

## **Olympism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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## **Olympism**

For most people, I suppose, the word 'Olympic' will conjure up images of the Olympic Games, either ancient or modern. The focus of their interest will be a two-week festival of sport held once in every four years between elite athletes representing their countries or city-states in inter-communal competition.

Most people, too, will have heard of an 'Olympiad', even though it is sometimes thought to refer to a particular Games. In fact it refers to a four-year period, during which a Games may or may not be held. So: the Athens Games are properly referred to not as the XXVIII Games (since there have been only twenty-five, three having been cancelled due to World Wars) but as the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad.

Fewer, however, will have heard of 'Olympism', the philosophy developed by the founder of the modern Olympic Movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, a French aristocrat who had been much influenced by the British Public School tradition of sport in education. This philosophy has as its focus of interest not just the elite athlete, but everyone; not just a short truce period, but the whole of life; not just competition and winning, but also the values of participation and co-operation; not just sport as an activity, but also as a formative and developmental influence contributing to desirable characteristics of individual personality and social life.

### **Olympism - a universal social philosophy**

Olympism is a social philosophy which emphasises the role of sport in world development, international understanding, peaceful co-existence, and social and moral education. De Coubertin understood, towards the end of the nineteenth century, that sport was about to become a major growth point in popular culture - and that, as physical activity, it was apparently universalisable, providing a means of contact and communication across cultures.

A universal philosophy by definition sees itself as relevant to everyone, regardless of nation, race, gender, social class, religion or ideology, and so the Olympic movement has worked for a coherent universal representation of itself - a concept of Olympism which identifies a range of values to which each nation can sincerely commit itself whilst at the same time finding for the general idea a form of expression which is unique to itself, generated by its own culture, location, history, tradition and projected future.

De Coubertin, being a product of late nineteenth-century liberalism, emphasised the values of equality, fairness, justice, respect for persons, rationality and understanding, autonomy, and excellence. These are values which span nearly 3000 years of Olympic history, although some of them may be differently interpreted at different times. They are, basically, the main values of liberal

humanism - or perhaps we should say simply humanism, since socialist societies have found little difficulty in including Olympic ideals into their overall ideological stance towards sport.

The contemporary task for the Olympic Movement is to further this project: to try to see more clearly what its Games (and sport in wider society) might come to mean. This task will be both at the level of ideas and of action. If the practice of sport is to be pursued and developed according to Olympic values, the theory must strive for a conception of Olympism which will support that practice. The ideal should seek both to sustain sports practice and to lead sport towards a vision of Olympism which will help to deal with the challenges which are bound to emerge.

### **The Olympic Charter**

The Olympic Charter (1995) states simply the relationship between Olympic philosophy, ethics and education:

Fundamental Principle 2 (p7) says:

*Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.*

Fundamental Principle 6 (p7) says:

*The goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.*

Chapter IV deals with National Olympic Committees, and again states simply and prominently the pre-eminent duties of NOCs with regard to Olympic education (p31):

*The mission of the NOCs is to develop and protect the Olympic Movement ... (and to) propagate the fundamental principles of Olympism at national level within the framework of sports activity and otherwise contribute, among other things, to the diffusion of Olympism in the teaching programmes of physical education and sport in schools and university establishments ... (and to) see to the creation of institutions which devote themselves to Olympic education.*

If we add to this de Coubertin's famous dicta 'all sports for all people' (quoted in During and Brisson, 1994, p187) and 'All games, all nations' (de Coubertin, 1934, p.127) we seem to have a recipe for the core values of Olympism: fair play, education and multiculturalism – and, at the

beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on the brink of war, it seems to me that 'multiculturalism' is an idea whose time has come.

I think that there is a close relationship between ethics and structures, inasmuch as structures encapsulate and express values. It is possible to 'read off' working values from structures and compare them with professed values. Conversely, the test of the sincerity with which professed values are held is whether or not they are represented in working practices. What the Olympic Movement means by its values should be written into its practices; and its sincerity may be interrogated through the reality of its practices.

### **The Olympic Programme**

Let's apply this test to the Olympic Programme. The main principles of selection of sports for the Games are popularity and universality: and unity of time and place is an important principle of organisation during their celebration. However, it also affirmed that one of the missions of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to the development of sport in all its forms. I believe that there is a contradiction here: the present criteria, though reasonable, tend to produce a list of sports which have already attained world popularity, which means, in effect, those which reflect the earlier cultural hegemony of the West (see Landry, 1984). This has the effect of reducing the popularity and influence of traditional and regional sports in favour of those on the Olympic programme.

The underdevelopment of those sports is therefore *produced* by Olympic criteria (a parallel with the 'development of underdevelopment' thesis within development economics, which says that underdevelopment is not simply a *condition* of a society, but rather a condition that is *produced* by development elsewhere). Eichberg has described this as 'the non-recognition of non-Western sports', corresponding to neo-colonisation (1984, p98).

But, if we believe in multiculturalism, we should surely be thinking of ways in which we can decentre Western practices within Olympic ideology, and recognise significant sporting forms and practices from around the world. There are many ways of doing this. The most radical suggestion might be to rethink entirely the Olympic programme of sports and events.

Let me make a simple provocative suggestion: why not implement a compensatory policy, according to which (for example) one popular sport from each continent should be included in the official programme? This would help to promote regional sports which have hitherto received little exposure (kabbadi is one example from India); and it would be a practical way of affirming a commitment to multiculturalism - an exemplar of the way in which Olympic values might be enshrined in its structures.

### **The Olympic Movement and International Understanding**

Let me draw attention to the emerging relationship between The Olympic Movement and the United Nations, two global organisations facing similar problems in regard to universality and particularity. The general problem is how we are to operate at a global (universal) level whilst there exist such apparently intractable differences at the particular level.

Some seek to resolve such difficulties by speaking of sport as a universal language; but this seems to me to under-represent the case. Not just sport, but Olympism itself seeks to be universal in its values: mutual recognition and respect, tolerance, solidarity, equity, anti-discrimination, peace, multiculturalism, etc. This is a quite specific set of values, which are at once a set of universal general principles; but which also require different interpretations in different cultures - *stated* in general terms; *interpreted* in the particular.

This search for a universal representation at the interpersonal and political level of our common humanity seems to me to be the essence of the optimism and hope of Olympism and other forms of humanism and internationalism. In the face of recent events in Europe and the Middle East it seems a fond hope and a naive optimism; but I for one shall continue to argue for and work towards a future of promise, and I still see a strong case for sport as an efficient means. I believe that sport has made an enormous contribution to modern society over the past 100 years or so; and that the philosophy of Olympism has been the most coherent systematisation of the ethical and political values underlying the practice of sport so far to have emerged.

### **Olympism: Immutable Values?**

The principles of Olympism, to be universal, must be unchanging, and yet they must apparently be everywhere different. They must not change over time, but at all times we see rule changes reflecting social changes. How are these paradoxes to be resolved?

What I have argued elsewhere (Parry, 1988) is that there are indeed fundamental differences between the ancient and modern games, and between de Coubertin's revivalist ideas and those which are current today. The ancient Games had developed over a thousand years, as an expression of the values of a developing archaic community. The modern Games, however, were created by a set of nineteenth century ideas which sought to impose a modern ideology onto ancient values so as to affect contemporary social practice for the better.

Such differences are inevitable, over time and space. Social ideas, or ideas inscribed in social practices, depend upon a specific social order or a particular set of social relationships for their full meaning to be exemplified. This seems to suggest that such meanings are culturally relative and

that therefore there could be no such thing as an universal idea of Olympism. But are we doomed to relativism? Are we doomed to a situation in which we must continue to misunderstand one another, since we inhabit different cultures (and therefore generate different meanings for 'Olympism')?

Rawls' distinction between concepts and conceptions is useful here. The *concept* of Olympism will be at a high level of generality, although this does not mean that it will be unclear. What it means is that the general ideas which comprise its meaning will admit of possibly contesting interpretations. Thus, naturally, the concept of Olympism will find different expressions in time and place, history and geography. There will be differing *conceptions* of Olympism, which will interpret the general concept in such a way as to bring it to real life in a particular context.

Taken together, the promotion of these values will be seen to be the educative task, and sport will be seen as a means. Each one of these values, being articulated at a high level of generality, will admit of a wide range of interpretation. But they nevertheless provide a framework which can be agreed upon by social groups with very differing commitments. This raises the questions of the relationships between such differing cultural formations, and of our own attitudes towards cultural difference. One way of addressing these questions is via a consideration of multiculturalism.

I believe that providing multicultural education in and for modern democracies is a new and urgent task, and one that must be made to work if we are to secure a workable political heritage for future generations. In the present global political context, this means promoting international understanding and mutual respect; and a commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflict.

In the case of Olympism, I think that the formal values underpinning the rule structures of sport, acceptance of which by all participants is a pre-condition of the continuing existence of sporting competition, support at the educational and cultural levels such political efforts. Children who are brought into sporting practices, and who are aware of international competitions such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, are thereby becoming aware of the possibilities of international co-operation, mutual respect, and mutual valuing.

### **A Philosophical Anthropology of Olympism**

Based on its heritage and traditions, each society (and each ideology) has a political and philosophical anthropology - an idealised conception of the kind of person that that society (or ideology) values, and tries to produce and reproduce through its formal and informal institutions.

I have elsewhere tried to present a philosophical anthropology of Olympism as part of an explication of its ideology, and as a contribution to a theory of sport and physical education (Parry

1998a, 1998b). If what I have said above about multiculturalism is correct, then Olympism is well placed to provide the basis for the world-wide development of physical education as a valued element in everyone's general education.

And that will be the contribution of Olympism to culture and to civilisation.

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