The Sensual and Intellectual Pleasures of Rowing: Pierre de Coubertin’s Ideal for Modern Sport

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In my opinion, no other sport demands such a continual and meticulous self-assessment. If one were to create an ultra modern convent, I would recommend that the prioress establish obligatory rowing as a means of examining one’s conscience.1 (Pierre de Coubertin, 1928)

Rowing has certainly been recognized as a vital force in the emergence and development of modern sporting institutions such as amateurism, intercollegiate sport, and the Olympic Games. In the latter decades of the 1800s and the early decades of the 1900s, men from divergent social backgrounds rowed recreationally and competitively on the waterways of Europe, North and South America, and Australasia.2 Though rowers of different classes rarely mixed socially at boathouses or in competitive regattas, the sport remained popular for participants and spectators and was regarded by commentators of the day as an exemplary athletic endeavour for modern times.3 But what lured men to the rivers and boat houses? What did rowers take away from their experiences? In the past several years, historical scholarship on rowing has been plentiful.4 As a modern sporting phenomenon in the 19th century, rowing has provided a potent backdrop for critical social class and gender histories. Compelling as these analyses are, the athletes who rowed during this era seem to be represented as passive objects of class, gender, and ethnic discourses. Their sporting instinct and erotic pleasure is supplanted with abstract references to power relations and the unequal distribution of economic capital. The athletic lives lived are stripped of cultural agency. As historians, how can we access the “feel for the game” or the “practical sense” of sport that enabled athletes to function as agents “to act and react in specific situations in a manner that

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was not always calculated and that was not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules.\textsuperscript{5} In short, we are left asking a fundamental question: How did rowing function culturally?

As an avid rower, Baron Pierre de Coubertin (the founder of the modern Olympic Movement) knew the feel for the sport of rowing; he had a practical sense of its culture. For this exceptional figure in the history of sport, rowing was a perfect physical activity and sport, "le plus beau des sports.\textsuperscript{6}" Fortunately, Coubertin was also a prolific theorist of sport and physical education and his literary oeuvre has been effectively preserved in the archives of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and through his own publishing efforts. Though Coubertin theorized and promoted many different and sometimes seemingly divergent initiatives related to sport, rowing emerges time and time again as an ideal against which most of these initiatives, including the Olympic Games, were measured. His willingness to express his own personal zeal for the sport is very evident in his prolific and esoteric writing. His meditations on the sport of rowing, and faith that it represented a kind of "ideal" for modern sport, are rich and vital evidence of sporting culture at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. If we are to explore the cultural nature of sport the way sport and physical activity brought meaning to the lives on men at the turn of this century, Pierre de Coubertin provides us with a vital point of departure.

Coubertin’s personal sporting experiences led him to a self-defined career as a promoter of sporting culture. Through his practical sense for the sport of rowing, he grew committed to the notion that this particular sport could provide vital truths for men of the modern world. Sociologist and cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu refers to this practical sense or "taste" for specific cultural practices as \textit{habitus}.\textsuperscript{7} His notion of \textit{habitus} does not, however, stand alone in explaining the sociological complexities of culture. For Bourdieu, the more precarious dimension of cultivating particular tastes emerges from within the "field" of the cultural production. Here, the manipulation and management of symbolic and cultural capital defines who can legitimately consume specific cultural practices and who is excluded from such production and consumption. Bourdieu reveals how a practical sense or \textit{habitus}, which predisposes us to prefer particular patterns of cultural consumption, is fundamentally linked to traditional social structures, systems of power related to specialized bodies of knowledge, and access to economic, symbolic, and cultural capital. Through the consumption and production of sports, arts, and aesthetic ideals, fields of cultural production are defined and lines of social authority are confirmed. At the most profound level, Bourdieu’s sociology of culture reveals that systems of cultural production, of which sport can be included, require the inculcation of tastes that are deceptive in the way they legitimize certain cultural forms at the expense of others. To fully understand the social implications of culture, one must analyze the history and organization of the
economic and symbolic capital associated with specific fields of cultural production. The literary and theoretical legacy of Pierre de Coubertin exposes the nuances of the *habitus* and field of rowing culture at the turn of the twentieth century.

Coubertin studied and promoted the nature of rowing from different perspectives. He relied on conventional discourses of his era to explain the superiority of rowing over other sports. He discussed the history of rowing in France and the sport’s educational potential. He also promoted the physiological and psychological benefits of the sport. Because of this discursive breadth of Coubertin’s oeuvre, interpreting and summarizing the ideas about rowing is often frustrating as he tended to meander haphazardly across the boundaries of these specialized bodies of knowledge. Even when he specified or delimited his discursive strategy explicitly, the end result was frequently a complex web of sociological, philosophical, psychological, and biomechanical ideas. He was a theorist for whom discursive synthesis seems to be the most prominent analytical paradigm. He commonly made sweeping assessments about rowing and other sports that conflated ideas from many different categories of specialized knowledge. Coubertin was not an expert in any particular theoretical discipline. However, this tendency to blend discourses and articulate eclectic proposals for sport and social reform is exactly what provides historians with an unique picture of the culture of sport and specifically the culture of rowing during this epoch. In essence, Coubertin’s eclecticism illuminates the *habitus* (or practical sense) of this sport; he expressed the way rowing brought meaning to the lives of the participants; he believed that rowing could empower individual athletes while supporting, and occasionally challenging, the social conventions that impacted on the sport.

This paper exposes Coubertin’s cultural assumptions about rowing by studying the formal concepts and discourses that were used to justify its status as the ideal sport for modern times. This analysis seeks to articulate the way Coubertin saw rowing, and hopefully sport in general, as a discursive practice. By focussing on a single sport, in this case rowing, we are able to cut like a biopsy through Coubertin’s vast oeuvre from a unique point of origin. Analysis, however, is not restricted to those Coubertinian texts that deal explicitly with the topic of rowing. Such an approach would eliminate the possibility of uncovering other substantive discursive strategies and conceptual nuances essential to the broader cultural interpretation of Coubertin’s theory of sport as it applied to this ideal. Certainly, Coubertin wrote and published a number of articles in which rowing was explicitly the central topic. These texts provide an essential starting point. From this selection of articles on rowing, certain ideas and concepts emerge that suggest where additional insights might be retrieved from other Coubertinian sources. Consequently, ideas about rowing, its superiority to other sports, and its broader cultural nature emerged from a surprisingly eclectic array of articles. Coubertin’s contribution to a rather expansive
literature on rowing spans a period between 1889 and 1928. For the most part, his ideas on rowing were expressed in sections of books and articles that he categorized as histories of sport and physical education, dissertations on pedagogical reform and physical education, and essays in the nascent fields of psychology and physiology of sport. These fields of knowledge, or discourses, have provided the basic structure for this paper. The final section examines Coubertin’s more subliminal discourse on the aesthetics of sport.

For Coubertin, rowing was an assertion of cultural modernism; rowing exemplified the ideal unities and harmonies that artists and intellectuals of this era believed ought to shape modern society. As sport, rowing was not merely symbolic of modern ideals; it was modernism embodied in the movement of the athletes. This particular sport fostered a coherency between the notion of social progress and physical activity; it promoted the rational use of the body and revealed the possibility of universal models of education. While these themes reflect Coubertin’s immersion in the dominant discourses of late 19th and early 20th century sport and physical education, his rowing literature also expressed a much more problematic and culturally ambiguous hermeneutic for modern sport. This is evident in his identification of problems associated with modern sport and the disenfranchising, or inauthentic, nature of modern sport spectacles. His discussion of the paradoxical nature of modern rowing reflected his concern for preserving the agency of athletes within sport. This was articulated most vividly in his meditations on the beauty of rowing.

Promoting British Rowing in France

Coubertin’s first major epistle on rowing predated his promotion of the Modern Olympic Games by five years. In an 1889 monograph expounding the virtues of English education, he dedicated an entire chapter to the history of rowing and its place in English school life. In *L’Education Anglais en France*, Coubertin provided his readers with an overview of rowing’s place in the history of French sport. Coubertin’s thoughts on rowing have a much broader historical context. He was not the only man of his generation to express his enthusiasm for this sport in writing. In fact, a colleague of Coubertin’s, Casper Whitney, wrote a provocative chapter on rowing in *A Sporting Pilgrimage*. Neil Wigglesworth, in his social history of rowing in Britain, references the work of two other International Olympic Committee members who published monographs on the history of rowing: Theodore A. Cook and Lord Desborough. For the most part, Coubertin acknowledged the work of other contemporary authorities on rowing. In particular, he admitted that many of his ideas about rowing were inspired by Dr. Warre, a former headmaster of Eton School.

In addition to chronicling the development of rowing in France, Coubertin also began revealing, albeit subtly, concepts that would become
more explicit over the years as his theory of modern sport became more complex. In this particular 1889 text, he described the pedagogical value of rowing as "la question capitale." He also suggested that rowing was the "sport scholaire par excellence." and he urged French rowing clubs to open their membership to lycéens and university students.\(^\text{18}\) Sharing private clubs' facilities with students was certainly part of his broader educational reform agenda. In one sense, this so-called history of English-style rowing in France was very much a commentary on the contemporary, social, and pedagogical reform issues that concerned him.

Coubertin's sociological conscience is evident but subtly expressed in this history of English education in France. He believed that rowing provided two important social benefits, comradery and a relatively inexpensive type of physical activity.\(^\text{19}\) Of course, the low cost of rowing was relative to the class of men he hoped would participate in the sport. While he believed that rowing could be beneficial to all social classes, he certainly did not expect that rowing clubs would serve any profound democratizing function in reforming class-based society. As will be discussed in the next section of this paper, he promoted very different types of rowing for men of different social classes. Ultimately, his ideas on accessibility to sport were innately practical and remained class-based. This was not problematic as he emphasized that rowing in England had not remained the sole domain of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in spite of the segregation of clubs and competitions.\(^\text{20}\)

Coubertin was not suggesting that workers and upper middle class amateurs compete together or share the same boathouses. He made no apologies for the division of competitions on the basis of class. He accepted this as inevitable. In spite of this, he steered clear of the excruciatingly derogatory class-based tributes to amateur rowing expressed by his American contemporary, Casper Whitney. Becoming IOC member in 1900, Whitney was adamant that rowing clubs not include members of the labouring class.\(^\text{21}\) In what ought to be recognized as a classic in 19\textsuperscript{th} century sport discourse, Whitney defended the segregation of labourers and gentlemen amateurs in the following passage.

I am more than willing to help my labouring brother of lesser refinement; to do all I can for him in his worthy efforts to attain a sound mind and healthful body; give him advice, time, aid, and to encourage every possible manner his endeavours to make more of a man of him. But I do not care to dine or play football with him.\(^\text{22}\)

A British counterpart, R. C. Lehmann, conveyed a more moderate class analysis of rowing when he titled one of his chapters in the Complete Oarsman (1909), "The Emancipation of the Amateur."\(^\text{23}\) By today's standards, the suggestion that gentleman amateurs gained their emancipation through rowing stings with political incorrectness. Though Coubertin's theory of rowing implied similar sentiments to those of Whitney
and Lehmann, he never transgressed from his own class-based paternalism to his colleagues' class-based paranoia.

In L'Education Anglaise en France, Coubertin willingly acknowledged that middle and working-class men deserved their own sporting culture. In this history of rowing in France, he conveyed sensitivity toward the cultural barriers that confronted lower and lower middle-class men of this epoch. He promoted rowing as a pleasant and alluring contrast to the mundane and routine lives of the growing rank of office clerks and urban labourers in late 19th century Europe. He believed that the benefits of rowing counterbalanced the restrictions of time and place perpetuated by modern urban society. Experiencing muscular pleasure through rowing, the joy of physical exertion in the open air and on open water, was an elixir for the anxiety of modern life.

Apart from the obvious association between rowing and pedagogical theory, this chapter in L'Education Anglaise en France introduced several other discourses that would emerge much more explicitly in later articles and books by Coubertin. For example, he alluded to the physiological and psychological benefits of rowing. From a medical perspective, he claimed that the muscular exertion of rowing would not create any of the detrimental nervous conditions that were associated with sports like athletics, fencing, and even running. When referring to the psychological benefits or perils of sport, rowing was identified as a valuable activity for men who work at intellectual jobs, because it did not require excessive mental energy. This he contrasted with fencing: "A man who is required to exert a great deal of mental energy in his occupation would be foolish to choose fencing (which demands intense mental energy) as his only sporting activity."  

Two decades after L'Education Anglaise en France was in print, Coubertin published another brief history of rowing in France. Again, in subtle fashion, the same themes re-emerged: rowing is superior to other sports; rowing, as an activity, is appropriate for all social classes; the spectacle of rowing separates it, in a positive sense, from other sports; and, athletes who pursue rowing receive potent moral training through their involvement with the sport. The essay was entitled "D'Andrésy à Henley" and was published as a chapter in Coubertin's first autobiography, Une Campagne de Vingt-et-un Ans (1909). In this chapter, he focussed on the series of events that led to the Anglicisation of rowing in France. The most significant event for the history of rowing in France was the debut of French crews at the Henley Regatta in 1893.

**Rowing and the Débrouillard**

Contrary to popular interpretations of Coubertin's oeuvre, British-style sport was not promoted as a universal ideal for the physical education of French youths. According to Miiller and Schantz, Coubertin
recognized the principle characteristics of sport as effort, intensity, and the desire for perfection. These attributes made sport an appropriate mode of physical education for upper-middle and upper-class men who had a cultivated taste for sport. Physical education, on the other hand, was a concept characterized by moderation and balance. These were the ideals that he believed would be most valuable to the lower-middle-class men and labourers who, because of their social background, would not have cultivated a taste for sport. Over the years, his pedagogical schemes and proposals appropriated and conflated sports skills and organizational structures from British public school sport with notions of practicality, compromise, and social benevolence. Effectively, sport was the cultural capital of the upper and upper-middle classes. Implicitly, socio-economic background restricted access to this cultural capital. In other words, the taste for elite competitive rowing was more inherently upper class.

The goal of providing labouring and lower-middle-class French men with an effective model of physical education was never far from Coubertin’s other more infamous initiative, the modern Olympic Games. The Olympic Games were not an end in themselves. For Coubertin, elite sportsmen embodied masculine vigour, and elite sport competition signified healthy vital amusement. Both could inspire the average man to become more physically active. He believed that Olympic Games would enhance the symbolic potency of sport for the average French man. Thus, Coubertin’s promotion of elite international sport was an extension of his much broader pedagogical and social reform agenda. He even tried to find a quantifiable rationalization for this relationship:

To have one hundred people devote themselves to physical culture, we must have fifty who participate in sport. To have fifty who participate in sport, we must have twenty who specialize in a particular sport. To have twenty who are specialists, we must have five who can demonstrate astonishing prowess.

Coubertin was not so naive to believe that promotion of Olympic Games and grass roots physical fitness would not be perceived as a paradox; that is, he was aware that the promotion of elite competitive sport, which is inherently exclusive and excessive, might seem to contradict the promotion of physical education for the masses which needed, in his own words, to be inclusive, moderate, and sensible. Coubertin’s analyses of rowing problematised the paradox between his pedagogical agenda and the justification for elite sport spectacles. From a visual standpoint, rowing is difficult to integrate into a spectacle. The races are linear and only allow spectators a brief moment to appreciate the competitors’ athleticism and the development of the competition. As a consequence, the opportunities to generate potent symbols that promote lifelong physical education and sporting habits among average members of society seemed limited. In addition to this restriction, Coubertin also acknowledged that rowing
societies had a tendency to be a little isolated and insular. He attributed this to the nature of the training, the requirement of intimate comradery, and the necessary discipline of a rower’s life. Conversely, it was these very shortcomings that he also identified as the essential elements that made rowing superior to other sports. In other words, the insular nature of rowing culture preserved the sport from the three major diversions that plagued modern sport: money, spectacle, and athletic parasites. In this regard, Coubertin’s sentiments were shared by his contemporaries. In The Complete Oarsman, R. C. Lehmann stated that

... rowing does for those who practise it nearly everything that the rules of the authorities proposed to do. It makes them live a regular and simple life; it gets them out of bed early in the morning and sends them to bed again at ten at night; it disciplines them, it keeps them healthy for it makes temperance necessary, and being essentially a cheap exercise, it withholds them from extravagance – and all this it does not under the stimulus of penalties framed by the dons, but by a system established and controlled by the very men who submit themselves to it.

The moral content of this passage, and that expressed in Coubertin’s text, must not be lost in the analysis of this modern sporting ideal.

Coubertin’s theories on sport pedagogy extended into a scheme for physical education that he called “utilitarian gymnastics.” While sport pedagogy was proposed as a mode of physical education for middle class men, utilitarian gymnastics was conceived as a physical education program targeted at lower-middle-class men who were working in urban settlements, principally as clerks or factory workers. Utilitarian gymnastics was, in fact, more than a physical education syllabus for lower-middle-class men whose social and financial status prohibited them from joining exclusive amateur sporting clubs and whose previous education would not have initiated them into sporting culture. It was a program of moral and social reform that derived from Coubertin’s philosophy of the débrouillard. A débrouillard was defined as “a young man skilful with his hands, prepared to put forward a good effort, supple in his muscles, resistant to fatigue, possessing a keen eye, able to make firm decisions and adjust in advance to necessary changes in his location, trade, situation, habits and ideas all of which reflected the inherently unstable conditions of modern societies.” The philosophy of the débrouillard and the scheme for utilitarian gymnastics were intricately woven into the sociological discourse that Coubertin articulated in his theory of rowing. Though he acknowledged the tendency of rowing clubs to promote social exclusivity, he believed that the activity of rowing itself was essential for the syllabus of utilitarian gymnastics. Indeed, the description of rowing for the débrouillard was a far cry from the style of rowing one associates with British amateur clubs. For the débrouillard, the type of watercraft was broadly defined.
Clearly, these young tradesmen and clerks lacked the financial means to own or rent the finely crafted outrigger-style racing skiffs used by gentlemen amateurs. In spite of this, Coubertin was satisfied that an adequate effect could be attained by making do with less sophisticated and costly boats. After all, débrouillardism was the art of making do with the resources on hand. His goal was to engage these young men in the dual pursuit of finding mechanical perfection in their own movement and experiencing the satisfaction of attaining this degree of perfection.

The rower’s pleasure comes from feeling like a thinking machine, to prove how force is generated from within him, how it is released and how it vanishes.  

Rowing for the débrouillard did not necessarily include competition that was fundamental in Coubertin’s scheme for upper class sport pedagogy. After all, the emphasis was on moderation and balance. This was the practical sense or habitus of sport that Coubertin was trying to cultivate for the débrouillard through rowing.

The metaphor of the “thinking machine” also reinforces the notion that public education in the late 19th century and early 20th century was intimately wed to the modern meta-narratives of positivism, rationalism, and progressivism. The ideal expressed in this metaphor was not exclusive to the débrouillard theory. Deriving bodily or erotic pleasure from the mechanical perfection demanded by rowing technique was something that was universal regardless of social class. In this sense, Coubertin’s consideration of sport specific movement seems closely linked to a philosophical conceptualization of embodiment. His interest in the more abstract notion of physical pleasure shifts his hermeneutics of sport away from the purely functional, positivistic, and rationalized theories of sport and physical education that we tend to associate with this era. Indeed, Coubertin seemed intent on directing French men of all classes toward the good life through a rationalized and mechanical experience of embodiment. This relationship between the highly mechanical nature of rowing and various healthful benefits is magnified further when studying Coubertin’s essays on the psychology and physiology of sport.

New Sport Sciences: The Psychology and Physiology of Rowing

A full interpretation of Coubertin’s ideas on utilitarian gymnastics and sport pedagogy is impossible without addressing his body of literature on the psychology and physiology of sport. At the same time, it is worth noting that his contributions to these two specialized bodies of knowledge are among his most bizarre and undisciplined. Though these essays convey very basic and, at times, rather naive assumptions about psychology and physiology, they reveal, nonetheless, concepts that further clarify Coubertin’s faith that rowing was the ideal modern sport. In the area of
psychology, his ideas related to schemes used to categorized sports according to their specific neuromotor demands and to theories that explained the motivation to participate in sport or physical activity. In the area of physiology, his essays emphasized the relationship between muscular exertion and the control of illnesses such as neurasthenia and arthritis.44

His first major contribution to the psychology of sport was published as a chapter in Notes sur l'Education Publique, 1901.45 He followed this with several short articles in Le Figaro in 1902 and 1903.46 In 1913, he hosted a conference in Lausanne that focussed on the psychology and physiology of sport.47 Coubertin ventured into the psychology of sport to explain the human attributes and external influences that produced modern sportsmen. In 1901, he proposed that sports could be categorized "psychologically" as either sports of balance or sports of combat.48 Rowing, a sport that epitomized balance, was one of the prominent examples that he used to justify this system. As such, he emphasized the special relationship between the motor skills necessary to row and the derivative physical pleasure to be experienced. The latter, he believed, was essential in sustaining the individual's motivation to remain active throughout life. As illustrated above in the discussion on utilitarian gymnastics, this relationship between achieving biomechanical perfection and the experience of physical pleasure was a common theme in Coubertin's rowing literature regardless of the explicit disciplinary context.

Through his initial efforts to explore the psychology of sport in 1901, Coubertin pursued the following questions: What is sporting instinct? What is the soul of the rower? What is the source of pleasure that the athlete experiences?49 His claims on the subject of sporting instinct were rather vague. He stated that this instinct can be cultivated providing the germ is planted at the right age and under the right circumstances. When addressing the issue of the rower's soul, his ideas were somewhat more tangible but also more philosophical. For Coubertin, the soul of a true athlete is reflected in his character, and character is developed in sport through perseverance, tenacity, and the desire to act. As for the pleasure that rowers experience, he again referred to the idea of the "human machine" and the satisfaction of attaining "mechanical perfection."50 Coubertin's theory of motivation seems to develop from a premise that individuals seek intrinsic value through physical activity. Thus philosophical assumptions about the value of perceiving one's embodiment and acknowledging the necessity of erotic pleasure are fundamental to his sport psychology discourse. This link between perceived embodiment and the biomechanical demands of sport is also evident in some of his later texts on rowing. For example, in 1908 he declared that "no other sport requires the participant to monitor each and every action so intensely."51 Rowers experience a joy from this effort and sense the force within themselves during each stroke. If the "thinking machine" was not proposed as a tangible ideal for sportsmen to strive toward, then it was, at the very least, a perfect example of the prominent
rhetoric of rationalism and progressivism permeating and shaping Coubertin’s practical sense of sport culture.52

Further evidence from Coubertin’s rowing literature supports the claim that the psychology of sport and the philosophy of sport were interwoven discourses. He believed that the inherent nature of sport leads participants toward excesses physically and emotionally. Accordingly, the nonutilitarian nature of sport, the expenditure of extreme effort (just for the sake of it), demands the development of the psychological attribute, la volonté (will power).53 The inevitable strength of will power leads to an even more valuable moral and social quality in athletes, virility.54 Ultimately, Coubertin admitted that the excesses in sport must be balanced with life in general. Again, he was willing to recognize the paradoxical nature of sport and physical education.55 Of primary importance for Coubertin was achieving balance between the excesses of sport and the broader realm of activities in modern life. Balancing the excess of sport itself was regarded as a rather futile project.56

Coubertin did not elaborate on what are now regarded as conventional subdisciplines in late 20th century physiological discourse; that is, he did not reduce his essays on rowing to theoretical analyses of the circulatory system, respiratory system, neural physiology, or biochemistry. Of course this is not surprising considering that the natural sciences as applied to the study of the human body in any context have changed dramatically over the past one hundred years. Like many of his contemporaries, Coubertin’s ideas on physiology seem to have been more linked to biomechanics than biochemistry. He did not claim to be an expert in physiology and occasionally deferred to the ideas of more qualified individuals. According to Coubertin, Doctor Fernand Lagrange was a leading authority.57 Like Coubertin, Lagrange believed that rowing was superior to other modern sports. And the foundation of Lagrange’s work as described by Coubertin was also strongly influenced by biomechanical considerations. Rowing epitomized effective exercise and mechanical efficiency; no body movement is wasteful in rowing; rowing offered a perfect expenditure of muscular energy in relation to the stress it places on neuromuscular pathways.58 The vocabulary of the physiological discourse appears to merge with the psychology theories that categorized sports according to their neuromotor demands. Coubertin (and Lagrange) suggested that the superiority of rowing was related to its automatisme.59 In 1907, Coubertin proposed a scheme for grouping sports according to their dominant neural requirements. The three groupings for sport were automatisme (sport requiring repetitive, efficient movements such as rowing), obéissance (sports requiring reactive and instinctive actions such as fencing), and initiatives répétées (sports requiring movements that are complex and delivered with great consistency such as gymnastics).60 This use of the word “automatism” suggests that his scheme derived, at least in part, from the work of other prominent sport theorists. R. B. Etherington Smith, M.B., F.R.C.S.,
whose work was included in Lehmann's *The Complete Oarsman*, explained how the "nervous system responds to repeated practice and produces a type of automatism."\(^{61}\)

In 1928, Coubertin examined rowing as a physical activity that offered a perfect prevention and possible cure for arthritis.\(^{62}\) He explained that "rowing's cure" was an extension of what he called "sport's cure." Though he referred to the curative properties of rowing as physiological, his justification was based fundamentally on the mechanical nature of the activity. In fact, he described the therapeutic benefits of rowing as "mécanothérapique."\(^{63}\) Once again, it is important to note that in his article entitled "*La cure d'aviron,/* he distinguished between sport and exercise. Sport emphasized speed and endurance and was not appropriate for curing arthritis. Exercise, on the other hand, emphasized moderation, repetition, and attention to technique that was appropriate for those suffering the symptoms of arthritis. To achieve a cure, the subject needed to pay special attention to consistent repetitions using perfect technique. The positive relationship between the human body and the implements of the rower (the boat and oars) lent themselves perfectly to this balance between repetition and technique. Rowing was superior to other activities because it disciplined the body; that is, the design of the boat, the locked oars, and the resistance of the water forced the body to conform to an ideal. Innovations in the equipment of rowing were praised because they extracted the most from the body in the most efficient and healthful ways.\(^{64}\) In short, the athlete's body was regarded as a passive object to be confined first and then exercised. Thus, recreational or leisure rowing was ideal for those afflicted with arthritis. The healthful benefits of rowing were linked to the controlled movement of the joints and the fact that the activity "cleaned-out the engine."\(^{65}\)

The intricate link between physiological and psychological benefits of rowing is also vividly illustrated in Coubertin's thoughts on the uniquely modern affliction of neurasthenia or fatigue of the nervous system.\(^{66}\) Physiologically, this condition occurred when the nervous system became depleted of its "vital" energy. In this case, the only cure was rest from physical activity. When a perfectly healthy individual suffered from the same symptoms, however, Coubertin referred to it as the "loss or affliction of virility."\(^{67}\) Under these circumstances, neurasthenia was a type of physical fatigue associated with the anxieties of coping with modern life. Horseback riding was regarded as the most effective cure, but rowing and boxing were also highly considered providing the neurasthenic was reasonably fit to begin with. The prescribed format of boxing was simply repetitive practice with a punching bag. Actual combat and competition were not required. According to Coubertin's analysis, both boxing and rowing provided modest but rigidly structured exertions that demanded the passive obedience of the person seeking the cure.\(^{68}\) As a nervous malady caused by the stress of modern urban life, it is not surprising that among the benefits
of rowing identified by Coubertin were simply access to fresh air and the opportunity to wear a few less clothes. The theme of corporal discipline is again evident as the neurasthenic was urged not to sweat and to stay as immobile as possible unless executing the precise athletic skill over prescribed durations of work. In this regard, the boat, oars, oar locks, and mechanics of rowing technique were all effective in controlling or limiting the neurasthenic's body.

As with the historical and pedagogical texts discussed above, Coubertin’s efforts to articulate the psychological and physiological benefits of rowing were bolstered by an underlying moral and social reform discourse. This was, after all, “la question capital.”69 And the moral and social discourse that shaped Coubertin’s understanding of sport culture resonated with the ideals of rationality and moderation. The mechanical requirements of rowing instilled discipline in the muscles, and yet they required the athlete to adapt his technique to that of his teammates.70 Mechanical superiority leads to physical superiority which, in turn, leads to social and moral superiority.71

Harmony and Unity: An Aesthetic Ideal Found in Rowing

Of all the sports that Coubertin examined throughout his oeuvre, rowing epitomized an aesthetic ideal for modern sport. In other words, rowing exemplified the notion of *eurythmie.*72 For Coubertin, *eurythmie* was a type of ephemeral beauty produced when a variety of elements merged harmoniously and spontaneously. *Eurythmie* had to be experienced and was, thus, bound to the concepts of time and place; this experience of beauty was dependent on the establishment of various harmonies and unities involving the man’s body as object and the man’s intellect as subject. Thus, *eurythmie* was not merely an erotic (sensual) notion. The experience of *eurythmie* was intended to elicit a moral reflexiveness.73 This notion of intellectualized beauty places the idea of *eurythmie* firmly in the discourse of aesthetic modernism.74 Art Berman describes modernism as a particular aesthetic movement with a moral and ethical mission that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and is conventionally applied to the fine arts.75 Associating Coubertin’s aesthetic imperative with modernism is all the more logical in view of Berman’s claim:

Modernism is the name of an aesthetic movement inside modernity, yet one that sees itself as counteracting certain negative aspects of modernity—the inability, for example, to yield a contented and equitable society, despite its promises.76

As discussed above, much of Coubertin’s moral and social reform agenda derived from a concern about the pitfalls of modernity. Histories of modernism claim that the fine arts are the preeminent vehicle for identifying
and contextualizing broad truths about the modern world. When analyzing Coubertin's sport theories from an aesthetic perspective, we see that rowing was also perceived as a vehicle for identifying and contextualizing broader moral and social truths. Coubertin explained that the spectacle of rowing provided a unique opportunity for modern athletes to recognize themselves as aesthetic subjects. In other words, they could learn truths about themselves and others. Rowing, however, was not a universal medium according to Coubertin. Its aesthetic could only be appreciated by people who had been initiated in the sport. This claim can be interpreted several ways. Coubertin certainly used this claim to dismiss idle spectators who knew nothing about the sport. He also suggested that the cultivated taste for rowing provided athletes with a degree of autonomy over the sport. In other words, the pleasure and beauty of rowing is really only attainable for those who have learned to row.

For Coubertin, rowing was the sport that provided the most potent aesthetic experience for both athletes and spectators. He also believed that fencing was a valuable source of aesthetic contemplation. In essays where he more explicitly addressed questions of beauty and art in relation to sport, rowing was frequently used to illustrate or reinforce his propositions. Essays published in the *Revue Olympique* between 1908 and 1911 that discussed rowing leave little doubt that Coubertin's theory of sport emphasized aesthetic perfection both in terms of the athletic and spectating experience.

It (rowing) is a perfect all-around exercise, not only because all muscles of the body are put to use but also because of the way they work together, it is superior to other sports that are less eurythmic in their movements. It is necessary to observe that it encourages this "thirst for air" in the medium best able to stimulate it - that is to say on the atmosphere of table-top smooth water or a flowing river. This same eurythmia is pleasing to the eye of the spectator as well. The movements of a good rower are among the most captivating to observe.

For the athletic participant, experiencing rhythm and harmony in movement revealed moral and social truths. In the article entitled "*Le rythme et la vitesse*" from *Revue Olympique* (September 1909), Coubertin defined rhythm as the "harmony engendered by exercise of the body with the implement to which he is joined." As much as any of Coubertin's explicit essays on the relationship between sport and art, "*Le rythme et la vitesse*" emphasized the quest for aesthetic pleasure, that is, the perception of beauty through participation in physical activity. He argued that the speed of an athlete's movements must be moderated in order to achieve perfect rhythm. He attempted to illustrate this by evoking an image of an athlete running at three different speeds: slow, moderately rapid, and excessive. Accordingly, at the so-called "moderately rapid" speed—which is difficult for an untrained person to sustain—is the athlete's motion perfectly harmonious.
"Only with sufficient fitness and skill training can an athlete know the sensation of beauty and rhythm through his movement." In this sense, fitness training was linked to the cultivation of taste. Although denouncing the use of excessive speed in this aesthetic theory of sport, Coubertin acknowledged that excessive speed might be essential to the pursuit of victory. Here again, he was willing to address the paradox between excess and moderation that was discussed earlier in this paper. Motivation to participate in sport was clearly linked to the disinterested pursuit of pleasure. The quest for victory was not a paramount attribute in Coubertin’s ideal of a modern sportsman. Though acknowledging the exhilaration and passion that the pursuit of speed could incite, he was adamant this did not capture the sporting spirit and, in fact, could block the route to achieving aesthetic perfection in sport. The techniques of rowing demanded restraint of speed and thus enhanced the athlete’s aesthetic experience.

Aesthetically, the production of harmony and rhythm was discussed in terms of rowing crews and single scullers. The harmonious and unified rowing crew was not simply a source of ephemeral pleasure for the athletes. Coubertin also believed that participating in a harmonious crew allows the athletes to perceive themselves as subjects in the production of beauty; that is, the athlete is the means and the end in the aesthetic experience. The embodied harmony and unity of a crew was tantamount to a moral achievement. Working together in a disciplined and courageous endeavour represented a social and athletic ideal: "Rowing is not necessarily a sport for well-off men, but it is absolutely a sport of unified men." The necessity for cooperation and coordinated efforts in the boat, at the boathouse, during fund raising for equipment, and with coaching and the management of clubs made rowing the perfect and most complete sport. It developed physical as well as social and moral qualities in its participants. The most successful rowing clubs were those that achieved and sustained a positive social harmony and a male centred “esprit de corps.” Experiencing this harmony reinforced the social truths that were inherently good.

Certainly Coubertin’s enthusiasm for rowing emphasized the aesthetic experience of athletes. However, in terms of spectators, he saw conflict. On the one hand, he regarded the Henley Regatta in England as one of the most impressive and aesthetically organized sporting events. At the same time, he acknowledged that rowing fails to offer the same profitable aesthetic experience as sports that were performed in stadiums. The linear nature of rowing races did not provide an interesting view or a sufficiently long period of time for the spectators to observe the rowers’ movements or to follow the development of the competition. Though acknowledging these shortcomings, he also believed that this lack of spectator appeal had a greater overall positive effect. The fact that rowing was not especially appealing to spectators was, he explained, the reason it had remained the purest of all sporting activities. Between 1907 and 1912, Coubertin pondered the function of spectators in relation to modern sport. He expressed
interesting and sometimes conflicting ideas about the legitimate role of modern sport spectators; these opinions were frequently formed by broader issues related to ideas on the function of art and concepts of beauty. His concern that sport tended to become too spectacular is another expression of his aesthetic modernism; that is, his aesthetic of rowing represented an alternative to what he believed was a negative disenfranchising aspect of modern sport.

Rowing and Modernism: Summary and Conclusions

One of the most enduring images of Coubertin is the old man with a heavy white moustache sitting in a single scull on Lac Léman. When assessing his theoretical legacy on rowing, one might be satisfied to conclude that the passionate and esoteric texts are merely a reflection of his personal enthusiasm for this particular sport. Indeed, the quaint tone of his writings can easily distract a reader from critiquing the complexities of the *habitus* expressed in this remarkable oeuvre. Over a period of forty years, he published essays that promoted rowing as an ideal sport for modern times. Analysis of his oeuvre has revealed how this notion of an ideal sport was constructed across a number of discourses that have come to dominate our understanding of sport and physical culture. Coubertin’s proposal that one sport was more effective than another was dependent on his “practical sense” of what was perfect for society at a particular time and place. In other words, his promotion of rowing represented a synthesis of ideas from a variety of established disciplines or specialized bodies of knowledge. Specifically, the ideal nature of rowing extended from Coubertin’s understanding of sport history, theories on educational reform, and the relatively new areas of sport psychology and sport physiology. These were the explicit, or formal, discourses that helped him organize his thoughts on rowing. They also provided him with a strategy for publishing his ideas. Beneath the surface, and linking each of these historical, pedagogical, and scientific texts on rowing, lay the telling elements of sociological and cultural discourses. His notion of an ideal sport was inseparable from a concept of society where paternalistic instinct was rooted in class distinction, where social progress was measured in the ability of individuals to assume responsibility for their own lives through disciplined and contemplative actions, and where rationalization and mechanization provided the dominant metaphors for the “good life.”

At the end of the twentieth century, scholars still grapple with the notion that sport and organized physical activity are legitimate and vital cultural practices in their own right. During Coubertin’s era, the association between cultural theory and sport represented an even more tenuous proposition. Sport theorists of Coubertin’s generation were forced to articulate the way physical activity brings meaning to the lives of individuals and society by rather subliminal or circuitous routes. As it turns out, the
cultural discourse that underscored much of Coubertin’s writing is, perhaps, his most valuable contribution to the hermeneutic of modern sport. Through words, he tried to express the essence of athleticism; that is, he sought to express how personal meaning can be derived from contemplating one’s embodiment. He saw rowing as an activity that could enable urban men to discover the truths of themselves and the modern world in which they lived. In this regard, he promoted rowing as a perfectly reflexive form of physical activity. The source of this reflexivity was the body of the rower. For Coubertin, the body of an athlete and the activity that engaged it were cultural capital. He attempted, within the confines of contemporary discursive structures, to articulate the way sporting bodies and the athletes’ sense of embodiment functioned as an instrument for social learning and social reproduction. The truly unique dimension of this cultural hermeneutic is the idea that the rower’s body could be read (or interpreted), both internally and externally. In other words, for the rower, embodiment was the source of cultural learning. For those who stood on the banks of the rivers and contemplated the crews and scullers who moved across the water, rowers’ bodies were a potent symbol of athletic, individual, and social perfection. This idea of perfection was rooted in the harmonies and unities established between athletes, racing shells, and the water; between the festival of sport and the natural and human environments that supported the festival; and between the individual and society. Coubertin’s ideal sport was, indeed, a part of a broader historical-cultural movement. From his meditations on the ideal nature of rowing, we can identify Coubertin’s hermeneutical bond to the meta-narrative of aesthetic modernism.

Pierre de Coubertin’s writings certainly convey what Bourdieu has referred to as the social limitations of a cultural habitus dominated by an elite sector of modern society. He did not romanticize or try to avoid discussing the inherently class-based nature of the aesthetic that he so fondly appreciated in amateur rowing. Indeed, the innovations to rowing culture that he proposed for the débrouillard and the “popular sport movement” were inspired by the dominant sporting culture that he and his Olympic Movement colleagues understood innately. Ultimately, however, he believed that the working classes in modern society needed to generate their own unique taste for sport; they needed to acquire a habitus that would enable them to appreciate their own types of sport. In this sense, the poignancy of Bourdieu’s social theory of taste resonates through Coubertin’s meditations on modern sport. In the end, the solutions that he proposed to bridge the social limitations of modern club rowing—merely accentuated what was clearly a field of cultural production and consumption with restricted access and defined by the dominant class’s control of symbolic and cultural capital. Coubertin’s enthusiastic declarations that rowing was an ideal sport for modern times was, in fact, a promotion for the manipulation and commodification of a field of cultural production that sustained the traditional divisions of an ideal class-based and gender-based modern society.
Endnotes


3Published commentary on, and analysis of, rowing flourished in the latter decades of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century. Some rather large volumes combined histories of rowing and up-to-date technical information on the sport. See, for example, The Modern Oarsman: A Compendium of Information on rowing, Sculling, Steering, Feathering, Coaching, Sliding Seats, Trimming and Sitting in a Boat, Dimensions of Work, etc. (Part of Robertson’s Cheap Series) (Toronto: J. R. Robertson, 1879); and, R. C. Lehmann, The Complete Oarsman (London: Methuen and Company, 1908).


7The concepts of habitus (the “practical sense” or “feel for the game”) and fields (specialized bodies of knowledge, or domains of capital production) lead to powerful insights about the culture of sport. Bourdieu uses these concepts to elaborate his thesis that “social class is defined as much by its being perceived as by its being, by its consumption—which need not be conspicuous to be symbolic—as much as by its position in relations of production (even if it is true that the latter governs the former).” Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, (translated by Richard Nice) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 483.


feminist historians, (Spring 1989), p. 41. Discourses are what Schottler and Foucault refer to as specialized and socially legitimized bodies of knowledge.


11The majority of analysis of Coubertin’s oeuvre has been motivated by questions related to the development of the modern Olympic Movement. As a result, sport historians have focussed on the institutional themes such as the relationships between the IOC, national Olympic committees, international federations and Olympic Games hosts. Common intellectual themes included the relationship between the ideology of Olympism and amateurism, internationalism, Hellenism, commercialism, etc.

12Identifying these particular texts was greatly facilitated by the editorial work of historians Norbert Müller and Otto Schantz whose ambitious anthology of Coubertin’s oeuvre, Textes Choisis, organizes his texts into groupings based on sport. See, Pierre de Coubertin, Textes Choisis, Tome III, Sports, eds. Norbert Müller and Otto Schantz, (Zurich: Weidmann, 1986). This anthology was produced in three volumes. The first volume (Tome I) was edited by George Rioux and is entitled Révélations. The second volume is edited by Müller, on his own, and is entitled Olympisme.

13Revue Olympique is a most valuable periodical for interpreting the context out of which the idea of the “ideal” sport of rowing emerged. Working with this periodical, the “organe officiel du CIO” is both fascinating and incredibly frustrating. Nevertheless, a chronological reading of this periodical, article by article, has offered insight into the oeuvre of Coubertin that no anthology can possibly replicate. Publication of the Revue Olympique began in 1901. At this time it was a quarterly periodical. By 1905, at the insistence of IOC members, Coubertin began publishing the Revue Olympique monthly. Very few complete copies of the Revue Olympique survive today. See Douglas A. Brown, “The Publishing Industry and the Revue Olympique,” Theories of Beauty and Modern Sport: Pierre de Coubertin’s Aesthetic Imperative for the Modern Olympic Movement, 1894-1914, (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, the University of Western Ontario, 1997), 105-137.

14The volume of literature by other authors of Coubertin’s generation is immediately evident when reviewing the notes in the books by Wigglesworth and Halladay. Examples of such literature are R. C. Lehmann, The Complete Oarsman (op. Cit.), G. C. Bourne, A Text-Book of Oarsmanship (London, 1925); S. Crossley, Pleasure and Leisure Boating (Innes & Co., 1899); Lord Desborough, The Story of the Oar (Horace Cox, 1910); W. E. Sherwood, Oxford Rowing (Henry Frowde, 1900).

15English language historians have tended to focus on his Olympic Games initiatives. See, for example, John J. MacAlon, This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and David C. Young, The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996). European (and specifically French and German) historians have been successful at locating Coubertin’s broader pedagogical agenda within the context of French Republican social and ideological history. Among the most authoritative histories in this latter category are Yves-Pierre


19Ibid.

20Ibid., p. 216 (Textes Choisis).


25Ibid., p. 213 (Textes Choisis).

26Pierre de Coubertin, “D’Andrésy à Henley,” *Textes Choisis, Tome III*, pp. 112-119 (originally published in *Une Campagne de Vingt-et-un ans*, Paris, 1909). This article is interesting because it outlines some of the differences between French amateur sport and British amateur sport in the early 1890s.

27Ibid., p. 113.

28While Coubertin found virtue in most formal systems of physical education, he also believed that a need existed in modern society to conceptualize and implement a new type of physical education that would accommodate the different needs of the different classes within France’s new Republican society. Coubertin attempted to explain a “cause and effect” relationship between sport and broader ontological elements that defined the human condition. Part of this unique theory of sport derived from his interpretation of student run sports in the British public schools, the social function of amateur sport clubs, different 19th century gymnastics movements, as well as his personal education in history, philosophy, and natural science. On these pedagogical influences, see Yves Pierre Boulogne, op. cit., and Müller and Schantz, op. cit.


30Ibid.

31Essentially, Coubertin’s theory of sport culture supports the claims of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s theory of culture is predicated on the notion that people’s tastes are defined by the different fields (economic, academic, political, etc.) that locate them within the hierarchical social structure of their particular historical time and place (Randal Johnson, Op.Cit., p. 8).


See “Le Tableau de L’Education Physique au XXe Siècle,” *Revue Olympique* (October 1902), pp. 51-65. This article describes different schools of physical education and elaborates on the nature of “sport.”


Ibid., p. 142.

Ibid.


Pierre de Coubertin, “La Philosophie du débrouillard,” *Une Campagne de Vingt-et-un Ans (1887-1908)* (Paris: Librairie de L’Education Physique, 1909). This is a published version of a speech that Coubertin delivered in the Grand Amphitheatre of the Sorbonne in 1907 at a celebration of the Société des Sports Populaire where diplomas were awarded in recognition of members who had achieved exceptional accomplishments.


Coubertin divided the syllabus into the following functional categories: life saving on the ground, life saving in water, defense, and locomotion. Rowing was included under locomotion. This system for categorizing sports was presented in a number of other texts written by Coubertin over the years. See for example, “Les gammes musculaires quotidiennes,” *Revue Olympique* (Octobre 1909), pp. 148-153.


Ibid., p. 223.

Ibid.

See, Pierre de Coubertin, 1908, op. cit., p. 228. In this article, his principal objective was to explain the therapeutic potential of rowing.

Ibid.

*Pleasures of Rowing*
Coubertin saw that modern life posed many problems for men attempting to achieve this special equilibrium. Many of the qualities and mechanisms for preserving balance in one's life, such as those that he recognized in rowing, were reflective of his more general philosophical position, which he described as a type of Hellenism for modern times. To identify the commonalities in the notion of balance between excess and moderation, one need only refer to Coubertinian texts such as "Le retour à la vie Grecque," Revue Olympique (Février 1907), pp. 211-215.


Unlike his forays into the discourses of physiology, psychology, history, and even pedagogy, Coubertin’s use of aesthetic concepts in his theory of sport and sporting spectacles was much more complex and often rather subliminal. The application of ontological concepts associated with the fine arts were evident in theories of sport from the outset of his career. The most vivid expressions of this aesthetic imperative emerged during the years 1909 to 1911. See Pierre de Coubertin, “Remedes sportifs pour les neurastheniques,” Revue Olympique (Fevrier 1912), pp. 27-30.


Tbid., p. viii.


Coubertin wrote prolifically on the benefits of fencing. As with his rowing literature, the aesthetic discourse emerges subtly as one contemplates the different contexts in which Coubertin elaborated on the performative dimension of fencing. See, for example, Pierre de Coubertin, "Le festival de la Sorbonne," *Revue Olympique* (Juin 1906), p. 94. In this brief article, Coubertin describes the eurythmie of a fencing match that he integrated into a ceremony that was part of the 1906 Consultative Conference for the Arts, Literature and Sport hosted at the Sorbonne.


Pierre de Coubertin, "And, it is well understood, we do not include he who is engaged in true competition, because he must, before all, attempt to be the first and, race or fight, it is by speed (or else by endurance) that victory is obtained. But we are talking of the everyday sportsman that visibly torments the speed demons and for-sakes that for the spell of rhythm." Translation mine.

In "Le rythme et la vitesse," rowing and fencing, the two sports that Coubertin most admired from an aesthetic point of view, were used to illustrate the important balance between rhythm and speed. "It is the contempt of rhythm which has led indirectly to the 'crude pull' in rowing and 'the clashing of swords' in fencing. To properly assimilate rhythm, one must, as one master puts it, know how to 'take one's time.' But the current generation has a strong tendency, when this is mentioned, to respond with these expressive and strong words: 'Darn! I have no time.'" Tbid., p. 137. Translation mine.


The essay "A Modern Olympia" (1909, Op. Cit.) provides the most sophisticated analysis of the problem of achieving harmony and equilibrium between athletes and spectators in modern sport. Though purely hypothetical, "A Modern Olympia" is a vivid example of Coubertin's aesthetic modernism.

Here, I refer to a photograph that is frequently reproduced to illustrate biographies on Coubertin and histories of the Olympic Games.