Polities and Olympics: Marking the Milestones and Clarifying the Trajectory

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Abstract

This article offers a historical overview of how dominant polities have fundamentally shaped the social functions of Olympic Games since the ancient times. Dominant polities' role in identifying social roles of the Games is explored in light of four polity types. The paper is a historical process research, and findings are reported in a case-oriented historical narrative format based on secondary sources. The paper concludes that different meanings and roles attributed to the same event–ie. Olympics in the study–compliant with the dominant polity type of the era are the evidence for the social construction of the reality.

Keywords: Polity, Structure-Culture dichotomy, Olympics, Nation-state, City-state

Introduction

Notions such as universality, attainment of higher truths are convincing markers of a broader paradigm that supported the Olympic movement. In a sense, these are the dominant discourses that help us contextualize the modern Olympics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, the ambiguity stems from the fact that it rejoices over change and progress while also reflecting critically upon the human condition produced by the nationally divided, urban, industrial world. Its moral and ethical interest originated in the apparent negative influence of industrialization in western European society (Brown, 2001). As a result, culture (e.g. African culture or gender inequality issue in Muslim communities) is seen as an obstacle in achieving the objectives of the Olympism. Nonetheless, a review of the Olympic history may reveal the shortcomings of such an approach (Young, 2004).

According to the former International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Juan Antonio Samaranch, human beings must change to be able to change the world, and Olympism as a philosophy with the objective of human development has a natural quality that motivates people to make contact with themselves, with their expectations and limitations. Nevertheless, global ideas such as Olympism are always challenged by local cultures, because promoting a 'universal humanism' raises important questions about power and privilege in a multicultural world. Therefore, the success of the globalization of sports predominantly depends on diminishing the contrasts while increasing the diversities. Today, the principal criticism against the Olympic Movement is its assumption that sport possesses universal values regardless of the cultural context, which is evaluated as 'Euro-centrism in Universalist guise'. So, any developmental role for sports involves 'civilizing' others, thus favoring particular ways of being (Guest, 2009).

For this reason, the paper analyzes the linkage between dominant polity and the Olympics from a historical perspective *to clarify* how dominant polities have fundamentally shaped social interactions by changing the roles attributed to the same event–ie. Olympics in the study–to sustain themselves. The paper is derived from the works of sports historians and other academic writings on the issue.

The paper is a historical process research and it provides a cursory look at the evolution of Olympics through ages and investigates its transformation. Historical process research focuses on a series of events that happen over a long period of time. For Schutt (2004), this kind of research allows for a much more complete understanding of historical developments than is often the case with historical case events research. In this study, findings were reported in a case-oriented historical narrative format based on secondary sources. However, it is conceded that the scope of such a subject matter ought to have a more insightful handling.

Polity and Structure/Culture Dichotomy

The Webster's American Family Dictionary (1999) defines polity as a state or organized community. For Khan & Miankhel (2012), the term is interchangeably used for "government" and "state". Nonetheless, polity, in Aristotelian sense, denotes a regime, which does not necessarily mean 'state' but norms, principles and procedures. Polity, in this sense, forms a socio-political whole with the basic norms governing the social relations.

For Größler (2010), "polity" is the institutional structure in which politics takes place, leading to policies. Institutional structures, for him, greatly shape the effectiveness of policies. Thus,

policy changes should go in harmony with institutional changes. Besides, the dominant polity has changed in time and place. For example, in ancient and Medieval Europe, the legal status of the individual was rooted in the city (Lem, 2013). In effect, these changes are the springboard for the re-examination of objectives and policies (Greig, 2001). On this issue, Lake (2003) maintains that, in the process of change, subordinate polities may predict the dominant polity's inclinations and act accordingly.

These debates echo the culture-structure dichotomy in sociology. For Gans (2012), the culture-structure dichotomy has deep impacts on sociology. He maintains that Cultural Sociologists evaluates the culture regardless of the macro-sociological, political and economic context, in which it exists; hence, they lack the policy-oriented research. Nonetheless, Structural Sociology underestimates the role of the culture by overemphasizing the role of the structures; thus, it has shortcomings in its policy recommendations.

On the same issue, Jacobs and Asokan (1999) identify the human resource as the driving force and primary determinant of the development. The evolution of the social institutions operates as vigorous stimuli for development by rising the frequency, intensity and efficiency of social interactions. The primary obstacles to human development are not physical barriers, but outmoded attitudes. As skills manage the energies of the individual and systems direct the energies of the organization, organizations regulate the energies of the society. When society searches for moving to the next higher level of development; existing beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and forms of organization become barriers for the transition to take place. Progression entails a transformation in the life style. A society is ready for development when it has the essential surplus energy and awareness. Society develops through the three levels – physical, vital, and mental. The progression from one level to another stimulates a rise in the productivity of society. Once a new activity is accepted, society establishes new organizations and policies to support it. When social acceptance of the activity becomes complete, the activity matures into an institution and it does not need the support of specialized organizations and policies to promote it. At a further stage, the activity is transmitted to future generations through the family and becomes part of the society's culture.

The Ancient Olympics: From City-states to Ecclesiastics

The Ancient Olympic Games were not only an arena for sports competitions but also a festival of arts, literature and music. Even today, there are many remaining works of art from the Ancient Games. The importance attributed to art and culture during the Ancient Olympics is a source of inspiration for many sport communities. *Mens sana in corpore sano* (a sound mind in a sound body) was the chief tenet at the core of the sports in ancient Greece (Juico, 2000). As to the economic dimension of the Games, in ancient Greece, economic concerns generally enjoyed a secondary importance at best. Unlike the contemporary world, economic activities were regarded as trivial. According to Plato, for example, economic activities did not require the attention of legislators in a well ordered state (Argyriades, 1998).

Another remarkable feature of the Ancient Games was *Ekecheria* (ie, the Olympic truce). Owing to Ekecheira, athletes were able to participate in the Games and return to their home in safety as the participating city-states were not allowed to take up arms for one to three months. To enforce the truce, in case of infringement, violators were heavily punished (Gialourēs, 1999). Nevertheless, according to Toohey and Veal (2007), the truce was

restricted and it was not providing a period of peace among warring cities but merely ensuring an unharmed passage for the participants and spectators.

The invasion of Greece by Macedonia and the successive invasion by Roman Empire decreased the competition among Greek cities and diminished the popularity of the Olympic Games; nonetheless, the main reason for the end the Games was the early Christian belief considering the body as a major hindrance to the final salvation of the soul. Moreover, ancient Olympics had a pagan tradition since they were organized in the honor of ancient Greek Gods; hence, first Christians took a negative stance against the Games. Consequently, the Ancient Olympic Games were banned by the Roman Emperor I. Theodosius in 393 AD because of the pressure of ecclesiastics (Young, *2004; 2005*; Connelly, 2007 ; Toohey & Veal, 2007). After the end of the ancient Olympics, sports events were neglected for a long period of time due to lack of free time, and the negative attitude of the ecclesiastics. With the re-discovery of Classical Antiquity during the Renaissance, obstacles against the sport began to disappear. Moreover, increasing free time for doing sport in the 19th century paved the way for the development of the sport. Until then, sport was seen as a luxury and the activity of some elites. After it had become massive, some new concepts and events like betting, sports management, and professionalism became a part of sport. The most important development for the sport in the 19th century, however, was the rise of nation-states. All the major sports events began to be organized on the basis of nation-states. Thus, the competition among city-states in the Ancient Olympics was replaced by the competition among the nation-states in the modern age, and the IOC was founded in 1894 with the efforts of Baron de Coubertin.

First Modern Olympics from a Different Perspective: Rise of Nation-States

Owing to the 1896 Athens Olympic Games, sports events determined the fate of a nation in an unprecedented way. Athens Games were important not only for being the first Games, but also for their tangible contributions to the formation of Greek identity. Since the ancient Olympic Games were also organized in Greece, first modern Olympic Games were regarded as the reminiscent of ancient Greek culture and identity on the formation of Greek national identity. On the other hand, Olympic Games strengthened the national self-confidence and irredentist visions in Greece as well. It is a kind of irony of history that one year later, in 1897, this national self-confidence would be crushed on the front of the war against Ottomans. Consequently, the first modern Olympic Games had different meanings for Greece: first as an instrument of foreign policy in the context of irredentist ambitions, second as a support of national self-confidence especially towards Europe, and third as a component of national mythology (Koulouri, 2010).

Demetrios Vikelas, who was a Greek intellectual living in Paris, was one of the leading figures in the organization of the Athens Games in 1896 along with Pierre de Coubertin. He was quite well known in French philhellenic circles for his passionate appreciation of French support to Greek struggle against the Ottoman Empire. Vikelas had often proclaimed in print the importance of ancient Olympia in the classical world. Therefore, he was seen as the best candidate for Coubertin to work with for organizing the first Modern Olympic Games in Athens. In 1894, Vikelas became the first president of the International Olympic Committee (MacAlloon, 2006). On the other hand, Greek prime minister, Tricoupis was hesitant about Coubertin's idea to revive the Olympic Games as the country was suffering financial hardships. Furthermore, even though he was known as a reformist, he considered the

Olympics as a frivolity. In the Aftermath of Tricoupis' resignation in 1895, Coubertin cleared his way to organize the first modern Olympic Games in Athens. On the other hand, Coubertin's interest was for a Universalist cause rather than a support for particular national ambitions (Smith, 2004). Toohey & Veal (2007), however, argue that Coubertin himself admitted the political dimension of the Games by claiming that the Games would facilitate the solution of "Eastern question" together with its contributions for athletics. [1]

According to Coubertin, the 1896 Athens Olympic Games revitalized the memory of Greek people, and it was a springboard for enhancing the Greek identity. Nevertheless, *Megali Idea* (Great Idea), which was an irredentist movement aiming at establishing a Greek state that would encompass all ethnic Greeks, became a popular slogan throughout the country during the Games. The success of some Greek athletes made most of the Greeks think that the Greek people were physically ready for a prospective war, and the tendencies of sympathy in Western countries for Greece created over-confidence. These two factors heightened the nationalistic sentiments. As a result, eleven months after the Games, Greece declared war with the Ottoman Empire because of the political problems in Crete Island. Plausibly, nationalistic sentiments alone are not enough to incite a war as there should be an initiative. Such a movement was instigated by a secret organization founded for increasing the army's role in Greece. The public support for *Ethniki Etaireia,* which was founded by young Greek Army officers in 1894, soared after the Games and this organization led the Greek nation in war (MacAlloon, 1981: 259-61). In September 1895, Ethniki Etaireia recruited civilians, all linked to the organization of the Olympic Games. Following the defeat against Ottomans in 1897, Prime Minister Georgios Theotokis disbanded the organization (Smith, 2004: 4-7).

Coubertin tried to assemble the youths from five continents, to revive and internationalize Olympic Games. Therefore, he added some clauses to the Olympic Charter to prevent racism and political intervention in the Games. He also expressed the necessity of differentiating the nationalism and patriotism concepts. According to him, patriotism was the love of the person towards his own country and his passion to serve it. Hence, it has a positive sense while nationalism has a negative one (MacAlloon, 1981: 258). As a matter of fact, Coubertin had the sympathy for Greek patriotism, but in Greece *Megali Idea* was comprised of hatred against the Ottomans. During the 1896 Athens Olympic Games, Greek fans' chauvinistic behaviors gave the first "red alert" for the future of the Games. Obviously, it was an honor for the participants and spectators to wave their national flag, or to listen to their anthem, but chauvinist movements were an obstacle for Coubertin to reach the aims of the Olympic Games in the long term. Nevertheless, he was quite satisfied with the organizational success of the first modern Olympic Games.

In general, the sympathy for Greek nationalist movement was evaluated within the framework of organization's continuity and the political climate of the era. Apparently, changing context—ie. rise of nationalism and declining Empires—was the main reason behind the tolerance to the nationalist movements. On the other hand, no matter what the political implications were, the first modern Games were certainly a milestone in Sports history.

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[1] Drawing on his discourse, it may be argued that Coubertin was an orientalist. According to the Orientalist approach, as the orient had been isolated from the European development in the science, commerce and art for a long period of time, it had fallen into sluggishness. This is why, the mission *civilisatrice* was mandatory for universal enlightenment. See Hosword and Wojtkowski, *Orientalism*.

Understanding the Pitfalls of the Emerging Polities: What went wrong?

Almost every scholarly discipline recognizes that sometime over the past 250 years a noteworthy paradigm shift changed the way of understanding the world, and a number of sport historians have pursued researches to explore this historical turning point (Brown, 2001). Nonetheless, today, turning of nation-states into "disarticulated states" compels the sport community. [2]

In addition, regional integration projects such as European Union (EU) have risen in importance. The EU has long been regarded as a civilian power. This aspect of the Union has been debated by many scholars and underlined with enthusiasm compared to economic or military aspects. Even if the end of Cold War is largely admitted as the main factor to remove the limitations upon the concept of EU as a civilian power, the broad normative basis has been developed over a longer period of time through several declarations, criteria and treaties. For example, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are strongly expressed in the origin of the Treaty on European Union of 1991 or the protection of minorities is underlined in the Copenhagen criteria. These norms symbolize central constitutive features of a polity which creates its identity as being more than a state (Manners, 2002).

About the direction of the union, Haas (2004), for example, maintains that by transferring their policy demands from the national level to supranational institutions, an EU-polity similar to the pluralist polity of the US could come into existence. Besides, Seidendorf (2008) argues that, instead of building a "pure" European memory, a tolerance to differing narratives of the past is a more fitting approach to find 'unity in diversity'.

Similar approaches may be observed in the ASEAN region on debates regarding "Asian values" argument promoted by some regional leaders claiming that Asians have some unique administrative traditions and values. But, even they have confirmed the diversity of Asian cultural norms that nullify the claim of an "Asian" tendency for more authoritarian political structures (Kraft, 2001).

As to the effects of these political changes on the Olympics, drawn on the Olympic History, Table 1 illustrates profound impact of dominant polities on the meaning and the role attributed to the Games. Today, in the Post-Cold War era, with rising importance of regional unions and international organizations, the local cultures found the opportunity to have a stronger voice in the Games, whereas issues such as national pride or identity eventually become less important—or counter–productive—in some cases.   Promoting local communities, such as in the case of Aboriginal athletes in the Sydney Games, or attributing more importance to the Paralympics and environmental issues has become main concern of the IOC in this new era (Herguner, 2012).

Currently, one of the most disputed issues regarding the culture and sports is the gender inequality in Islam. In spite of global efforts, Muslim women are in a disadvantaged position in the field of physical activity. The growing leaving rate of Muslim girls from physical education is one of the main problems at school level. There are similar difficulties at community and international sporting levels, and both religious and cultural factors have been attributed to this phenomenon (Dagkas et al., 2011). Moreover, the representation of women

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[2] "Disarticulated state" refers to less meaningful borders. For example, polluted water in one country may be a product of economic activity in another. See Frederickson and Smith, *The Public Administration Theory Primer*.

in the National Olympic Committees is lower on average in the countries that are members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. However, to explain this fact by reference to the religion rather than the local cultures is problematic (Chin et al., 2009). Therefore, it may be argued that two extreme positions damage the Olympism along with the outmoded attitudes in traditional societies: Radical constructivists, who favor a certain life style as the sole sustainable option for the world and compel the others to accept it, and western cultural relativists, according to whom it is impossible for others to adopt the values and institutions peculiar to the West.

Table 1. Polities and Olympics

Dominant Polity Type	Dominant Idea in Politics-Olympics axis	Major impact on Olympics	Meaning attributed to the Olympics and Olympism
City-State	A sound mind in a sound body (sport as a vital requirement)	Ekecheria (the Olympic Truce as the sport was regarded as a vital requirement)	Olympics as a catalyst for the social life
Ecclesiastic, Empire	Education of soul instead of body	End of Ancient Olympics	Olympics as a distraction from social objectives
Nation-State	Sense of identity and unity (owing to strong state control and limited access to communication)	Boycotts, chauvinism.	Olympism as an institutional culture (Narrow sense)
Regional-Transnational	Think global, act local (contested with think holistic,act personal), thanks to greater communication level among people	Reaching local people, and people with special needs–stronger support for the Paralympics	Olympism as a way of life (broader sense)

Olympic Transformation and Local Cultures: Towards Olympism as a Way of Life?

Olympic transformation may be a prolific instrument to strengthen local cultures. Seoul and Barcelona Olympic Games are successful examples. Seoul's Olympic urbanization did not only change the landscape and infrastructure of the city, but it also promoted the Korean culture to the world and improved the city's general health and hygiene standards. Localism and Korean identity were highlighted in the design of key Olympic architecture, and several cultural utilities, including museums, art centers and historic monuments were established in time for the Games (Liao & Pitt, 2006). In addition, Olympic Games as Mega-sports events are used as a catalyst to transform a location into a tourist destination. So, they may help the

promotion of the local culture. For example, during the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, the city considerably benefited from the Games to transform its infrastructure to become a cultural city. Besides, the cultural presentation educates the host population and compels them to address their history.[3]

The idea of continuous human improvement is an idea present in all fields of life as well as sports culture, and diversity is a catalyst of evolution for human being. Today, to be a citizen denotes learning to live with others and respect their diversity. Learning to live with differences is also a sign of universalism—a value so dear to Olympism. This is why; Olympism and Olympic education may have a lot to contribute to today's multicultural schools for enforcing the will of living together. Olympic education can contribute on the condition that no attempt will be made to remove cultural differences or to impose a uniform morality. Although cultural diversity in some countries is the result of immigration, and schools and sports grounds are the places where integration is achieved, this is not the only source of diversity. In today's culture of diversity, the integration process embraces all the people with physical or mental disability. The fact that the term *disability* has been replaced by *special needs* or *special educational requirements* is a clear sign of the evolution of the culture of diversity. Together with the school pedagogy, Olympic pedagogy has positively contributed to this development through the Paralympics and Special Olympics (Ionescu, 2009).

Conclusions

Drawing on the Olympic history, this paper concludes that all dominant polities play a role for the "emancipation of the people" by designing organizations or giving new meanings to the events. However, their success is dependent on the processes, which lead to a social change shaped by both the structure and the culture. On the other hand, different meanings and roles attributed to the same event–ie. Olympics in the study–compliant with the dominant polity type are the evidence for the social construction of the reality.

Nevertheless, today, Radical constructivists, who favor a certain life style as the sole sustainable option for the world and compel the others to accept it, and western cultural relativists, according to whom it is impossible for others to adopt the values and institutions peculiar to the West, are two extreme groups harming the Olympic idea.

To sum up, cultural diversities do not endanger the future of the Olympic movement as the societies are inclined to underestimate or neglect them as long as they believe that Olympism is truly implemented in its broader meaning and the IOC implements the Olympic values in their broader sense by keeping the balance among cultures.

Finally, this study with its exploratory nature does not offer an exhaustive analysis. Hence, admittedly, there is a need for future researches to investigate the said Ages in more detail.

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[3] We can mention the growing awareness of Aboriginal history in Australia during the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games and increasing understanding of Mormon traditions in the US during the 2002 Salt Lake Olympic Winter Games. See Gratton & Preuss, "Maximizing Olympic Impacts by Building Up Legacies" for more.

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