

Culture @ the Olympics. **Intangible, invisible, but impacting**

Exploring Internationalism (Glasgow, 20 June 2005)ⁱ

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Why are the Olympic Games more special than any other sporting event? Why is the media coverage surrounding the decision over who wins the Olympics so immense? Is it just because the Olympics is an enormous event with large trans-national stakeholders?

In this paper, we argue that there are a number of intangible, invisible and yet impacting aspects of the Olympics that are obscured from the view of most people, but nevertheless represent the foundation of what makes the Olympics special.

Our first question, 'are the Olympic Games more than sport', deliberately misrepresents what the Olympics is all about. At the Games, the athletes are central to what takes place, but athletes represent something more than competition and medals. They represent the 'Youth of the World'.

The reason for placing young people at the heart of the Olympics is articulated by the founder of the Modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin, who saw the Olympics as a mechanism for bringing about social change. It is for this reason that the Olympics is much more than a sporting event: it builds on the values of sport to expound a set of values and an ideology. Excellence in sport is symbolic of higher aspirations and transcending limitations.

This understanding invites us to consider how these values contribute to the emotional commitment individuals, cities and nations make when deciding to bid for the Olympic Games. In so doing, we argue that they commit to something much more ambitious and outreaching – but also difficult to measure – than financial investment. It is these intangible and invisible elements that should command our attention.

The intangible Olympics...

The Olympic Games is considered the largest organised event in the world today. For over seventeen days, it gathers in the same place more than 200 nation-states, 11,000 athletes, 20,000 media representatives, and 45,000 volunteers. Its status has not been achieved just through the high visibility of sport competitions and international medal rankings. Rather, it is the result of the Games being embedded within a much wider social movement.

The Olympic Movement has a history spanning 110 years (or 2,700, if we include the Ancient Games in Greece), from which to draw inspiration. It aims to protect the philosophy of Olympism, which is based on three main principles: 'sport, culture and education' and the recent addition of the 'environment'.

The most easily identifiable aspects of the philosophy of 'Olympism' are the established rituals and symbols that accompany the staging of the Games. These symbols have been used as key elements of Olympic branding but have a history that precedes the use of marketing and promotional strategies

- the five interlocked rings, representing the colours of all flags in the world

- the torch relay, re-enacting a tradition of the ancient Olympic Games
- the playing of anthems and reciting of oaths at the opening ceremony.

These elements have gained worldwide recognition and a status that adds value to the sporting competition. As a result, becoming an 'Olympian' is often referred to as the ultimate aspiration of athletes that may otherwise have a very successful career and medals from other worldwide competitions such as World Championships. The fact that the Games occur every four years adds to its status as an event that is special, unique, and not accessible to all. This combination of factors has embedded a mythic dimension to the Games.

Cities and countries have objective, material reasons to want to stage the Games. These include securing media attention worldwide and, with it, attracting leisure and business tourism and inward investments, and accelerating physical infrastructure development.

The high visibility allowed by the Olympics is seen as a guarantor to these aspirations, regardless of the fact that many previous Olympic hosts have encountered difficulties ensuring the long-term sustainability of the experience.

But, despite the potentially lucrative business prospects that surround the staging of an Olympics, the key factors securing their desirability (and, the disregard for potential economic pitfalls) remain intangible. Issues such as 'image change' and social and cultural regeneration – including the strengthening of cultural identities and community confidence - remain equally high in the agenda of aspiring host cities and their public justification for bidding and organising the Games. The latter suggests that, in addition to the aforementioned 'symbolic' dimensions, there are also important – intangible – political dimensions.

Symbolic Dimensions: Culture or Politics?

The Games are structured as an international sports competition – with teams representing nation states from around the world. The levels of expectation surrounding the battle for medals are linked to feelings of patriotism, with the flags and national anthems helping consolidate these emotions. As a result, there is a thin line between the prospect of creating new bonds between nations and the risk of accentuating rivalries.

One example of the attempt to use the Games as a platform to claim the supremacy of certain countries arose during the Cold War period, when some Eastern

bloc countries became notorious for their experimentation with performance enhancements. Also during this time, the Games were the subject of boycotts from both the USA and USSR. This is characteristic of the many uses and abuses of the symbolic dimensions of sport for political reasons.

In trying to avoid the latter – from national rivalries to boycotts - the Olympic Movement aspires to offer a framework for the sporting competition which places an emphasis on intercultural dialogue. Its purported values include fair play, as well as peace and understanding.

The Movement imposes some rules for the setting for the Games so as to encourage mutual support and harmony. A strong example for this is the Olympic Village, which all athletes are supposed to share. A further, but less known example are the diverse educational and cultural/artistic programmes that surround the staging of the Games.

Before exploring these apparently 'invisible' programmes and activities, it is worth asking how does the Olympics operate at a socio-political level? Which sort of identities does it try to represent? Is it about the culture of 'cities' – as hosts – of nation states, of nations/regions, of the world?

What is the place for city identity, national identity, global identity?

Given the Olympics' international and intercultural dimension, the position and influence of local identities has traditionally been a contested one. The bidding and hosting process for an Olympic Games is framed within the context of specific cities, however, the funding required to stage the Games is the responsibility of regions and states, and athletes compete representing national states.

The notion of a 'national team' seemed to make sense in the late 19C, but it has been subjected to regular questioning and controversy throughout the 20C due to the strengthening of regional autonomies and devolution processes. This is clearly the case in the United Kingdom, where the notion of a 'national identity' is blurred between claims towards Britishness and the separate claims of English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish communities.

As such, does the Olympic Games as a contest between nations, continue to make sense in the 21st century where boundaries between nations and nationhood are more blurred than they ever have been?

Frequently, the Games have been used to represent the identity of

their hosts in a wide variety of political contexts. The emphasis has been as much on the local as the national or indeed international dimensions of respective identities:

- **Barcelona in 1992** used the Games to present the Catalan identity as distinct from the rest of Spain. It negotiated its role in promoting a modern Spain with a clear emphasis on presenting a modern, autonomous and culturally different Catalonia.
- **Atlanta in 1996** celebrated the American south, with an emphasis on 'regionality', while Los Angeles in 1984 had celebrated the notion of the 'American Dream' and the US as a whole, and the impact of Hollywood in shaping international culture and identity.
- **Sydney in 2000** used the Games to present contemporary Australia rather than separate localities.

The issue of identity and representation is particularly interesting in the case non-Western host cities:

- **Tokio 1964 and Seoul 1988** used the Games to represent their respective countries but were also keen to explore and emphasise the values of Asian culture as opposed to the

dominant Western cultures that had invariably hosted the Games up to that time. Beijing in 2008 is expected to go to unprecedented lengths to showcase Chinese culture.

- **Mexico 1968** symbolised the cultures of Latino America – but questions arose as to whether it could be seen as representing the whole of South America. The Games have not been hosted in any other country south of the Mexican border.

Indeed, one of the remaining questions for the Olympic Movement is when the Games will go to Africa and what are the necessary conditions to make it a reality.

The notion of exchange

A healthy view of the Olympic Games and the opportunities it presents to represent national/cultural identity is to understand it as a dialogue or exchange. Cities and nations bring the event to their home, but the event brings many other places to the host environment. The notion of 'hosting the world' and 'bringing the world together' is central to what the Olympics represents. For world cities such as London, this should take into account the diversity of their local communities, which, themselves, already represent a large proportion of the world. By

ensuring that local inhabitants are central to the process of hosting and organising events, the Olympics can become a catalyst for meaningful and long-lasting intercultural understanding, which can contribute to tolerance and integration. A good indication of how this can be brought about is through the Olympic institution of volunteering. This process of community making is central to the Olympic spirit and continues to develop strong networks between people, as the Games passes from place to place.

To maximise the benefits of such a process of 'exchange', the Games experience must be contextualised within cultural activities. Arts and education programmes can be used to explain the value of sports competitions. Through these activities, notions of identity and citizenship are continually discussed. But, what elements of the Olympics help these elements come to the fore?

For audiences around the world, the broadcast of sporting moments is central. However, these moments become more memorable when contextualised with expressions of support by live spectators, iconic images of the city, and the rituals surrounding the competition. The most memorable moments are often the images of sport played against the backdrop of respective cities.

Who could forget the overview of Barcelona from the diving venue in 1992, or the Sydney Opera House and the Parthenon in Athens acting as a stage for the marathon, road cycling and triathlons in 2000 and 2004. Also, the lighting ceremony at the Opening Ceremony communicates social values, merely by the presence of certain people within it. These are opportunities to represent a nation or locality.

For live spectators, local citizens and those working for the Games, including the volunteers, the street atmosphere, and cultural and educational events are important to maximise their engagement with the place, beyond the often standardised and excessively sanitised atmosphere of sporting venues. For athletes, it is their safe passage to the Olympic Games, the feeling of being part of the Olympic family and their experience at the Olympic village.

In short, the Olympics is not only about sports competitions. Rather, they provide the focal point for a range of celebrations and exchanges. The modern Olympics is about utilising sport to advance a social, humanitarian agenda. As already mentioned, the social agenda of the Olympic Movement has been quite contested throughout its first one hundred years in existence: how to reconcile the forces of cultural imperialism (19C), modernisation

(20C) and globalisation (21C)? One might even question whether Olympism is consistent with itself. For example, many scholars point to the fact that Coubertin was against the participation of women in the Olympics. Yet, for most involved, the Olympic movement is best understood as a social institution that can provide a basis for debating values and sharing in common goals. A key limitation remains the invisibility of non-sporting elements. This should be overcome by future hosts.

The invisible Olympics

What don't we know about the Olympics? The Olympic movement is characterised by a range of projects, which rarely receive space in the newspapers or in television coverage. These include:

- **Olympic Solidarity**, established in 1961, it is one of the IOC commissions. Its mandate is to manage the share of the television rights for the broadcast of the Games that is allocated to respective National Olympic Committees (NOCs). The larger amounts of funding are made available to the NOCs in greater need - the funding covers for education, technical and travel support for athletes and their coaches among other things. One of its established aid programmes is

'Olympic Participation', set to guarantee the participation of all NOCs in the Games.

http://www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/commissions/solidarity/index_uk.asp

- **International Olympic Academy**, officially inaugurated in 1961. Its headquarters are in Athens and Ancient Olympia - all main sessions take place in Olympia. The IOA has an education focus and hosts a wide diversity of sessions throughout the year to explain the Olympic ideals to young people, postgraduates and a wide range of Olympic stakeholders (NOCs, NOAs, sport educators, coaches, administrators, journalists etc.). The IOA, with support from Olympic Solidarity, has a fund to cover for the travel and stay of young people from around the world to attend their annual postgraduate research sessions (average 35 participants from as many countries) and young participant sessions (up to 200 participants). Participants are selected by NOCs and professors / teachers involved in Olympic education in respective countries. More info: <http://www.ioa.org.gr/>
- **Olympic Museum / Olympic Studies Centre**, The museum was officially opened in 1993 in Lausanne. The museum was set to host the archives of the IOC and other memorabilia on top of establishing a wide range of educational activities and acting as a public information centre about the Movement. The Studies Centre manages the Museum Library, the archives and has established a series of grant programmes for postgraduate students and scholars interested in the Movement. It also hosts conferences and public seminars. More info: http://www.olympic.org/uk/p/mission/museum/mission/index_uk.asp and Studies Centre: http://www.olympic.org/uk/p/mission/studies/index_uk.asp
- **International Olympic Truce Foundation and International Olympic Truce Centre**, established in July 2000. Their main aim is to uphold the observance of the Olympic Truce, calling for all hostilities to cease during the Olympic Games and beyond. To this end, they are dedicated to creating the necessary support framework for the observance of the Olympic Truce and for the global promotion of a culture of peace. Key partners include the UN. More info: <http://www.olympictruce.org/>
- **National Olympic Academies** around the world - the British Olympic Foundation in the UK. They are the educational

branch of respective NOC (National Olympic Committees) with the aim to promote the Olympic ideals and philosophy. The BOF is particularly active in this domain and has a very well reputed annual NOA meeting which attracts participants from other parts of the world. The BOF is also in charge of promoting the Olympic Day involving activities in schools: <http://www.olympics.org.uk/education/education.asp>

- **Olympic Studies Centres** around the world - very low numbers and less established than the NOAs, but where existent, they can be quite active institutions, normally with a focus on higher education and academic research and links to the IOA and the Olympic Museum / Studies centre in Lausanne. Some examples: <http://olympicstudies.uab.es/>, <http://www.uwo.ca/olympic/>
- **The Cultural Olympiad**, term officially launched as a component of the Games by Barcelona in 1988 - 4 years of cultural programming linking to Games editions and culminating during the Games themselves. A response to the IOC demand that host cities offer a cultural and artistic programme to complement the sporting competitions - originally, Olympic Arts Competitions

(established by Coubertin first hosted in 1906, last in 1948) - then Olympic Arts Festivals - now the Olympiad. Athens proposed the establishment of a foundation in 2001.

<http://www.cultural-olympiad.gr/>

Beyond these Olympic Movement based organisations, the IOC has also established relationships with world organisations such as the UN, UNESCO, International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Health Organisation.

We may wonder, why don't we know about these institutions and initiatives? One explanation is that they are not particularly media friendly. They rarely lend themselves to controversy or spectacular news. Yet, they are constants in Olympic history and provide the foundation for the global networks that make the Games possible.

A further explanation is that these cultural and educational components are disconnected from the Games and politically disenfranchised. Cultural and educational activities are not considered truly influential in the process towards winning the right to host the Games. That is, the IOC does not establish clear guidelines for delivery and evaluation. Also, the lack of public expectation means there is little or no public outrage if promises towards Olympic

culture and education are not properly delivered. Olympic education programmes have been used as a platform for children's merchandising without generating major media criticism.

Further, the Games are rarely considered a failure if promises of multicultural inclusiveness and national involvement do not materialise. However, if the Games success or failure is not linked to its deep cultural and educational dimensions, how do we make sense of the highly valued and highly recognised Olympic symbols? Have they just become pieces of branding without a credible philosophical message?

In Sydney 2000, the Opening Ceremony was celebrated by the media for its depiction of Aboriginal groups – but cultural analysts would argue that its narrative was problematic and helped to reinforce rather than overcome old stereotypes of Aboriginal groups as 'strange others'. A far more progressive narrative was presented through the official indigenous arts festival 'Festival of the Dreaming' in 1997 and the Aboriginal art exhibitions in 2000. But while the Opening Ceremony received close to \$65 million for one evening, the arts programme had just \$21 m for four years of festivals and cultural activity reaching out throughout the country and internationally. Why do we allow this to happen when

this is precisely the aspect of the Olympics that can ensure it becomes a progressive movement?

Sport and spectacle provides a platform and a global, powerful network of influence. A vision is needed that can trigger its cultural and educational context so that the experience is as meaningful as it can be. Presently, Olympic Academies and Study Centres are providing meaningful experiences to just a few. So, how can we argue that this the real source of meaningful impacts and legacies?

The impacting Olympics

The really valuable aspects of hosting the Games are its sustainable legacies. A review of recent Olympic editions clearly suggests that the most sustainable elements tend to be cultural and educational. These include:

- **Re-constructing the city** – a good example is Barcelona post 1992: The Games brought an urban planning achievement but its most successful dimension has been cultural. While the Olympic Village struggles to become part of the community, the concept of the cultural city, open to the sea, distinct within Spain has strengthened local identity.

- **Reconstructing identity/ image** – Sydney post 2000: while the Olympic park area is suffering from criticisms of it becoming a ‘white elephant’, Australia was able to represent itself beyond surf and kangaroos and the Games were used to contribute towards a pressing for a more progressive political agenda recognising the cultural rights of Aboriginal people.
- **Reconstructing heritage** – Athens post 2004: the city is having to face the consequences of rushed urban planning, but it is successfully working towards a celebration of its contemporary cultures as an addition of its widely recognised Hellenic heritage.

Media (moments), myths and memories

Ultimately, it is through their intangible (invisible) elements that we make sense of the Olympics and remember them in the long term. Iconic images need to be culturally embedded to be meaningful. We cannot dismiss the value of spectacle – but, ultimately, what counts is to be able to touch people. However, there are some challenges with achieving this. For example, only seeing the value of the Olympics through their business or commercial benefits and their media profile can lead to ephemeral, ineffective initiatives.

Instead, we should focus on sustainability – and this might not even require winning the right to host the Games. The bid process may also lead to creating sustainable momentum, if brings the opportunity to openly discuss how a locality, a region, a nation wants to represent itself in the global arena.

With this paper, we have outlined the broader context of the Olympic Movement. In part, this is specifically to challenge the dominant business rationale for hosting the Olympics and to suggest its wider implications.

Further questions must be asked. For example, an important question for London before knowing whether it was to host the 2012 Games: how do we secure a legacy from the bidding process? For who should this legacy be? For London only, UK-wide? Some suggestions:

- Establish research centres – and support them regardless of hosting processes
- Establish a progressive agenda for culture and education. At the moment, not enough serious research is undertaken on the Olympics, so the long term vision is lost
- Include and discuss with international partners – IOA, museum grants, other exchange programmes, look beyond the business side, use existing networks

- Take into account processes of devolution and their impact on nationhood. How will this be built into the programme to 'Make Britain Proud'?

Impacting beyond London... relationship to Scotland

The cultural relevance of bidding for and, ultimately, hosting the London 2012 can also bring an impact and legacy to Scotland. Certainly, the consequences will be felt by young, Scottish athletes who might find themselves competing in 2012. However, there are also opportunities for the Scottish based cultural industries. Already, there are activities in Scotland that reveal expertise for the Olympics. In July, the Special Olympics comes to Glasgow, a city renowned for regeneration and change. Glasgow is also bidding for the Commonwealth Games and success in attracting the 2012 Olympics could strengthen the profile of the UK as a location that can host successful mega-events. The Commonwealth Games in Manchester is widely recognised as one such instance. Further to this, Scotland is a nation of festivals. In August 2012, the Edinburgh Festival will take place at the same time as the Olympic Games.

ⁱ Proceedings from the seminar:
Exploring Internationalism: Scotland responds to London's Olympic vision for

This can bring unprecedented opportunities to create synergies between the largest arts event and the largest sporting event in the world.

Concluding remarks

Global media events can act as platforms for international activism. What do these fora offer in terms of multicultural, intercultural, international, multinational understanding? What do they imply for people, for countries/ nations, for corporations? How to use them for the advantage of specific communities? Engaging with these debates as part of the Olympic planning process is central, if a city and nation hopes to achieve some legacy for sustaining the Olympic values and building opportunities for diplomacy, both locally and globally. The Olympic Movement has more than 100 years experience to inform this debate, more than 200 nation states are involved, and the most powerful people/institutions in the world support its work. Hosting the Olympics is an opportunity to make something out of those connections and this work transcends the medal table at the end of the competition.

culture in 2012. Organised by the Centre for Cultural Policy Research, University of Glasgow, in association with London 2012 Culture & Education.