The Ongoing Successful Contributions of the International Olympic Committee to the Olympic Movement and the Refugee Olympic Team

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When one thinks of the ‘Olympics’, it casts feelings of victory, competition, and strength, just to name a few. It is safe to say that almost every single person on the planet knows what the Olympics are. The Olympics have spread into a movement that every two years, people all around the world look forward to cheer on for their favourite events and teams hoping they medal. Needless to say, the scale that the Olympics have spread to is simply massive. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is the institutional body that is in charge of organizing the Olympics, which is no simple task. Recently, the IOC committed itself to establishing the Refugee Olympic Team (ROT). This paper will argue that the IOC is a powerful organization that has been and continues to successfully contribute to the Olympic Movement through the ROT. This will be demonstrated through analyzing the IOC as a civil society part of associational life, partnerships, and instrumentalization to promote the Olympic Movement.

The paper will first introduce background information about the IOC, Olympic Movement, and the ROT. Secondly, some of the more important ‘buzzwords’ will be unpacked. Thirdly, key concepts of major authors from the course will help to conceptualize and theorize the way in which the Olympic Movement has developed over the years. Lastly, the conclusion will follow.

The essay will now provide some background information about the IOC. According to the Olympic Charter (2019, p.10), the IOC was established on June 23, 1894 through the International Athletic Congress of Paris, which was conceived by Pierre de Coubertin. Pierre de Coubertin wanted to bring the Olympics back from the ancient times of Greece, over 3,000 years ago. The charter continues to state that the IOC hosted its first Summer Games in Athens, Greece, in 1896 and its first Winter Games in Chamonix, France, in 1924. The famous five ring symbol for the Olympics is a representation of the five continents that part take in the Games, which are Europe, Asian, South America, North America, and Africa. Now the Olympics are hosted every two years alternating between Summer and Winter Games.

The IOC is a non-governmental not-for-profit independent international organization that is entirely privately funded committing itself to distributing 90% of its revenue (over USD 3.4 million/day) to support athletes and sports organizations all around the world at all levels, which primarily derives from broadcasting contracts (IOC, 2019). The goal is to make the world a ‘better’ place with sport. What better entails is not clear, however it is clear that the IOC has a strong commitment to assisting athletes, coaches, national federations, officials, and the general public in the sports community. The three main values of the IOC are excellence, respect, and friendship with the following three missions: ensuring the uniqueness and the regular celebration of the Olympic Games, putting athletes at the heart of the Olympic Movement, and promoting sport and the Olympic values in society with a focus on young people (IOC, 2019).

The Olympic Movement is embedded in the mission of the IOC since the establishment in 1896. What is the Olympic Movement? The following section will illustrate some of the highlights of the Olympic Movement. The Olympic movement can also be referred to as Olympism. The charter states that 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 of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles” (2019, p.11). Essentially, the Olympic Movement is a way of life that incorporates sport into character building of an individual through education. It is implied that Olympism is universal, meaning it can be applied and accepted by all people. Ideas on universalism will be explored later in the analysis section of the paper.

One of the central values that the IOC has been recently pursuing is solidarity. The charter states that Olympic Solidarity aims to provide assistance to National Olympic Committees (NOCs) for athlete development programmes, specifically for individuals who are the most in need of it (IOC, 2019). Part of the Olympic Solidarity initiative is the ROT. This section will provide background information on the ROT. The ROT was created by Thomas Bach for the first time for the Brazil 2016 Olympics. For the 10 athletes coming from countries like South Sudan, Ethiopia and Syria from sports such as swimming and track events, this was a time of hope (IOC, 2018). The next ROT for the 2020 Japan Summer Olympics will be announced in June 2020. Even though these athletes compete under the Olympic flag and not of their country of origin, this was a great symbolic demonstration showing the world that refugee and internally displaced individuals can still have access to opportunities in sport. The ROT acts as role models for the 70.7 million displaced people, refugees, and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2019).

The IOC pursued the Olympic Movement with the creation of the ROT. According to Donnelly and Saunders (2017, p.2), it is asserted that if it was not for the ROT, even if the athletes qualified for the Olympics, their refugee status would pose as a problem because they would not officially belong to their home country and are not associated with any NOC. That is why the ROT is so important and much needed if Olympic Solidarity is to be upheld. The Olympic Movement was most likely the reason that triggered such an initiative. The global refugee crisis has been getting vast media attention in the recent years, so this could be the reason Bach pushed for the ROT. For example, in 2015, 336,000 asylum seekers were attempting to reach European shores by sea of many which, unfortunately, ended up in 2,373 migrant death tolls just in 2015 (Orchard, 2015). At least half of this migrant population was coming from Syria. Clearly, the Syria conflict was a large driving factor of the increased amount of displaced people. Without getting further into the politics of the Syrian conflict, this reflects the immensity of the crisis where the world began to take notice including the IOC.

Another potential reason for the creation of the ROT ties directly into the Olympic Movement. MacAloon (2016, p.4-5) states that the Olympic Movement has been ‘suffering’ the last couple of decades due to negative public image that comes along with hosting the Olympic Games, such as cost/benefit, sustainability, and transparency issues. By ‘suffering’ the author is attempting to illustrate that the IOC has acquired a negative reputation due to a host of reasons with some of them being mentioned above. Whether it is true or not is something that cannot be explored due to the scope of this essay, however, MacAloon is arguing that the Olympic Movement needs and is currently experiencing revitalization. The main catalyst of the reform is the current president, Thomas Bach, who introduced the Agenda 2020 for the IOC.

Bach realized that the IOC along with the Olympic Movement needed reform especially after the events of 2013 to 2014 where more cities were not able or willing to host the Olympic Games (MacAloon, 2016, p.2). Europe began turning itself against Olympics where the opinion polls anti-games, specifically in Poland showed that 70% of Krakow’s citizens were against the Olympic project. Then the author continues to state that for the 2022 bids, four out of the original six countries dropped out of the bidding race for various reasons, one of them being Norway who was initially the most likely city to win the bid. The Olympic Games are a large financial and time commitment, so it is understandable why more host cities are reluctant to host, but this was not the case just a decade ago. Is the Olympic spirit still there? That is what Bach intended to change, to reignite Olympism.

The 2020 Agenda was approved in 2014 with the following reforms just to name a few: adoption of partnership style relationships with host cities, adoption of transparent practices, adapting to the changing times, improving communication techniques with the public, cutting operating costs, appointing a compliance office, and rewriting the Code of Ethics and Rules of Procedure (MacAloon, 2016, p.4-8). Not enough time has passed to conclude whether or not these reforms will improve the reputation of the IOC and Olympism, but it is a step in the right direction for the Olympic Movement. With the global refugee crisis, the public image of the IOC, and the negative reputation of the Olympic Games that was further perpetrated with the Sochi 2014 Winter Games, the creation of the ROT is a comprehensible action to take on behalf of the IOC.

It is crucial to view the IOC operating within the public space as part civil society. This section will now unpack some of the key terms. Cornwall and Brock (2005) warn about ‘buzzwords’, which are words that become hegemonic in development discourse where they attach different meanings to themselves over time that can be interpreted in different ways depending on the context and region. The IOC committee utilizes words that often attach mainstream meanings that are linked to economic growth and liberalization, which will be expanded later on in the paper. Neo-liberalism is a word that has become a buzzword. The IOC is a powerful organization controlling all Olympic related activities, so it is natural that it has embodied the neo-liberal ideology because the agenda of the IOC requires millions of dollars to operate its mandate.

What does neo-liberalism mean? This ideology is a dynamic one with no one meaning. According to Howell and Pearce (2001) neo-liberalism pursues capitalism where the state has a minimal role and economic freedom. In this framework, the IOC fits right in since it accepts millions of dollars from private donors, if neo-liberalism was not adopted by the IOC, then where would the IOC get its capital from? The IOC is heavily dependent on their donors. Additionally, most of the values and the main ideology of the IOC come from a Western perspective. Edwards in Chapter 1 argues that this mainstream ideology of neoliberalism emerged from the West, so it can be argued that the IOC is a representation of the West. The IOC’s headquarters are located in Lausanne, Switzerland and the president is a German citizen. Even though the IOC has 105 members from all over the world including from Developing countries, the majority of the decisions are made by the Developed nations due to the fact that the headquarters and the president are both from the ‘West’.

With that being said, The Olympic Movement is an embodiment of these western conceptualizations of neo-liberalism and universalism. As mentioned earlier, Olympism means “social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles”, there are many buzzwords within this sentence. Social responsibility, universalism, and Olympics are some of the three dominant buzzwords of the IOC. The IOC does not unpack these terms, except for Olympism which is representative of the word ‘Olympics’ and was discussed in the first section of the paper. But what does the IOC mean by universalism?

The IOC perceives its values to be universal, such as the right to access sport, which is not perceived the same in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East. For example, in traditional Islam, women participating in sport can potentially be considered taboo. This example demonstrates that the Olympic Movement is not as universal as it implies. Howell and Pearce (2001, p.32) support this claim when they argue that the alternative genealogies perspective helps challenge dominant values of universalism and neo-liberalism because the Global South has its own unique history and context that does need to be taken into account. However, every single country even from majority-Muslim states has sent women to participate in the Olympics. So, the Olympic Movement has helped push for greater gender equality even though the idea of women participating in sport is not considered a universal value all over the world.

The final section of the paper is going to analyze the concepts of public space and how the IOC operates within it, the importance of partnerships, and the utilization of instrumentalism as a tool to promote the Olympic Movement. Firstly, understanding the way in which the IOC operates as a civil society is necessary to identify. Edwards states that civil society can be viewed as associational life operating within the public sphere (2014). The IOC can be considered as ‘good’ society in Edwards terms because they are positively reforming their organization with the Agenda 2020 and pursuing initiative like the ROT. These changes were partly prompted by the public opinion as discussed earlier, so the general public is helping shape the direction the Olympic Movement is taking. For the Olympic Movement to exist, the public has to adopt it and accept it.

Dagher (2017) offers a conceptualization that there is a difference between civil and uncivil society. The individuals who hold a negative view on the IOC may say that the IOC could potentially be considered as an uncivil society. MacAloon illustrates that these negative images are stemming from false or inaccurate media coverage where it is reported that the Olympics cause environmental damage, a waste of taxpayer money, or infringe on human rights (2016, p.4). Whether or not his is the case is not within the scope of the paper, however, the agenda 2020 addresses these same issues, so the IOC is listening to the public and is taking action to ensure the Olympic Movement upholds sustainable and inclusive values.

This paper would argue that the Olympic Games that take place every two years ignite Olympism within nations bringing communities closer including the Refugee community. A sort of national consciousness occurs where collective identity emerges with migrants around the world. Porta et al. (2006) asserts that social movements can only be sustained and developed when collective identity is enacted. The ROT faced many barriers in their individual stories before they qualified for the Olympic Team, many refugees around the world can relate to these athletes and their experiences. The Olympic Movement has helped unite these refugee communities in this associational life.

The IOC is very active and is able to accomplish its work with the ROT due to its many partnerships. The main three constituents of the Olympic Movement are the NOCs, the IOC, and the International Sports Federations (IOC, 2019). Additionally, the IOC is engaged with many programs, forums, and special projects where cooperation with many entities is required. Edwards (2014) asserts that partnerships and plurality are necessary for civil society. Some of the major partnerships of the IOC are Air Bnb, broadcasting companies, and host cities. The IOC is not capable of doing everything it would like to as is mapped out in the Olympic charter all on its own without the assistance of other organizations who choose to participate in the Olympic Movement. To drive the ROT initiative, the IOC partnered up with the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR.

Porta et al. (2006) states that social movements are informal networks that are created from individuals, organizations, and groups who are engaged in cultural conflicts (p.69). In the case of the Olympic Movement, the cultural conflict is the lack of opportunities and support for the ROT where partnerships are also necessary just like in civil society. The authors note that civil society and social movements have associational life in common as well as autonomy, but they are different in their own ways.

Moreover, Baker (1999) asserted that civil society can be viewed in instrumental terms. The IOC utilizes to its advantage the above stated partnerships to pursue its agenda. Instrumentalization a big key feature in addition to partnerships to create the space it needs to operate within this public sphere. Globalization is a big contributor to the Olympic Movement. Globalization allows for the Olympic Movement to spread through technology and interconnectedness of the world. The broadcasting licenses are the main revenue source for the IOC, thanks to globalization, the IOC is able to profit from this. Globalization has been a positive influence where anyone with a radio or a television is able to watch and follow the Games. And in turn, the IOC has been able to support athletes, coaches, and officials with their earnings that they generated from the licenses.

Applying Lewis at al.’s (2009) ideas on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the IOC has been successfully delivering services, acquiring strong partnerships, and acting as a catalysis for the Olympic Movement including innovating new ways of spreading Olympism and being the main advocate for it. In 1994, the IOC created the Olympic Refuge Foundation to help promote and fund projects that support refugee communities through participation in physical activity with the help of UNHCR (IOC, 2019). A lot more work still has to be done in supporting the refugee potential and current athletes, but this is a step in the right direction because support and change need to start somewhere. The IOC will continue with the ROT initiative where it will slowly grow over time and hopefully all refugees will have the capability to qualify for the Olympics in the future. This change will be progressively slow, but with Thomas Bach’s support and commitment to Olympism, the ROT will show the world that they deserve to be on the pedestal just like any other person.

In conclusion, this paper has argued that the IOC is a powerful organization that has been and continues to successfully contribute to the Olympic Movement through the ROT. This was demonstrated through analyzing the IOC as a civil society part of associational life, partnerships, and instrumentalization to promote the Olympic Movement. Organizations like the IOC is what fuels passion for sport for billions of people around the world. The difficult task of putting on the Games and spreading Olympism is no easy task, which the IOC continues to succeed in.

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