



Sport and Warfare (1912)¹

Pierre de Coubertin

Abstract

Pierre de Coubertin's ambiguous ideas regarding sports, conflict, violence, and war are clearly illustrated in his article "Sport and Warfare" that he wrote for the Revue Olympique in 1912. In this short essay, the founding father of the modern Olympic Games contends that there is no direct causal relation between sport and war. Rather, sports can be conceived as a social instrument which shapes the bodies and minds of its participants. While, on the one hand, sports may help men to feel ready and prepared for war. However, Coubertin believes that sport and its philosophy may teach future soldiers to behave more virtuously and less violently. His hope is that, through encouraging future soldiers to display specific skills and sportsmanship on the battlefield, sport may help in humanizing and rationalizing modern warfare.

Keywords

Pierre de Coubertin ; Conflict ; Sport ; Violence ; Warfare.



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Sport and Warfare (1912)¹

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Abstract: *Pierre de Coubertin's ambiguous ideas regarding sports, conflict, violence, and war are clearly illustrated in his article "Sport and Warfare" that he wrote for the Revue Olympique in 1912. In this short essay, the founding father of the modern Olympic Games contends that there is no direct causal relation between sport and war. Rather, sports can be conceived as a social instrument which shapes the bodies and minds of its participants. According to Coubertin, sports may help men to feel ready and prepared for war. But he also believes that sport and its philosophy may teach future soldiers to behave more virtuously and less violently. His hope is that, through encouraging future soldiers to display specific skills and sportsmanship on the battlefield, sport may help in humanizing and rationalizing modern warfare.*

Keywords: *Pierre de Coubertin; Conflict; Sport; Violence; Warfare.*

War in olden days, often had a somewhat of a sporty characteristic. In particular times, one could see mass mobilizations [*levées en masse*], as in the period when Napoleon fought to achieve his wild ambitions and when Europe defended its independence and its threatened freedom against him. However, other wars, like the Crimean War or French African Campaigns in 19th Century, did not have this nationalistic feature. While the most important part of the youth was kept busy with their peaceful activities, only the most active were enlisting; men enamoured with adventure, sportsmen who were satisfied with nothing but war and muscular instincts.

Then, Western civilization evolved; "armed nations" replaced professional armies and everybody said that the era of conquest and aggression had ended, that taking arms would only have the goal of defending the land and the essential rights of the country. However, we saw, as soon as the dawn of 19th Century, a succession of wars which showed this outstanding characteristic that none of them was undertaken for defending the land and the essential rights of the country—except if we understand by "essential rights" the annexation of neighbourhood land. Only naïve humanitarianism or those ignorant of history were astonished by these contradictions which, on the contrary, have been subject to the mischief that the old philosophers enjoy when they notice the eternal contradictions between human actions and intentions.

These recent wars were not wars of volunteers; in most of the countries, except England, enlistment was not used to support them. However, they triggered enthusiasm at a

¹ For the original French version of this paper see Pierre de Coubertin, "Le sport et la guerre," *Revue Olympique* 76 (April 1912). This paper can be accessed via: <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll1/id/13206/rec/1142> (accessed November 25, 2018). The paper was re-published in Coubertin's *Essais de psychologie sportive* which is available on Wikisource, under the CC0 copyright: https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Essais_de_psychologie_sportive/Chapitre_XXXII (accessed November 25, 2018).

pronounced level and the youth took part in it with an obvious drive. These wars can no longer be seen as a matter of unsatisfied sportive instincts. Currently, sportive instincts are abundantly satisfied with the pleasures of the civil life. But does the fact that the passion for sports and the practice of sports developed with such intensity influence the “warmongering” of young people? Or do we have to look for the cause of their fervour for fighting only in the power of the imperialist movements, these movements of which each nation, one after the other, seems to experience the bitter contact [*âpre contact*]?

We shall leave this latter point of view aside, which is not our concern, and only examine the former. One of the causes of this juvenile impetus, of which we already mentioned the strength, could be in the indirect preparation for war that every sport contains. It is certain that muscles were trained, and particular habits of physical life were taken, in order to make man much more able to endure the fatigues of a [military] campaign. It has sometimes been said that our fathers were more robust, that their health was better than ours. This observation is likely, although rather questionable. But our fathers did not live in this state of being “half-trained”, which results from sport, and if their resistance in the long run was higher than today, the sudden contrast between the life in the camps and the casual existence was for them much higher, and the change consequently more painful. Sports have brought forth all the qualities which are useful for war: recklessness, cheerfulness, habituation to the unexpected, exact knowledge of how to do the requested efforts without wasting useless energy... Obviously, the young sportsman feels himself readier to “go off” to war than were his elders. And when we feel ready for something, we do it more willingly.

On the other hand, sports contributed to spread what we shall call the feeling of the game. In a French journal, a few weeks ago, a well-known journalist, Mr. Pierre Mille, analysed in the following words the state of mind of his young compatriots: “They frequently compare a possible war to a game which requires to be played the best possible way after having been studied scientifically. We hold out, remain cold-blooded and hold our breath until the end. And if we win, then we won; if we lose, then we lost; this not dishonourable. The game is the game, and that is all”. We believe that this state of mind is currently quite common in the world. If it does not change war itself, it changes its consequences in a peculiar way. One must think about how such a way to regard the battle may facilitate future reconciliations, peaceful understandings, daily relationships between winners and losers which are necessarily rebuilt after the fight. In addition, war entails the quite pretty qualities of chivalry and is therefore far from diminishing those who experience these warlike feelings. On the contrary, war makes them nobler and stronger.

But is it correct to say that this state of mind does not change warfare itself? Of course, it does. It changes warfare because it tends to ease its most barbaric and nasty features. An army of sportsmen will be more human, more empathetic during the fight, and calmer and softer after the fight. There is no doubt about that. The Spanish-American War proved it, and no one should forget the sublime word of the American Chief trying to calm down his men whose hurrahs were celebrating the sinking of a Spanish ship: “Don’t cheer! They are dying.”² This was a sportive statement and its morality, which will be, we hope, the morality of the future, will be highly aided in its dissemination through sports.

Therefore, what seems accurate regarding the issue we are addressing could be summarized as follows. Sports do not tend to make the youth more belligerent, but only more militaristic, that is to say, sports provide young people with the feeling of their own power but without encouraging them to use this power beyond necessity. Sports did not

² Pierre de Coubertin refers here to John Woodward Philip (1840-1900) who was a famous US Navy officer during the Civil War and the Spanish-American War. It seems that J.W. Philip exact words were: “Don’t cheer, boys. The poor devils are dying.”

increase the likelihood of war but did not decrease this likelihood either. When war is declared, sports provide it with higher and unprecedented features of offensive, decision and promptness. Sports also help to make prevail gentler and more human customs, and, once peace is re-established, to alleviate resulting grudges and hates. Eventually, these effects [of sports on warfare] are only sketched here., The rebirth of sportsmanship and its spread are rather recent phenomena which did not have time to show their full effects yet.

Translated by Raphaël Verchère.

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This article is a translation of “Le Sport et la Guerre,” that Pierre de Coubertin first published in French in the *Revue Olympique* in 1912. The *Revue Olympique* was created by Pierre de Coubertin in 1901. In his own words, he conceived the journal as a “propaganda organ” for the ideas of the International Olympic Committee. On special occasions, some articles have been written in English or German. However, most of the papers published in the *Revue Olympique* were written in French. Currently, there is no comprehensive English translation of Coubertin’s writings. Although Pierre de Coubertin’s works are pivotal regarding the history of sports, most of them remain unknown in the English-speaking-world.

However, some papers of Pierre de Coubertin and some studies about his work are available in English. Here are some important references:

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For other writings of Pierre de Coubertin, see the search index of the LA84 Foundation: <https://digital.la84.org/>.