

The Spirit of the Olympics vs. Commercial Success: A Critical Examination of the Strategic Position of the Olympic Movement

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Abstract

“The Baron’s Dream” about the revival of the ancient Olympic Games was realised at a time when sport was an essential part of the education of young people, both in France -home country of Baron Pierre de Coubertin- and in England, where views on “the moral influence of physical culture” (Guttman, 2002; Coubertin et al., 1897) where the leitmotiv in discussions amongst the aristocratic circles of the time, albeit, always within the context of amateurism. The ancient fundamental belief regarding the harmonious relationship of body, soul and mind, “the threefold harmony of Hellenism” (Chatziefstratiou & Henry, 2010) which the Romans term ‘mens sana in corpore sano’, became the essential axiom of Olympism: “for education, international understanding, equal opportunities, fair and equal competition, cultural expression, independence of sport and personal excellence embodied in the modern Olympic Games”. This moral and social dimension of the Olympic movement is what distinguishes the Olympic Games “from all other international sport events and institutions” (Girginov, 2010; Garcia, 2002).

Keywords: Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, Olympic Spirit, Olympic Symbols, Commercialisation.

Introduction

The origins of modern Olympic Games can be traced back to the ancient Olympic Games, which, according to historical sources, were first held in 776 BC at the sanctuary of Olympia. Pausanias, the ancient author and traveler (2nd century AD.), mentions that the sacred games referred to mythology and, in particular, to the confrontation between Saturn and Zeus, and that the first winner in Olympic Games was Hercules Idaios (Papachatzis, 2002).

The first values of Olympism, i.e. "the standards of creation and virtue", were already established in ancient times, given that by practicing sports "man can tame his fierce nature and develop his inexhaustible mental and bodily powers" (Gialouris, 1982). The Games established the ideal of "noble emulation" as part of the education of the youth. In the context of this ideal, victory was rewarded with a "garland made of branches of the wild olive tree" (kotinos), as indicated by the traveler Pausanias, established by Hercules Idaios for the winners of Olympic Games (Papachatzis, 2002). Already in ancient times one can notice - albeit on a different basis - the conflict between the Olympic idea and its commercialization. Indeed, according to the ancient historian Herodotus (Gialouris, 1982), the Persians, who attended the Games in Olympia in 480 BC, expressed their perplexity at the fact that the winners were not rewarded with gold. The concepts of "Athlos" (contest) and "Nike" (victory) represented the intellectual dimension of the Games, and this is why they were embodied in symbolic statues. These concepts captured amateur athleticism as a value, which later had a considerable influence on the founder of the modern era Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin.

The Revival of the Olympic Games

In modern times, the Olympic Games, which were instituted upon the initiative of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, were organized for the first time in Athens in 1896. Following the success of his endeavor, he claimed that "the revival of the Olympic Games will bring athleticism to a high state of perfection, and that they will infuse new elements of ambition in the lives of the rising generation: a love for concord and a respect for life!" (Coubertin et al., 1897).

The "Olympic Movement", which also represents the ideology of the Olympic Games, dates from at that time. Coubertin himself had described Olympism in the following terms: "Philosophy of life, healthy democracy, wise and peaceful internationalism, will penetrate the new stadium and preserve within it the cult of honor and disinterestedness which will enable athletics to help in the tasks of moral education and social peace as well as of muscular development"(Loland, 1995). In a way, the revival of the Olympic Games embodied "the idea of restoring the grandeur of antiquity" (Young, 2010), an idea deeply rooted in much of Greek and European intellectual thought of the time; therefore, the selection of Athens for the celebration of the first modern Olympic Games, in 1896, was a natural outcome; besides, from its very beginning, Olympism "was associated with Hellenism and the ancient Greek values of body, mind and spirit, which had been re-invented in eighteenth- and nineteenth- century Europe" (Hatziefstathiou & Henry, 2010).

It would be difficult to claim that the Olympic values are strictly adhered to these days, because many of them have been undermined by the pursuit of commercial profit. Even for the first Olympic Games, in 1896, the financial assistance of private individuals was required, for example, for the reconstruction of the "Panathenaic Stadion", where the Games were held. The Panathenaic Stadion was built on the same site where the ancient stadium (dating from the 4th century BC) had been and all the costs were covered by the wealthy Greek merchant George Averoff (Coubertin et al., 1897; Cashman, 1998). George Averoff was not a sponsor, in the modern sense of the term, and did not aim at making any profit. He only sought glory, and that is why the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided to place his statue at the entrance of the Stadium. Back then, the Olympic Games were financially supported by commercial companies, by the sale of tickets, medals, stamps and other Olympic items. "Promotion and marketing of the Olympics is not new", said Amanda Johnston (1999).

Amateurism or professionalism?

The "fundamental principles" of Olympism are also described in the Olympic Charter of the International Olympic Committee (Olympic Charter, 1991; Loland, 1995) and, generally speaking, Olympism is a set of ideals, made up of three strands: "sport, culture and the environment" (Cashman, 1999). The fundamental principles of Olympism are also expressed in the Olympic Anthem established by the International Olympic Committee in 1896. From its inception, Olympism has been at the center of a dispute revolving around the character of the Olympic Games, i.e. about whether they should be amateur or professional, and whether they would be treated as a commodity. Coubertin was in favor of amateurism and his perception of athleticism was idealized. Indeed, in the preparation stage of the first Olympic Games, he collaborated with various amateur athletic associations from France and England (Coubertin et al., 1997).

However, from the Los Angeles Olympic Games, in 1984, on, those responsible for their organization decided that the Games were to acquire a commercial and professional character. "In LA 1984 everything was for sale", said Alan Tomlinson (2006). Besides, it is well known that the IOC "was not averse to accepting some forms of commercial support" (Tomlinson, 2006). However, the specter of commercialization had become noticeable, and this is why the former President of the IOC, A. Brundage, stated in Munich, in 1972 that "the IOC should have nothing to do with money" (Barney et al., 2002; Tomlinson, 2006). However, from the Los Angeles Games on, everything changed and the IOC decided to commercialize the Olympic symbols, establishing its own Olympic Program Sponsorship (TOP), so as to control the commercial potential of the Games (Tomlinson, 2006).

Furthermore, from this time on, one can notice the participation of professional national teams in the Games (such as the USA basketball "Dream Team") (Cashman, 1999; Johnston, 1999). Professionalism entailed fierce and often unfair competition, and reinforced nationalism in many instances. The chasing of records by athletes and the financial rewards offered by commercial companies have had side effects on both athletes' behavior and their health.

Olympism and the Olympic Spirit

The main characteristic of the Olympic ideal is 'Olympism', an ideological position that stems from antiquity and has been revived in the late 19th century by Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Sigmund Loland examines this 'Olympic ideology' politically and philosophically in a splendid article, on the occasion of de Coubertin's proclamation about Olympism in 1896. Although he ignores the negative aspects of Olympism, he admits that the Olympic movement can survive and grow at all. (Loland, 1995).

Another interesting point of view of the phenomenon is given by Jim Parry in a specialized article, in which he examines in a comprehensive way the ideological origins of Olympism and particularly from the side of "universal social philosophy", which "emphasizes the role of sport in world development, international understanding, peaceful co-existence, and social and moral education" (Parry, 2003). Furthermore, he connects the Olympic movement with multiculturalism and he analyzes the 'Olympic Chapter' referring to the relation between "Olympic philosophy, ethics and education" (Parry, 2003).

Finally, another excellent article by Seth Brown, examines the Olympism through the concepts of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Axes of the text are the questions posed by the author, like for example "how Olympism contributes to social justice, equity and human rights" (Brown, 2009).

Olympism highlighted fundamental moral values, such as fair play, friendship, mutual respect and peace, which have their origins in ancient times and constitute the Spirit of the Olympic Games. In a more detailed analysis, Leo Hsu (2000) mentions the values included in the Olympic spirit, such as "truce, honor and honesty, beauty, healthy body towards healthy mind, fair play, pursuit of excellence, kalos kagathia- a concept that denoted the successful integration of moral, artistic, intellectual, and physical creativity". The same scholar indicates the essential characteristics of the new Olympic Spirit, which can be briefly described as follows: "a religion of sport, an aristocracy, an elite, chivalry, truce, rhythm, the young adult male individual, beauty, peace, promoted by mutual respect based on mutual understanding" (Hsu, 2000).

Regarding the Olympic truce, already since 1896 many efforts have been undertaken to respect this ancient custom in the name of peace and friendship between peoples. However, the complexities of the modern political system prevented this from materializing, and the whole effort has remained a hope for the future of the world (Parry, 2009). For most people, the concept of Olympism is related to the Olympic Games that take place every four years, and, as stated by Jim Parry, the tradition of Pierre de Coubertin, who had been influenced by the British Public School for athleticism and education, is preserved as the ultimate value (Parry, 2003).

The Olympic Symbols and its commercialisation

The significance and the meaning of Olympism are included in its "symbols" that have accompanied the Olympic Games since their very beginning. They are the symbols that communicate the intellectual significance and the ideas of Olympism. The three main Olympic symbols are (a) the five rings symbolizing the five continents, (b) the motto "Citius-Altius-Fortius" (Faster-Higher-Stronger); "these three words encourage the athlete to give his or best during competition", and (c) the flame. The Olympic flame "can only be lit by the sun's rays" and "symbolizes friendship between peoples with the torch relay usually traveling through different countries in the world" (Olympic Museum, 2007). However, many of these symbols have become the object of commercial exploitation, in particular the Olympic flame, which in its course from ancient Olympia to the new Olympic Games city is exploited by a multitude of commercial companies, and the flag as well as the Olympic rings have been transformed into trade marks. Nevertheless, the most significant fact, demonstrating the introduction of professionalism in the Games, is the sponsorships awarded to individual athletes. Such sponsorships amount to enormous sums of money, especially when the athlete not only wins but also sets a world record. Sponsorships to athletes have introduced unfair competition in the Games, to such an extent that the Olympic concept of fair play has been undermined, and they represent the most extreme form of commercialization of the Olympic Games.

The Olympic Games are the most important athletic games organized globally due to the participation of such large numbers of athletes and national teams and also to the fact that very large numbers of people from all around the world watch them via the media. Television plays the most important role in this respect, given that it transmits images from the Olympic Games to billions of people worldwide because of the enormous profits arising from commercial advertising. Of course, the organizing Olympic committee owns the transmission rights of the Games, collecting revenues that cover a large part of the expenses required for their organization. "The Games have many continuing assets, such as the weight of tradition and the power of the Olympic sites and symbols" (Cashman, 1999).

The Olympic Games have an enormous international appeal and they leave behind an important heritage to the Olympic cities. They embrace all aspects of human activity, from finance and tourism to trade, communication, urban regeneration and culture.

It is a phenomenon constantly evolving to finally take the character of a huge festival, with the inevitable political confrontations, the enormous costs and the scandals involving doped athletes. The introduction of professionalism in the Games, since the 1980s, and the reversal of the ideology of amateurism, the upset of ideologies, encouraged the development of nationalistic perceptions, overvaluing victory and scoffing at mere participation, and, generally speaking, the undermining of the Olympic spirit values are potentially the greatest risks facing the Olympic Games.

The commercialization of the Games may, on the one hand, help the organizing countries meet the enormous costs of their organization, but it may, on the other hand, undermine the Olympic values. The city organizing the Olympic Games may obtain revenues from donations and sponsorships, the intellectual property rights for the transmission of the Games (Gratton, 1999), the sale of tickets and memorabilia from the Olympic Games and from other sources, which do not aim at exploiting the Olympic symbols in the name of commercial profit. However, the greatest risk is the "sale" of the athletes themselves to commercial companies and the commercial exploitation of their performances. History has shown that, since the introduction of professionalism in the Games and the subsequent entry of commercial companies in the sports, the number of athletes using controlled substances has multiplied with the well-known consequences to their health, as well as the continuing erosion of the Olympic ideals. It is high time that the Games return to the idealistic perception of athleticism of Pierre de Coubertin, because "doping is cheating. Doping is akin to death", as Antonio Samaranch, former President of the International Olympic Committee, said (Duncan, 1999).

Conclusion

In the end, what are the Olympic Games? Do they "celebrate humanity" or "consumers"? (Maquire et al., 2010). Do they promote the Olympic Spirit or do they succumb to the need of countries to raise money? The truth is that this very important critical question becomes a contradictory dilemma, especially in today's globalized society. The Olympic Games are now organized by countries with strong economies and are hosted by cities that can meet the enormous costs required for their organization. They offer many opportunities to the Olympic cities to take advantage of the cultural stock created on the occasion of the Games, and also to promote the development of tourism (Weed, M, 2011). However, the risks of complete commercialization of the Olympic Games remain, if no steps are taken to promote in a modern manner the views of Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The alienation from the original spirit of Olympism may result in the degeneration of the Games and, as noted by Cashman (1999), "the once-grand spectacle and pageantry of Olympic Games, could be reduced to a mere soap opera".

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