

A CONTEMPORARY OLYMPIC DISCOURSE: SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

DIKAIA CHATZIEFSTATHIOU
IAN HENRY
CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY
LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY
dc130@Canterbury.ac.uk
i.p.henry@lboro.ac.uk

Abstract keywords

Olympics, Sport for Development, International Relations

Aim of abstract/paper - research question

This paper deals with sport for development and international relations within the context of the Olympic Movement, recognising this area as one of the contemporary discourse themes in, and engaging with, Olympism which are evident in the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century. This we take to incorporate a range of initiatives and projects relating to sport for peace, sport to promote the millennium development goals, sport for health, and sport as a human right.

Theoretical background or literature review*

The focus on low-cost, high impact humanitarian, development and peace building activity focusing predominantly on children proved remarkably attractive to the Olympic movement. Although IOC activity was evident with Olympic Aid well before the Salt Lake City scandal came to the fore, sport for development was certainly attractive in terms of the IOC's concern about its image in the wake of the scandal. In addition it played to the IOC's concern about the integration of youth, and maintained the IOC's centrality in what was an increasing area of activity, namely the use of sport as a development tool. As a consequence when Sebastian Coe in his presentation of London's bid to host the 2012 Games at the IOC Congress in Singapore in 2005 undertook (in what became known as the 'Singapore Promise') that if London were successful in its bid it would ensure that it would use this opportunity "...to reach young people all around the world and connect them to the inspirational power of sport", the British government developed with partners the development of the International Inspiration programme with the goal of reaching through sport 12 million children in 20 countries.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The current paper is part of a larger study which investigated the changing nature of the ideology of Olympism against the broader contemporaneous historical, geopolitical, socio-cultural and economic contexts. This was done through an analysis of related documentary sources, largely reports, correspondence, articles and speeches written by key actors of the Movement. The three actors / sets of actors and the sources relating to them are Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937), founder of the modern Olympic Movement; Carl Diem (1882-1962), close collaborator of Coubertin and initiator of many Olympic innovations (such as the torch relay and the Olympic Village); and selected speakers and visiting lecturers at the International Olympic Academy (IOA) between 1961 and the end of the last century. To some degree, we have made certain decisions about who exercises power over discourse by selecting our sources, Coubertin, Diem, the IOA speakers and so on. However the discussion of the critics of these sources also implies a consideration of oppositional voices and their efficacy. In terms of power in discourse we can refer to Links's (1982) formulation of discourse as (quotation translated and cited by Jäger and Maier 2009: 35) "an institutionalised way of talking that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power".

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions**

The discourse of life changing experiences delivered to young people in developing countries has been subject to criticism on a number of levels. Darnell (2007) in a study of Right to Play materials and interviews with personnel argues that there is an implicit post-colonial frame which portrays the provider (the West) as "benevolent, rational and expert" (p. 574) implying by contrast naiveté and dependence on the part of recipients, while Coalter (2010) points to the difficulties of solving large scale problems through small scale local initiatives and the tendency for evaluation to be used as supportive rhetoric for the NGOs and other organisations which promote such programmes. Giulianotti (2004: 356-7) points to the exporting of sports evangelism following its relative failure in 'civilising' the young in Western societies, which might be said to illustrate the limits of governmentality through sport.

The objectives of some funding agencies may also be mixed with the concern for the image of the funding body or its backers. The British Council for example has as a major aim the promotion of a positive image of Britain and British culture and such concerns will inform approaches to projects such as International Inspiration. Right to Play relies on positive publicity to sustain donations, as will be the case for many other agencies. Thus delivery of projects and self-reporting of performance will be subject to other pressures.

The depth and sustainability of programmes are also issues to consider. The International Inspiration programmes target to reach 12 million children which was achieved in 2011, calculated 'reach' on the basis of a young person having attended at least one event on one occasion. Leaving aside any difficulties in calculation, attendance (perhaps even passive attendance) at an event is unlikely to constitute a life changing experience. In addition sustaining projects beyond the lifetime of externally funded projects invariably proves challenging.

All this is not to say that truly worthwhile experiences are not generated for young people in a range of contexts but it does have a bearing on the way such programmes are discursively constructed.

References

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