

Olympic Humanitarianism

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2008 was an important year in Olympic history, as it saw the Summer Games being organized in Asia for the third time. Beijing 2008 also achieved the highest ever audiences, the highest numbers of broadcast hours ever produced both online and offline, and the highest figure for TV rights revenue.

Yet, 2008 also brought, as President Jacques Rogge (Jacobs, 2008) called it, an Olympic crisis when the international leg of the Torch Relay was transformed into an arena of protest around China's role as Olympic host. The protests were reminiscent of Beijing's previous bid for the 2000 Games. Moreover, the way in which the discourse was played

out in the media reminded of the Cold War, when the ideological dispute between East and West was transformed into a boycott of the Games themselves.



IOC President Jacques Rogge, Copenhagen, 2009 [screenshot]

However, the rhetoric in 2008 was considerably different, as were the politics surrounding the Games. Advocates of Beijing 2008 would refer to the cases of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Summer Games and that of anti-apartheid campaigns around South Africa when the Olympic Movement has acted as a catalyst for positive social and political change. On such a view, locating the Olympic Games in a country that would give rise to controversy can be seen as a mechanism to advance social causes. Alternatively, anti-Beijing voices argued that the high values promoted through the fundamental principles of Olympism - listed in the Olympic Charter - are incompatible with China's human rights record.

Since advocates from each side of the argument appeal to the Olympic Charter to make their case, I have recently undertaken a qualitative study analyzing the

changes of the fundamental principles of Olympism ever since the Olympic Charter's first edition was published in 1908. This research was possible thanks to an IOC Olympic Studies Centre grant I obtained in 2008/9 which enabled me to access the archives of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne including the previous editions of the Charter, the minutes of the IOC Executive Board Meeting from 1921 until 1975 and the minutes of the IOC Sessions from 1894 until 2000.

In the 113-year history of the modern Olympic Games the charter numbers fifty editions, with yearly updates to rules and by-laws being done almost every year since the mid 70s. However, the fundamental principles have gone through only three major changes and, on each occasion, the alteration has broadened the goals of Olympism. Moreover, this extension of their aspirations has led to them overlapping, in parts, with those of human rights promotion. For example, the Charter's first equality clause was introduced in 1923. Also, shortly after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed, the Olympic Charter included its first non-discrimination article in 1948. Finally, in 1996 the Olympic Charter recognized participation in sport as a human right. In this context, the claims of human rights advocacy groups and opponents of the Beijing Games might appear to be well founded: that the Olympic ideals turned into a commitment through the

fundamental principles of the charter, aiming to promote a peaceful and better world concerned with the preservation of human dignity is incompatible with China's reported human rights abuses. However, their argument requires evaluating in the context of the broad range of ways in which the Olympic Movement undertakes its work, either through the formal programmes of the IOC or through informal, but nevertheless organized structures, such as the National Olympic Academies and the International Olympic Academy.

For the charter to be amended, a very lengthy and highly bureaucratic process takes place within the IOC. First, a suggestion or request for change needs to be registered in one of the IOC Session meetings. Subsequently, a proposal must be submitted by the promoters of the change, which will be evaluated by a designated IOC structure. Depending on the change requested, this might be a specially appointed commission or committee within the IOC. Their feedback and recommendations are then passed on to the International Federations, National Olympic Committees and, sometimes, even to the members of the Olympic family at large. All their feedback is collected and a new proposal for incorporation is drafted, which is then sent to the IOC Executive Board. With these final recommendations, the

changes are submitted to the analysis of the upcoming IOC Session, which will pass the change providing a minimum of two thirds of the IOC agree, which would make it effective.

Before their most recent change in 2004, the principles underwent significant revision in 1996 when article eight, inspired by UNESCO's 1978 International Charter of Physical Education and Sport, defining sport as a human right, was introduced. The 1996 version of the charter reflected a common agreement within the IOC that sport, and therefore both the Olympic Games as well as the programs funded by the IOC, can provide a positive example and therefore promote values like friendship, fair-play and equality, all a reflection of a peaceful society where human rights are inherently respected. The current version of the charter, published in 2007 includes no variation in the fundamental principles compared with the 2004 version. It is perhaps the most idealized form that the fundamental principles have ever made given by the use of concepts like "philosophy of life", "educational value of good example", "respect for universal fundamental ethical principles", "preservation of human dignity", "peaceful society", "sport is a human right". Furthermore, this version of the Charter articulates the Olympic Movement's non-discrimination philosophy two ways. First, it states that

discrimination is incompatible with the Olympic spirit and second, it emphasizes UNESCO's vision without, however, making any reference to the institution, that every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport without discrimination of any kind.

In a world where corporate social responsibility is in high demand and when the public and media alike expect all groups, be they governmental or non-governmental, commercial or not-for-profit, to do their best to translate their vision into practice, it might be a good time for the fundamental principles to be reviewed and the Olympic Movement to spend some time not only on defining its mission, but communicating better how its system is organized and where its boundaries of influence end. This requires even more transparency from the IOC together with increased communication efforts emphasizing its related activities in non-Games times.

Presently, there is a disconnection between the highly philosophical fundamental principles of the Olympism and the highly pragmatic, professionalized and legal formulation of all the other chapters of the charter. For example, the Olympic Movement's fundamental principle to promote access to sport without discrimination is mirrored in the mission of the IOC, in the IOC admission ceremony of new members as

well as into the mission and role of NOCs. Similar actions that aim to translate into practice and enforce the other fundamental principles will need to be taken as well. This requires, among other things, more transparency from the IOC and an active dialogue with critics and supporters of the Olympic Movement alike. In this respect, significant steps were recently taken during the IOC's XIII Congress in Copenhagen. Inviting feedback from the public via the virtual congress certainly contributed towards furthering transparency and an active dialogue, as did setting up a YouTube channel as well as having live webcast from the congress.

With regards to human rights, this year's IOC congress is historical in the sense that it not only restored IOC's humanitarian discourse but also made the IOC publicly assume its mission while also acknowledging its limits:

We are going to study what the best way is how to handle this important aspect where we have the responsibility to work for the respect of human dignity within the sphere of sport. We cannot be held responsible for everything that happens in the world, but when it comes within the sphere of sport, of course we have that responsibility. And we are going to see how first of all we can get the best possible objective unbiased information. The IOC is not expert in human rights. We will rely on the advice of human rights organizations. It can be Amnesty International. It can be Human Rights Watch. It can be others. It can be the United Nations

Human Rights Council. And we want to gather information from these organizations, and we are going to see how we can best act upon that within the organization. (Rogge, 2009)

References

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