The Modern Olympic Games – a Globalised Cultural and Sporting Event

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Abstract

The Olympic Games are a major global sporting event, which attracts huge worldwide interest, from people of all races, ages, and social positions, transforming them in absolute global and democratic happenings. Last year over 4.8 billions of TV-viewers were connected to this major sportive and cultural feast (7.1 billion is the entire world population). From the beginning, the modern Olympic Games were part of world culture and modern history, reflecting political tensions, economic crises, cultural flowering, and technological development. The purpose of this study is to reveal the interconnection between culture and modern Olympic Games in a global historic context. The documentation for this study includes a large range of data about the 20th and the down of 21st century history, statistics, art history, anthropological studies, biographical sites and economics. In the Olympic history I find a paradoxical moment: if the Olympic ideal is about celebrate the peace and a healthy mind in a healthy body, the Paralympics idea arose after the Second World War to honor the people who have got permanent disabilities on the battle fields. The social rituals performed in Olympic ceremonies evolved from a sacred place and have a religious dimension, which finds a profane expression in public arenas, but the values and the symbols they promote still attract large crowds. Conclusions. The widening of the Olympics movement around the world, as well as the connection between large numbers of countries makes the IOC a model structure that operates successfully on a global scale. The impact of the most important sporting event on the host city’s community for more than three weeks represents a paradigm of urban anthropology.

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1. Introduction

The modern Olympic Games are a major global sporting event, which attracts huge worldwide interest, from people of all races, ages, and social positions. Last year, over 4.8 billion people (over half the world’s population) watched this major sporting and cultural feast. The number of television (TV) viewers of the summer Olympics increased after every edition (olympic-2012-london.co.uk/, 2012).

In this study, I will reveal the connection between culture and the modern Olympic Games in a global historic context. The documentation for this study includes a large range of data about the 20th and the down of 21st century history, statistics, art history, anthropological studies, biographical sites and economics.

The widening of the Olympics movement around the world, as well as the connection between large numbers of countries makes the IOC a model structure that operates successfully on a global scale. The impact of this important sporting and cultural event on the host city’s community represents a paradigm of urban anthropology and a unique model of how the entire planet can be compressed in one place for celebrating peace, youth and talent.

2. Symbols and rituals in Olympic arena

The Olympics is a display of performance in a specific context, which takes four forms, even at the same time: ceremony, competition, fete, and entertainment (Piette, 1994). In the opening ceremony, the Olympic symbols including the flag, the circles, the anthems, the oaths and the Olympic flame, are presented in solemn moments recalling ancient religious rituals from the time when the games in Olympia were dedicated to the Greek gods.

The spectator is conscious of the emotional experience alongside the aesthetical presentation and of the associated values and attributes such as peace, fraternity, youth, vigour, honesty, respect for rules and for humanity. The ritual space is clearly defined by substantial enclosures, lights, and security, creating the context for inducing in the collective consciousness the exaltation and the feeling of being part of an exceptional moment.

The ceremonies include cultural performances and bring out the spirit of the hosting nation through its most valuable historical, cultural, and scientific symbols and personalities in a profane festive atmosphere. The study of Olympic rituals and symbols reveals the subtle energy, which unites ordinary people and sportspeople to participate in the fight for Olympic glory.

In 2004, the Olympic Games returned to the original cradle of the Games in Athens. In the opening ceremony, over 4,000 years of culture and civilization were condensed into a spectacular performance. At the Beijing festivity, in 2008, hundreds of millions of people (spectators and viewers) were shown a superlative and fascinating combination of high technology and millennial tradition (www.usatoday.com, 2008).

Today, in the difficult economic conditions experienced by a large number of nations, we can consider the Olympic Games in London to be the most important and positive global event of 2012.

3. Olympics - a global event

The modern Olympics became a major global event due to support from transnational media corporations, large multinational companies, intergovernmental organizations (United Nations, the European Union) and National Government Organisations (NGO) who are the main drivers of globalisation. These organisations have more extended interests than national organisations in that they have global agendas and an increasing impact on worldwide system management.

International sports federations and the International Olympics Committee (IOC) are supranational organisations that coordinate the activity of some non-governmental institutions such as the national Olympic committees and the national sports federations. The enormous development of the Olympic movement across the
world as well as the adhesion between a large number of countries (over 200), makes the IOC a structural model that can operate on a global scale.

Sport remains a means of asserting and preserving national identity through the values it promotes and through its symbols. Representing a state in international competitions, especially at the Olympic Games is a matter of national prestige. The athlete for whom the flag is hoisted and the national anthem is sung, is the bearer of this prestige. This statement from an Olympic charter article - "The Olympic Games are competitions between athletes and teams, not between countries" - leads me to assert that it is simply a declaration, even though in the spirit of globalisation.

From the perspective of globalisation, we could consider sport as being in the vanguard. The IOC was created in 1894 and there are nearly 100 years between the launching of the idea of the Olympics and the impetus given to globalisation by the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991.


Baron Pierre de Coubertin launched the idea of reviving the Olympic Games at a time of great cultural effervescence. At the end of the XIX century, the focus was on Paris and an elite of art reformers from across Europe and other parts of the world. There was a revolution in art, in the famous Montmartre district and Latin Quarter, begun by the impressionists, and continued by symbolist and post-impressionists, through fauvism and expressionism and by Art Nouveau in 1900, with the diffusion of art in common object aesthetics. In Paris, the art capital of the world, the global artistic community viewed art from a changed perspective (Hepp, 2010).

An emblematic generation, inspired by the present, does not write, compose, or paint about other times, but makes history. Toulouse-Lautrec and Claude Monet put can-can dancers and seraphic female figures in their paintings, each one representing his approach to life and art (Morariu, 1980). Van Gogh (1853-1890) with his vigorous and vibrant style of painting personified the rebel times and spirit. Gauguin and Cezanne painted representations of their emotions until the early years of the XX century (Marshall & Cavendish, 2008). The writers Oscar Wild, Henry James, Anton Chekov and the poets Verlaine and Rimbaud were the most prominent personalities of literature in the last decade of XIX century. These artists and their creations transformed ordinary men into heroes.

At such times, in which reforming geniuses struggled for affirmation and recognition, it was possible to revive the Olympics and to accede to the international Olympic idea. A few days after the idea went public; the IOC met for their first session and decided that the first Olympic Games would take place in Greece, in homage to the cradle of the ancient Games. In Athens, in 1896, 245 male competitors, representing 14 nations took part in the first modern Olympic competition.

Although he was a visionary, Pierre de Coubertin believed that the Olympics should remain traditionally “a eulogy of male sport”. This reservation, however, could not prevent women from participating, and in 1900, they competed in tennis and golf. The second event, held in Paris, had 1,330 participants, representing 22 nations. 1900 in the “city of lights” was the pick of “la Belle Epoque” - a time of peace, prosperity and progress.

The third Olympic Games took place in St. Louis and could hardly be considered an international competition. Travel from Europe was by ship at the time and was very expensive. The athletes, amateur in the true sense, could not afford it, so among 681 athletes, 525 were American. The competition started on Monday, 29 August, and ended on Saturday, 3 September with a day off on Friday. At this time, all Olympic competitions lasted five days. Athletes, who belonged to ethnic minorities, competed in separate events, which included beatings with mud, throwing stones and spears. These events were conceived as a struggle between two tribes of savages, and perhaps an original illustration of the idea of peace and friendship between other people. This special event was called “the anthropology day”.

There were two Olympic events until the outbreak of World War One - in London (1908) and in Stockholm (1912).
When weapons speak, the Muses are silent. All energies are absorbed in war; Games are suspended and the momentum wears off. In four years of war, ten million people died, mostly men (www.historyonthenet.com/.../statistics.htm, n. d.). In this situation, the role of women in society was reviewed, and voting rights for women in England was achieved in 1920 after decades of struggle. More and more occupational fields became open to women, and sports were no exception; women were admitted to competitions which were opened to the other half of humanity.

At the 1920 Olympics, in Anvers, countries that lost in WWI (Germany, Austria, Bulgaria and Turkey) were banned from participating, and for the first time, registration of participants had to go through the national Olympic committees.

The inter-war period saw a frantic resumption of artistic creation. They were the crazy years in which the world took revenge against the hardships of war. While Europe emerged from the war significantly changed, and endeavoured to remove all traces of the disaster, the United States experienced ten years of extraordinary economic growth, becoming the world’s top economic power. From 1919, the US Republican party had significant power and they refused to accede to the League of Nations and imposed prohibition. As a result, the French Riviera became overcrowded, with everyone and anyone, and especially Americans. Josephine Baker, the jazz singer, crossed the ocean to be there, representing a culture formed from merging different civilizations.

As far as the Olympic domain is concerned, these years were marked by the opening of the first Winter Olympics at Chamonix, in 1924. At the 1924, Summer Olympic Games in Paris, Romania was represented for the first time in an Olympic competition by 24 men and won its first medal (www.cor.ro, n. d.). Romania's rugby team participated in the Olympics and after losing two matches against the host country and the US, managed a touchdown and a bronze medal... three teams participated in the competition.

Arts had the greatest impact on the masses, cinema, in particular. Hollywood began its offensive on the entire world, and in 1927 had a great hit with "The Jazz Singer" - the first film with sound. Great athletes, Olympic champions from the 1920-30 years, became famous for their roles in highly successful films. Johnny Weissmuller, the five times Olympic swimming champion was particularly popular in the role of Tarzan. The Norwegian, Sonja Henie, the ten times world champion and six times European champion, won the figure skating Olympic champion title three times: 1928, 32 and 36. After the Olympic Games in 1936 Henie gave up the amateur sport and starred in several successful films in the US.

On October 24, 1929, Wall Street's economic crisis began and it gradually expanded to Europe stopping economic growth. Governments that fail to solve the crisis are forced to leave power, and dictators take over and there is fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany and General’s Franco regime in Spain. In 1932, during the recession, the Olympic Games return to the US, to Los Angeles for the summer Games and to Lake Placid for the winter Games. Due to the distance and the cost of such a long journey, and due to worldwide economic difficulties, not one country had announced its participation six months prior to the start. Eventually in Los Angeles, 1332 athletes (126 women and 1206 men) made it to the starting line, less than half of the number who participated in the previous Games (Amsterdam 1928 - 2883 athletes). (www.olympic.org/olympic-games, n. d.).

Berlin organized the tenth Olympic Games in 1936, and Hitler was in the official stand when his theory of Aryan race supremacy was shattered by the performance of an exceptional coloured athlete, Jesse Owens. Owens won the Olympic title in four events: 100 and 200m, long jump and the 4x100m relay, once becoming the first Afro-American champion in the history of the Olympics. Hitler and his entourage left the stadium before the prize giving ceremony.

The Second World War begins in 1939 after the German invasion of Poland, and by 1945, the conflict has engulfed the entire world involving over 40 countries across all continents. Casualties are estimated at between 62 and 78 million soldiers and civilians (www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo, n. d.). The next Olympics were postponed until 1948 after almost six years of armed conflict and colossal destruction. After two suspended editions of the Games, representatives of 59 nations gathered in London to
celebrate peace and to confirm the Olympic ideal. On this occasion, the first victory in an Olympic contest of a
coloured woman - Alice Coachman - was recorded for the high jump (www.teamusa.org. 2012). This was just the
start, and once engaged in the race for titles and Olympic records, black athletes were fully instated. American
Carl Lewis holds the record of nine Olympic titles in the sprint races and long jump (notablebiographies.com,
2010).

During WW2, a large number of people were permanently disabled and needed rehabilitation. In a
medical facility, in England, a doctor named Ludwig Guttmann launched the idea of using sport in the treatment
and rehabilitation of disabled people (www.morethangold.org.uk/, n. d.). In 1948, the first competition between
veterans in London took place. In 2012, also in London, the Paralympics Games reunited 4,200 competitors from
147 nations to take part in 21 different sports (www.paralympics.org.uk/games, n. d.). We can say that the
visionary doctor Guttmann was to the Paralympics what Coubertin was to the modern Olympics.

The 1950’s were marked by the arms race and the fear of a possible nuclear war between the US and the
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The “Cold War” began and propaganda was rife. Sports were used
as a vehicle for superiority of one political regime over the other. Totalitarian regimes have continued the idea of
creating a new man, a Nazi concept, extended afterwards in communist ideology. This new man prioritised his
physical attributes, working incessantly, but his spirit was severely censored. Champion athletes were used for
propaganda purposes as models for the supremacy of communism, and they were given international visibility in
the sports arena.

In the Olympics arena, the Cold War culminates in the boycott of the 1980 and 1984 Games. The US
does not participate at the event organised by Moscow, in protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A
further 60 nations supported this position. In retaliation, the next Games, held in Los Angeles in 1984 are
boycotted by the USSR, who expressed doubts about security measures. Fifteen nations, influenced by the
communist power supported the boycott. Romania had a different position and sent a delegation to Los Angeles,
which was welcomed with sympathy at the opening ceremony. At this event, our country achieved a record of 53
medals, of which 20 were gold.

Sports phenomenon is always present in the media and has a regular audience, passionate about
competitions and sporting performance. Since 1936, Olympic competitions have been broadcast. In Berlin,
viewers had the opportunity to see transmissions in special viewing rooms; the London Olympic Games were
also televised, although in 1948 few people had TV sets in their homes. Once television became widespread,
sporting events became accessible to everyone, at almost any time and all over the world (Pop, 2006).

![Fig. 1 TV viewers of summer Olympics 1996 - 2012](source: IOC)

The Olympic Games have become a well-known event, watched by a large and diverse audience. Many
Olympic champions are recognised all over the world, and are popular ambassadors for their countries.
The most serious occurrence of political interference at the Olympic Games took place in 1972. Due to political conditions in the Middle East, the Israeli delegation at Munich, were attacked by an Arab commando in the Olympic village. Two athletes were killed and nine others were taken hostage and died later, when the German police attacked the terrorists. Competitions were suspended for one day for mourning. Recent history shows that such terrorist actions that target institutions and symbols of a country rely on the powerful impact on public opinion.

Changes in the international political landscape since 1989 were reflected in participation in the Olympic Games in Barcelona in 1992. Among the 172 nations participating were, the reunified Germany, the United Team of Russia and 11 other former Soviet republics, the Baltic republics (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia - for the first time since separation from the USSR), and South Africa (suspended since 1960 until it outlawed apartheid). The former Yugoslavian republics also participated with their first separate sports delegations. In Barcelona, for the first time since 1972, no country boycotted the Olympic competition.

In the information age, sport takes place on the Internet, which liberalises cultural, artistic, and sporting events, making them instantly accessible worldwide. Such exposure makes the Olympic phenomenon an ideal target for marketing and economic gain. In addition, globalisation makes athletic talent cross borders and unite in multinational teams whose performance exceeds the potential of many national ones. These professional sportspeople have financial agreements with media trusts, advertising and sports management agencies, and the equipment industry. In sport the flow across the globe of goods, equipment and talents “has developed into a multi-billion dollar business in recent years and represents a transnational” network (Maguire, 2008). We are now bombarded with marketing and advertising information from the complex arena of sport and only education and common sense can help us discern what is valuable in this information avalanche.

Besides the link between culture and sport, the Olympics involve a great financial commitment from the country, which organises the competition. The bill for these huge investments is becoming increasingly difficult to pay and this situation is unlikely to improve. The economic benefits those cities (and by extension - countries) organising the events could have had, have gone since the end of the last millennium, with the Games in Atlanta and Sydney (Matthewman, Kamel & Bearne, 2009).

Although nations experience difficult economic conditions these days, there were still a large number of athletes involved in the London Olympics, which increased from 10.178 in Beijing to 10.961 (www.olympic.org/olympic-games, 2012). English minister responsible for organizing the great event said that the Olympics were awarded to certain economic conditions, and now they will be held in a different situation. If he could have anticipated the economic crisis almost certainly he would have ceased the organization (en.oboulo.com, n.d.).

Organising the Olympic Games takes a great deal of effort for the host nation and communities where the Games take place. New sports arenas, Olympic villages, and infrastructure projects, (transport, security, tourist services, utilities, etc.) change the face of the city for good. The large number of people participating in the Games at the same time in the same city at a number of large-scale urban events, substantially changes the life of its citizens. This is a relevant example of a global event impact over a community.

5. Conclusions

The social rituals performed in Olympic ceremonies evolved from a sacred place and have a religious dimension, which finds a profane expression in public arenas, but the values and the symbols they promote still attract large crowds.

The widening of the Olympics movement around the world, as well as the connection between large numbers of countries (204) more than United Nations (193), makes the IOC a model structure that operates successfully on a global scale.

From the beginning, the modern Olympic Games were part of world culture and modern history,
reflecting political tensions, economic crises, cultural flowering, and technological development. The impact of the most important sporting event on the host city’s community for more than three weeks represents a paradigm of urban anthropology. This paper has several limitations because it is displaying just the most important historical events of the last century but with a decisive impact on Olympic movement and the Games.

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