

Olympism

Opinion

by Fékrou Kidane

You are certainly aware of the crisis that the International Olympic Committee is currently facing.

The disclosure to the media of a forged, unsigned letter by someone seeking to settle a score with leaders of the organizing committee of the XIX Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City in 2002 (SLOC), sparked off a disproportionate campaign against the International Olympic Committee.

This forged letter, which never was sent by SLOC, concerned the payment of a scholarship at an American university to the daughter of an IOC member, who died last August.

Subsequent allegations surrounding the selection of Salt Lake City as the city to host the Olympic Games blew up a storm, which continues to rage through the media. Even before the results of the inquiries were published, accusations were levelled without any thought to such fundamental rights as the presumption of innocence and the right to a hearing. Scores will continue to be settled at all levels, and for a long time, because ill-intentioned people can always be found to feed the press.

What is regrettable is the slur being cast upon the IOC members in general - including those whose integrity and behaviour are beyond reproach - by various persons. These disclosures, which to some smack of "conspiracy" and "influence-peddling", have deeply saddened all those who have devoted their lives to promoting the Olympic ideal. Scandal has become a part of our daily fare; it is a popular dish that can be enjoyed at any time. In these circumstances, anyone who has a score to settle, whether out of mean-spiritedness, rancour, jealousy, hatred or racism, can indulge. Tolerance, respect for others, fair play and human rights lose all meaning.

Unfortunately, our society is faced with the use of reprehensible methods that poison human relations. Corruption is

Open letter to a friend

used to obtain information, market shares, services, and to defend national, commercial and political interests. There is no lack of examples, both in the public and in the private sectors. Some sin out of ignorance and naïveté, negligence or poverty; others sin out of self-interest, fully aware of what they are doing. Very little is said of those who do the corrupting. The first to take an interest in them was the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which called the IOC a victim of corrupters. Whatever the reasons, elementary rules require that everyone respect the laws that govern our actions within the community. For members of the Olympic family, and for the IOC members in particular, this means observing the *Olympic Charter*, to which they all adhere of their own free will.

President Samaranch did not hesitate to take the necessary measures to clarify the Salt Lake City case. In a statement made to the press after the release of the report by the ad hoc commission on Salt Lake City, the IOC President said, "I am sincerely disappointed that IOC members were involved in the events revealed in this investigation and deeply saddened by their conduct. [...] We are resolute in our determination to root out the improprieties and to ensure that this never occurs again. [...] We will do whatever is necessary to protect the integrity and ideals of the Olympic Games, and to restore the people's faith in the Olympic Movement."

While presenting the report of the ad hoc inquiry commission which he pre-

sides, Richard Pound said among other things that, "I would also like to make it clear that we are not accusing any member of corruption or bribery. Nor are we suggesting that there was criminal conduct in these circumstances. These individuals are guilty of breaking the oath they took when they were inducted as members of the IOC and for bringing the reputation of the IOC into disrepute. Finally, let me also say that this is not an issue of geography, culture, or race and should not be perceived that way. It is a matter of individual conduct in an organization that places the highest importance on its members' personal integrity."

Despite what its detractors say, the Olympic Movement, led by millions of volunteers around the world, whose image people are seeking to tarnish with accusations of corruption - if, indeed, there was corruption - is a movement which is alive and characterized by responsibility and integrity, compared with the scandals that have smeared political and economic circles. The Olympic Movement strives toward the development of sport and the well-being of youth, although some have tried to claim that Olympic Solidarity's aid to developing countries, and particularly to the most disadvantaged, only exists in fiction. In order to be convinced that the contrary is true, one has simply to go into the field and see the benefits in these countries of this assistance, which helps to preserve the universality of the Olympic Games.

Alas, everything that is positive does not interest the press. As the saying

goes, "Good news is no news". In defiance of the absurd and insulting comments and demands for resignation made by people who have absolutely nothing to do with the Olympic Movement, or by opportunists, Samaranch will remain at the helm to continue his work of modernization. Only the IOC Session, which includes all the IOC members, can pass a vote of "no confidence", not these self-styled moral arbiters. The founder of the IOC, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, said "while there were blows to be taken - and to strike - I

remained joyfully at the post in which the continuing unanimity of your votes kept me." Samaranch can say the same.

But in the end, who are these people who have distinguished themselves through their arrogance, their aggressiveness and their misunderstanding of the facts, and who claim to uphold "moral values" of which they themselves do not know the meaning? Nevertheless, I am convinced that the IOC will come out of this crisis and take all the necessary measures to correct the weaknesses in its different

structures. You know that the IOC, which is in its 105th year of existence, has never suspended its activities except during the First and Second World Wars.

The IOC will continue its fight against doping in sport by creating an anti-doping Agency, and its fight against under-development by increasing its actions of Olympic solidarity to the benefit of the most disadvantaged countries, and by cooperating closely with the Organizing Committees, in order to ensure the success of the Olympic Games of the next millennium.

News flash

Israel

The 1998 annual session of the National Olympic Academy of Israel was held in the city of Eilat. Nahum Rogel, who was part of the Israeli Olympic team to the Games of the XXV and XXVI Olympiads in Barcelona and Atlanta in

1992 and 1996, respectively, and who is now training in preparation for the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in Sydney in 2000, was the keynote speaker. The session was attended by many young people, who enjoyed this opportunity to meet an Olympic athlete.



A young participant receives a certificate of participation from Gabi Kadosh, mayor of Eilat. Zvi Varshaviak, NOC president, is pictured left.

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The NOC president Vasil Tupurkovski recently presented the 1998 IOC Sports Ethics Trophy to sports medicine specialist Milos

Vucidolov, and the 1997 IOC Sport for All Trophy to Sokrat Eftimovski, a physical education teacher.



(From left to right) Sokrat Eftimovski, Vasil Tupurkovski and Milos Vucidolov

Olympism

by Yves-Pierre Boulonge*



Youth festival at the Olympic Museum.

The current crisis being faced by the Olympic Movement is nothing new. It might come as a surprise to some innocent souls, taking refuge behind a facile Puritanism; it might appear to excite the indignation of badly-informed or badly-intentioned journalists, always ready to cast themselves in the role of moral arbiters and launch into diatribes.

But let us be reasonable.

Back to the beginning

Neo-Olympism - the Olympism of modern times - did not emerge fully-fledged from the brain of a single man, however great he might have been. The Olympic Movement appeared with the first Industrial Revolution. From its birth it has been one with the warp and weft of liberal democracy. It is both a cause and an effect of society.

Moreover, it is not by chance that the first Games were sideshows to the international commercial fairs that hosted them. Olympism, a phenomenon of society that was born with the century and has continued to grow, has always been challenged by the avatars of modern society.

Coubertin was well aware of this when, in 1890, he began to advocate reviving the Games; in the face of encroaching nationalism and xenophobia (beginning in Athens in 1896), he intended the Games to be no more than an epiphenomenon of the whole enterprise. The nucleus of the enterprise - and this was for him the only means of countering aberrations - would reside in reforming the education of adolescents through daily education in Olympism. From the very beginning, "Coubertinian" neo-Olympism asserted itself as a humanism.

Olympism, more than ever

Lucidity and wisdom

Coubertin was not a dreamer or a wide-eyed innocent. From his first steps onto the public stage (around 1880), he realized that sport, which he wanted to be the cornerstone of his educational system, was being eaten away by the same ills that were rotting the life of society: racketeering, nationalism, chauvinism, xenophobia. With a virulence bordering on violence, he denounced the influence of money on betting-based sport, which was already sullied by the poison of drugs. The Victorian model of sport, as he had discovered it through reading and during trips to Great Britain, was not enough. He wanted to give modern sport a theoretical corpus - as had been the case in ancient Greece - to shelter it from the damaging effects of modern civilization.

This was why:

1. The Olympic Movement was provided with a "charter" [that particular word would not be used until later], which would be the concrete translation of a philosophical direction includ-

ing the humanist values Coubertin wished to give to Olympism.

2. The members of the International Committee for the Olympic Games (the IOC's original name) would be coopted from circles (political or academic) where the golden calf was not idolized.

We could prate about how the IOC's system of cooptation was based on the regulations of the Henley Regatta (in Great Britain). We know its limitations and its disadvantages. The system may be contrary to democratic common sense. It is nevertheless clear that the IOC, composed originally of men whose material needs were well provided for (such as Coubertin, who sunk his entire fortune in the IOC), was thus able to survive the disasters of the 20th century. Moreover, one has to concede that the Olympic Movement also survived because, back in 1894, it was provided with a philosophical framework, that of liberal democracy, which, although its merits may be debatable after the experience of this terrible century, is nevertheless the most acceptable form of government.

Reflecting upon this philosophical design is, of course, synonymous with reflecting upon Olympism, as it was conceived and as it was experienced.

What is Olympism?

It is an existential philosophy intended to ensure the development of psychosomatic harmony within an individual, and the coherence of society. As clearly stated in the Olympic Charter (Fundamental Principles, articles 1, 2 and 3), "Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind" (or, in other words, body, character and mind). To reduce Olympism to mere events of "body", to see Olympism as nothing more than the records and exploits of the Olympic Games, is to understand nothing of the philosophy of Olympism.

Hence the importance of ensuring that education of the "soma" is in harmony with that of the "psyche". Sport (the modern means of educating the body) would therefore have a place in the general education of mankind. But only a place. Coubertin made no mistake: he wanted, he demanded. he wrote and said - at all times and in all places - that the body must always surrender to the mind. And this we translate, to

paraphrase Rabelais, as "sport without conscience is but the ruin of man."

But for all that, sport is not relegated to the role of an auxiliary to the mind. On the contrary, and here lies the greatness of Coubertin and of Olympism, sport becomes the axiological foundation and moral vector of Olympism. The plastic arts, music, dance (the seven Muses) combine in a "harmonious bundle" to make up the corpus of Olympic education. But at the basis, there is the sporting ascetic.

What is the reality?

What do we know? Sport, a product that is bought and sold according to the market forces of the capitalist economy is, at the highest level, dependent upon the big international companies that, for some people, sponsor the Olympic Games and, to a great degree, define the financial equilibrium of the IOC and the international and national sports federation. The financial stakes are considerable. The festive, spectacular, profitable aspect of sport has two major consequences. On the one hand, sport as a consumer product is not seen by the general public as a means of education and culture. On the other hand, through the social and political importance it has acquired in society,

sport completely obscures the educational and moral aims of Olympism. For the majority of men and women of the planet, the Olympic Games are not a cultural event dedicated to the honour of humanity; they are merely world championships, with a less dense and more compact format. The artistic exhibitions and the magnificent concerts laid on by the organizers do little to change the reductive view of the spectators Deprived of a sense, Olympic sport, the fundamental element of Olympism, can no longer play the axiological role with which Coubertin and the IOC entrusted it.

An error of short-termism

Let us forget about those scribblers who only know how to make personal attacks. The error, today, in the face of corrupters and corrupt alike, would be to decide to throw the baby out with the bath water. The baby, contrary to what some people would have us believe, is in fact a fine gentleman who should be allowed to live.

It is worth repeating that the current situation is entirely to be expected in the life of a movement which is so inextricably enmeshed with the weave of society as is the IOC. The IOC of today, like that of yesteryear, is a phenomenon of society, and as such is powerless to escape society's tensions and contradictions. Its leaders are no more angels than anyone else. It is not by chance that the current scandal is hitting people from developing or economically crippled countries.

Once again, this problem is eternal. Let us consider briefly the following episode.

In 1936, Coubertin gave an interview for Curt Riess, a Jewish German journalist living in exile in the United States. An account of their dialogue appeared on 18 August 1988 in "Die Weltwoche". We learned that in 1936 Coubertin refused a payment offered by the Chancellery of the Third Reich ("I may be rather poor, but I am not corrupt," said Coubertin), and that he had been



Closing ceremony of the Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta.



Children from Nagano accompany singer Ryoko Moriyama.

offered "I don't know what in order to have the next Olympic Games in such and such a country" - offers he rejected with contempt.

What can one do when faced with the ordinary challenges of life?

Let us agree on the following statements:

1. The IOC, the International Federations and the National Olympic Committees make up an "Olympic system" which, although it may be cumbersome, has also proved effective.
2. Today, the philosophical meaning of Olympism has been totally obscured. The most striking example is provided by the Games which, for millions of television viewers, are now nothing more than a picturesque show. It is also clear (research has shown this) that the actors on the Olympic stage - athletes, leaders, including the IOC - are largely ignorant of the ins and outs of Olympic philosophy.
3. It is clear that elite sport today is rife with all sorts of ethical deviations, for reasons of productivity, and that it is difficult to ask highly qualified (but tired) workers to learn about and understand the finer points of Olympism. Neverthe-

less, it would be wrong to abandon these strong-willed men and women to their ignorance of the history and philosophy of Olympism.

4. The vast majority of sportsmen and women act out of nothing more than their own good will and seek to give a direction to their lives through sport, These are the ones that Coubertin was thinking of when he revived the Games, And today it is above all they (members of "sport for all" organizations) who are ready to listen to the humanist message of Olympism. It is through them, through the Olympic education that they will help to propagate, that the health of the Olympic Movement will be assured into the 21st century.

5. And finally the IOC, as guardian of the Tables of the Law, should give clear expression to its philosophical vision of Olympism and agree, by attracting the best minds of the planet, to open up this vision to constant criticism, a constant process of reformulation, because it is a function of real society.

Conclusion

The Olympic Movement has no reason to blush over the crisis shaking it today. Over the past century it has lived

through other scandals. It will confront others in the future. It has always come out of them stronger and more alive.

The Olympic Movement, woven into the social and historical fabric of the human race, is essential to the life and harmony of the human race. To deny this is to commit a serious error, Nevertheless, all crises are a signal for criticism and self-criticism. Today's crisis could be healthy; it could mean progress (in crisis = in progress) so long as the IOC focuses on and makes a determined effort to direct its educational activities towards the greatest possible transparency in the way it works, in its membership and in the discussions of its commissions. The system of cooptation should be retained as it has shown its worth over the course of this century.

The current crisis will help mankind toward greater understanding and peace if the IOC clearly states that its mission is educational and cultural, and affirms that, because Olympism is a kind of humanism, it serenely and clearly assumes its responsibilities to History, and thus to humankind.

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