

## One great symbol, many vague values

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**Numerous approaches could be used to articulate ideas about the philosophy of the Ancient Olympic Games, the Modern Olympic Games and their intimate, though distinct relationship.**

For example, one might consider the organising structures implicit or explicit of these very different versions of the same event.

Though even here one would find it particularly difficult to talk broadly about the Modern Games as a consistent organisational model from 1896 to 2000. Thus, it would be my contention that, to isolate this one characteristic as a comparison within the modern Olympic Games and between the modern Olympics and ancient Olympic Games, would be to present a fairly limiting review of these enduring and complex events.

In contrast, I argue that there exist relevant and enduring links between the Ancient and Modern Games, and, indeed, their closest bond has to do with the social currency of their underpinning values. It is of considerable value to elaborate on these values, since

it has become a commonplace to consider the Olympic Movement – or at least, the Olympic Games – as being in a state of ideological crisis.

The over-emphasis on winning, results, records, and the inextricable logic of professionalism, commercialism, coupled with the concept of Olympism as a brand to be marketed, a consumer produced have provoked a distrust from spectators in the Olympic Games as a predominantly value-driven institution (Coakley, 1998). The dominant logic of commercialism in organised and, particularly, elite sport has squeezed the Olympic Games of its value, transforming value into economic viability.

This tension between the Games or Movement as an organisation, brand, or product, and as a social movement will be explored later, though serves to identify that the notion of Olympism is in turmoil, uncertain quite what kind of institution it is. I will also discuss the paradoxical implications of the main product that Olympism has to sell are its values, and that if commerce is the interest then it must nurture these values –

which does not seem to be where the marketing of Olympism is focused.

Given this, at least superficial, crisis with the Olympic image, the need for reflection, articulation, and the promotion of the values of Olympism is in great demand, if it hopes to withstand public scrutiny. Moreover, it would seem relevant to base an understanding of the links and description between the Ancient Games and the Modern Games upon their concordant values.

This is not to advocate that the modern games should purport or aspire to the values that have endured through time - despite the appeal of such a concept. Indeed, such ideas would be fanciful and to treat both versions of the Games as entirely similar would be to misunderstand their independent significance disastrously.

Rather, the value of uniting the Ancient Games and the Modern Games through their values lies in their continuity, despite the vast changes that have ensued - despite professionalism, despite commerce, and despite nearly 3000 years between the two versions. This journey might seem somewhat nostalgic and academically irrelevant, though it is intended to restate what is important about the Games; what must be held onto if the games are to continue to flourish and

embrace the broad notions of Olympism. Moreover, one can trace the changes that are peripheral to this underlying value base to demonstrate how the games have changed over the years.

It seems logical to begin by considering the Ancient Olympic Games and the Modern Games, though I think it unimportant where we start. The main part of this review will begin with the AOG and then progress to the MOG, concluding with an articulation of the enduring and contingent links between them. From these discussions, it is intended that an understanding of the value and meaning in the OG will be clarified. It will be argued that, without value and meaning in the Games and, I argue, a rather prescriptive notion of these two characteristics, that the Games is devoid of interesting aspects.

## **The Ancient Olympic Games (AOG)**

The AOG were characterised by ritual, rather than record (Guttman, 1978) and this can be seen from the origins of the Games. The myth of Pelops explains how this Asian outsider sought to wed the daughter of King Oinomaos, though the King would not allow it. Subsequently, he was to challenge Pelops to a chariot race where, if Pelops was victorious, he would have his

chosen bride and her father's kingdom. Before the race, Pelops knew that he would struggle to beat Innomas and so paid for some commoners to sabotage the King's chariot, placing wax pins into the wheel axel. During the contest, these pins melted throwing the King's chariot into the air and killing him. Thus, the ritual of the Games was set, in part mirroring the myth of Pelops, where contests took place between home countries and outsiders, and ceremonial events took place reflecting the marriage of Pelops and Hippodameia. Indeed, this similar structure can be seen in the Modern Games, although these implicit meanings are hardly well understood or known to participants and spectators. Thus, one can begin to appreciate the importance and value of symbols within these ancient times and how they have sustained throughout the revival of the modern games.

Consisting of a limited number of sporting events, the primary interest of the AOG was not to record times or measure distances in performance, but to know who was the rightful victor. In this sense, one might liken the Ancient Games to the Modern Games, though this comparison requires some caution. Of course, this is not to refute the archaeological evidence and scriptures that tell of the victory of great athletes and that give their biographical details. Rather it is to marginalise this aspect of

the Games in comparison to other aspects, such as the festival, ritual, and symbolic value of competition. Thus, if one is to attempt an articulation of the values of the AOG, then one must look beyond the physical characteristics of the sporting competitions beyond modern values of fair play, sportsmanship, and so on.

### **The Modern Olympic Games (MOG)**

In comparison, the Modern Games appears to be devoid of this mythic, super-natural ceremony. However, in some aspects of the proceedings of the Games, one can identify strong links to ancient times. For example, the lighting ceremony of the Olympic torch entails a proclamation to the Gods asking for the safe journey of the flame to the host city. Thus, the link between the Games and divinity is far from having been severed. Yet, it seems plausible to argue that the emphasis has shifted tremendously.

Furthermore, one must recognise the political ambitions of the Modern Games. Of particular interest to Baron Pierre De Coubertin, founder of the Modern Games and his compatriots of the European Peace Movement, was to further world peace, integration, inter-cultural education, moral development, health and

harmony. While these ideals need not be entirely different from the ancient games, they are explicit throughout the constitution of the Modern Games, where in ancient times, these values are, at most, expressed implicitly through myth and story telling. Whereas in ancient times, the values could be said to have come from the enterprise of the games – their very experience – they seem more dictated in the Modern Games; perhaps not imposed but certainly prescribed.

Admittedly, these ambitions are fairly ambiguous and deliberately so. If one is to ensure breadth in appeals to value it seems important to select values that are specific enough to identify a virtuous concept, though vague enough to ensure that no practical intentions can be deduced. Thus, it is much better to claim – as does the Olympic Charter – that it strives only for friendship, rather than give any substance to what or with which kind of people such friendship is sought.

It is important here to return to a point made very early in this review, which is to say more about the distinction between the Olympic Movement, and the Olympics as a commercial, professional and organisation. The distinction between these two characters is important since how one perceives the successfulness of the Olympics

depends upon on which terms it is evaluated.

As I have said previously, the MOG appears to exist in this tension between professionalism and it as a social movement. This tension is hardly surprising given the enormity of the games and the organisation required to arrange this global spectacle. Although, if one examines the nature of the Games as an organisation, it becomes clear that its marketing force – that which it can sell – is the characteristics derived from the Movement's ideological and philosophical underpinnings.

This is documented in the IOC commissioned, Olympic Imagery Validation Study (1999) where respondents documented that they found the Games to be important due to their ability to embody such concepts as multiculturalism, friendship, global culture, peace, and participation. Thus, paradoxically, if the Olympic Games (as an Organisation) seek to be successful – to attract people – then it must look to the values of Olympism, it must return to its definition as a movement.

Such ideas are problematic since they are strongly contrasted with the values of elitism and the emphasis on performance. Despite having been conducted by an independent body (Sponsorship Research International), one might be

critical of the study and argue that it presents a deliberately skewed questionnaire that would almost certainly have guaranteed the Olympic image to appear very positive, though still the point remains.

In response, one might suggest that the study presents a bias. No questions within it asked people about the significance of excellence in competition. It was not asked how important it seemed that world records are broken at the events or that the best athletes in the world take part at these events. Yet, it is difficult to believe that these factors are not important to the spectators' interest to witness the games. Moreover, it is unclear whether the study documents those spectators that can be said to invest the most into the games or are the most committed or cognisant with the values to which it really aspires. Intuitively, it seems alarming that such a broad audience could be so in tune with the very specific and somewhat unknown values that the games embody.

It might first be asked why this is a tension at all and why it is not possible with the ideology of the Games as a commercial enterprise to be commensurate in terms of values associated with social movements. This may be explained by examining the interests and characteristics of both of these practices. First, if one considers the Olympics as a

social movement, then it must fulfil a number of conditions. It must stand for and against something – it must have an ideology. Also, there must be support for this ideology, there must be a sense of collectivity or solidarity between persons about these issues. It is necessary for these ideas to manifest themselves in some kind of action - it is not sufficient to remain at a conceptual level, people must do something about these beliefs.

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Finally, it must be characterised by some degree of leadership or vision, though notably this might not be apparent and the leaders might not be obvious. If one places these characteristics into the organisational structure of the Olympic Games, it would seem to fulfil a number of them. It seems without doubt that it is ideological. It is most definitely a collective event and is also very active. However, as far as leadership is concerned it is a little ambiguous as to whether this could be called a movement.

The International Olympic Committee is highly visible, as is the President of the IOC, currently Juan Antonio Samaranch. In this sense, then, it could be suggested that the Olympic Movement fails and falls into the guise of commercialism and branding.



*The Olympic rings at the Sydney Harbour Bridge. One of the iconic images of the 2000 Games.*

In conclusion, in this age where the Olympic Movement is of secondary importance to the Games as a spectacle, product, and brand, what is left of value in its enterprise? Though perhaps the question is a little unfair. It might simply require us to re-define the games in terms of value, to embrace the commercialisation of the Olympics and to accept its mixed bag of values that it offers.

Thus, we must accept the exploitation of athletes by advertising, the dependence of the Games upon television sponsorship, the insurmountable

complexities produced by drug-taking and struggles against it, the scandals of the IOC, in favour of the widening participation, the greater investment into sports and athletes, and the research that now goes into health and sport science.

Yet, it is entirely these values and ambiguous of Olympism that require re-evaluation at this time. Is the aspiration of widening participation infinitely a good one? Is the investment into athlete providing a prudential career for a large number of prospective athletes? Is research that is directed towards performance enhancement necessarily of value?

Intuitively, the answer to these questions seems unclear. However, this does not mean that the Olympic Games fail to contribute anything meaningful to society or that its negative impacts outweigh the positive. Instead, perhaps greater claims can be made to shift – once again – the emphasis of the interest of the Olympics. The cultural and arts festivals are, perhaps, very useful examples.

As overwhelming as it might be, it is not unimaginable to conceive of the Olympic Games as becoming equally interest in excellence in dance and music as well as sports and the music festival particularly appears to have an enduring appeal. So here, my suggestion appears to

be an about face, a return to Ancient times, where such activities had greater value.

While this interest will in no way guarantee or even contribute to lessening the emphasis on commerce – indeed, it might further it – it would certainly reaffirm the broader values of Olympism that are explicit in De Coubertin’s philosophy, and are implicit of the Ancient Games.

Furthermore, it would most certainly allow a broader, global participation in the events of the Games, since merit based on artistic criteria is less dependent upon scientific advantage and the ability to finance participants than elite sports. It is notable in the Olympic symbol that no reference is made to sport and this would seem a valuable asset to promote diversity and further Olympic ideals.

## References

Coakley, J. (1998) *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies* (6th Ed)

International Olympic Committee (1999) *Olympic Imagery Validation Study*. Sponsorship Research Council