanization of the “retarded peoples” in the colonies: “The great lesson from the experience and the conclusions of the last Congress of Colonial Sociology, organized at the occasion of the Universal Exposition, shows that we have to leave to the retarded peoples as much as possible of what they have acquired, and to bring to them only what seems to be really necessary for their progressive Europeanization.”

Those who “consider that this Europeanization is illegitimate, that their religions are equal to ours, that they are different but not inferior” lack realism and just preach “lovely sophisms.” But this Europeanization will be a long process as “heredity cannot be replaced; it can be lost or it can be slowly acquired. You can try to educate the barbarian, instruct him intensely, remove him, take him out of the country, he cannot become similar to you; huge gaps will separate him from you…” Coubertin believed that it had been proven scientifically that Europeanization is possible, but only at long term. This knowledge, he claims, has the advantage that it “will largely enlighten the effort of colonization without discouraging it.”

He had a paternalistic attitude towards the colonies: “The colonies are like children: it is relatively easy to make them, but it is difficult to provide them with a good education.” This position of Coubertin concurred with “[…] the ‘civilizing mission’ of imperial ideology, which encouraged colonial powers to take up with the ‘white man’s burden’ and raise up the condition of the inferior races who were idealized as child-like and malleable.” Further evidence of Coubertin’s paternalistic attitude towards colonized peoples is his denomination of the Asian Games as a “kindergarten of Olympism.”
The Role of Sports in the Civilizing Mission

For Coubertin educational reform in France was a necessary pillar for a successful colonialism. In the new educational system, adapted to the demands of the imperial 20th century, sports had an important role to play to prepare the colonizers for the strenuous efforts abroad. It was “an eminent factor of the colonial enterprise at such a point that colonizing without sporting preparation constitutes a dangerous imprudence.”

After the First World War, physical activities were no more just an auxiliary instrument for military, hygienic or social purposes, but became an integral part of French colonial politics. Sports were an efficient instrument to prepare the colonizers for their mission; at the same time, sport was part of the superior civilization and as such it should be transmitted to the natives. Coubertin was convinced that the popular games and physical activities of the natives would never be “anything more than amusements, recreation.” In his opinion, only modern Western sports were civilized activities: “If one wishes to extend to natives in colonized countries what we will boldly call the benefits of ‘athletic civilization,’ they must be made to enter into the broad athletic system with codified regulations and comparative results, which is the necessary basis of that civilization.”

It is understandable that Coubertin was embarrassed by the St. Louis Anthropological Days and their “savage games” of the indigenous who were not ready to participate in such a prestigious event. He regarded the Olympic Games as the flagship of his “athletic civilization mission.” The legacy of this mission is still manifest in our times: despite what Coubertin considered to be “the fundamental rule of the modern Olympiads which fits into two words: all games, all nations,” the program of the Games remains dominated by Western sports.

In the colonies Coubertin believed sports to be “a vigorous instrument of the disciplining” of the indigenous people to be colonized. Sport should help to keep social peace in the colonies, because “sport not only strengthens but also calms.” Commercial exchange between the Western World and the colonies but also the civilizing mission would have been troubled without social peace among the natives and the colonizers. The colonies became an experimental field for social engineering in the home country, where Coubertin tried to use sport as an instrument to foster mutual understanding between different social strata.

Coubertin’s Racial Attitude after the First World War

In the first decade of the 20th century, Coubertin’s position toward the racial question was rather ambiguous, but started changing even before the First World War.

In an article of the Olympic Revue from 1912, entitled “Eugenics,” Coubertin criticized vehemently “the belief in the natural sovereignty of a specific race, designated to dominate all the others.” He treats the defenders of this theory, like Lapouge, as “demi-savants” (half-scientific) and regards their ideas as “âneries” (nonsense).

After the First World War, his attitudes towards colonized people became more compassionate and humane. Writing about the African Games in his Olympic Memoirs he argues against the old “colonial spirit” and pleads for the emancipation of indigenous people.

There may be different reasons for Coubertin’s ambiguous attitudes before the First World War. One explanation could be that he took a more cautious position in the Olympic Review, which was addressed to a worldwide public, while he could express his harsh racial position when writing for reviews like the Revue de Pays de Caux, the Revue pour les Français or the Revue des Deux Mondes as the readership of these publications was in general in favor of ruthless colonial politics.
The heroic and selfless devotion of the African soldiers serving in the French Army during the Great War contributed to a somewhat less racist attitude towards the natives in the French colonies. An example of the respect towards these soldiers was the attitude of General Lyautey, Coubertin’s close friend and one of the great figures of French colonial activities, who demanded that all kinds of racist exhibitions should be forbidden during the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris.\(^{59}\)

In his writings after the First World War, Coubertin has a monogenetic perception of humanity even though he thinks that there is no historical evidence to back up this theory. In the preface of his *Universal History*, he presents different ways to classify human beings according to skin color, language or cranial measurement, and he demonstrates that, depending on the methods, the resulting race categories are different.\(^{60}\) Regarding the question of equality of the different races, he states that arguments favoring the superiority of the “white group representatives” are not corroborated. Like Montesquieu he thinks that the influence of the milieu, the context, is clearly proven and for him the “climate has been the real stonemason of the races, it gave them their physiognomy and their distinctive traits.”\(^{61}\)

**Conclusion**

After careful analysis, we can distinguish three different time phases in Pierre de Coubertin’s conception of race:

A period of empathy, where class differences are perceived to be more troubling than racial differences. During this time Coubertin believed in the existence of different races with different cultural levels due to the environmental conditions, but able to improve and to catch up with the dominant once; see comments on African-Americans.

An ambiguous racist period from 1900 to the end of the First World War, with many racist statements claiming the innate inferiority of non-whites on the one hand and on the other hand statements considering the educability of “races” other than the white race. The change in Coubertin’s attitude toward non-white people is probably influenced by the International Congress of Colonial Sociology (Congrès International de Sociologie Coloniale”) held during the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition. This congress can be considered as a turning point. It favored segregation politics, arguing that there are fundamental and definitive differences between the races.

A change back to an assimilation theory after the World War I, in quest of social and international peace, according to his Olympic and educational ideas. A changing focus from national education and improvement of the French “race” to improvement of humankind.

Coubertin’s comments on the Anthropological Days, which I quoted at the beginning, were written in a phase of his life when in his writings he showed ambiguous, but often clearly racist, attitudes toward non-white people. At the time he was probably influenced by the widely promulgated “scientific” racial paradigm of the Third French Republic.

But instead of judging Coubertin solely on this period of life, we should take into consideration his whole work and the evolution of his thoughts and ideas. From 1900 on, Coubertin’s writings had shifted from the class-as-race discourse to an emphasis of co-operation between classes and education of lower classes. This shift was parallel to a general evolution in Europe after 1900, where “the efficient working together of all for the greater cohesion and strength of the nation locked in struggle with other states.”\(^{62}\) After the trauma of the Great War and the shock of the Russian October Revolution, he changed profoundly, and focused his efforts on popular education.\(^{63}\) He probably realized that neither social peace nor international peace would be possible while major groups of people are dominated by others and deprived of education.
Coubertin’s work was characterized by the will to improve humankind. First, at a national level, he focused on the moral, intellectual, and physical education of the French aristocratic and bourgeois society, then he expanded this uplifting mission to the whole of mankind. His efforts for educational reform in France, his fervent philhellenism, his enthusiasm for the colonial endeavor, his engagements for popular education were all part of his “great work” of keeping social and international peace and of “uplifting mankind.” He considered the “civilized part” of mankind threatened by moral and physical degeneration, while he saw the rest still in a state of “primitive” and inferior civilization. The Olympic Games, which brought together the finest youth of the whole world every four years, were a symbol of an eternal spring of humankind, a symbol of the eternal striving to better humanity. In Coubertin’s mind, peoples at the stage of “half-savages” were not ready yet for this noble and elitist meeting. Also their games were not serious enough to be included in the Olympic Games that were to accomplish the athletic part of the civilizing mission. Today, the Olympic Games, as a legacy of the civilization mission, still promote Western or westernized sports exclusively, even though they claim to be a universal movement.

Endnotes

1 There is a translation error in the English version of, “Pierre de Coubertin, Olympicism: Selected Writings:” the original states that the Turks were not flattered. Cf. Pierre de Coubertin, Une Campagne de vingt-et-un ans (1987-1908) (Paris: Librairie de l’éducation physique, 1909), 161.
11 Ibid., 259.
12 Ibid.
13 Pierre de Coubertin, La question nègre, Le Figaro, 26 September 1903, 1.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
Pierre de Coubertin’s “Civilizing Mission”


29 Ibid., 198.

30 Unlike in 1889, there were no direct exhibitions of indigenous or “indigenous villages” as Alfred Picard, the director of the Exhibition, judged those displays to be “used and outdated;” cf. Alfred Picard, _Exposition Universelle de 1900 à Paris, Vol. IV_ (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902-03), 352.


40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 38.

42 Ibid., 38.


47 Cf. ibid.


51 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
61 Ibid., XII.