
PUERTO RICO IS NOT THE ONLY ONE:

Politics and disparity between the United Nations and the IOC membership

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How many countries are in the world? Anyone would think this might be an easy question to answer, because it should be a concrete issue. In theory, it would be enough to count them all.

Anyhow, the answer varies drastically depending whether we consider the numbers of members provided by the United Nations (UN), those given by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), or if we consider as such all those community of individuals who proclaim themselves nation-states.

When the 27th Olympic Games opened in Sydney, Australia, I was in New York City and, precisely, that specific day I took a tour at the United Nations, where I was informed that their membership consisted of 189 countries. That night, during the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, 200 countries participated. Then, thanks to a basic arithmetic operation, I asked myself, not only which were the eleven countries which were unaccounted for, but also how and who defines a country.

That is how I became more interested in the dynamics pertaining to the process of community of individuals becoming internationally recognized as nation-states. I made two lists based on the information gathered from two of the main international organizations: the IOC and the UN. Both organizations have their own requirements as to whom becomes a member, but they are extremely vague and ambiguous, which makes for a very arbitrary process.

There are three member countries that do not have a National Olympic Committee (NOC) recognized by the IOC:

- The Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean, with 52,000 people. They belonged to the United States and were admitted at the UN on September 17, 1991.
- Kiribati is an archipelago consisting of 33 islands in the Pacific Ocean, which was an Australian territory and was admitted on September 14, 1999.
- Tuvalu, was an English possession with 9,000 inhabitants, also in the Pacific Ocean. It was the most recent acquisition by the UN, September 5th, 2000.

I could not find out why those countries do not have yet their Olympic representation, but I assume that the reason is because of their recent political recognition, especially Kiribati and Tuvalu.

On the other hand, there are fourteen countries that have their National Olympic Committees, NOC, recognized by the International Olympic Committee, IOC, but are not UN members. I was deeply surprised by this number because, influenced by an insular attitude, I thought Puerto Rico was an exception, having sport sovereignty, without having its political counterpart.

After studying each of these countries' political situations, I found different patterns regarding their status at the international level. Some of them are remnants of the colonial system, specifically those situated at the Caribbean and in the Pacific beam. Other, such as Taiwan and Palestine are still undefined politically, at least using the definitions given by UN.

The Netherlands Antilles (AHO) is a group of islands in the Caribbean, including Curacao and Bonaire. Their NOC was founded in 1931 and that same year the IOC gave them recognition, even though their Olympic debut had to wait until 1952 in Helsinki, Finland. Their first Olympic medal was in 1988 in Seoul, South Korea and was a silver medal in board surfing.

Aruba (ARU) used to participate under the Netherlands Antilles flag until 1986, when they started to do it under their own, because their NOC was recognized the year before. Their Olympic debut was in 1988 in Seoul and still has not got any medal. This island of 69,000 people is a Dutch autonomous territory.

The so-called American Samoa (ASA) is a United States unincorporated territory in the Pacific Ocean. In 1987 the IOC recognized it and they debuted a year later in the Seoul Olympics. Until now they have not won any medals.

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Bermuda (BER) is an English Caribbean island of 60,000 inhabitants. Their Olympic debut was in 1936 in Berlin, Germany, with a swimming team. Its only Olympic medal was bronze in boxing in 1976 Olympics in Montreal, Canada.

The Cayman Islands (CAY) is a Western Caribbean English colony, which has its Olympic Committee since 1973. Their Olympic debut was in Montreal in 1976.

Cook Islands (COK) is an archipelago of fifteen islands in the Pacific Ocean, which were a New Zealand colony, although they are now "almost independents." The IOC recognized them in 1986 and they debuted in the 1988 Olympic Games.

Guam (GUM) is a USA territory with 145,000 inhabitants. In 1976 founded its National Olympic Committee and ten years later was recognized by the IOC, debuting in 1988 in the Winter Olympics.

Hong Kong (HKG) was an English colony with six million people, that now belongs to the People's Republic of China. In 1950 Hong Kong formed its NOC and since then has participated in the Olympic program. In 1996 it won its first Olympic medal and it was by a woman in windsurfing.

United States Virgin Islands (ISV) comprehends three islands: Saint Croix, Saint Thomas and Saint John and have 100,000 inhabitants. ISV created its NOC in 1980, being recognized by the IOC two years later. Its Olympic debut was in 1984 in Los Angeles.

The British Virgin Islands (IVB) used to be an English colony, now an overseas territory of the United Kingdom. In 1980, created their National Olympic Committee, recognized two years later by the IOC and debuting in Los Angeles in 1984. They are still waiting for their first Olympic medal.

Palestine (PLE) has a brief Olympic history. When in 1993 the Palestinian people signed a peace pact with Israel, they created the Youth and Sport Minister, but because of the limited space and the chaotic situation in which they live, they have not been able to develop sports and other recreational activities. Their most common sports are basketball and soccer, which they even practiced in the refugee's camps. In the same 1993 they created the Palestinian Olympic Committee, recognized by the IOC. Their Olympic debut was in 1996 in Atlanta. They have not yet won medals.

Switzerland is a very unusual case. It has been the home of the International Olympic Committee and the Olympic Museum since the 1915. Besides Switzerland hosted the Winter Games in 1928 and 1948. Switzerland was not a member of the United Nations, and like the Vatican, was a permanent observer. Recently, on March 3 of the current year, they voted in favor of becoming a UN member in a referendum. Later, on last September, they became the 190th member of the United Nations. In the last Olympic Games in Sydney, Switzerland won nine medals (1-6-2).

Taiwan, better known within the Olympic movement as Chinese Taipei (TPE), is a territory that belongs to the People's Republic of China since 1949. Due to its complex political situation and the international community recognition, its Olympic participation, as China, has been uneven. In 1956 Taipei participated as the Republic of China in Melbourne, Australia. In these Olympic Games China did not participate, because of Taipei's Olympic recognition. In 1960 Taipei created its own National Olympic Committee and the IOC recognized it. That same year they participated in Rome, Italy as Taiwan/Formosa. In the next three Olympic Games (1964, 1968, and 1972) Taipei participated as the Republic of China. In the 1976 Olympics in Montreal they did not compete because the international community had already recognized China (and its name). That year they had reconstructed their National Olympic Committee. The IOC recognized the Chinese NOC in 1979 and their Olympic debut took place in the 1980 Winter Games in Lake Placid, New York. A year later Taipei accepted to participate as Chinese-Taipei, as they had done until present, participating simultaneously with China. Its first Olympic medal was in 1968 in Mexico and was a woman in Track and Field. In Sydney Taipei won five medals (0-1-4).

Puerto Rico (PUR) is another country whose Olympic participation has been a complex one, competing under flags of the United States, Puerto Rico, both and the IOC. Its Olympic debut was in 1948 in London, England. Because its present political status, a Commonwealth with the United States, was not yet constituted, Puerto Rican athletes competed with two flags: the USA and another with a Puerto Rican shield. In 1952, during the Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland, when the Commonwealth was approved, the Puerto Rican flag was hoisted, and this flag and the national anthem have been used since then. Puerto Rico won its first Olympic medal on its debut in 1948 in boxing and, until now has won six medals, all in this sport.

While doing this research, I found out that this has been a constantly changing situation, both at the UN and the IOC, but always keeping mostly the same amount of members, because these organizations work together in some of the cases. For example, after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the rest of the socialists' European countries, the UN recognized between 1991 and 1993 16 of these countries and so did the IOC, around one year later. But in other cases, such as the fourteen listed above, the IOC has recognized these countries and provided them a space at the international community, regardless of the UN considerations or rules.

The relation between the international political system and the games dated back to the Ancient Games, when the political system in Greece was city-states, and only those could host the Games. When the Olympic Games were revived in 1896 by the influence of Pierre de Coubertin, it was the time of the decline of the empires and the beginning of the nation-states as we know them today, which means, in theory, one nation represented in one state. The first Games were under this political system, some empires, some nations and the beginning of the nationalism in Europe. Actually, the host country, Greece, used the Games politically, as a

means of national unity in their ongoing fight against the Ottoman Empire. Through all these years of Modern Olympic Games we can trace the political history of our century, passing through the nation-state system and what some called its decline on the globalization era, because of the migrations and heterogeneous states. Maybe we can see this crisis reflected in the ambiguity of the NOCs and in some of the exceptional cases of the last decades, such as the Soviet Union and East Timor, one representing the breaking of a nation-state and the other, the creation of a new one, both tendencies, maybe contradictories, representative of our contemporary times. In the era in which we are living, there are both breaking and creations of new nation-states, both an increase of nationalism and, because of globalization, internationalism, cosmopolitanism, or mixing of cultures. Because of the division of the Soviet Union and the fall of their socialist block, there was a huge increase of the amounts of nation-states in the past decade (reflected both in the IOC and the UN), resulting from the division of other nation-states. But there is also an increase of what is called ethnic-nationalism, which usually occurs within nation-states and promotes the creation of other states according to their nation. This paradox between nationalism and the internationalism of the globalized world is reflected clearly in the Olympic movement, especially in their political body, the IOC, maybe better than in the UN.

In the past Olympic Games, 200 countries participated. Among them, the only one that did not compete although having a NOC, was Afghanistan, because it was sanctioned by the IOC, for implementing Islamic laws to sport. Afghanistan is temporarily banned from the IOC, its NOC not even appears listed in the IOC web page.

On the other hand, there was a representation of East Timor, whose people voted in favor of independence from Indonesia on August, 1999. East Timor consists of a group of islands that were a Portuguese colony until 1975, when they were invaded by Indonesia. Thanks to a UN incentive, especially promoted by the Secretary General Kofi Annan, the IOC acceded to let them participate in Sydney, with the Olympic flag and under the name of the Independent Olympic Athletes (IOA). In this way, four Timorese athletes debuted in what constitutes the first recognition by the international community to their national sovereignty. This has not happened since 1992, when a group of Yugoslav athletes participated in the Barcelona Olympic Games, as "Independent Olympic Participants." Yugoslav, but not its athletes, was sanctioned by the UN because its aggressions against Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In these same Games, the recently dismantled Soviet Union participated as the "Common Independent States." Another moment in which we had athletes not representing nation-states was in 1980 in Moscow, Soviet Union, when because of the United States-inspired boycott, there were around 20 nations participating under the Olympic flag.

The examples of Yugoslavia and East Timor show how the UN, as a representative of the "official international political community" influences the IOC recognizing decisions, which introduces a political dimension to the Olympic movement. Not surprisingly, because when we talk about competition between nations, states or countries, we are using political categories, that define, exclude and delimit. Also, the UN intervention in both cases broke with the tradition that athletes represent nations and this may be a dangerous precedent because in other situations, mostly during boycotts, independent athletes have asked to compete as so and the IOC has declined it. The relation between the UN and the IOC is another huge topic that needs to be deeply addressed and researched in another paper. The relation between these two bodies has been growing in the past years, under the mandate of Kofi Annan, and Juan Antonio Samaranch, former President of the IOC. There are many projects together, such as the Olympic Truce, which was an ideal of the Ancient Games and it was revived in 1995, embraced by both the UN and the IOC. The IOC relations with the UN are made through the IOC Department of International Cooperation, directed by Fekrou Kedane. For example, since the Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996, the UN flag is present in the Games, and in Sydney Kofi Annan sent a message which was presented in the venues. This may not be a strange relation, considering that the values and goals of both organizations are similar. But also there is an inexplicit issue on which is the main international organization and who rules and decides at the time of recognizing a nation as a state. The IOC, although is simultaneously part and reflection of the established international order, is not just a product and passive receptor of it, but an active agent. Actually, it was the first transnational body, created at the end of the nineteenth century, antedating the League of Nations, what later became the UN, by over two decades.

This issue of the nation-state and the nations as states in sports goes back to the origins of the games and Pierre de Coubertin himself. In the Ancient Games, only Greek citizens could participate as athletes. Then, when the Games were revived, Coubertin's internationalism influenced, therefore in the first Olympic Games (1896, 1900, 1904, 1908) only individuals participated, there was no competition between nations. This was introduced in 1912 in Stockholm, Sweden, when also nationalism was increasing in Europe, preparing the arena for the First World War and the creation of the nation-state system. It was the debut of nations, flags and national anthems, also the moment when the nation became the participating unit in the Olympic Games, displacing the individual competitors as just part of it. This created some problems with nations such as Finland and Bohemia, both part of empires, the Russian and Hapsburg, respectively. When both nations asked for their participation and their empires protested, Coubertin proclaimed that they had the right to participate because they were nations and "a nation is not necessarily an independent State."¹ In order to justify his own political theory, he proclaimed that "there is an athletic geography that may differ at times from political geography."² He also said that the spirit was "all games, all nations." In 1912, Bohemia participated with both flags and under the name Bohemia-Austria and Finland, although entered its own team, in case of victory, it was the Russian flag the one that had to be raised.

All the examples presented from the past Olympic Games in Sydney, showed that there is still an "athletic geography." We had 199 "nations" participating in Sydney, but we know that they were present because their NOCs were recognized by the IOC and that there are many more nations in the world which are not states, such as Catalonia. In May 29, 1987, the Catalanian Parliament approved the creation of the Catalanian Olympic Committee (COC) and in March 19, 1991, asked its admission to the IOC. The purpose was to participate in the Olympics in Barcelona in 1992, but the IOC rejected, because they did not fulfill the requirements. Which requirements? Is Puerto Rican's "nationhood" more recognized as unique than that of the Catalonians? What will happen if all the nations in the world create their own states? What if the IOC continues to recognize nations regardless of their political situation? On the other hand, there may be more radical positions, why an international event organized on nation-states, when these are so amorphous and heterogenous and overlap on each other? All these create, and have created, concrete situations, such as gigantism, the amount of nations in the Games, among other problems, which have strong political implications. This also represents, in a very peculiar and often not discussed way, all the current theoretical debates on what constitutes a nation, who defines or imagines it, what are the possibilities of a transnational political order, etc.

What started as a curiosity, ended as a project of some days and possible a thesis topic, that still leaves me with many doubts. It is evident that the IOC is much more flexible at the moment of "recognizing" a country as sovereign, allowing it to have representation in the Olympic international community face to face with the other countries of the world. The Olympic Charter, Chapter 4, Article 34 states that " 'country' means an independent State recognized by the international community;"³ this is a vague definition. The Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) expresses that "although most NOCs are from nations, the IOC also recognizes independent territories, commonwealths, protectorates and geographical areas..."⁴ These are examples that Coubertin's "athletic geography" is expressed on the Olympic ideals and documents. On the other side, the UN has other considerations, not always less arbitrary, at the moment of determine who has the right to be recognized as a nation-state. In the Charter of the United Nations, Chapter II, Article 4-1 says that " membership is open to all other peace-loving states which accept the obligations contained in the present Charter..."⁵ And if we take into consideration all those who self proclaim themselves as countries, the number would probably be larger.

In conclusion, it is still an embracing topic and source of multiple research, because it includes issues such as nationalism, sovereignty, citizenship, national and cultural identities, and international legitimacy, among others. An example of how dynamic this issue is, is that since I first wrote this essay, two new nations have been added as members of the United Nations, Switzerland (September 10, 2002) and East Timor, who was just accepted officially as the 191th member of the UN as Timor-Leste on September 27, 2002. Meanwhile, for me these past Olympic Games were almost a course in Geo Politics, besides a sportive banquet.

Table 1

IOC not UN

Netherlands Antilles
Aruba
American Samoa
Bermuda
Cayman Islands
Cook Islands
Guam
Hong Kong
USA Virgin Islands
British Virgin Islands
Palestine
Puerto Rico
Taiwan

UN not IOC

Kiribati
Tuvalu
Marshall Islands

UN not Sydney

Afghanistan

Endnotes

- 1 Pierre de Coubertin, *Olympism Selected Writings*. (Switzerland: International Olympic Committee, 2000, pp. 590).
 - 2 Coubertin, 590.
 - 3 Olympic Charter, 2000, Chapter 4, Article 34.
 - 4 <http://www.olympic.org/uk/organization/noc>
 - 5 Charter of the United Nations, Chapter II, Article 4.
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