



Olympism and Corona

Dear colleagues in Olympic Studies,

In regard to the message sent by the Olympic Studies Center, we would hereby like to share our perspectives on the massive challenges faced by the Olympic Movement in the circumstances that led to and followed the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

We are the Group of Olympic Studies at the University of São Paulo, in Brazil, and we are composed of psychologists, educators, historians, journalists, and philosophers, who share a passion for Olympism. Our Group of Olympic Studies has been conducting academic studies on matters related to Olympism with a multidisciplinary approach for the past twenty years, and our focus has always been directed towards aspects that precede the managerial, systemic discussions that are prevalent in the field of sports studies. Instead of approaching the Olympic Games as a mere enterprise, or a business, we keep in the core of our analyses what we believe to be their most precious assets: the fact that they can be traced back to ancient rituals, and that thus far they have managed to carry along traditions and an imagery that transcend the event itself, adding to the consolidation of our humanity as such.

There are undoubtedly tremendous challenges ahead of the decision of postponing the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games: there are calendar issues, financial losses, contractual difficulties, political pressures, and in the center of it all the persisting uncertainty about whether it will be possible and feasible to deliver the Olympic Games, even more than a year from now. We have seen seemingly countless publications trying to gauge the size of the task at hand, speculating about possible additional unfoldings of the far-reaching consequences of this decision. What seems to have been left out of the

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conversation, which we wish to bring to the spotlight, is the symbolic losses that can be expected moving forward; while they may sound abstract, it is urgent that the transcendent nature of the Olympic Movement is brought back to its core in order to ensure the Olympic Games keep their uniqueness.

It is important to clarify that we understand and appreciate that the IOC and the Olympic Movement must play their role in ensuring that the Tokyo Organizing Committee (TOCOG) will not be carrying the burden of this postponement, or potential cancellation, alone. We also understand that immense investments (financial, emotional, political, etc.) were made to deliver that which had everything to be a memorable edition of the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, as the institution which spearheads the Olympic movement, the IOC must bear in mind that its role is not limited to safeguarding the business and political aspects of it; Olympism has thus far been one of the most solid traditions of human civilization, and protecting the integrity of this tradition is as important as protecting its financial health.

After their revival in the 19th century, the Olympic Games have consolidated, through integrity, consistency and repetition, a tradition that is strong enough to feel ageless. In its existence of over a century, the Olympic Games (and their imagery, rituals, and symbols) have outlived two World Wars, the Cold War, the rise and fall of nations, shifts in economic models and systems. When Baron Pierre de Coubertin set out to revive the Olympic Games, he identified the symbolic power of the tradition of the ancient Olympic Games. The Modern Olympic Games are based on a secular ceremony that lasted for more than seven centuries, from which many symbols and imagery have been incorporated. Through their rituals and traditions, the Modern Olympic Games became larger than life - which, however, did not prevent them from being directly and severely impacted by humanity's vulnerability to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Traditions, different from customs and habits, are conditioned to their invariability. Their invention and consolidation are a process of formalization and ritualization based on past events, enforced by repetition, and traditions can be re-signified as society evolves. Sport as we know it nowadays stems from England's industrial society, and the movement culture propagated in their schools. The

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British model may have inspired Coubertin, but it lacked the basis of tradition to be consolidated in a world marked by colonialism and aristocratic values. Any innovation, if it is to survive and be socially acknowledged and accepted, must be grounded on socially respected values. And this is precisely what the revival of the Olympic Games added to the sports endeavors of British aristocracy in the 19th century: ritualistic sustenance and a flair of traditions that emulated a past to which European society wanted to be proudly attached.

For ancient Greeks, competitions were more than just a means to an end, they were a vital principle. The value of a competition did not reside in the result it produced, but in the value that resided in the struggle itself, the ardor that took over the competitor during the supreme instants of the competition. Ancient Greek history walks hand in hand with the history of sport itself, and is intertwined with myths, tales of gods and heroes. For ancient Greeks, the Games were sacred, the closest platform of interaction with the gods themselves; not by chance, they were celebrated and named after the god worshipped in the location where they took place. Other sporting events were, on the other hand, just mere contests; they lacked the sacred enrapture that made the Games distinct. The Olympic experience, then, should transcend the competition, and the business surrounding it; that is what made the ancient Olympic Games unique enough to resist for centuries, and what should encompass every discussion about the Olympic movement going forward. Or are the Modern Olympic Games to become just another sport event, like many others?

As previously mentioned, we do not minimize the many financial, political and human implications that derive from the decision to reschedule the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, this decision stretches beyond such implications; it interrupts the tradition of what should be a sacred calendar. During the past century, this tradition was maintained through many disturbances of global proportions; the discussion now is whether this year will mark the end of this sacred tradition so as to tend to secular implications, or if the Olympic Movement will embrace such secular implications in order to safeguard one of its most important sacred traditions. Without this consistency in traditions, the Olympic Games risk losing its most precious asset: its immemorial flair.

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This argument is here briefly presented, as each concept and perspective presented above could have been presented with the proper academic endorsements. We understand, however, that the invitation to be a part of this discussion aimed at gathering a diversity of perspectives through abbreviated comments, and not by combing through various academic publications that are already readily available. We remain at your disposal to further this conversation and, should the opportunity arise, deepen the comments hereby presented.

Thank you very much for opening up this channel, and we hope Olympism will emerge on the other end of this crisis stronger and able to navigate through the challenges that amass day by day.

Warm regards,

Group of Olympic Studies at the University of São Paulo