

Coubertin and Sport in France

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E So, to the current elitism of the contemporary upper classes, COUBERTIN opposed another brand of elitism, more in tune with the times because more activist, more competitive, and also, at least apparently, more open and accessible. (21) Competitive games reflected a society which stressed competition in most fields. England, first to accept the competitive principle in economic life, first to introduce it in the recruitment of its bureaucracy, was also the first to idealize it in sport, to edulcorate it with notions of sportsmanship and fair play, to turn it into a social convention. Other modern societies had to follow suit or face grave risks. RASTIGNAC's apostrophe to Paris: "*Et maintenant, à nous deux!*" is that of a player about to enter the ring, but a player determined to win, whatever the means, whatever the effect on the game, on the rules, or on others. RASTIGNAC is the professional champion, for whom the game is a means, not an end, and the values he represents (or accepts) are precisely those that COUBERTIN and his friends wished to counteract. The games they sponsored were meant to provide such satisfactions that the end of play would be not its justification but merely its final point.

A society where competition ruled in business, elections, examinations and *concours*, where winning at any price appeared essential but where the dice were too often loaded, discovered a mitigating factor in the regulated competition of sports. Aleatory in the real world, the rewards of effort and merit were codified and (almost) assured in the reconstituted world of track and field, where ideal, sheltered conditions permitted official values to be honoured in the observance rather than the breach. And, lest even these conditions were too hard to bear, the proviso was added in a famous address to the participants in the London Olympic Games of 1908, that "it is less important to win than to take part". A sentiment more memorably worded in Grantland RICE's verse:

*For when the one Great Scorer comes
To write against your name,
He marks - not that you won or lost -
But how you played the game.*

Good, aristocratic injunctions which, if heeded, would take some of the pressure off contemporary society. Reminiscent of Knut ROCKNE's remark that "After the church, football's the best thing we've got".

As it happened, the leading personalities of the sporting world insisted on keeping sport out of politics, and political issues out of sporting life. "All political or religious discussions are rigorously forbidden", declare the Statutes of the *Ligue girondine de l'éducation physique*, drawn up in 1889: "Furthermore, the League forbids itself any political or religious activity". Athletics, another art for art's sake, could provide activity without action: an excellent refuge for a certain kind of internal emigration that today we describe as non-participation.

This cautious and conservative point of view found concrete expression when, at the height of the DREYFUS affair, "*Le Vélo*", France's only sporting daily, blotted its copybook by showing too much sympathy for the condemned officer. To preserve the basic principles of apolitism, a group of wealthy 'industrialists and sportsmen', including the Comte de DION, Baron de ZUYLEN de NYEVELT (President of the Automobile Club de France), the Comte de CHASSELOUP-LAUBAT, Edouard MICHELIN, Adolphe CLEMENT (great bicycle manufacturer and French distributor of Dunlop tyres), subsidised the publication of a rival daily, "*L'Auto-Vélo*", whose first number appeared in October 1900.

While "*L'Auto's*" editor, Henri DESGRANGES, was a sporting enthusiast with no apparent political ideas, his backers' political neutrality was clearly inflected towards the Right. The MICHELINS had already acquired the authoritarian reputation they retain today; CHASSELOUP-LAUBAT's army connections made him an early and pugnacious anti-DREYFUSARD; while DION, even more notorious for his reactionary views than for the automobiles he built, had got himself arrested at Longchamps for his part in the anti-DREYFUSARD demonstrations of June 4, 1899 against President LOUBET. Like certain dinner tables, athletic activities were to constitute that privileged domain which, providing its own end, would prosper best by excluding the potentially disintegrating influences of the outside world. As Thomas ARNOLD once wrote to a friend, "The state of public affairs is not inviting, and I rejoice that we take no daily paper". (22)

While noting the political possibilities that such 'sportsmanship' held out, it is necessary to absolve COUBERTIN

from all but the most Arnoldian of its motivations. One might go further and credit him with a perceptiveness that went beyond reaction, convention, or tradition. It is a commonplace to say that the long spell of European peace that ran (for France) from 1871 to 1914, was highly unusual. It is almost equally commonplace to note that, in the twenty or thirty years before the First World War, the most vocal advocates of pacifism were socialists, Marxists, and working-class groups which proposed an alternative to foreign war in internal class warfare, replacing international by civil conflicts. One wonders in this context whether the experience of a prolonged period of peace was not in some ways unnatural and, practically speaking, uneasy - most especially for that group, a small minority but strategically placed and highly articulate, whose incomes or whose parents' incomes protected them from struggles and left them a great deal of leisure and energy to spare.

Some twenty years ago, a suggestive essay by John BOWDITCH argued that BERGSON's *élan vital* was a rationalization of national weakness, a kind of contemporary myth. (23) The argument might perhaps be reversed, treating BERGSON's notion as the expression of an overflowing vitality around him, quite literally around him in his own social class and among the students he taught: a super-abundance of unused energy, producing a will-to-action that burst out in the political struggles of the *fin de siècle* as in the literary and artistic movements of the time. Like nationalism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism were all expressions of this unexpended energy, which also led to an increase in youthful violence and rebellion, and which a number of contemporary observers connected with the sheer need to blow off steam somehow, steam that could be jettisoned, in the course of play especially, by people to whom few other forms of effort were normally open.

"The glories of our generation are unquestionably ANDRE, BOUIN, and CARPENTIER", declares the athletic hero of Jules JOLINON's *Joueur de Balle*. (24) "Small glory, you will say. Is there any other at our age? Are we permitted any success in art, in politics, in science? Do not old men seize on all the openings, close every issue, cling to every last seat? Is it not decreed that we are worth nothing before our thighs have withered? Is it not settled that youth has no other talents than muscular one?"

As long as one bears in mind GIRAUDOUX's friendly remark that a sporting life is a heroic life in a vacuum, there is no contesting the liberating effect of competitive games on those who play them. What the schools of the bourgeoisie offered at this time was disinterested culture, as remote as possible from practical, utilitarian education, designed

rather to differentiate its beneficiaries from the unprivileged masses than to train them for life. The games COUBERTIN promoted fitted this non-utilitarian schema, yet permitted the manifestation of personal merit in activities that were simple and whose ends were clear. They encouraged self-affirmation but at the expense of no particular interest, transferred the principles of free enterprise to a collective plane, reconciled individualism and social spirit, all on an innocuous level even more separated from the surrounding world than the elite circles and institutions from which they drew recruits.

However, like the education that lycées and universities imparted, games scarcely trained for life. The liberation they provided seldom went beyond conventional limits. Reminiscing in 1918 about his rugby-playing days as a lycéen, Pierre MACORLAN remembered the watching girls and "their confused feeling that the young men in their English-style gear were no longer, at least for eighty minutes, under the control of their parents. Girls, even bourgeois girls, have an inclination for those who can reach a freedom to which they do not themselves aspire". Freedoms such as these were just what a bourgeois doctor would have ordered. Offering a reality-substitute for a minority of the ruling minority, they added yet one more abstraction to the abstractions in which French education and public life already revelled. As BARRES once said of his own life, they provided "*not a race towards some goal, but a flight towards elsewhere*".

From a way of broadening and cleansing the lives of men, COUBERTIN's dream turned into an escape from real life, a provision for social adjustment, and, eventually, a gain-producing activity. The forces it had been designed to foil assimilated it. The ulterior motives which first inspired state sponsorship of physical education in the schools came to justify a similar adoption of organised games, mitigated only by continually scarce resources. By 1933, HUIZINGA's commencement address at the University of Leyden referred to sport as a sterile function which had quite discarded the ludic factor. The easy freedom of earlier days, with their fantasies and improvisations, had been left behind. In the new era, declared an expert, one no longer had the right to fun. The new ideal now was to improve men's productivity.

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As for COUBERTIN, his greatest successes were obtained beyond the borders of the country he had hoped to rejuvenate. The Olympic Games themselves, whose international committee he presided over until 1925, were a dubious success when matched against his ideals of peace, international understanding, amateurism, and an aristocracy of merit. The French took to Olympics very slowly. The Games of 1900, meant to be held in Paris in the context of the Universal

Exhibition of that year, foundered before the antagonisms of rival or unsympathetic cliques. For the only time since 1896, the Games turned into a mere series of athletic events, symbolically presided over by the President of the *Union des Sociétés de Tir*. This was to be atoned for in 1924, when the eighth games were actually held in Paris, leaving their mark on men like MONTHERLANT, and on the city which still retains the Olympic Stadium at Colombes. Yet French youth, whom COUBERTIN had set out to *rebronzer*, would not begin to get brown in the air and sun until after the Second World War. The French masses, appreciative enough of spectator sports, scarcely took part in them until after the social laws of 1936.

The question must be asked why sporting activities and, above all, the sporting spirit that COUBERTIN so valued, failed to catch on in France beyond restricted circles. But any answers, at this stage, can be only tentative and superficial.

In nineteenth-century England, the practice of sports had become a didactic method of social integration. It was deliberately used to inculcate a particular set of socially approved attitudes, first in the schools of the ruling minority, then at all accessible levels of the public. The values which sports helped to generalise were widely accepted. In a deferential society, not riven by profound ideological conflicts, they coloured the language and the behaviour not of particular groups but of the nation. At the most obvious level, notions derived from games, sports, and athletics - sporting behaviour, fair play, respect for the rules of the game - became part of the English character, as the English conceived it and as outsiders perceived it.

French conditions rendered such developments impossible. Like ARNOLD's, COUBERTIN's had begun as a private, isolated, didactic initiative. Like ARNOLD, COUBERTIN directed his appeal to the young of the ruling elite. But in France this elite did not exist unchallenged and admired. Social emulation had given way to political competition. The dominant ideology was not one of reconciliation but of struggle. The educated minority was divided by political, social and religious differences. Success in one quarter caused hostility in others, support by one faction sparked off the criticism of another.

A professedly elitist and aristocratic enterprise like COUBERTIN's could hardly elicit the support of political opponents. GROUSSET's opposition illustrates this fundamental breach. The social background of the first sportsmen and of their supporters seemed to justify suspicion, and their ideology confirmed it. Political neutrality was

already associated with conservatism. In any case, what they had to offer had no wide appeal. Few ambitious *bourgeois* of the Third Republic aspired to be *gentilhommes*. They sent their sons to school not to become Christian Gentlemen but to pass examinations; the competition they envisaged conformed to rules other than those of sportsmanship. In such conditions, athletic sports were condemned to social insignificance (26); derivatives for the energies of the favoured few, irrelevant luxuries to many, they might eventually furnish spectacles for the popular masses. Their moral overtones, alien to the needs and conceptions of the Republic's rulers, were soon left aside.

Little wonder, then, that like most prophets, COUBERTIN reaped little honour in his country. When he died in 1937, he must have been one of few Frenchmen left undecorated. His fortune had been spent on his work, lost in the war and subsequent depressions. He was poor. In 1935, at 72, he had looked for a paying job and failed. His house in the rue Oudinot, where he had been born and married, had to be sold in 1918; the family château at Mirville was abandoned in 1930. In the last years of his life he lived in hotels, and in an apartment placed at his disposal in the headquarters of the Olympic Institution at Lausanne. That is where he died at the age of 74, a few weeks after Lausanne had elected him an Honorary Citizen. The citation referred to *"the disinterested and magnificent initiatives which have contributed to developing, throughout the entire world, the influence and renown of the generous ideas appertaining to the French spirit"*. The generosity of the French spirit did not extend to remembrance.

It was later, in 1964, that steps were taken to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the re-establishment of the Olympic Games, and also the hundredth anniversary of COUBERTIN's birth. There were ceremonies, speeches, and a plaque was placed in the aula of the Sorbonne where, in 1894, COUBERTIN won his greatest victory. Paris and a number of French cities named streets, squares, and stadiums after COUBERTIN. But COUBERTIN was dead.

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(21) Roger CAILLOIS, *"Les Jeux et les hommes"* (1958), 193-4, refers to the magic of the sporting star who triumphs by skill, stubbornness and strength - means apparently available to all - and also by luck, which enables the humblest admirer to dream that he, too, might perhaps do as much. For CAILLOIS this one of the essential compensation-fantasies of democratic societies.

(22) A.P. STANLEY, *"Life of Dr. ARNOLD"* (London 1839), I, 158. Compare Jean GIRAUDOUX, *"Le Sport"* (1928), 60, who praises the particularity of sporting papers: 'Loin de vouloir nous apprendre ce qui se passe dans le monde, ils nous retiennent du bain de nouvelles où trempe lamentablement le pauvre Européen'.

(23) In E.M. EARLE, *"Modern France"* (1951), 32-43.

(24) *Op. cit.*, 75. Géo ANDRE (1889-1943), French champion in high jump, was second in the Olympic Games of 1908; Jean BOUIN (1888-1914), runner, was second in the 5,000-metre race in the Olympic Games of 1912; Georges CARPENTIER, the boxing champion, needs no introduction.

(25) Jean BOBET, brother of cycling champion Louison BOBET, *"Les lettres françaises"*, 2 October 1957: 'pour améliorer le rendement de l'homme, on n'a plus le droit de s'amuser'.

(26) For enduring social and intellectual prejudice, see B. BUILLEMAIN, *"Le Sport et l'Education"* (1955), 31. An international UNESCO study, *"La Place du Sport dans l'Education"* (1956), 5, notes that where most Western nations consider sport as part of their national heritage and an integral part of school curricula, the French look on it as 'a form of play without much purpose, likely to make the child lose hours precious for his studies'. Compare the disenchanting comments in Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1900 à Paris. Concours Internationaux d'Exercices Physiques et de Sports. Rapports (1901). II, 341-2. 

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