

Carrying the torch: A decolonial approach on the Olympic traditions connections with the Eurocentric narrative of the Spirit

Daniel Malanski

Univeristy of Paris 3

danielmalanski@gmail.com

Abstract

Mega-events, like World Exhibitions and the Olympics, are modern creations. Such events' purpose and/or narratives have thus to fit within modernity so they keep attracting their audiences and justifying their existence. Some of Hegel's narratives over the development of mankind are shared by much of the western world. In one of these narratives, the Spirit attains a higher degree of maturity in Ancient Greece, is further developed in Rome and – after a long period of absence during the middle ages - has its renaissance in Modern Europe. Deliberately or not, De Coubertin mirrored such a narrative to reinvent the games in the modern world. In this paper, we will use a *decolonial* approach (Mignolo, 2011) to explore how the narrative of the modern Olympics somewhat mirrors that of the *World Spirit*. Our objective is to understand how and why hosting the games are seen as tokens of societal development, making emergent nations use the Olympics as a symbol of prestige to support their entrance in the concert of developed nations and/or of world great powers.

Keywords

Olympic traditions, Grand narratives, Modernity/Coloniality, *Weltgeist*, Emergent nations.

Malanski, D. (2019). Carrying the torch: A decolonial approach on the Olympic traditions connections with the Eurocentric narrative of the Spirit. *Diagoras: International Academic Journal on Olympic Studies*, 3, 113–131. Retrieved from <http://diagorasjournal.com/index.php/diagoras/article/view/67>



Introduction

Cultural events like fairs and parades are products of their age and societies. They carry embedded with them a wide range of purposes and narratives that were used to justify their inception. These narratives and purposes are, nonetheless, often expanded or revisited to justify their existence as the years go by. By the same token, our understandings of these events are also subject to the societies we come from, the time we live in as well as our personal experiences. Lyotard has argued that we live in the Postmodern era, an epoch in which people have shown an increasing incredulity towards grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984). Such a central feature of postmodernity, he argues, contrasts with his understanding of modernity – a post-Enlightenment age in which Western society brought forward comprehensive explanations of historical experiences based on reason, truth and progress (*Ibid.*).

As mega-events are products of modernity, they needed to fit within modernity in order to come to light and prosper. Arguably, one of the most popular international events of the nineteenth century was the Universal Expositions (Auerbach, 1999, p 1-2). As both modernity and world exhibits go hand in hand with the creation (and exposition) of the modern nation-state and its industrial development, international expositions were arguably the ultimate expression of the modern ethos: Walter Benjamin, for instance, considered the expositions to be “places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish” that “glorify the exchange value of commodity” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 169-170). A similar critic over this type of event was made by Sandra Pesavento: as for her “the universal expositions would not just be the edge of the spear for the internationalisation of capitalism as a system, as they would also materialise the universal dimension of the bourgeois imaginary” (Pesavento, 1997, p. 15). Karl Marx and Frederick Engels themselves were harsh critics of the bourgeois character of the world exhibits. For them, the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition was “a striking proof of the concentrated power with which modern large-scale industry [was] everywhere demolishing national barriers and increasingly blurring local peculiarities of production, society and national character among all peoples” (Marx & Engels, 1850).

If in the nineteenth-century Universal Expos began the era of

modern mega-events of global reach as means to the exposure of nationalistic narratives and undoubtedly became the world's main events of the genre - in the twentieth century - such a prominent position was gradually matched and, later, surpassed by the modern Olympic games. As the World Exhibits arguably served as a source of inspiration to the creation of modern Olympic Games educational internationalism (as a matter of fact, the games of Paris 1900 and St. Louis 1904 took place as part of their respective World Exhibits) the creation and further development of the two events were envisioned and fostered by members of the European elites of the *dix-neuvième* which shared similar backgrounds and international ambitions. It was thus natural that both events shared several similarities on their narratives and social meanings.

Among their similar traits, one could point out that World Exhibits and Olympic games are both international arenas from where modern nation-states can display their nationalistic narratives and thus strengthen their national identities. Moreover, one could also say that these events are organised in a way that global leading powers could peacefully show their upper-hand over their former colonies and their competing nations. What is more, they could also advertise their societal models and economic systems.

Nonetheless, both Expos and Olympics had their narratives deeply influenced by the *Geist der Zeit* of their epoch and by the *Weltanschauung* of their architects. In that respect, Sociology professor Maurice Roche is among those who share the understanding that Universal Expos and the Olympic movement “continue this tradition, typically developing and promoting their events using an idealistic discourse of universalistic and humanitarian values (...) derived from the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century ‘progress’ worldviews” (Roche, 2003, p. 198).

In terms of narrative, however, differently than the Expos, the Olympics' architects have searched into the classical antiquity a historical narrative to justify its existence as a western tradition of global significance. Therefore, whereas both Expos and Olympics had their narratives based on the idea that the events were catalysers of human development and progress, leading humanity to a better *future*, the Olympics connected its narrative to the classical past, thus working as a meta-narrative to western historiography in which is based the very principle of *Renaissance* due to the anthropocentric shift in Europe (i.e. the rebirth of western civilisation from the dark ages). The Olympic movement

has thus attempted to establish continuity with a suitable historic past for the games' narrative, making of the Olympics a modern *invented tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2013) symbolically related to the games in classical Greece.

It is precisely because of this Janus-faced narrative of the Olympics – that mirrors that of Western historiography (which divides the last two millennia of human history into classical, dark and modern ages) – that the games as a modern neo-tradition can benefit from a decolonial perspective¹ - i.e. an external standpoint, from the margins or an analytic standpoint “confronting and delinking from (...) the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 2011, p. xxvii) - in order to better contemplate the allure of the Olympics to non-European and emergent nations.

Objectives

In this article, we will discuss why the architects of the modern Olympics needed a grand narrative to justify the creation of a sportive educational culture of global reach as well as why such grand narrative ended up by mirroring the Eurocentric narrative of the *Spirit*. We thus want to address some questions regarding why an ancient tradition of classical Greece – and not from elsewhere in the world - was refashioned into the Olympic modern games in nineteenth-century Europe. We also argue that different Olympic sub-narratives and traditions – such as the torch relay ceremony - have departed from the main modern Olympics account, thus reinforcing the symbolic link between modern Olympic hosts the classical world. Finally, we will discuss the allure of such a narrative to emergent nations.

Discussion

Linking modern games to the classical world, the creation of a powerful narrative

Such a narrative to the modern Olympics neo-tradition has not come about *ex nihilo*. In the 1890s, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, considered to be the father of modern Olympics, was a “young man from the élite classes [who] could not ignore the ancient roots of civilisation” (Clastres, 2010, p. 9). For several years prior

¹ For more information on *Decoloniality and Coloniality of Power* see Quijano 2000, Dussel 2000, Mignolo 2008 and 2011.

to his famous 1894's speech², the Baron had unsuccessfully tried to implement physical education in French schools, as he had a favourable experience with its adoption in English institutions (MacAloon, 1981, p.52-70). His drive to do it so came out of the classical belief that "the successful development of physical qualities generally produces a happy equilibrium in the moral domain. *Mens sana in corpore sano*" (Coubertin 1887, p. 642, as cited by MacAloon 1981, p. 81). Such a belief was not unorthodox at the time since "an Olympic Zeitgeist certainly existed in philhellenic Europe, which had a strong influence on de Coubertin" (Clastres, 2010, p. 11).

In spite of de Coubertin's first failures in convincing the French education ministry to adopt physical education as part of the French school's curricula, he did not give up of his objective and travelled to different countries - such as the United States, England and, to a lesser extent, Greece - in order to gather further political and financial support as well as supplementary evidences on the benefits of sport education (MacAloon, 1981).

Nonetheless, de Coubertin's fortune seemed to have changed when he got in touch with the ideals of the ancient Olympic games and modern attempts at reviving it in Greece (Clastres, 2010, p. 11). The young aristocrat thus realised that he could use the Olympics revival as his champion for advertisement of the importance of physical education, making of the revival of Ancient Greece sports traditions not solely a valuable opportunity to build a narrative to the implementation of physical education in France but also a means to the development of sportsmanlike principles across the Western world.

The Olympics and the West: a Janus-faced rhetoric

As a result, Pierre de Coubertin and other members of the recently established International Olympic Committee (IOC), ended up by bringing forward a powerful narrative - well-fitted in the *Geist der Zeit* of the nineteenth-century and their peers' worldviews - to convince heads of state and Expo organisers to support the games as a sports event of international scale. Therefore, the IOC made use of the modern European narrative of history - which finds its philosophical embodiment on narratives such as the one of the world spirit – or *Weltgeist* (Hegel, 2001) - as justification

² De Coubertin's speech in 1894 at La Sorbonne is largely understood as the foundation mark of the modern Olympic movement. See Clastres, 2010; MacAloon, 1981.

to give continuity to an otherwise ancient Greek tradition which had not been practised for two millennia (Ruprecht, 2008, p.75).

In a nutshell, such a worldview sees modern Western civilisation as the natural development of Ancient Greece and identifies the anthropocentric shift in fifteenth-century Europe as a historical process that took the continent, and the world, out of the dark ages and set it into modern times. Such a narrative sees history as the coherent and rational development of the spirit as it governs “the rise and fall of nations” (Inwood, 1992, p. 274). Within such a narrative, Western Europe was the nineteenth-century recipient of the *Spirit*, which once appeared in Greece and then Rome, and had a civilising mission with regard to the rest of the globe.

Therefore, the modern Olympics were created as a set of modern neo-traditions that mirrored the Hegelian narrative of intercultural transition towards human development where the *Spirit* goes from one people to another in order to continue to evolve itself towards civilization and human self-awareness (Hegel, 2001).

Among the modern Olympics’ neo-traditions that seem to be influenced by the grand narrative of the *Spirit*, one may point out the need to connect the Games with classical Greece as a prerogative to justify its existence in modern Europe. As we have previously seen, the modern Olympic games narrative can be considered as a meta-narrative of Hegel’s *Spirit* because, similarly to the *Weltgeist*, the Olympics made its way from Greece to Modern Europe. The Olympic games are said to have their first incarnation in Ancient Greece. Then, the Olympics had a second revival (776 BC to 393 AD) in classical Greece – even though a part of this second incarnation has taken place under the Roman rule on the Peloponnesus - until its prohibition in 393 AD as part of Theodosius I imposition of Christianity as a state religion in Rome (Ruprecht, 2008, p.75). “After an eclipse of centuries” (De Coubertin, 1894) the Olympics were then finally revived in modern Europe as a result of the anthropocentric shift caused by the Enlightenment and further developed by the modern project.

The idea that the modern Olympics were inspired by - and represented a revival of - the ancient Olympics served as a natural justification for its existence in the modern world, a world in which grand narratives of human progress were used to legitimate socio-political and educational institutions (Lyotard, 1984). Moreover, the importance that the games had in Classical Greece,

as well as Coubertin's claims that "corporal qualities have been discredited since the Middle Ages" (Clastres, 2010, p. 21), worked as prerogative to its existence in the present as an aftermath - and a symbol of - the Enlightenment's anthropocentric shift and as an expression of the idea of continuity, linking classical tradition to the modern world.

Therefore, the connection between classic and modern intellectual traditions - or the connections and ruptures between what Western historiography considers to be the great cultures of the past and future as means of human evolution - is precisely one of the main characteristics of the narrative of the *spirit*. The Olympics, as a neo-tradition created under the modern *Geist der Zeit*, also encapsulates such an understanding.

As a matter of fact, Hogan is one of the authors who understood the Olympic tradition as a meta-narrative for modernity: "from the beginning of the modern Olympic movement, Olympic rhetoric has been Janus-faced, gazing both back in time to ancient Greece, long constructed as an exemplar of Western culture, learning, and the arts and forward in time to a world of change and progress" (Hogan, 2003, p. 104).

The Western bias over modern Olympic sports

A further example of the "Janus-faced rhetoric" of the games, that is in line with the Hegelian narrative of the *Spirit* development from one age after another, from a nation to the next, manifests itself in the origins of the constituent sports within the original Olympic programme and the further inclusion of other sports by the subsequent Olympic hosts (which was also necessary to increase the popularity of the games in non-Western countries and as attempt to consolidate the image of the Olympics as a universal competition rather than just European).

Before the first games held in Athens in 1896, Pierre de Coubertin was not particularly interested in ancient Greek sports. According to Clastres, Coubertin "favoured noble arts (fencing, riding) and sports that originated from England in the 19th century with their own established regulations such as rowing, boxing, running, football-rugby, tennis and yachting" (Clastres, 2010, p. 11). De Coubertin has, nonetheless, added a few ancient Greek sports into the original programme due to the influence of the Greek delegates on the IOC (Clastres, 2004).

In the search for the modernisation of the games, de Coubertin - on the one hand - privileged modern sports over classical ones, mirroring the idea of evolution of the spirit, while - on the other hand - he also privileged the already established sports of the nineteenth-century imperial powers instead of seeking a more balanced programme which would encompass the physical activities originated within other contemporary cultures from elsewhere in the globe.

As a consequence, such an initial predilection towards British sports resulted in the further enhancement of western European sports prestige, leading the so-called Olympic sports to a boost of popularity among the world's elites (it is important to note that many of these sports were already somewhat popular among the privileged classes of colonised nations of Africa and Oceania due to nineteenth-century European imperialism and that European culture was also embraced as elite culture in the Americas due to the European rule in the region in the precedent centuries).

Nonetheless, when it comes to Olympic sports, such an unbalanced relation between European sports and the sports of other parts of the world within the Olympic programme could be gradually amended as, until Barcelona 1992, host countries had the opportunity to suggest a sport to be included in the original Olympic programme through the appointment of a demonstration sport (events without official medals status) that could eventually make to the Olympic official programme³. Such an opportunity, the recognition of the importance of the host nation to the history of sports, was, however, just possible if a given nation was to host the games in the first place. Therefore, for most of the Modern Olympics history, once a country satisfactorily covered most of the IOC's Olympic hosting criteria and was awarded the games, this country was also entitled to make its contribution to the event's calendar, collaborating to the development of the games.

The Olympics as a time-marker capturing different ages' Geist der Zeit

Another historical characteristic of the games relates to their periodicity, the four years' time-span of an Olympiad. Roche

³ The Guardian. The Joy of Six: Olympic demonstration sport sports. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/01/the-joy-of-six-olympic-demonstration-sports>. Accessed on January 22, 2019.

explains that the four-year interval between each game generates a time-structure that is experienced by us as a time-marker (Roche, 2003, p. 222). In addition, the Olympiad dialogues with the narrative of the *Spirit* development insofar as it establishes a natural link between a particular year and a given Olympic host (I.e. Barcelona 1992, Beijing 2008 or Rio de Janeiro 2016) socially constructing the representation of a given people's *Spirit* – which is to be displayed through the Olympic ceremonies and the events' marketing material – and thus making of the games historical milestones within the western historical narrative.

Therefore, by granting world superpowers the right to hosting the Olympics, the games may also work as representations of the current international socio-political moment, capturing the *Geist der Zeit* of different ages. This can be exemplified by the Olympics in Berlin 1936 - when the world was on the verge of a second world war caused by the popular and military advances of ultranationalist regimes - as well as those of Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984, when the Soviet Union and the United States of America have boycotted one another's Olympics due to their socio-political divergences during the Cold War.

A further aspect of the Olympics that drinks from a Hegelian source of inspiration lies on Coubertin's understanding that the games were the “quadrennial celebration of the springtime of human life and do honour to the coming of age of each successive generation of men” (Coubertin, 1956, p. 53). Each Olympic Games edition should thus present the world with a new generation of talented young adults, as a means to pay tribute to each generation, which was responsible for the “immediate future and the smooth bridging of the gap between future and past” (*Ibid.*, p. 54).

The Olympic torch relay ceremony as a symbol of continuity between classical Greece and the modern Olympic host

Furthermore, many of the ritual practices within the games also seem to have been inspired by modern historiography as well as the Hegelian narrative of the Spirit. A good example of the reproduction of such narratives is the modern Olympic torch relay allegory - implemented in Berlin 1936 under the *Geist der Zeit* of ultra-nationalism in Europe - in which a flame is ritualistically lit by the sun in the ruins of Ancient Olympia and then taken

to the Olympic hosting nation to ignite the Olympic cauldron. The meaning of the invention of such a new tradition – which is generally attributed to the sport administrator Carl Diem – is multi-fold. According to the IOC, while “the knowledge, mastery and use of fire figure amongst the most important achievements of humanities. Its place in the beliefs of most ethnic groups is proof of this” (The Olympic Museum, 2013, p. 4), the torch relay functions “to herald the Olympic games and to transmit a message of peace and friendship to the people along its route” (*Ibid.*, p. 3).

What is more, the torch relay is also embedded with modern European symbolism such as the connection between classical Greece and post-Enlightenment Western society: “[the] choice of Olympia as a departure point emphasises the link between the Ancient and Modern Games and underlines the profound connection between these two events” (*Ibid.*, p. 3).

One may find further similarities between the developments of the Olympic torch ceremony and Hegel’s *Weltgeist*. The on (a) the torch being lit by the sun, “as if there was a continuity between men’s microcosms and the universe macrocosms” (Fernández Peña and Ramajo Hernandez, 2014, p. 712); (b) the image of light been taken from Ancient Olympia ruins (which also symbolises Ancient Greece as a whole) to the nation where the Olympics are held as well as the torch relay along the way between these two places, symbolising the long path travelled by the *Spirit* from the centre of the classical world to the current instalment of the modern world’s centre (i.e. the current Olympic city); and (c) the particular designs of the torches and the cauldron, the spirit’s new recipients, reflecting the cultural heritage of the people whose nation is hosting the event.

In spite of its message of brotherhood, in its first Olympic appearance (Berlin 1936), it was the torch relay symbolism as a token of the *Spirit* historical development from Ancient Greece to a new Germany which prevailed – thus being enthusiastically embraced by the Nazi administration (Perrottet, 2004). Regarding the matter, Perrottet tells us about the torch relay meaning in Berlin 1936: “with its aura of ancient mysticism, the rite linked Nazism to the civilized glories of classical Greece, which the Reich’s academics were arguing had been an Aryan wonderland” (*Ibid.*, p. 81). As a result, “the Nazi propaganda machine covered the torch relay slavishly, broadcast radio reports from every step of

the route, and filled the Games with the iconography of ancient Greek athletics” (Ibid., p.81).

Therefore, in spite of its present-day meaning of peace and international collaboration among nations, the torch relay ceremony may also materialise the myth of cosmically ordained civilisations through its set of symbols based on concepts of purity (materialised by the image of the fire being lit by the sun in the ruins of Ancient Olympia) and progress (the connection which is made between classical Greece and the host nation). Therefore - as a good share of the modern world has been subject to an Eurocentric biased account of the evolution of mankind from its primitive state to the inception of modern civilisation - emergent countries that want to consolidate their position as first-class members in the concert of nations may see on the torch relay ceremony a singular opportunity to achieve such a goal, at least, on the symbolically level.

The host country as the ephemeral centre of the modern world

What is more, the games also carried socio-geographical and mediatized aspects that reflect the Spirit narrative. Such a trait is based on the international importance that the city receives during the days that the competition takes place. Since its inception and the IOC invitation to “all the civilized peoples who claim to have roots in antique Greece to participate in the revived games” (de Coubertin as cited by Clastres, 2010, p.18) the modern Olympics only made sense with the participation of the international community (increasingly so throughout the twentieth-century and the subsequent engagement of non-Western nations within the Olympic movement).

Therefore, at every new Olympiad, a different city is traditionally chosen to host a new edition of the mega-event. For a few weeks, this city plays the role of a modern Olympia and, during this period, it physically becomes the *de facto* centre of the planet by receiving world-level athletes, chief of states and tourists from around the globe.

The worldwide attention that the Olympic hosts attract before, during and after the mega-event takes place is used and catalysed by the new technologies of media. Already before the start of the competition, events that are only indirectly linked to the Olympics taking place in the city tend to have a boost in the international

attention they receive (IOC 2009). Furthermore, “in the medium and longer-term, the communication process may be extended as the host becomes an ‘Olympic city’, the Olympics becoming part of its identity” (Moragas i Spá et al., 2005, p. 3).

Moreover, nowadays - with the present-day media possibilities - it is estimated that close to a billion people watch the event opening ceremony and, as for Beijing 2008, 4.3 billion people (or about 63% of world’s population) were capable of doing so (IOC 2009). Such enhanced visibility has catalysed the global attention that is given to the host city during the competition days and has changed how the Olympics are designed and advertised. What is more, the increasingly mediatisation of the games has affected the ceremonies aesthetics within mega-events, which have become more spectacular and visually-oriented (Bertho-Lavenir, 2012, p. 722).

For that reason, since Berlin 1936, the first Olympics to be recorded on video, and Tokyo 1964, the first time the games were broadcasted via satellite (Fernández Peña, 2016, p. 96), the ceremonies within this mega-event have become more and more mediatised, expensive and elaborated as the host nations see the Olympics as a singular opportunity to display their civilisation, cultural heritage and show a somewhat biased and vivid image of their *Volksgeist* to the global community. As a result, the host countries have increasingly shown their interest in utilising the occasion also as a means of displaying their previous and/or potential contributions to the world and the modern civilisatory project.

Examples of such agendas on the contemporary Olympic opening ceremonies can be found, at least, on the ceremonies of the last three Olympics. If one critically reflects over the ceremonies of Beijing 2008, London 2012 and Rio 2016, one will arguably notice that their openings have made references to their respective country’s past and *Volksgeist* by celebrating filtered narratives of their indigenous populations. What is more, they also used the occasions as a means to advertise their nations’ importance within the global scene – i.e. the role of their countries in the evolution of modern society and/or the potential contributions that their nations could give to the development of the *Spirit*. In doing so, the architects of these ceremonies have also, perhaps inadvertently, brought forward their perceptions of modernity and how they wished our future to be.

Therefore, in a sense, one would say that the Olympic ceremonies have come to replace in importance and global reach the World Exhibits as “a special kind of time-structuring institution in modernity” (Roche, 2003, p. 102) as well as singular opportunities to internationally address their nations in relation to the narrative of the development of modern society.

The games' allure to emergent nations

Finally, the Olympic games play a symbolical and practical role in the development of Hegel's narrative of the Spirit towards western modernity. According to Hegel, one of the essential aspects necessary to the full development of the *Spirit* was its transition from one people to the next. The same is true when it comes to the Olympic hosting and its relationship with modernity. Therefore, understanding the Olympics relation within a Hegelian narrative of the *Weltgeist* (Hegel, 2001) may be a way to the understanding of one among the reasons why nations usually take pride in hosting the event and the Olympics significance to emergent countries.

As we have seen before, the invitation to the first Olympic Games of the modern era was sent to “all the civilized peoples who claim to have roots in antique Greece” (Clastres, 2010, p. 18). In 1896, such an invitation was both a request and a flattery - but it nonetheless effectively meant that only western nations (i.e. the nations from Europe that directly inherited the spirit from Greece or overseas nations - with a recognised European ancestry and/or cultural values - which were thus, at least indirectly, touched by the *Spirit*) were to participate in the event.

Even if in the subsequent Olympics the invitation was extended to non-Western nations - in accordance to the Olympic principle of equality among different peoples and the intention to include all the world nations in the games, expressed by the creation of the Olympic flag in 1914 – until Tokyo 1964 the games had only being hosted by modern Western societies, which, within Hegel's narrative of the *Spirit*, could be considered modern recipients of the *World Spirit*.

Nonetheless, even after 1964, when a non-Western nation was granted the right to host the games for the first time, these nations were, in their vast majority, considered by the IOC to have achieved a sufficient degree of modernity or have undeniably

become important global players, enabling them to become part of the selective group of countries in which the Olympics have taken place.

One should not forget that at every Olympiad the International Olympic Committee (IOC) chooses a nation to host the games based on her degree of (western) development. Such a degree of *progress* is measured by a series of criteria such as finance, general infrastructure, and experience from past sports events; as well as the nation's willingness to receive the mega-event; and/or her current (or even future) perceived importance within the global stage (IOC, 2008).

Although such a selection is made on the basis of characteristics the IOC understands to be essential to the success of the event, on the symbolic level, the Olympic hosting is generally perceived - and, sometimes, public displayed - as a recognition of a given nation importance within the global arena and/or as a token that prizes the social and economic advances of a nation towards modernity.

Therefore, these two views over the meaning of hosting the Olympics - namely the games hosting as a confirmation of a given country importance within the global arena and/or as a sign of the western society recognition of a given nation development - may be one of the reasons why several emergent countries have shown their interest in hosting the event⁴. After all, the Olympics symbolise a given nation's success in its path towards modernisation and international influence. Consequently, as "emerging states, including the BRICS countries, attempting to wield soft power through hosting the Olympic Games only stand a chance of success to the extent that their modernities are consistent with a neoliberal paradigm of development" (Grix & Kramareva, 2015, p. 3), the prospect of hosting the Olympics can be also seen as a catalyst to the further embracing of the current model of socio-economic modernity (i.e. the development of the global market economy).

Lastly, for Hegel (2001), the world was divided two sorts of nations: those that can influence and further develop the *Weltgeist* or world history; and those in which the *Spirit* is absent (countries which play a minor role, if any, in the development of *civilisation* or human history).

⁴ From 2000 to 2020, countries such Turkey (5 times), Brazil (4 times), China (twice), Russia (twice), Doha (twice), Argentina, South Africa, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Thailand, Malaysia, Egypt and the Emirates have bid to host the summer Olympics.

Therefore, modern Olympics hosting - as a *prize* given to the nations which have achieved (or have emulated the achievement of) a high level of socio-economic development, modernity and/ or a fair amount of influence within the global arena – is a rite of passage for emergent nations that want to move from the latter to the former group on the eyes of the global community.

The theatrical representation of a nation's culture, history and folklore during the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies would thus be a way to imprint the hosting nation *Volksgeist* within the western imaginary, therefore contributing to the development of the world-spirit, human civilisation, and human self-awareness. In other words, the staging of Olympic ceremonies provides the hosting countries with a unique opportunity of presenting their version of local and global history, thus re-fashioning modernity itself in so far the content of these ceremonies are generally under the political agenda of the hosting nations.

Conclusion

To conclude our discussion on the perception that the revival of the modern Olympics found on the nineteenth-century narrative of the Spirit an optimal environment to its development and popularisation among international elites, one might say that the narrative of the *Weltgeist* – as well as the one used to the modern Olympics establishment as a global phenomenon - originated from the belief that western civilisation, as the spearhead of all mankind, achieved an elevated degree of development in Greece and that western modernity would be the natural continuity of such development.

Such an idea leads to the understanding that “global history, as told by Hegel, is ‘the history’ of all the inhabitants of the planet regardless their language or their sets of beliefs” (Mignolo, 2008, p. 42). For those who utterly embrace such narrative, modernity is an unavoidable global process for the general benefit of mankind that will eventually lead all humanity to a utopian state of existence. However, for its critics, such a narrative establishes the western European model of civilisation as the only desirable alternative to different societies around the globe (see Quijano 2000, Dussel 2000, Mignolo 2008).

One cannot argue with certitude that De Coubertin and his peers were familiar with Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit -

originally published in 1807 - and Lectures on the Philosophy of World History - published for the first time in 1837. One may thus attribute the similarities between the narratives of Hegel's *Weltgeist* and the historical account from which the modern Olympics drinks from to the nineteenth-century European elites' *Weltanschauung* (i.e. the understanding that Western European empires had a cosmically ordained mission to civilise the rest of the world).

Such a world view –one of the fundamental pieces of the narrative of the *Spirit*– was not solely used as a *civilisatory* excuse to the further expansion of European colonisation in Africa and elsewhere in the globe, but also as an allegory to modern mega-events as the World Exhibits and the Olympic games. The very success of the Olympic games as the most prestigious mega-event of the modern era can be largely ascribed to such a modern ethos inasmuch as the games materialised into a mega-event of global proportions the belief that the future of humanity lies on the further development and spread of western civilisation traditions and values attributed to the classical world.

Additionally, the idiosyncrasies of the host nation selection process are based on criteria that privilege countries with a high level of (western) development and that show a substantial interest in organising the event. Therefore, the IOC tends to award nations that have made sensible advances towards the fulfilment of the modern project in recent years. For this reason, hosting the Olympics is a matter of national pride in so far it grants to the hosting country the international status of modern state through its inclusion in the hall of Olympic nations, symbolic turning them into recipients for the further development of the *Absolute Spirit*.

References

- Auerbach, J. (1999). *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1969). Paris: capital of the nineteenth century. *Perspecta*, 12, 165-172.
- Bertho-Lavenir, C. (2012). Au-delà du folklore : le festival interceltique de Lorient. *Ethnologie française*, 42(4), 719-731.
- Clastres, P. (2004). La renaissance des Jeux Olympiques, une invention diplomatique. *Outre-terre*, 3, 281-291.
- Clastres, P. (2010). Playing with Greece. Pierre de Coubertin and the Motherland of Humanities and Olympics. *Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société*, 12, 1-9.
- De Coubertin, P. (1887). L'Éducation anglaise. *La Reforme sociale*, 13, 632-652.
- De Coubertin, P. (1894). Discours de Monsieur le Baron Pierre de Coubertin au Congrès de Paris tenu en Sorbonne. Retrieved from <http://library.la84.org/OlympicInformationCenter/RevueOlympique/1969/ORF22/ORF22n.pdf>.
- De Coubertin, P. (1956). The Fundamentals of the Philosophy of the Modern Olympics. *Bulletin du Comité International Olympique*, 56, 52-5.
- Dussel, E. (2000). Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism. *Nepantla: views from South*, 1(3). 465-478.
- Fernández Peña, E & Ramajo Hernández, N. (2014). La Comunicación en el Deporte Global: los Medios y los Juegos Olímpicos de verano (1894-2010). *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 19, 703-714.
- Fernández Peña, E. (2016). *Juegos Olímpicos, Televisión y Redes Sociales*. Barcelona: Editorial UOC.
- Grix, J & Kramareva, N. (2015). The Sochi Winter Olympics and Russia's unique soft power strategy. *Sport in Society*, 20(4), 461-475.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2001). *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2018). *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford UP
- Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. (2013). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hogan, J. (2003). Staging the nation- Gendered and Ethnicized discourses of national identity in Olympic Opening Ceremonies. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*. 27(2). 100-123.

- Inwood, M. (1992). *A Hegel Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- IOC. (2008). *Games of the XXXI Olympiad 2016 Working Group report*. IOC: Lausanne.
- IOC. (2009). *Games of the XXIX Olympiad, Beijing 2008. Global Television and Online Media report*. IOC: Lausanne.
- Lyotard, J-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- MacAloon, J. (1981). *This Great Symbol. Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Origins of the Modern Olympics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marx, K & Engels, F. (1850). *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Revue*, May-October. Retrieved from [http:// www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/11/01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/11/01.htm) . Accessed 23 October, 2014.
- Mignolo, W. (2008). Hermenéutica de la democracia: el pensamiento de los límites y la diferencia colonial. *Tabula Rasa*. 9. 39-60.
- Mignolo, W. (2011). *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moragas i Spà, M, Kennett, C; et al. (2005). *Olympic cities and Communication*. Barcelona : Centre d'Etudis Olímpics.
- Pesavento, S. (1997). *Exposições Universais. Espetáculos da Modernidade do Século XIX*. São Paulo: Hucitec.
- Perrottet, Tony. (2004). *The Naked Olympics – The True Story of the Ancient Games*. New York: Random House.
- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. *International Sociology*, 15(2), 215-232.
- Roche, M. (2003). Mega-events, Time and Modernity on Time Structures in Global Society. *Time & Society*, 12(1), 99-126.
- Ruprecht Jr. L. (2008). Greek Exercises: The Modern Olympics as Hellenic Appropriation and Reinvention. *Thesis Eleven*. 93. 72-87.
- The Guardian. *The Joy of Six: Olympic demonstration sport sports*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/01/the-joy-of-six-olympic-demonstration-sports>. Accessed on January 22, 2019.
- The Olympic Museum Educational and Cultural services. (2013). *The Olympic Flame and the Torch relay*. Lausanne: IOC press.

Author

Daniel Malanski has a PhD in Cultural History from the University of Paris 3 - Sorbonne Nouvelle (France) and in Audio-visual Communication from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain). He also holds a MA in Media and Communication Studies from Stockholm University (Sweden). The author researches themes related to the representation of national identities in international mega-events and Latin American cultural history.