

# A THEORY OF OLYMPIC INTERNATIONALISM

John Hoberman  
University of Texas - Austin  
Austin, Texas, U.S.A.

## Abstract

The Olympic movement has never been studied in a comparative manner. This essay interprets the Olympic phenomenon as one of several “idealistic” (as opposed to more purely practical) organized movements founded during the period 1860-1914, including the Red Cross (1863-), the Esperanto movement (1887-), the Zionist movement (1898-), the scout movement (1908-), and even the Wagnerian movement of the late nineteenth century. The similarities discovered in the course of such a comparative study enable us to better understand the origins of the Olympic movement, Coubertin’s function as founding father, the conversion of nationalist impulses into internationalist ideals, the role of movement ideology and rhetoric, the political behaviour of the IOC over the past century, and why internationalist movements sometimes serve as refuges for dubious political personalities.

The challenge of the comparative approach is, then, to generate a theory of how internationalist movements function- In addition to dealing with the topics noted above, any theory of these movements must also address their quasi-religious elements, claims to a salvational mission (including fantasies of political reconciliation), the problem of megalomaniacal leadership, differing approaches to the ideal of world-citizenship, the demonstrated transnational appeal of certain cultural media (music and sport), and the ethical compromises that are made to accommodate a diverse international constituency.

Comparative analysis of the Olympic movement suggests that it is best understood as a “right-wing internationalism” that has gone through several phases since the 1890s. The “right-wing” dimension is evident in the comparative context when we note that the early phase of the Olympic movement overlaps that of the Second International (1889-1914). During the 1930s, as a result of intense Franco-German collaboration, the Olympic movement functioned to a large extent as an adjunct of the inchoate Fascist International that celebrated the 1936 Berlin Olympiad as its major propaganda triumph. Drawing important ideological themes from the world of chivalry, itself a medieval internationalism, the Olympic ideology was almost entirely compatible with a Nazi Weltanschauung that included racial neo-Hellenism, a cult of youth, its own chivalric norms, and a cult of performance.