

## **Cultural Olympiad: The Legacy of the Olympic Games Athens 1896, 2004**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the institution of the Cultural Olympiad as well as the legacy of the Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 and 2004. The Cultural Olympiad, as an institution, was developed in the context of the Olympic Games and, therefore, expresses the Olympic spirit and the humanitarian values of antiquity, which are briefly explained in the paper. The Olympic Games are connected to a program of cultural activities, which is developed during the four years between the Games. The basic aims of the Cultural Olympiad are to designate values for the development of human relations and also to add a permanent value to the Olympic Ideal. The legacy of the Cultural Olympiad for every Olympic City is a stable spiritual and economic value. The Olympic Games of 1896 contributed significantly to the designation of the Greek cultural legacy, whereas the Cultural Olympiad of 2004 was greatly extended and its cultural program covered the period before, during, and after the Games.*

**Keywords:** cultural Olympiad, Olympic legacy, art, museum

### ***Introduction: aim, methodology and necessity of the study***

This study discusses the cultural dimension of the Olympic Games held in Athens in 1896 and 2004 whose chronicle, as well as semantic scope, was unprecedented in modern Greece. The extraordinarily long duration of the Cultural Olympiad, the astonishing number of cultural events and the great cultural interventions in the Greek capital render the subject of this study challenging and particularly interesting. This study was carried out using particularly primary sources (official archives) as well as literature on the subject. Although the Cultural Olympiad was a very important issue for Athens, the research conducted so far on it is almost non-existent. In the Greek case, the academic literature ignores the issue of the Cultural Olympiad, perhaps due to the fact that the Games are not seen as a cultural event, where the body and mind unite, but as a sports festival, where they remain separate entities (Gold and Revill 2011: 80, 105). This study aims to fill this gap in research as well as become a stimulus for further research.

### **The Revival of the Olympic Games**

#### **Historical Overview**

According to the ancient writer and traveller Pausanias (2nd century AD), the patron of the Olympic Games was Zeus and the first Olympic champion the hero Hercules. According to the legend, Zeus defeated Cronus for kingship of ancient Olympia, where the first Olympic Games was held (Papahatzis 1982). Pausanias also describes, in great detail, the monuments, sanctuaries, altars and temples of Olympia, where the temple dedicated to Zeus holds a prominent position. All monuments were offerings from athletes and those who were loyal to the gods such that the relationship between sports and religious worship was evident (Gialouris 1982). The first Olympic Games dates back to 776 BC and the last games of antiquity were held in 393 AD. Their revival took place in Athens in 1896.

The moral and social dimension of the Olympic movement is what distinguishes the Olympic Games from all other international sport events and institutions (Girginov 2010: 9; Garcia 2002: 42). In a way, the revival of the Olympic Games embodied the principle of 'restoring the grandeur of antiquity' (Young 2010: 42), an idea deeply rooted in much of Greek intellectual thought of the time. Therefore, the selection of Athens for the celebration of the first modern Olympic Games in 1896 was a natural outcome.

Moreover, from its very beginning the Olympic values were ‘associated with Hellenism and the ancient Greek values of body, mind and spirit, which had been re-invented in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe’ (Hatziefstathiou & Henry 2010: 124). From the first Games, the Greeks wanted the Games to be held in Athens permanently, an idea that de Coubertin (founder of the International Olympic Committee and father of the modern Olympic Games) opposed strongly (Chatziefstathiou & Henry 2010: 130).

### **Olympism and the Olympic Spirit**

A prominent characteristic of the Olympic Ideal is ‘Olympism’, an ideology that originates from antiquity and was revived in the late nineteenth century by Baron Pierre de Coubertin. This ‘Olympic Ideology’ is examined politically and philosophically in an article by Sigmund Loland (1995) on the occasion of De Coubertin's proclamation about Olympism in 1896. Although Loland ignores the negative aspects of Olympism, he admits that the Olympic movement ‘can survive and grow at all’ (Loland 1995: 39). The negative aspect of Olympism is examined in the context of today's commercialized and globalized world and where Olympism appears as an ‘anachronism’. Its fundamental principles provide ‘little action guiding force, inconsistencies and contradictions reduce its value as a system of ideas’ (Loland 1995: 39).

Another interesting aspect of the phenomenon is given by Jim Parry who examines, in a comprehensive way, the ideological origins of Olympism and particularly the concept of ‘universal social philosophy’, which ‘emphasizes the role of sport in world development, international understanding, peaceful co-existence, and social and moral education’ (Parry 2003: 2). Additionally, he examines the Olympic movement from the angle of multiculturalism and he also analyzes the Olympic Charter (1995), referring to the relationship between ‘Olympic philosophy, ethics and education’ (Parry 2003: 3). Finally, Seth Brown, examines Olympism through the concepts of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. One of the questions he considers is ‘how Olympism contributes to social justice, equity and human rights’ (Brown 2009: 3). More specifically, referring to other researchers’ Foucauldian analysis of Olympism (Chatziefstathiou & Henry 2008 & Laurendeau 2008), Brown concludes that ‘Olympism has the possibility to contribute to social justice, equity and human rights and may be productive and useful in form of Olympic education’ (2009: 10). According to the fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter (2011) ‘The Olympic Movement is the concerted, organised, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism’.

### **Olympic Truce**

Olympic Truce is a concept that fits well within the framework of the Olympic ideal. In ancient Greece, during the Olympic Games, all military action was ceased and peace was imposed (‘ekecheiria’) (Gialouris 1982). In recent years, there have been many attempts to preserve this practice, but there have been times where the outcome was not always successful. In 1993 the United Nations General Assembly decided to observe the Olympic Truce during the Olympic Games. As Kidane points out ‘the IOC [International Olympic Committee] initiative through the Olympic Truce is part of this permanent campaign to promote peace throughout the world’ (Kidane 1998: 49). Even if Olympic Truce is related to politics, however peace is a universal value that from Antiquity is closely connected to the spiritual content of the Games.

### **Cultural Olympiad**

#### **The Olympic Games and Art**

Many of the ancient games, whether they were held in Olympia or not, were reflected impressively in the arts, especially in sculpture and pottery. Moreover, a frequent phenomenon was the depiction of the Olympic champions, as well as of the symbols of Olympia (the olive, Zeus and Hera) in ancient coins, which were used for recalling a particular event (Martini 1996). Even in recent years, sports and athletes in general have had a dominant position in contemporary art, on the occasion of the Olympic Games. This occurred in the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004 (and on a much smaller scale in the Olympic Games of 1896), through the organization of large-scale group exhibitions with artworks inspired by the Olympics (Kounenaki 2003).

#### **The Role of the Cultural Olympiad**

The Cultural Olympiad and its values have been studied thoroughly in a series of articles by Beatriz Garcia (2002, 2004). More specifically, in one of her articles, she focuses on the Olympic Ideal and its conflicts within the current state of the Games. She remarks how, since the first Games celebration in 1896, the event has grown from being a utopian initiative by European aristocrats into the largest international peace gathering, which receives United Nations endorsement (2004: 1).

Additionally, in an earlier article, she emphasizes the importance of the role of cultural events in the Olympic Games by exploring deeply the historical evolution of the cultural Olympiad and suggests ways of managing and promoting the Olympic cultural programs (2002). Furthermore, Joseph Subiros (1992), describes the objectives, thoughts and planning of the cultural Olympiad in Barcelona in 1992. He also diversifies the project of cultural Olympics with the games.

Beatriz Garcia (2000) also did a valuable comparative study of two Olympic Games- Barcelona and Sydney- in which she discusses the difficulties in the creation and production of a Cultural Olympiad. Furthermore, in another article, she states that the Olympic Games constitute not only an opportunity, but also a major threat for the development and the projection of 'visual arts' and 'cultural performances' (Garcia 2000: 2).

Both the theoretical and the practical aspects of the Cultural Olympiad are placed under the supervision of the IOC, which has drafted the Olympic Charter on the basis of the principles of the Olympic Movement, as formulated by Pierre de Coubertin in 1894 and incorporating the frequent revisions and adaptations it has undergone through time (Cahil 2000: 1).

In general, all the above mentioned researchers promote the idea of the Cultural Olympiad as an important dimension of the Olympic Games, while they highlight its meaning in the context that athleticism is culture.

The Hellenic Ministry of Culture and the Hellenic Organizing Olympic Committee attributed great importance to the Cultural Olympiad by creating a cultural program of duration of four years (2001 – 2004). They provided a significant budget for new cultural infrastructures as well numerous cultural events.

### **Olympic Cities and Olympic Legacy**

According to John and Margaret Gold (2011: 3-7), the term 'legacy' in the Olympic Movement parlance 'had a patchy and non-specific usage' and its use was not necessarily related to Olympic benefits. Historically, the word acquired its current meaning at the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984. The term 'could clearly consist of a broad package of sporting, urban regenerative and environmental elements'. Equally, the term could encompass 'a disparate range of intangible ingredients that include skills, sport and cultural participation, volunteering, national pride and city status' (Gold & Gold 2011: 3-4).

Stephen Essex and Brian Chalkley (1998: 187) note that the Olympic Games are regarded as the world's most prestigious sporting occasion and have emerged as a 'significant catalyst of urban change' and can act as a 'key instrument of urban policy' for their host cities. The cities that host the Olympic Games have been developed economically leading to urban regeneration (187). They highlight that the Olympics represent an 'international showcase, which can enhance a city's global recognition, image and reputation' (189). Furthermore, the facilities and the built environment in these cities have had a progressive evolution: 'The Games since 1960 have increasingly been used as a trigger for a wide range of urban improvements. In addition to the provision of large new sports stadia and facilities tourist and cultural facilities, parks and beautification projects were designed to enhance the city's landscape and environment' (200-201). In addition, Richard Cashman states that 'almost every Olympic city since the Games were revived in 1896, has some form of legacy whether it be in the form of buildings, monuments, art, galleries and museums, repositories and archives, stamps, souvenirs, memorabilia, plaques, and even street names' (1998: 107).

Furthermore, the author points out that the most significant reconstruction of Olympic Games in 1896 was the ancient Panathenian Stadium originally built in 330 BC with pure marble from Mount Pentelikus (107). The cultural Olympics are part of the Olympic legacy and the Olympic museums reflect the memory of the Olympic Games (Cashman 1998). The Olympic Villages also constitute an important part of the Olympic legacy: 'These buildings, full of monumental character and symbology, remain with us like a static defiance to city change, like loyal witnesses of the times and degree of development' (Millet 1997: 3). The Olympic Games leave 'a large stamp' on a host city (Cashman 2002: 5).

The city of Athens took over the organization of the Olympic Games in 2004 and Greece put forward the establishment of the Cultural Olympiad. The Cultural Olympiad consists of two value sets: a) Ecumenical ideals, at the heart of which lies the motion of globalization, in itself featuring the interplay of four sets: state and democracy, religion and equality, science and progress art and creativity and b) Democracy, Humanitarianism, Universality, Harmony and Olympic ideal (Hellenic Ministry of Culture 2012).

The Olympic Games have a 'positive contribution to the host area economy' (Veraros et al. 2004: 749) and they are 'a global event, not merely of supreme significance in the world of sport, but as a carrier of cultural meanings that are almost uniquely available to vast international audiences' (Bernard et al. 2006: 25). Athens projects were classified into three main categories: (a) projects related to built heritage, (b) projects based on innovative design of space, and (c) 'non-competitive' projects, that means projects that attempted to improve the 'functional dimension of urban space' as well as 'embellish existing public open spaces by means of conventional micro-scale redesign' (Beriatis & Gospodini 2004: 189, 195-196). The most important interventions were made to archaeological sites, historic buildings, roads and a large project involving the creation of the new Olympic village and sports facilities. The architect Santiago Calatrava has designed Athens' Olympic Sports Complex. 'The 2004 Olympic Games will work as a catalyst for the city to transform its landscape towards for the city globalised physiognomy' (Beriatis & Gospodini 2004: 197).

### **Olympic Museums and Olympic Studies Centres**

A result of the Olympic Games was the creation of the Olympic Museums. One of them is the Olympic Museum in Lausanne (1993), home of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The Olympic Museum, as an institution, supports the 'concept of culture, especially the arts, within the Olympic Movement' (Garcia 2001: 7). Lausanne also is the home of the Olympic Studies Centre (OSC), inspired by the founder of the Modern Olympic Games Pierre de Coubertin, which was created in 1982. Among its main missions are the preservation and diffusion of the Olympic patrimony, the facilitation to the access of its written and audiovisual collections, the enhancement of research, the promotion of academic activities as well as collaborations between Olympic studies centres and, lastly, the preservation of the global Olympic heritage (OSC 2012). Another important Centre of Olympic Studies is that of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (CEO), founded in 1992 (CEO 2012).

In Spain, the Barcelona Olympic Foundation manages the Olympic and Sports Museum (Museu Olímpic i de l'Esport, Joan Antoni Samaranch), which offers an insight into the sport universe, a universe without borders as a tool for social integration. In order to accomplish that, the museum uses advanced technology and enhances interactivity as means of promoting the Olympic values (Olympic and Sports Museum 2012). The museum is a member of the Olympic Museums network, which spreads all over Europe as well as the United States of America, where many Olympic Museums have been founded (IOC 2012).

In Greece, there are two Olympic museums, but with different content. The first is located in ancient Olympia and refers to the History of Olympic Games in Ancient Greece. This history is presented through original findings from the excavations in the area (sculptures, vases, inscriptions) and other artefacts related to the sports evolution through antiquity (Hellenic Ministry of Culture 2012).

The second is the Olympic Museum of Thessaloniki, which was established in 1998. Ten years later, in 2008, in recognition of the Olympic Committee, it was renamed 'Olympic Museum'. The mission of the museum is to conserve the record of the prominent national Olympic history and sport culture as well as to promote the cultural side of sport, which is materialized through permanent and temporary exhibitions, by which the museum communicates and interacts not only with the public of Thessaloniki, but also with the wider area. As a vivid space it motivates the public to participate and access the healthy side of athleticism (Olympic Museum of Thessaloniki 2012).

### **Conclusion**

The Cultural Olympiad, as an institution, was developed in the context of the Olympic Games and, therefore, expresses the Olympic spirit and the humanitarian values of antiquity, according to the declaration of Baron de Coubertin in 1896. Its political, social, philosophical and economical dimensions were indisputable. The Olympic Games show a remarkable evolution through the construction of major projects that will be touristically and economically exploited. It is common knowledge that the Olympic Games are connected with a program of cultural activities, which is developed during the four years between the Games. The basic aims of the Cultural Olympiad are to designate values for the development of human relations and also to add a permanent value to the Olympic Ideal. The legacy of the Cultural Olympiad for every Olympic city is a stable spiritual and economical value. The Olympic Games of 1896 contributed significantly to the designation of the Greek cultural legacy, whereas the Cultural Olympiad of 2004 was extremely extended and its cultural program covered the period before, during, and after the Games. However, the question is whether an Olympic city is able to maintain, after the Games, the 'international profile' it acquired, and whether it can use the Olympic facilities, re-evaluate them and integrate them in the city's urban life.

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