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## **Olympic Games, Olympism and Internationalism: a Historical Perspective**

*Olympism is part of history.*

*To celebrate the Olympic Games is to lay claim to history<sup>1</sup>.*

Pierre de Coubertin, 1935.

### **1. Introduction**

The Olympic Games and sports are today a basic constituent of world mass, international and everyday culture. This may be confirmed by the place occupied by sports in printed and electronic information, the importance of sports and gymnastics in the educational process within and outside school, the extremely rapid spread of special premises for exercise and training, the football fans, sport advertising and the economic weight possessed by sport enterprises, as well as the increasingly sophisticated and elaborated spectacle of the modern Olympic Games. No one disputes, in any event, that the modern Olympic Games are one of the most important institutions of the twentieth century in which world-wide developments have been reflected.

In the light of these observations, we can in fact argue that sport is a 'global' or 'holistic' phenomenon, an epitome of the society which 'produces' it. Consequently, it is meaningful for the study of sport to be integrated into its historical context in each instance, or, conversely, the study of sport can lead us, inductively, to knowledge of the society to which each particular sport activity belongs. To put it briefly, in spite of the fact that sport, like play, is an enduring and universal human activity, an understanding and interpretation of them require their historicization.

The same is true about the Olympic Games and Olympism. Although there is a widespread impression that the modern Olympic Games have been directly linked to the ancient Olympic Games, historical analysis proves that there are substantial differences between them. It is more accurate to use the term 'discontinuity' instead of the term

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<sup>1</sup> *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937 Olympism Selected Writings*, ed. N.Müller, Lausanne, IOC, 2000, p. 583.

‘continuity’ when we talk about the relation between ancient and modern games. Actually, the history of sport, as written by modern historians, emphasizes the concept of ‘discontinuity’ and interprets the appearance of sport as a symptom of the transition from the traditional to a modern, industrial society. Thus the revival of the Olympic Games in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. cannot be understood within the context of continuity, but, on the contrary, within the framework of the great changes - economic, social, ideological, and cultural - which took place in Western societies from the eighteenth century on.

On the other hand, Olympism is also a modern phenomenon that has to be historically contextualised. It is closely linked to the revival of the Olympic games in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and to their periodical celebration in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. until today. It is of course widely believed that Olympism exists as a global phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> The idealizing trend of literature on the Olympic Games approaches the Olympic Games in the spirit of the educative dimension of Olympism and as a means of realizing moral values and ideals. The theoretical foundation is provided by the texts of Pierre de Coubertin and is renewed by the supporters of the Olympic idea and the ideals associated with it. However, the study of Coubertin’s thought alone reveals a process of evolution. Through his writings we may detect a change until he arrives to put together a system of values that we may place under the heading of ‘Olympism’.

Today, we use the term ‘Olympism’ without having a clear idea about its content or about the ethical and pedagogical values it implies. Many people from around the globe, watching the Olympic Games in Beijing last year would probably assert wrongly that Olympism was a movement that developed in ancient Greece linked to the ancient Olympic games. However, what is Olympism actually? Has its content been clearly determined and by whom? How is Olympism received and instrumentalized in modern societies? And is it possible to integrate Olympic values in our educational system?

I don’t intend to answer all these questions but only to contribute to exploring concepts and practices. Being a historian of the modern Olympic Games, I would like to investigate the different parameters of Olympism in order to put it into its historical context and consequently to better understand its content.

In my paper, I will analyze (a) the historical context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century which gave birth to a new global institution, the international Olympic Games; (b) the ideas of the inspirer of the revival of the Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin; (c) the main elements of Olympism

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<sup>2</sup> *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937 Olympism*, p. 527.

as an international project; (d) the co-existence of internationalism and nationalism in the Olympic Games.

## **2. The Modern Olympic Games**

### **2.1. The Revival of the Olympic Games at the Sorbonne Congress, 1894**

The beginning of the revival of the Olympic Games in the form we know them today can be traced back to 25 November 1892, when de Coubertin first proposed their revival, at a festive event organized by the “Union des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Athlétiques” (Union of French Societies of Athletic Sports) at the Sorbonne in Paris. The second and decisive step was again taken at the Sorbonne, in July 1894. Amateurism was presented as principal subject of the congress, but the discussion on the revival of the Olympic Games was included too, as an individual issue. The congress changed its title from “International Congress of Amateurs” to “International Congress for the Re-establishment of the Olympic Games”<sup>3</sup>. In the session of 23 June 1894 Athens was chosen by acclamation as the first city to hold the modern Olympic Games, and that decision was greeted with enthusiastic applause.

The modern Olympic Games are –in my knowledge- the unique case of successful revival of an ancient institution –an institution which had disappeared since the 4<sup>th</sup> century of the Christian era. The fact that the modern Games were referring to their ancient example to draw inspiration, principles and values created the misleading impression that there had been historical continuity between the Olympic Games of the ancient Hellas and the international Olympic Games restored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, taking the historical perspective, we should start with two main points:

- (1) There was no continuity from antiquity down to the nineteenth century, and so the term 'revival' is very properly used;
- (2) Bodily exercise had an entirely different ideological and social function in antiquity, on the one hand, and in the modern world, on the other.

The differences between the ancient and modern Olympic Games (meaning the Games in the form in which they were revived in 1896) could be summed up in the religious character of the Games, amateurism, performance (records), the position of women, and the

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<sup>3</sup> D.C. Young, *The Modern Olympics. A Struggle for Revival*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London 1996, p. 90-92.

events. A further difference, moreover, is the international character of the modern Games, in contrast with the national character of their ancient counterpart.

## **2.2. Ancient and Modern Olympic Games**

### **2.2.1. Religion**

In antiquity, the Games were integrated into an entirety of cult practices and had no autonomy. They were not, that is to say, an autonomous form of recreation and activity but a feature incorporated into religious observances in honour of the dead and the gods. Religious feeling was the ideological underpinning of ancient sport, as is demonstrated by the sacrifices and processions which were held during the course of Games, by the worship which was rendered to some Olympic victors, and by the location of the venues of the games next to sanctuaries. We also know that it was the custom for dead heroes to be honoured with games.

In the modern world, on the contrary, sports have been completely dissociated from any other celebration and have acquired their own calendar; they have also become an end in themselves. The sports calendar is based on periodicity, but is independent of religious and political events. Modern sport contests adopt, of course, a ritual and a symbolic language which incorporate selected features from the ancient Olympic Games. These are modern secularised functions which have replaced the religious functions of traditional society.

At the same time, Olympism, as conceived by Coubertin, is structured with religious references. As Norbert Müller writes: “Coubertin reintroduced the religious goals of the ancient Olympic Games into the modern version, essentially without changing the spiritual sense of the Games”.<sup>4</sup> This is not, however, a religion but a philosophical and moral system – the '*religio athletae*'.

### **2.2.2. Amateurism**

A constituent element of the revival of the Olympic Games was the ideology of amateurism, which gave expression to the system of values of the rising middle classes. That amateurism is a feature of modern society which did not exist in antiquity is proved by the fact that physical exercise takes place for 'recreation' and the pleasure it gives lies in the actual carrying out of the sport activity. For the amateur athlete, the aim is not only victory but –

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<sup>4</sup> *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937 Olympism*, p. 44.

above all – taking part. On the contrary, in ancient Greece, the concept of ‘amateur athlete’ did not exist at all, since ‘athlete’ means a competitor for a prize.<sup>5</sup>

Amateurism condenses in an optimal way the values which dominated in Western Europe at the time of the revival of the Olympic Games. It was a feature of the ideology of a British elite of birth and wealth. A basic characteristic of it was that sport activity was dissociated from any practical usefulness – in essence, that is, the contrasting of sport with the very concept of work. Sports were, then, engaged in for ‘amusement’ and were an end in itself. They made reference to ‘conspicuous leisure’ – the non-productive consumption of time – which, as Thorstein Veblen has shown, ensured the symbolic superiority of the ‘leisure class’.<sup>6</sup>

The second feature of amateurism was the so-called ‘fair play’, that is, ‘civilised’ competition, governed by rules voluntarily accepted by those taking part. The rules of athletic competition were determined by modern, bourgeois values: meritocracy, equality, solidarity, individualism. The contest on the track or the pitch was based on ‘democratic’ competition between ‘equals’, and the ‘best athlete’ won not because of social status or inherited right, but because of his individual worth and his individual effort. As in the case of universal suffrage, all voters are ‘equal’, so in athletic competition, opponents are ‘equal’, and any previously existing social differences are not taken into account.

Equality was a component concept of amateurism, but we must make a basic distinction in order to understand the covert social exclusion which amateurism cultivated: (a) equality as to the terms of competition, and (b) equality as to access to the competition. The game was, in fact, regulated by rules which were common for all those competing. In the stadium or on the pitch all were equal. But there was no equality of access to the contest. Amateurism imposed this limit, a clearly social limit, since the professional sportsman who did not take exercise for ‘pleasure’ but for financial remuneration was excluded.

### **2.2.3. Performance**

In the ancient games there was no interest in the recording of performance. Only victory counted. For this reason, there is no record anywhere of the distances of the victor's throw in discus-throwing or of the time achieved by runners. The rules of the contests were, of course, codified and there were specially trained judges, the *hellanodikai*, who decided, at a time

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<sup>5</sup> See D.C. Young, *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics*, Chicago: Ares, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> See Thorstein Veblen's famous book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York, August M. Kelley, 1991 (1st ed. 1899).

when there were no chronometers or photo-finishes, who was the winner. On the contrary, since the revival of the Olympic Games down to the present a detailed record of achievements has been kept at a world level, to such a point that the pursuit of the record has become an end in itself and has led to the phenomena of doping.<sup>7</sup>

As Jean-Pierre Vernant points out, in antiquity "victory was self-sufficient. There was no need for it to be measured by anything else except itself. It is absolute". In ancient sport, the idea of 'accomplishment' dominated, whereas modern sports are defined by the idea of 'surpassing'.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, the victor in antiquity was an '*Olympionikes*' – an Olympic victor – and not a champion who had achieved a provisional record. The victor's body in fact encapsulated the essential difference between the ancient and the modern Games: in antiquity, the body of the victor was like the body of a deity, it had a religious identity and made reference to the heroes of epic poetry; in the modern world, it is a body which is controllable, measurable, and subject to medical control.<sup>9</sup>

#### **2.2.4. Women**

An important difference from antiquity, moreover, is to be seen in the position of women. Women were excluded from the games, not only from the track, but also as spectators. In ancient society, the role of women was confined to the home and its care. In the nineteenth century, in spite of the fact that the position of women was marginal in terms of physical exercise, their attendance at sport spectacles was not banned. In contrast with antiquity, women rapidly won a place on the pitches of modern sports and on the classic track as athletes. Moreover, from the early nineteenth century – again in contrast with antiquity – gymnastics were considered essential for the education not only of boys but of girls as well.

The Intermediate Olympics held in Athens in 1906, though considered "a great celebration of beauty and male vigour",<sup>10</sup> involved the public presence of sportswomen in the form of the Danish women gymnasts' team, which gave a display of Swedish gymnastics and in that of the tennis contests, in which Greece produced a woman Olympic champion. Since then female participation in the Olympic Games increased considerably but has not been

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<sup>7</sup> See the seminal work of A.Gutmann, *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sports*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Isabelle Queval, *S'accomplir ou se dépasser. Essai sur le sport contemporain*, Paris : Gallimard, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, « Jeux anciens-Sport moderne », *Imeros* 5.1, 2005, 19-28.

<sup>10</sup> P.S. Savvidis, *Album of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Olympic Games at Athens 1906*, Athens 1907, 125 (in Greek).

equal to male participation until the Beijing Games.<sup>11</sup> Actually, at the 2004 Games, women's participation reached 40.6% of the total number of participants.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.2.5. Events

Finally, the modern world has created events which did not exist in antiquity, chiefly team events of British origin, such as football, or events which are associated with new technologies, such as the bicycle or motor car. In the case of the Olympic Games in particular, events were added from the very start which though they existed in antiquity, were not Olympic (such as swimming, rowing, and weight-lifting), as well as others which were entirely new, such as tennis. Besides, the Marathon race, although inspired by antiquity, was also an invention –very successful, indeed- for the 1896 games at Athens.

## 3. Olympism

### 3.1. A modern doctrine

In Antiquity, there were Olympic Games but there was no Olympism. This is another important difference between ancient and modern Olympic Games. The same is the case with the various 'revivals' of the Olympic Games before Pierre de Coubertin. When we speak about the time of the Olympic Games' revival, we have to distinguish between the Olympic Games and Olympism. Although, today, these two elements appear to be closely linked to one another and the Olympic Games are now perceived as integral part of Olympism, this was not the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The various attempts to revive the Olympic Games that date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and mostly to the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>, shared similar ideological sources, but

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<sup>11</sup> D. Miller, *Athens to Athens. The Official History of the Olympic Games and the IOC, 1894-2004*, Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 2003, p. 491.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/binary-data/WSF\\_ARTICLE/pdf\\_file/28.pdf](http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/binary-data/WSF_ARTICLE/pdf_file/28.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> In England there were the Olympic Games of Robert Dover (since 1612). Much Wenlock (since 1850), Shropshire (1860-62, 1864) Liverpool (1862-67), the Olympic Games of Morpeth, Northumberland, where professionals took part (1870-1958) and the "National Olympic Games" (1866-68, 1874, 1877, 1883) of the National Olympian Association. In Germany, near Dessau that was a center of gymnastic education, the Olympic Games of Drehberg were held (1776-99, 1840 – 42), while Olympic Games are also reported in France (at the catholic school of Rondeau, 1832-1954), in Sweden (Ramlösa, 1834, 1836), in Canada (Montreal, 1844), the USA (New York, 1853) and Hungary (Palic, 1880-1914). Cf. J.K. Rühl, «The Olympian Games at Athens in the year 1877», *Journal of Olympic History*, Fall 1997, p. 28-31 and «Olympische Spiele ausserhalb Griechenlands» in W. Decker, G. Dolianitis and K. Lennartz (ed.), *100 Jahre Olympische Spiele. Der Neugriechische Ursprung*, Würzburg, Ergon, 1996, p. 60-79. For the Greek attempts to revive the Games see Christina Koulouri, "On the Path to Revival", in *Athens in the late Nineteenth Century. The First International*

did not propose a moral and educational system as Coubertin did. They were inspired by antiquity and wanted to revive an ancient institution in a modern context. In this sense they overlapped with Coubertin's revival project. The concept of Olympism, however, which included the celebration of Olympic Games, was something completely different, because of its moral and educational dimension. Consequently, Olympism cannot be understood if we don't understand Coubertin's thought.

### **3.2. Pierre de Coubertin**

Born in 1863, de Coubertin grew up in the climate of "Revanche", which prevailed after the defeat of France by Germany in 1870. Within this climate, criticism of the French educational system and the attribution of the defeat to the superiority of German education were commonplaces. So de Coubertin, like many others of his contemporaries, sought ways and methods of improving the upbringing of French youth and, by extension, of strengthening the French nation. De Coubertin's path of patriotism was the path of sports and physical education. He himself articulated the idea of internationalization with the need for French sports to get to know the competition of the more advanced countries in the domain of sport, a need of which he became aware through his contact with England. Coubertin conceived the idea of the revival of the ancient Olympic Games within a framework of overall renaissance in which sports would serve as a means for the physical, moral and intellectual formation of younger generations. His famous saying that the Olympic Games are 'the quadrennial celebration of the human springtime'<sup>14</sup> reveals the core of his thought.

Besides, Coubertin coined the term 'Olympism', a neologism to describe a 'philosophical and religious doctrine' that was related to the periodical celebration of the Olympic Games. According to Coubertin, Olympism referred to the "gentleman's" system of values and the ethical attributes contained in the "religio athletae", while at the same time taking the form of Olympic education. Coubertin created his Olympic theory gradually between 1906 and 1918. During that period he conceived the symbolic language of Olympism, which included the athletic oath, the athletes' parade, and the Olympic flag which illustrated Olympic universalism and pacifism. Coubertin's Olympism was, according to

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*Olympic Games*, Ministry of Culture, General Secretariat for the Olympic Games, Historic and Ethnological Society of Greece, 2004, p. 13-42.

<sup>14</sup>*Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937 Olympism*, p. 581.



Patrick Clastres, “an enlightened and elitist masculinism”.<sup>15</sup> His model was the ‘republican gentleman’.<sup>16</sup>

Actually, Olympism has a philosophical and an educational dimension. It is, on the one hand, a spiritual and moral stance, a '*religio athletae*', which includes the "advance to an ideal of a higher life and a pursuit of perfection", the moral qualities of 'chivalry' - belonging to an élite of 'equal origins' - and an aesthetic which glorifies beauty.<sup>17</sup>

The content of Olympism has been presented as *par excellence* moral. Sports in general have pretended to offer a moral example. As Georges Vigarello has written: "sport has always been nurtured by the struggle against 'evil'. Its inner struggle is essential. The legitimation of its existence depends upon an ethic that has to be exhibited. It must be seen to be always governed by moral purity. Its necessary paradigmatic character constructs an orthodoxy: it determines who are exalted and who are exiled."<sup>18</sup> A clear distinction is made, then, between those who are entitled to take part and those who are excluded - amateurs and professionals, the 'doped' and the 'clean', etc. Sport makes manifest an ethic which condenses the principal values of modern societies: equality, meritocracy, solidarity, democratic competition. Conversely, the Olympic Games are called upon to serve as a paradigm and to provide ethical models in the modern world, particularly for young people.

On the other hand, Olympism takes the form of Olympic education, which is based on "the cultivation of effort and the cultivation of bodily harmony - and so on the combination of the desire for pre-eminence and the desire for the measure".<sup>19</sup> The famous Olympic motto '*citius, altius, fortius*' (faster, higher, stronger), devised by the Dominican priest Henri Didon in 1891 and adopted by Coubertin in 1894 in fact distills not only athletic values (better performances in specific events), but, more generally, moral and pedagogic values as well.<sup>20</sup>

In the years which followed his retirement from the presidency of the IOC (1925), Coubertin attempted to leave his spiritual testament as to the plan which he had served with devotion since the 1880s: the ideal education which aims at the integrated formation of a balanced human being. On his visit to Olympia in 1927, he addressed the following words to the "Young Athletes of All Nations":

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<sup>15</sup> P.Clastres, *Jeux Olympiques. Un siècle de passions*, Paris : Les Quatre Chemins, 2008, pp.52-54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p.38.

<sup>17</sup> See G. Rioux (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin Textes choisis. Tome I: Révélation*, Zurich - Hildesheim - New York 1986, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> G. Vigarello, *Du jeu ancien au show sportif*, p. 206.

<sup>19</sup> *Lettres Olympiques V, Gazette de Lausanne*, 28 Nov. 1918, No. 325, pp. 1-2, in N. Müller (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin, ... Vol. II, op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> See N. Müller (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin ...*, Vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 442.

*Olympism can become a school for moral nobility and purity as well as physical endurance and energy, but this can happen only if you continually raise your concept of athletic honor and impartiality to the level of your muscular ability.*<sup>21</sup>

Olympism therefore, as conceived and described by the reviver of the Olympic Games, provides a medium for attaining universal values, and ideals through physical exercise and international Olympic Games.

Actually, the content of Olympism was defined during a period of almost forty years, as Coubertin's writings reveal. The final outcome can be summarized as a set of 'integrating Olympic values' according to the German philosopher Hans Lenk (1964)<sup>22</sup>:

- The cultural and religious celebration
- Artistic and spiritual training
- The idea of the elite and of equal chances
- Competition and contest
- Sportsmanship: fair play and the spirit of chivalry
- The regular holding of the games, tradition, and armistice
- Internationalism and nationalism ('understanding people' and cultural pluralism)
- The community of all the athletic disciplines
- The notion of amateurism
- Olympic independence
- The ancient model and the modern form

The text that sums up all the constituent elements of Coubertin's Olympism is his speech broadcast on radio in 1935 about "The Philosophical Foundations of Modern Olympism".<sup>23</sup> He was seventy-two and he would die two years later.

Coubertin's legacy has been treasured by the IOC and by all those who wrote about Olympic values and Olympic education. A whole universe has been created around the term 'Olympism' in the post-war era, while, simultaneously, sports have been spreading around the globe, gaining an increasing percentage in everyday culture.

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<sup>21</sup> *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937 Olympism*, p. 560.

<sup>22</sup> *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937 Olympism*, pp. 527-528.

<sup>23</sup> *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937 Olympism*, pp. 580-583.

The definition of Olympism in the Olympic Charter (1999) is still relevant with the doctrine synthesized by Coubertin some decades ago:

*Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.*<sup>24</sup>

#### **4. Internationalism and nationalism**

The concurrence of internationalism and nationalism characterized the modern Olympic Games from the moment of their revival. The organization and celebration of all the Olympic Games since 1896 have been marked by the co-existence and the interaction of the international, the national and the local element at a political, ideological and cultural level. In fact, in a strange way, the first consequence of the internationalization of the Olympic Games was the close association of athleticism with nationalism. The Olympic Games became, from the moment of their revival, a further field for national confrontation, albeit symbolic.

##### **4.1. Olympism as an internationalist project**

For de Coubertin the international exhibitions, the new opportunities for global communication that had emerged from the railways and the telegraph, and the sports contests between athletes coming from different countries, constituted parts of a wider movement which led as logical outcome to the internationalization of sport. Aim of this internationalization through the revival of the Olympic Games was the ‘unification’ and the ‘purification’ of sport, so that it fulfilled its educational mission in the modern world<sup>25</sup>.

The international character of the Olympic Games is underscored by the rituals and symbols which have been selected and gradually established. Olympic internationalism, both realistic and reformist, used the language of symbols in order to promote the ideals of international co-operation and peaceful co-existence of the world's peoples. Such symbols are the Olympic circles and the Olympic flag, the Olympic anthem, and the Olympic oath, while

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid. 528.

<sup>25</sup> Müller, *Pierre de Coubertin*, p.124-126 (text 7/19 April 1896).

ceremonies such as the torch relay, the opening and closing ceremonies of the Games, and the parade of athletes incorporated into these play a similar role.

The internationalization of sport was made possible in an age when the speed of transport and communication between people increased, communication which led to a knowledge of other peoples and the comparison of achievements, through international exhibitions. Knowledge increased rivalry and competition - now at an international level.

#### **4.1.1. International exhibitions**

International exhibitions were festivals of “progress” and of trade, reflecting the internationalization of the economy and promoting the idea of competition. The internationalization of the economy in the nineteenth century through the expansion of industrialization, public transport, and communications, movements of people, capital, and goods, and of the quest for markets and raw materials created the conditions for the establishment of permanent international institutions and organizations. Between 1851, when the first international exhibition was held in London, and 1914, 42 similar exhibitions were held in 30 different cities throughout the world.<sup>26</sup> These exhibitions were a magnet which attracted a large number of visitors and were at the starting-point of mass tourism.<sup>27</sup>

These festivals of “progress” and of trade had their roots in the tradition of the Enlightenment, which - at the time of the French Revolution - introduced, on the one hand, a new type of festival which served as a means of social cohesion and instruction and, on the other, promoted faith in the global nature of knowledge and the "unity of human kind".<sup>28</sup> From 1867, when Paris hosted the international industrial exhibition, these exhibitions also included athletic events.<sup>29</sup> Nor is it any accident that, apart from the Athens Olympics, all the first Olympiads (1900, 1904, and 1908) were connected with the world exhibitions held in the same years in the same cities. A similar co-existence of industrial exhibitions with sporting and artistic competitions had been observable at national level in various countries, among which we can quote the example of the Zappas Olympiads at Athens (1859-1889).

The idea of competition was integral part of international exhibitions and found easily its echo in the realm of sports. Athletic achievement through competition - precisely what is

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<sup>26</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Internationalism in Europe 1815-1914*, London: A.W. Sythoff, 1963, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> André Rauch, *Vacances en France de 1830 à nos jours*, Paris : Hachette, 2001, p. 292-293.

<sup>28</sup> Otto Schantz, «Französische Festkultur als Wegbereiter der Modernen Olympischen Spiele», *Stadion* 21-22 (1995-96), p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> See Walter Borgers, “From the Temple of Industry to Olympic Arena. The Exhibition Tradition of the Olympic Games”, *Journal of Olympic History* 11/1, January 2003, p. 7-21.

meant by the motto '*citius, altius, fortius*' - symbolises the whole of the values of modernity, which also mark creativity and innovation in industry, science, and art.<sup>30</sup>

The cult of achievement, the quest for records and quantification became core features of modern sports<sup>31</sup>. The setting down of the records was from the very beginning a constituent element of the Olympic Games and led to specialization on the part of the athletes, the cult of achievement in the Olympic stadiums, and the use of any means of breaking a record (even doping).

#### **4.1.2. Idealistic internationalisms**

Olympism met up with other fin-de-siècle "idealistic internationalisms" with which it shared a totality of common values and behaviors, as well as overlapping clientèles<sup>32</sup>. Four movements are identified as "idealistic internationalisms": the Red Cross (1863), the Esperanto movement (1887), the Olympic movement (1894), and the Scouting movement (1908). "Idealistic internationalisms", heirs to the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, proclaimed that they could transform the modern world by "training" the younger generations. Such, for example, was the nature of the Boy Scouts movement, which had much in common with Olympism: it was worldwide, apolitical, classless, non racial. Olympism was, moreover, put forward as a, politically neutral, internationalist movement, with the promotion of world peace as its aim, particularly after the First World War.

Idealistic internationalisms shared a set of common features such as the idea of reform through education, political neutrality, and the aim of international co-operation and peace.

#### **The idea of reform through education**

Idealistic internationalisms, inspired by the pedagogical optimism of the Enlightenment, were seeking to change the world through education. Olympism, as initially conceived by de Coubertin, was mainly an educational system.

Already in a speech in 1889 Coubertin had defined 'sports education' as a pedagogical system with specific subject, method and rules. In this system the moral

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Arne Martin Klausen, 'Introduction' in Arne Martin Klausen (ed.), *Olympic Games as a Performance and Public Event. The Case of the XVII Winter Olympic Games in Norway*, Berghahn, New York - Oxford 1999, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sports*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

<sup>32</sup> John Hoberman, 'Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism', *Journal of Sport History* 22/1 (Spring 1995), p.6.

dimension was particularly important, because sports led, according to him, to the victory of the will and the fulfillment of the human ideal.<sup>33</sup>

### **Political neutrality**

Political neutrality in particular was projected equally by all the non-socialist internationalist enterprises of the second half of the nineteenth century (such as, for example, the Red Cross, founded in 1863) as absolutely necessary for their success. It was, nevertheless, obvious that no internationalist project could succeed without powerful social and political underpinning. The athletic internationalism of Coubertin made use, in its first phase, of the relations of its inspirer with the European aristocracy<sup>34</sup> and the support of royal houses. The most fervent support, of course, was forthcoming from the Greek dynasty, which saw in the revival of the Olympic Games an opportunity to reinforce its prestige and power on the domestic political scene. However, Edward VII was also present at the London Olympics of 1908 and performed the official opening, while Gustav V, King of Sweden, attended the Stockholm Games in 1912.

### **International co-operation and peace**

In 1918, Coubertin determined that the role of Olympism was "to maintain and spread social peace".<sup>35</sup> However, as early as the time when the idea of reviving the Olympic Games was born in Coubertin, there was an ideological affinity with the International Peace Movement, which was represented by important members at the Sorbonne Congress.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the balance between internationalism and patriotism which we find in Coubertin's writings reflects basic principles of the Peace Movement of the time, which, though recognizing the variety of nations and the concept of conflict as being interwoven with human action, promoted the need for 'civilized' solutions instead of war. Peace was, then, advanced through "enlightened patriotism" and not through "utopian and superficial cosmopolitanism", while a love for one's country was balanced by a love for mankind.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> G. Rioux (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin. Textes choisis*, vol. 1: *Révélation*, Weidmann, Zurich/ Hildersheim/New York, p. 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> In 1908, 68% of the members of the IOC were of aristocratic origin, a figure which fell to 41% in 1924. Hoberman, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> N. Müller (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin*, vol. II, p. 396.

<sup>36</sup> According to Dietrich R. Quanz, the International Peace Movement was strongly represented among the honorary members of the Sorbonne Congress: "Civic Pacifism and Sports-Based Internationalism: Framework for the Founding of the International Olympic Committee", *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 2 (1993), pp. 9 - 10. See also Clastres, *op.cit.*, pp.34-35.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

## **4.2. Nationalism**

Despite Olympism's proclaimed strategy in favor of a politically neutral internationalism, the Olympic Games, as a modern global institution, could not remain immune from nationalist conflicts and major international clashes, namely the two world wars, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, physical education, primarily aimed at training eventual soldiers who would defend their country at the battlefields, was closely associated with nationalist movements. The history of the modern Olympic Games goes hand in hand with modern political, economic and cultural history, and is linked as much with the spirit of conciliation of peoples and international peace as with – on the contrary – national and political rivalries.

### **4.2.1. The Olympic Games as a field for national confrontation**

Since the first modern Olympiad, the organization of the Games and of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was based on the national criterion. The nation did not always coincide with the state, and usually took precedence. On the choice of Coubertin himself, there was, as to the composition of the national teams and their representation at the Olympic Games, an "athletics geography" which was not necessarily identical with the political geography. Thus nations which were not autonomous states, such as Bohemia and Finland, had the right of autonomous representation at the Games, while the same right had not been granted to Ireland, Catalonia, and the Basques.

On several occasions, moreover, victories in the stadiums and pitches have been used to redress the balance in rivalries between nations. Mainly on the pitch, but also in the stadium, 'small' nations can conquer the 'great', or a nation can humiliate its historic 'enemy'.

### **4.2.2. The nations in the stadium**

In the stadium in which the Games are held, the nations are present. The parade of athletes during the opening ceremony is held on the basis of nationhood, while the flag comes first in each national team. The victories of the athletes are also classified on the basis of nations (states). The playing of the national anthem and the raising of the flag at the award of the medals is also a reminder that the athletes do not compete as individuals but as members of a nation - precisely as the decisions taken at the Sorbonne Congress provided.

On the Olympic track, national competition used a shared international language, that of the quantitative measurement of achievements. The codification of the athletic contest,

through a system of international operating rules of athletic institutions and the holding of the Games ensured the 'objective' documentation of national superiority. The prestige of a nation was, then, measurable: it depended on the number of its Olympic champions, with the records which they had achieved and - where a particular country had undertaken to host the Games - on its success in this undertaking.

#### **4.2.3. Olympic champions as national heroes**

Olympic champions represent the “glory” of a nation and are treated as national heroes. Actually, at the Olympic Games at Athens in 1896 a new model of national hero appeared for the first time –the Olympic champion (and, in general, the sport champion). At the same time, sport spectacle was connected with national sentiment and belonging-ness. At the Olympic Games, spectators have been characteristically positioned as patriotic partisan objects<sup>38</sup>.

At Athens in 1896, the spectators’ behavior illustrated identification with one’s “own” competitors. The reactions of the Greek public ranged from joy to disappointment, depending on Greek athletes’ performance. It is interesting to read the description of the first Greek victory in the Stadium:

*A few moments later the number of Mitropoulos is put up and the Greek flag is hoisted. He is the first Greek Olympic winner in the stadium. The enthusiasm bursts forth beyond control; tears damp the eyes, hats are hurled into the air and handkerchiefs are waved frenziedly. The cheers and the endless applause of which the signal is given by the Royal Family constitute an indescribable composite sound.*<sup>39</sup>

However, the first Greek athlete who became a national hero was Spyridon Louis, the winner of the Marathon race in 1896. This event was the only one that had neither an ancient origin nor a modern equivalent. It was created especially for the first modern Olympic Games after Michel Breal’s idea who also offered a silver cup for the winner<sup>40</sup>. Even before the Games, the Marathon race took a national character, and in Greece it was widely accepted that the winner should be a Greek. This is why when Louis entered the Stadium as the winner, Greece recognized in his face its national hero. Louis’s appearance in the local costume (“foustanella”) to receive his medal enhanced the symbolic weight of the new type of national hero.

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<sup>38</sup> John Horne-Alan Tomlinson-Garry Whannel (eds.), *Understanding sport. An introduction to the sociological and cultural analysis of sport*, London and New York: Spon Press, 1999, p.177-178.

<sup>39</sup> *The Olympic Games 776 BC – 1896. Part II. The 1896 Olympic Games, by de Coubertin, T. Philimon, N. Politis and Ch. Anninos (translation of 1966)*, C. Beck (ed.), Athens 1896, p.140.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Breal was a French philosopher and academic, close friend of de Coubertin’s.



On the other hand, Louis's victory was experienced beyond its national borders, as a European victory. It made people who were present feel that all nations coexisted in an Olympic celebration that confirmed the values of western civilization. The Marathon race symbolized the victory of the Greeks against the Persians in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., victory of European civilization over "Asiatic barbarism". The description of Hugues le Roux, correspondent of the French newspaper *Figaro*, was very eloquent:

*Yet, when we saw at the end of the stadium, that peasant appear who was arriving first, there was not one of us, of whatever nation he may happen belong, who did not thrill with joy. We felt that the Greek earth had run below its son to bring him victory. It had to be that it was a Greek who might come and say: 'Forget that which divided you. The barbarians have been repulsed. Civilisation triumphs for a second time'.<sup>41</sup>*

## **Conclusion**

The revival of the Olympic Games and the implementation of a novel philosophical and educational doctrine, namely Olympism, can be analyzed and understood in the historical context of modernity, industrialization and internationalization. Most of the features that characterize modern sport and also Olympic competitions relate to those historical instances – i.e. performance, discipline, quantification, democracy, progress, peace, etc. The main innovative feature of the modern Olympic Games compared with their ancient model was the international dimension. Olympism appeared as a movement that shared common elements with other internationalisms of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century like the International Peace Movement, the Red Cross and the Boy Scout movement. It claimed political neutrality and supported world peace. However, despite Olympism's proclaimed strategy in favor of a politically neutral internationalism, the Olympic Games, as a modern global institution, could not remain immune from nationalist conflicts and major international clashes, namely the two world wars, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, the Olympic Games and Olympism have been oscillating between internationalism and nationalism since their revival in 1896. Exclusions - voluntary or imposed - and boycotting of the Olympic Games run through all the period from the First World War to the war in Yugoslavia (1991-5). The stadium has become an arena of international relations.

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<sup>41</sup> *The Olympic Games 776 BC – 1896*, op.cit., p.153.

Despite all threats and crises, Olympism managed to survive and to become one of the major mega events of our time. The once contested and modest Olympic Games have been transformed to a mass spectacle and a huge enterprise through technological innovation (radio, cinema, television) and commercialization. Olympic champions do not look any more like Spiridon Louis, the Olympic champion of Marathon race at Athens in 1896. The comparison of the images of Olympic champions is the best illustration of the transformation of Olympism. But even images which have not been altered have changed their meaning. Is the Olympic flag still the symbol of a system of values or a commercial logo?