Coubertin, Colonialism and Control of the Spread of Olympic Sport in Africa

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Introduction

The goals, methods and outcomes of management of the early Olympic Movement were centrally influenced by the ideology of Olympism promoted by Pierre de Coubertin. Thus an understanding of the value positions adopted by Coubertin is central to an understanding of the ways in which the IOC in particular developed policy in its early days. This paper focuses on Coubertin's writings largely towards the end of his life, when colonial power in Africa had begun to wane. In the latter part of the nineteenth century Western dominance had been extended over almost all of Africa. The protection of European dominance over any local expressions of autonomy was of prime concern for the colonial powers (Huntington, 1996). Within this context, this paper reviews Coubertin's world view as evidenced in his writings, illustrating how Coubertin's aims in relation to the development of sport in Africa and the role of the Olympic Movement (OM) reflect the concern to maintain a Western dominated cultural system of sporting practices and values and countering any serious development of indigenous sporting cultures.

Method

For this project a critical realist approach has been adopted. Central to critical realism is the argument that although social structures may not always be observable, they can nevertheless be characterised as real since they impact upon observable human behaviour (Layder, 1997). Thus, the Olympic Movement provides a set of structures (ideological and material), which form key constituents of the social, cultural, political and economic context enabling and / or constraining the development of policy in the Olympic world. The method adopted is that of Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) (a variation of the qualitative content analysis) (Altheide, 1996). ECA follows a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development and sampling; data collection and coding; analysis and interpretation. It is analytic including a range of flexible and iterative processes. Categories and variables initially guide the study, but other inductive categories emerge from the documents.

Results and Discussion

The analysis elucidates arguments developed by Coubertin in relation to the reasons for the development of the Western sporting model in Africa in terms of those benefits which would accrue to the indigenous populations and to the colonial powers respectively. Three key points are rehearsed in this paper. These are the French and the British colonial resistance to the establishment of the African Games, European control over African sport, and the dismissal of indigenous sporting cultures.

In respect of the first of these, Coubertin wished to promote Olympism in the African continent at a time when the most influential European countries were competing for influence in Africa. In that context, Coubertin also turned his attention towards the African continent for the promotion of Olympism and 'the propagation of athletic activity among indigenous youth' (Coubertin, 1931a). To this end, he started a programme with clearly propagandist goals establishing an 'African medal' and initiating the African Games. Nevertheless, the African medal 'was a serious matter that created a storm in some topics of government' (Coubertin, 1931a). In an issue of the *Olympic Review* (January 1912) Coubertin, attempted to persuade the colonials who were against the Regional (African) Games that they had nothing to fear from such an event. Nonetheless, the local colonial governments opposed such initiatives fearing that the colonisers' position of power would be undermined by sporting defeat by indigenous groups. However the resistance to allowing indigenous groups access to competition in Olympic sport was by no means common to all powers. Some years later Coubertin explains that the German, the British and the Italian colonies did not have much hesitation about being open to sport contests involving both the colonials and colonised (Coubertin, 1931a). However, he claimed that the French were the major opponents of the African Games countering and finally managing to stop the organisation of the first African Games in Algeria (planned for 1925). Moreover, due to English and French political manoeuvring the inauguration of a stadium in Egypt at Alexandria designed subsequently to host the African Games was denied international exposure and the opening was thus able to attract publicity only on a strictly local scale.

The second point to emerge in this analysis relates to the fact that although Coubertin shared with colonial interests a concern to secure European rule on the African continent, he had developed a different approach from that of some colonial officials. Colonial officials feared that with the organisation of the African Games the indigenous populations would be encouraged to seek more prerogatives. Coubertin, however, believed the opposite. The development of sport in Africa, he argued, was inevitable and it was simply a matter for deciding whether that development should take place under the patronage of Europe or develop through the efforts of indigenous groups. In his opinion, if Europe wanted to have more control over the sport movement in Africa (and to foster its interests in other spheres), it should not hesitate to seize such opportunities. His fear was that, '…before long, in spite of everything, sport will be organised throughout Africa but perhaps less well than if Europe had been clever enough to take over the running of the movement at the right moment'. (Coubertin, 1931b). This approach illustrates the paternalist colonial attitudes of those European interests involved in the management and planning of the sport movement in Africa.

The third theme evident in Coubertin's analysis, is that he, in common with the colonial powers viewed the indigenous sporting cultures as 'peripheral' merely providing 'entertainment and recreation' (Coubertin, 1931b). By contrast, the Western sporting model was seen as the only efficient system that with its rules and regulations could lead to competitive sport performances 'which form[ed] the basis of this [European, Western] civilisation' (Coubertin, 1931b). Nevertheless, the European powers were 'aware' of the difficulties of introducing modern sport into a continent that 'is behind the times and among peoples still without elementary culture and [it is] particularly presumptuous to expect this expansion to lead to a speeding up of the march of civilisation in these countries' (Coubertin, 1931c).

The three themes identified lend weight to a set of theoretical perspectives on this material. It is argued that the evidence reviewed provides support for aspects of both the modernisation thesis and cultural imperialism. Although, many of the processes may have been seen as an 'inevitable' consequence of the modernisation practices that were taking place, such as rationalisation, secularisation and bureaucratisation, such paternalist approaches also aimed at maintaining control and power of the sport movement by the West, and thus subject to a cultural imperialist programme.

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