

Art and Sport

ON THE CULTURES OF "CULTURE" DEFINITION AND OVERVIEW

First of all, Pierre de Coubertin actually had some very helpful things to say on this subject. Speaking both as a Coubertin biographer and as a professional cultural anthropologist, my analysis will consist largely of an update of what the founder already understood, and understood perhaps better than many of his successors do today.

Secondly, this is a moment of the highest practical importance with regard to the IOC leadership's working understanding of "culture." On the recommendation of the IOC 2000 Commission, the 110th Session approved critical reforms in the area of IOC cultural policy.⁽¹⁾ In particular, the Session approved the merger of the IOC culture and education commissions and the creation of a new professional Department of Education and Culture within the IOC administration. It is therefore essential that consensus be reached, as these new entities come into being, as to what the "cultural" mandate and portfolio precisely entail for the IOC.

Thirdly, IOC leadership and staff need to reflect on how their working concept of culture does or does not match up with those of other Olympic bodies, notably the OCOGs, and those of outside interlocutors, such as the academic communities, government culture ministries, legal cultural property institutions, and worldwide popular movements concerned with cultural identity and cultural rights.

In the brief time allotted to me, I can only suggest that the hegemonic or "default" conception of culture that still dominates Olympic Lausanne today may be dangerously narrow and seriously out of touch with the "cultures of

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"culture" dominant or emergent in other sectors and regions of contemporary world affairs.

If so, and there is no immediate reform, then the new IOC cultural initiatives and entities are doomed in advance to irrelevance and failure.

There is a certain classical notion of culture associated with a universalizing humanism of European origin: culture as "cultivation," culture, that is, as a quality which some human beings, human groups, and human creations are said to possess, while others do not, except perhaps potentially. Parallel conceptions are known in other civilizations, for example, in East Asia.

The association of such ideas of culture with class chauvinisms, racist nationalisms, and colonial imperialisms is now so well-documented and so widely-discussed that it is rare to hear them openly asserted any more. However, in milder, more superficially tolerant forms, the concept of culture as cultivation, - especially as associated with "educated tastes," for example, for "high art" - remains very much with us.

In the 1890s, Coubertin's concept of

culture was that of a universal humanist, whose colonialist views were mainstream and unabashed and for whom the world was not much bigger than Euro-American views of the world. But Coubertin's understanding of culture underwent an important transformation, such that by 1923, he could write the following in reaction to the European "belief in African inferiority." These peoples possess, for the most part, remarkable artistic attitudes. Their war chants and love songs are expressive, their rhythms original, their style figurative; certain of their languages are notable for their richness and suppleness. Some among them invented indigenous musical instruments; others carve ivory and emboss in gold in a manner which has awakened the vivid attentions of modern collectors. But that which is important above all is to penetrate the family organization which distinguishes them, their conception of life, and the secrets of the beliefs they profess. On this last point, it seems that fanaticism is foreign to their nature, and that, when it does appear, the responsibility for it lies with whites. (Coubertin, 1923).

Coubertin's judgment as to who, between Africans and Europeans, were the civilized and who the savages is obviously the most dramatic thing about this passage. But what is most of interest for present purposes are the explicit understandings of culture contained within it. Coubertin has thoroughly deconstructed the monolithic humanistic understanding of culture as cultivation into several different aspects and formulations. Culture is not only fine arts, but also folk arts, crafts, and music. Culture is language

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and poetics. Culture is also the logic of social organization, multiple conceptions of life, and systems of belief, Violence itself is cultural, here the intercultural production of colonialism, not of essentialist African or generic human nature.

True, the standards of judgement obviously remain those of 20th century bourgeois modernism in this passage (figurative expressionism, originality, inventive technology, secret beliefs... the "attentions" of Paris art collectors), and Coubertin remains innocent of that fact of modern linguistic science that no language as a whole can be said to be any more or less rich or supple than any other language. Nevertheless this text offers conceptual steps forward that one wishes all of today's Olympic leaders and officials had made for themselves, most notably the breaking of any

essentialist, constitutive, and privileged, much less exclusive relation between culture and the fine arts, The arts are most assuredly part of any people's or any movement's culture, but they are never the whole of it. Just so, the IOC culture commission and administrative department, and the Olympic Museum for that matter, must certainly concern themselves with the arts. But if their agendas are only or even mostly the arts, then something has gone terribly wrong. Formulaic expressions like "sport, culture, and education," heard so frequently in official Olympic circles, are profoundly misconceived, as Coubertin shows us.

Sport and education are just as cultural as anything else, and therefore all that "culture" could really imply in this formula is, once again, "the arts." And while the plastic and non-verbal per-

forming arts may have some functional value in drawing safer and less controversial attention across complicated cultural boundaries, they are never neutral. I have often wondered how many Lausanne Olympic officials realize that the wonderful artworks which bedeck Vidy or the Museum can also be strange, even alienating objects which do not speak at all to persons and communities who may be just as artful and just as devoted to Olympism as they are. (Perhaps, the recent scandals helped to bring about this recognition?) Lausanne, as it presently expresses itself, is a marvelous interpretation of Olympism, but it is a cultural interpretation and far from the only one. Speaking, representing, understanding, interpreting: such terms lead us to what is lacking in the properly multi-form but quite disaggregated notion of culture with which



Aerial view of the Olympic Museum and Park.

Coubertin left off. If the arch of universal humanism has been deconstructed, in what form can the separate stones of culture - language, art, kinship practices, belief systems, etc. - be reconnected into a larger conceptual whole, and one which is not Eurocentric in its very being?

This is the main intellectual problem which my own disciplines of anthropology and cultural history have struggled throughout the 20th century. I cannot recite this complex history of debate here. I can only tell you that for many scholars today, culture is best defined as the historically created and transmitted systems of symbols and meanings through which human communities make sense of their experiences. We live in a world of many, many distinctive cultures (incidentally increasing not decreasing in number) which are the products of and the resources for this common human business of making things meaningful, of imbuing our various worlds with significance.

As this sense of culture as a process of meaning-making encompasses all the particular cultural forms - from marriage rules, to ritual symbols, to business contracts, to art -, so too this concept of culture should be the intellectual framework, in my opinion, by which IOC cultural policy and Vidy offices and commissions conceptualize their tasks and organize their activities in the future.

Trying to assert a single normative, hegemonic interpretation of Olympic phenomena, endeavouring to "educate" the international masses into it, and even (god help us!) to "brand" it world-wide: this has consciously or unconsciously been the IOC cultural policy of the recent past, as I have observed it in my years of ethnographic research on the subject. Because it is based on a default understanding of culture that is not only not universal, but is highly

parochial in the real pluri-cultural world of today, this approach has increasingly alienated the IOC from other cultural centres and processes of Olympic meaning-making around the world. Is any more proof required than the shocking realizations made apparent by the IOC corruption scandals?

For example, the IOC was very pleased to publicize its studies showing that the reputation of the Olympic Games had not been tarnished by the IOC's difficulties.

The organization, apparently with sponsors and partners most in mind, was delighted to show that publics in many cultures mentally separated the Games from the IOC. How ironic, when these same results could just as easily be read as showing how utterly irrelevant mass centres of Olympic cultural meaning-making find the IOC and its own version of Olympic culture to be! Is there not some justice here? As the IOC and related central organs become less aware of and concerned with the rich and alternative cultural readings and performances of Olympism multiplying everyday in every corner of the world, so too much of the world today finds Lausanne Olympic culture just one, and perhaps not even a very interesting one among many Olympic cultural interpretations. If there were space, I could bring forward provocative and detailed evidence showing that this is certainly the way that OCOGs and Olympic Games host cultures generally perceive the situation!

If this diagnosis is correct then the IOC has, it seems to me, only two choices for its future "cultural policy." It can turn the new cultural initiatives right away back into the old ones, turn "culture" back into "the arts," and leave intercultural education, beyond this, to the standard "Olympic Academy" version of the world, all the while thumping its chest in the name of "universal cultural values" while really meaning "IOC

supreme authority." Or the IOC can understand that its new cultural policy must be a radically different one.

If the IOC Culture and Education Commission, the new IOC Department of Education and Culture, the Olympic Museum, the International Olympic Academy, and all of the other key agencies and sites abandoned their claims to being "fountains of universal truth" and instead set themselves the alternative task of becoming communicative centres and laboratories of multi-cultural exploration, where all of the different Olympic cultures assembled to endeavour to articulate to one another, and in their own ways and terms, the multiplicities of cultural understandings and symbolizations of Olympic meanings, then the IOC might have its world cultural relevance back, then it might actually be recognized as sharing the same conceptions and being involved in the same projects as the majority of culture ministries and movements in the world today. Then the IOC might actually know more about and come to sincerely collaborate with (instead of compete with) the far more effective and innovative cultural initiatives of OCOGs. Then indeed, maybe in future surveys, populations around the world might not be so ready to set "IOC culture" off to the side of both the Olympic Games as a cultural phenomenon, and their own rich and compelling Olympic cultures.

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1. The relevant recommendations are numbers 30-33 of the 110th IOC Session, published as a supplement to the 'Olympic Review XXVI-30', December 1999-January 2000, pp. 15-16.