

# The 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games as a Platform for Pierre de Coubertin's educational Internationalism

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## Abstract

The first edition of the modern Olympic Games took place in Athens in 1896. From 6th to 15th April 262 athletes from 13 nations competed in 9 sports or 43 disciplines. At the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games more than 11.000 athletes from 206 National Olympic Committees (NOC) can be welcomed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Without doubt, the increase of the numbers of athletes would have been welcomed by the founder of the modern Olympic Movement Pierre de Coubertin as he planned the modern Olympic Games as an international platform for exchange between athletes and spectators of all countries ideally. The educational idea behind this, its contemporary meaning and probable relevance for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games are analysed in this article.<sup>1</sup>

1 As a direct consequence of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic the IOC in collaboration with the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee have decided on 24th March 2020 to re-schedule the Games of the XXXIII to a date beyond 2020 but not later than summer 2021. As the lecture was delivered on 17th October 2019 the information on the re-scheduling of the Tokyo Olympics Games must be taken into account retrospectively.

## Keywords

Educational Internationalism, World Peace Conferences, Pierre de Coubertin, Olympic Games as vehicle to support transcultural understanding, inter-Korean conflict, 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games.

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## **Introduction**

Historiography describes the end of the 19th century as the age of imperialism, nationalism, and continuous industrialization. The latter had an enormous influence on the world's economic, technical, political and social life. It also supported internationalisation by improvements in transport and communication. But in the area of tension between nationalism and imperialism, the first initiatives also developed to promote a peaceful, educationally motivated internationalism. The objective was to defuse mono-nationalist thinking, which determined and challenged global policy guidelines.

Pierre de Coubertin grew up in the 3rd French Republic and experienced both nationalistic tendencies and endeavours to think and act more internationally on the educational, cultural, economic and political level. The article explores how Coubertin imbedded initiatives of the young but emerging educational internationalism in his concept of the Olympic Games as an international platform for athletes from different nations. The nature and concept of an educational internationalism itself is explained in chapter two. Coubertin's reception of it is analysed in chapter three. Then, in chapter four, the argument is developed that the international dimension in Coubertin's thinking can still be experienced today. This will be done with a focus on the fragile political situation in Korea and an analysis of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games as a potential vehicle to vitalize dialogues between the Democratic Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of Korea.

## **Cornerstones of an educationally motivated internationalism**

The tradition of the World Fairs as exhibitions in the areas of industry, culture and science became an international symbol for progress (Wassong, 2002). The debut of the World Fairs took place at Crystal Palace in London in 1851. The British magazine *The Spectator* labelled the World Fair in London as "Olympic Games of Industry" (Loland, 1995) and Queen Victoria (1819 - 1901) stated in her opening address her expectations of the international event:

*"It is my anxious desire to promote among nations the cultivation of all those arts which are fostered by peace, and which in return contribute to maintain the peace of the world."*

(Borgers & Quanz, 1996, p. 80)

In the following decades Paris became the centre of the growing popularity of the World Fairs with their organization in 1867, 1878 and 1889. This contributed much to the fact that Paris also became the focal point of the emerging peace movement. Together with the World Fair in 1889, the first World Peace Congress also took place in Paris. Its main organizers were the Englishman Hodgson Pratt (1824 – 1907), who had already founded the *International Peace and Arbitration Association* in London, and Frédéric Passy (1822 – 1912) from France. Passy had established the *Société des amis de la paix* in Paris and chaired the *Interparliamentary Union* (IPU). He was awarded the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1896 together with Jean Henri Dunant (1828 – 1910) who founded the International Red Cross in 1863. The IPU was composed of parliamentarians of different nations who had to respect claims for the neutrality of international law made by the IPU. The inaugural meeting of the IPU took place in Paris in the temporal environment of the World Fair and the World Peace Congress. Without anticipating further remarks, it must already be mentioned here that Coubertin maintained close contacts with Pratt and Passy (Quanz, 2002).

At the World Peace Congress, as well as at the IPU's annual congresses, considerations were developed on the promotion of educational, political, economic, scientific and cultural cooperation at the international level. A platform for dialogue should be created between representatives of different nations with the aim to initiate processes of mutual learning and understanding. This should lead to the reduction of mistrust and prejudice against other nations which was regarded as one of the main driving forces behind the outbreak of armed conflicts (Wassong, 2002).

In 1891, the 3rd World Peace Congress was held in Rome. Pratt addressed the role of students as future leaders of an educationally motivated internationalism. He first recommended the promotion of international historiography for the universities. It was important for him not to focus on the history of one's own in research only. Publications on the history, politics, society and culture of other nations should broaden the horizon of knowledge and lead to constructive dialogues, free from unjustified prejudices. Pratt regarded this as the basis for the development of transnational understanding and growing mutual respect between the nations. This recommendation reads in the documentation of the 3rd World Peace Congress as follows:

*“[109] Mutual respect and friendliness should be sowed between students of European and American universities.*

*[119] Students should study the progress of civilization by reading universal historiography and by analysing each nation`s contribution to the progress of humankind.”*

(International Peace Bureau, 1898, p. 26)

Another proposal that Pratt presented at the World Peace Congress in Rome was the organization of annual student meetings in rotating university cities. Students from European and American universities should be given the opportunity to get to know one another in joint scientific and cultural workshops, addressing the topics of unity and the value of international collaboration. This should also lead to the development of tolerance towards other cultures, which in turn should then encourage the establishment of a peaceful understanding between nations. It is interesting to know that according to Pratt the organization of sport meetings should also be considered as a vehicle to strengthen the objective of the international student meetings.

*“The congress expresses the desire to determine measures:*

*[points 1-3]*

*That an appeal is made to the students of universities, in which they are advised of contributing to the implementation of the peace principle;*

*That a meeting and an annual celebration of fraternization are to be held alternately at different large universities, whose task would be to find the means of attaining this aim.*

*The celebrations are to consist of physical exercises and prize work in prose and poetry on the topic of unity and international co-operation.”*

(International Peace Bureau , 1898, p. 27)

## **Coubertin’s reception and application of an educational internationalism**

According to Coubertin the international flair radiating from the World’s Fairs, which he experienced as a 15-year-old visiting the 4th World’s Fair in 1878 in Paris for the first time, led to his early international awakening (Coubertin in Quanz, 1993). Coubertin was personally involved in the World Fair as he co-organized a congress on sport and physical education. In accordance with the

objectives of the World Fair he stressed the international nature of the congress by initiating a worldwide survey on the role of school sport. At the congress itself, Coubertin presented an evaluation of the written replies which he had received from schools and universities in USA, Canada, England, Australia and many other remote English colonies. Thus, he was able to demonstrate an impressive worldwide interest in the topic of sport and physical education (Wassong, 2002).

But Coubertin not only showed interest in the World Fair but also in the first edition of the World Peace Congress, which opening coincides with the 1889 Paris World Fair. Coubertin published a report on the World Peace Congress in the French magazine *La Réforme Sociale* and entitled his article *L'Education de la paix* (Coubertin, 2002). Probably more important is that at the World Peace Congress in 1889 Coubertin also came into contact with Pratt, Passy and other leading representatives of the international peace movement. Particularly through his contacts to Pratt, Coubertin learned about the recommendations for the promotion of intercultural learning processes which had been initiated at the World Peace Congress in Rome in 1891 (Wassong, 2002). But why is this so important to focus on? It is because it coined Coubertin's vision of establishing the modern Olympic Games as an international sport meeting open for athletes from all nations.

As to the current state of research by Quanz (1993), Borgers (1996), Hobermann (1995) and Wassong (2002)<sup>1</sup> Coubertin transferred the idea of the World Fairs as a platform for international exchange in the fields of technology, science and culture and the educational intentions of World Peace Congresses to the life of sport. For Coubertin it was worth turning to sport as a means to foster international understanding. Sport enjoyed a high popularity in societies in Europe and even beyond; it was already an international phenomenon in the fading years of the 19th century and technical innovations in communication and transport had tentatively promoted the organization of

1 Hobermann, JM.: Toward a *Theory of Olympic Internationalism*. In: Journal of Sport History 22 (1995), 1, 1-37.; Loland, S.: *Coubertin's Ideology of Olympism from the Perspective of the History of Ideas*. In: Olympika. The International Journal of Olympic Studies IV (1995), 49 – 78.; Borgers, W. & Quanz, D.R.: *Weltausstellung und Sport* (Olympische Spiele). *Vom Tempel der Industrie zur Olympischen Arena*. In: Decker, W., Dolianitis, G. & Lennartz, K. (Ed.): 100 Jahre Olympische Spiele. Der Neugriechische Ursprung. Würzburg 1996, 80 – 89.; Quanz, D.R.: *Civic Pacifism and Sports-Related Internationalism. Framework for the founding of the International Olympic Committee*. In: Olympika. The International Journal of Olympic Studies II (1993), 1 – 12. Wassong, St.: Pierre de Coubertins US-amerikanische Studien und ihre Bedeutung für die Analyse seiner frühen Erziehungskampagne. Würzburg 2002.

international sport meetings. Coubertin describes the already established international nature of sport in his article *Te Re-establishment of the Olympic Games*, which was published in 1894:

*“From the United States sport has spread throughout Europe: it has gained a firm footing in France, in Belgium, Holland, Germany; it is rapidly instating itself in Hungary, Italy, Spain, Switzerland. Upon all rivers glides the light race boat, upon all roads runs the bicycle, and football forces an entrance into all collegiate establishments. The same sun in the course of twenty-four hours lets its light fall upon a boat race in Australia, a football party in Uruguay, and the carriage of President Kruger on his way to pretoria, Cap Colony, for the celebration of I know not what great occasion, under the escort of eighty bicyclists.”*

(Coubertin, 1894, p. 696 – 700)

The invention of the modern Olympic Games should further promote this development and should also link it with the development of an educationally motivated internationalism. According to Coubertin the competition at the Olympic Games should provide the chance of presenting one`s own nation with dignity as well as getting to know the characteristics of other nations. Coubertin supposed that this would contribute to the development of mutual respect which he regarded as a central vehicle for the prevention of conflict (Coubertin, 2000).

Coubertin presented his idea to revive the modern Olympic Games for the first time in public at the 5th anniversary of the *Union des Sociétés française de Sport athlétiques* (USFSA) in November 1892. The following excerpt of his closing speech displays his modern thinking by stressing both the democratic and international nature of his Olympic project. As to the latter, the links to the World Fairs and an educationally motivated internationalism have to be highlighted again:

*“As for athletics in general, I do not know what its fate will be, but I wish to draw your attention to the important fact that it presents two new features (...). It is democratic and international. The first of these characteristics will guarantee its future: anything that is not democratic is no longer viable today. As for the second, it opens unexpected prospect to us. (...). Let us export rowers, runners and fencers; this is the free trade of the future, and the day that it is introduced into the everyday existence of old Europe, the cause of peace will receive new and powerful support.*

*That is enough to encourage me to think now about the second part of my programme. I hope that you will help me as you have helped me thus far and that, with you, I shall be able to continue and realize, on a basis appropriate to the conditions of modern life, this grandiose and beneficent work: the re-establishment of the Olympic Games.”*

(Coubertin, 1994, p. 79)

The audience was surprised about the presentation of this ambitious idea and reacted moderately but not supportively (Wassong, 2002)<sup>2</sup>. Despite the passive reaction Coubertin did not give up his Olympic idea. With the support of William M. Sloane (1850 – 1928), who was professor at Princeton University, and Charles Herbert (1846 – 1924), the then secretary general of the Amateur Athletic Association in England, Coubertin organized the *Congrès International de Paris Pour Le Rétablissement des Jeux Olympiques*.

The international congress was held at the Sorbonne in Paris from 16th to 24th June in 1894. The list of participants comprised 58 French delegates from 24 sport organisations and 20 delegates from 20 foreign sport associations/clubs spread over 9 countries. It was decided to re-establish the modern Olympic Games, to hold the first Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, found the International Olympic Committee (IOC), appoint the Greek literary Demetrius Vikelas (1835 – 1908) as the first president of the IOC and to agree on a core set of amateur rules.

The meetings at the congress were framed by festive elements such as the performance of the Hymn to Apollo, which had been discovered in Delphi in 1893, sport competitions, banquets and fireworks. In speeches delivered at the opening and closing ceremony the educational value of sport was stressed. References were made to the importance of sport for character education, social peace and the development of an educational internationalism. The revival of the modern Olympic Games was praised as an opportunity to foster mutual respect between the participants (Müller, 1994).

But next to content related references to sport as a promoter for a peaceful transnational understanding, the 1894 Sorbonne congress was linked to the growing peace movement on a personal level. Quanz analysed the list of the honorary members compiled by Coubertin. It was composed of personalities from high nobility, politicians, progressive-minded educators, diplomats, scientists, and representatives of sport organizations. 12 out of the 50 persons from this list were influential supporters of the international peace movement. Among them were Pratt and Passy, of course. But one can also find the presidents of the World Peace Congresses in

<sup>2</sup> Many of them believed that Coubertin had developed this idea more or less spontaneously. But this was wrongly perceived as Coubertin had mentioned this idea to Andrew D. White (1864 – 1929), founding president of Cornell University in the USA, in a letter dated 23rd July 1892. Even earlier than this, namely in 1888/89, Coubertin mentioned his idea to plan an organisation of sport for all nations to William M. Sloane (1850 – 1928), university professor at Princeton University in the USA, and to the French historian and philosopher Hippolyte A. Taine (1828 – 1893). Refer to Wassong: Coubertin, Würzburg 2002, p. 191 – 194.

1889, 1890 and 1891, the secretary of the World Peace Conference in 1894, parliamentarians of the IPU, and 4 future Nobel Peace Prize winners.<sup>3</sup> Coubertin was aware that these personalities could hardly attend the congress. But this should not lead to wrongly concluding that Coubertin intended merely name dropping so as to increase the reputation of the congress with the public, as argued in some historical analyses of the congress.<sup>4</sup> As to Quanz, the invitation of members of the peace movement followed the clear intention of linking the Olympic project with an educational internationalism right from its beginning.

This was acknowledged by the Austrian pacifist Alfred Fried (1864 – 1921) who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1911 for his literary and academic achievements for the peace movement. Fried regarded sport competitions between nations as a pragmatic approach to foster dialogue and tolerance between nations. Repeatedly he explicitly paid tribute to the modern Olympic Games as a medium for international understanding (Quanz, 1993). As for him the foundation of the IOC was a driving force for the internationalisation of sport. Its institutionalisation in 1894 corresponded with the growing tendency in the second half of the 19th century to strengthen international collaboration in humanitarian, social, economic, educational and scientific fields by establishing international organisations, associations, boards and committees. 244 of them were founded between 1850 and 1907 and Fried listed them all in his book *Das Internationale Leben der Gegenwart* published in 1911. Next to, amongst others, the Red Cross (1863), International Committee for Physiologists (1904), International Women's Council (1880), Interparliamentary Union for Arbitration (1888), and Salvation Army (1865) he listed the IOC (1894).

Of course, Coubertin was aware that the strengthening of an educational internationalism by the invention of the modern Olympic Games had to be developed step by step. The first edition of the Olympic Games was celebrated in Athens 1896, and only two years after the decision of the founding congress at the Sorbonne. In his article *The Olympic Games of 1896* which was

<sup>3</sup> To learn more about the names of these representatives of the peace movement and their institutional affiliations please refer to: QUANZ: Civic Pacifism (1993), p. 22 - 23.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas, J.A.: Review of V.P. Boulogne „La vie et l'œuvre pédagogique de Pierre de Coubertin, 1863 – 1937”. In: Stadion II (1976), 317. MANDELL, R.: The First Modern Olympics. Berkley 1976, 75. MORBACH, A.: Dimítrios Vikélas – Patriotischer Literat und Kosmopolit. Leben und Wirken des ersten Präsidenten des Internationalen Olympischen Komitees. Würzburg 1998, 159.

published in the US-American magazine *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* in 1896, Coubertin evaluated the Olympic Games in Athens positively. In regard to the importance of the Olympic Games as a vehicle for supporting the development of a peaceful internationalism Coubertin wrote the following:

*“Should the institution (Olympic Games) prosper, - as I am persuaded, all civilized nations aiding, that it will – it may be a potent, if indirect, factor in securing universal peace. Wars break out because nations misunderstood each other. We shall not have peace until the prejudices which now separate the different races shall have been outlived. To attain this end, what better means than to bring the youth of all races periodically together for amiable trials of muscular strength and agility.”*

(Coubertin, 1896, p. 53)

### **Coubertin’s educational internationalism and its importance for a contemporary Olympic context**

By having analysed Coubertin’s appreciation of an educational internationalism, he can be portrayed as a far-sighted and progressively minded educator. His vision that the Olympic Games can lead to strengthening respect between the nations as a possible contribution to conflict resolution has been a central basis of the Olympic Movement from its beginning. 125 years after its founding congress at the Sorbonne in 1894 it is still visible today and even marks the uniqueness of the Olympic Movement.

This can be stressed further considering that, as in Coubertin’s time, nowadays the emerging and intensified mono-nationalist thinking tends to challenge the positive benefits of transnational dialogues and civil society exchange processes. The fact that this is a breeding ground for tensions between nations, becomes obvious in view of today’s world political situation. References can be made, amongst others, to the political alienation processes between the USA and Russia, Europe and Russia, the intense situation in the Middle East and between the USA and North Korea. The latter has, due to its historical context, an impact on South Korea and the pursuit of an inter-Korean process of relaxation and reconciliation (Hilpert & Meier, 2018).

The progressive government of South Korea under President Moon Jae-in has relied on dialogues to de-escalate the fragile situation. Moon’s initiatives met first with persistent disinterest with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. However, in February,

the 2018 Olympics created an opportunity to engage in an inter-Korean dialogue as on 1st January 2018 Kim Jong-un surprisingly announced North Korea's intention to send athletes to the Winter Olympic Games. The following meetings in January 2018 about North Korea's short-term decision to participate in the forthcoming PyeongChang Olympic Games were the first to be held between the two leaderships in general since 2015. Discussions and decisions appeared somehow conciliatory, given the heightened military tensions on the Korean peninsula in the previous months. They even agreed to organize another meeting between the two Korean governments which then took place in March 2018 in the North Korean capital Pyongyang. It is appropriate to view the Olympic Games as a motivator for this summit. A fact which enjoyed a further momentum during the Olympic Games.

North and South Korean teams came into the PyeongChang Olympic Stadium together behind one flag; white with the blue Korean peninsula in the middle. It was also promising that at the 2018 PyeongChang Olympic Winter Games the two countries have also formed a joint women's ice hockey team consisting of 23 South Korean and 12 North Korean athletes. North Korea has also sent hundreds of people to PyeongChang, including officials, athletes, artists, journalists and supporters. Of course, there were always critical voices that devalued this as diplomatic camouflage for politics and sport; their opinions neglecting to recognize that there was no unified Korean team before at the Olympics and the last time joint Korean teams entered into an Olympic stadium went back to the 2006 Torino Olympic Winter Games, preceded by 2000 Sydney Olympic Summer Games.

After the Olympic Games, diplomatic activities followed in both politics and sport. The summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un in June 2018 sparked hopes for defusing the world political situation in, amongst others, economic, preventive-military and humanitarian aspects, and for protecting the tentative process of inter-Korean rapprochement. As to the Olympic context, promising talks were initiated on the possibility of continuing to seek the Olympic Games as a platform for improving the relationship between North and South Korea. Discussions focused on a potential co-bid for the 2032 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games and initiatives for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games such as a joint march at the opening ceremony and united teams in women's basketball, canoeing, rowing, table

tennis and judo. An essential political precondition for this is Japanese approval for North Korean athletes and sport officials to enter Japan. The Japanese government is set to carry out a review of whether to make an exception to the country's sanction. Key actors in the discussions and meetings were Kim Jong-un, Moon Jae-in, Bach, the IOC's Director General, and sport officials from North and South Korea. They have met in different constellations and locations (Etchells , 2019).

The high expectations associated with these Olympic-related initiatives have not been jeopardized by the premature termination of the second summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un in February 2019. Bach explained this at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the IOC in March 2019.

*“We have decided we will continue our effort and talks, regardless of any political decisions that have been taken in the past couple of weeks. We will, as in the past, concentrate on sports. We'll continue to support athletes from North Korea in qualification and preparation.*

*We'll keep [in] contact with the two Governments and two National Olympic Committees on any additional joint activity.”*

(Mackay, 2019)

It is a strong statement, the validity of which has not been blurred by the new missile tests launched by North Korea since August 2019 and the decision of Kim Jong-un to terminate nuclear talks with the USA early in October 2019. While at the political level the culture of dialogue seems to have cooled off again, it can still be continued responsibly in the field of sport and the Olympic Games. Similar to the 2018 PyeongChang Olympic Winter Games, the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Summer Games could stimulate the inter-Korean process of rapprochement. This would be an impressive legacy of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, fuelling the already ongoing discussions on a joint Korean bid for the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. It could be realized that Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in will meet at the Korean Demilitarized Zone to help promote the joint bid during the Association of National Olympic Committees General Assembly, to be held in Seoul in November 2020.

## **Concluding statement**

Educational internationalism was a central objective of Coubertin's in founding the modern Olympic Movement. It has developed into a central pillar of the Olympic Movement's importance as a sustainable platform for civil society exchange processes. This platform retains its impact even if dialogues at the political level tend to counter the expansion of rapprochement processes. One has to give credit here as it demonstrates the global value of the Olympic Movement and its strength to act autonomously. The IOC has become proactive in preserving, expanding and applying this directive – as has been demonstrated in this article.

The analysis of Coubertin's educationally motivated internationalism and its relevance for a contemporary context stresses an objectively and up-to-date identification with Coubertin as the founder of the Olympic Movement. One should expand this approach to a modern reading of Coubertin by analysing the validity of his other educational thoughts for a comprehensive understanding of the Olympic Movement. For example, it would be worthwhile addressing today's relevance of Coubertin's vision of the Olympic athlete as a role model, the ideal of fair-play, Coubertin's advocacy for amateurism, and his idea for the promotion of sport for all via Olympic Games. By doing so a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary educational objectives of the Olympic Movement would be stressed and, consequently, would defuse the misinterpretation that today's Olympic Movement and Olympic Games have been alienated from their founding ideas.

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