

THE IOC GEOPOLITICS IN SOUTH AMERICA, 1896-1936



By Lamartine P. DaCosta

In 1990, speaking in the opening session of the 'Sport... The Third Millennium' International Symposium - Québec, John MacAloon advised that, in the future, Olympic leaders and scholars would have to give a higher priority to both diplomacy and mutual respect when international sport relationships were involved.¹

Although MacAloon's focus referred to present-days, it is important to point out that Pierre de Coubertin, back in 1911, had already proposed a *géographie sportive qui peut differer parfois d'avec la géographie politique*². In more precise terms, Coubertin's sport geography was contextualized in the 'all games, all nations' doctrine, in which sports practiced by different cultures prevail over national boundaries.³

Coubertin's perspective, therefore, approached a more recent interpretation of geography related to sport, in which sport sociologists and historians consider both space and location as focal points of their studies⁴. MacAloon, on the other hand, drew on a geopolitics based on cultural relativism when he set up future perspectives for both sport and Olympism. In his analysis, the 'world culture' expression becomes relevant once the "deepest commitment of Olympism to intercultural understanding and mutual respect to proceed in the 21st century"⁵ is enhanced.

Assuming that MacAloon's Olympic geopolitics is similar to Coubertin's sport

geography in respect to the agglutinative role of politics, we might otherwise presuppose that there has been a duality in terms of the IOC political maneuvers while treating different cultures and geographical spaces in worldwide perspectives. In other words, this conjecture stands as an IOC sport geopolitics that would have been mostly developed as a global expansion of the Committee's influential power rather than a diplomatic means to improve the relationships among sport organizations from different cultures additionally to local sport developments.

This essay aims at providing a historical revision on IOC's interventions in practice regarding its global political interests. As an empirical support to this analysis, we intend to, at first, focus briefly on South America as a case study, starting from Pierre de Coubertin's interpretations and resulting interventions on the sport politics of that continent during the first half of the 20th century.

Coubertin - historian and geographer

The initial idea of Olympism as conceived by Coubertin had some undeniable influences from the history of sport, as the restorer of the Modern Olympic Games himself emphasized in his 1915 writings⁶. When Coubertin, the historian, adopted a geographer's point of view, cultural singularities from a certain region or country were explored through sport.

From Coubertin's extensive published work, therefore, Boulongne et al. (1998) listed forty

¹ MacAloon, J. J., The turn of two centuries: sport and the politics of intercultural relations. In Landry, F., Landry, M. & Yerlès (eds), *Sport...The third millenium*. Les Presses de l'Université Laval, Sainte-Foy, Quebec, 1991, p.36.

² Coubertin, P., *Géographie Sportive*, *Revue Olympique*, avril 1911, pp. 51 - 52. In Mueller, N. (ed), *Pierre de Coubertin. Textes Choisis, Tome II - Olympisme*. Weidmann, Zurich, 1986, p. 452.

³ Coubertin in this text emphasized that even the IOC had no authority to surpass the fundamental rule of "all games, all nations".

⁴ Perhaps the best known text in this respect is the John Bale's volume "Sport, Space and the City", Blackburn Press, London, 1993.

⁵ MacAloon, J.J., *Op.Cit.*, p. 38.

⁶ See Boulongne, Y., et al., *Mieux Connaître... Pierre de Coubertin*. Comité Français Pierre de Coubertin, Paris, 1998, p. 12.

articles on history and world perspectives, related to countries such as Ethiopia, Bulgaria, Australia, South Africa, Finland, Russia, etc.⁷ Also in this group, regions such as Europe, Oceania, Africa, Mediterranean, Arab world, German empire, Hispanic world and South America were included, the latter deserving from Coubertin a 27-page-brochure called 'A travers l'Histoire Sud-Américaine' (Plon-Nourrit, Paris, 1916)⁸.

In this context, we might as well forward the assumption that Coubertin was strategically and culturally interested in South America, which may be seen by the insertions found in his writings when considering IOC's continental relationships. To begin with, it is noteworthy that Coubertin reported in his opening speech at the 1923 International Olympic Committee Annual Session (Rome) the results of the six months work of diplomatic visits in Latin America by IOC's vice president, saying that "this has brought to us the best of superb perspectives through which such a universality of the Games is confirmed"⁹.

Coubertin's auspicious comments are based on the then effective IOC policy that would make the Olympic movement become universal through Regional Games. But he also continued to pay individually attention to affiliate countries as formalized by Coubertin himself in an article he wrote for the 'Revue Olympique' in January 1913. In this article he evaluates the Olympic movement after the Olympic Games held in Stockholm in 1912¹⁰. In another article, 'Le Projet de Olympie Moderne et l'Avenir de Lausanne', a brochure from 1918, Coubertin includes the South

American continent as part of his expansion plans, naming it as 'Les Etats de Amerique du Sud'¹¹. The same designation may be found in 'L'Amateurisme au Congrès de Prague', a 1925 writing which makes a cultural distinction between the 'Latin' sport and the one practiced by those countries which have had an English influence¹².

Aside from the controversy between 'Latin America' and 'South America', the Baron was often somehow connected with that continent either by celebrating people or judging values, as it may be seen in the following notes: in 1894 he refers to 'Dr. Zubiaur' as being the representative of South America' among the 79 delegates from 13 countries responsible for the IOC creation¹³; in 1901 he pays a homage to Santos Dumont, who had Brazilian nationality, for the first Olympic Certificate granted to Olympic sport personalities¹⁴, in 1904, writing about a shooting competition held in Lyon, France, he makes an apologia for one of the participant countries: *très sportive l'Argentine*¹⁵, in 1909, as far as how the Olympism is promoted, he mentions Mexico and Argentina, praising their 'intelligent ecletism'¹⁶, in 1912 he emphasizes the good perspectives presented when Chile joined the Olympic movement, stating that 'du Chile on ne peut dire encore qu'une chose, c'est que la question l'agite'¹⁷.

Those expressive comments, very typical of Coubertin's 'sprit de finesse', achieved their highest level during the 1914 Congress in Paris, when the five entwined rings in five different colors were presented as the Symbol of the Movement. On this occasion, after he had presented the Olympic rings, Coubertin

⁷ Ibidem, p. 4.

⁸ Besides Boulongne's list, a reference on this brochure is found in *Textes Choisis - Tome III, Op. Cit.*, p. 808.

⁹ *Textes Choisis - Tome II, Op.Cit.*, p.400.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 663.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 740.

¹² Ibidem, p. 589.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 327.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 210.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 658.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 209.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 664.

talked over some geographical distribution which revealed his universal purposes¹⁸. “The blue and yellow from Sweden, the blue and white from Greece, the three-colored French, British, American, German, Belgian, Italian, Hungarian, the yellow and red from Spain, close to the innovations from Brazil and Australia and close to the old Japan and the young China. This is indeed an international badge”.

The geopolitics of regional Games

In retrospective, the Latin American Games, held in September 1922, were actually a South American sport event included in the International Exhibition of Rio de Janeiro of that year. As such, those Games may have their impact assessed through two sources of information from local archives: the programs of the 1922 Exhibition events filed in Rio's Historical and Geographic Institute¹⁹ and the report from the Physical Education National Commission of Uruguay, published in the 'Uruguay Sport', its official magazine, in October 1922²⁰. In both documents, the period which was given most emphasis goes from September 6 through September 16, 1922.

By cross comparisons, it was acknowledged that Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay attended the event as representatives of the Latin American continent to compete for different types of sports such as athletics, boxing, tennis, fencing, swimming, springboard diving, water polo, equestrian, shooting and rowing. There was also a soccer competition associated with the Exhibition, not the Games, which included Paraguay among the other countries mentioned above.

The Fluminense Stadium, the largest sport

facility found in Rio de Janeiro, was rebuilt in order to host the main competitions included in the Games' program. Besides this location, other privileged places, such as Botafogo Bay and Derby Club, held rowing and equestrian competitions, respectively. Other competitions were also held in the Brazilian Army premises, and there was a cross country competition all the way on Corcovado Hill - the city's most visited place - which anyone interested in could join. In all, in today's review this availability suggests that the Games were not marginal on account of the Exhibition's structure, as often ascribed to Paris (1900) and Saint Louis (1904) similar jointly events.

The attendees of the Games were invited by the then Brazilian Sports Confederation, including athletes and sport clubs according to the 'Uruguay Sport'²¹. Through diplomatic channels, however, the Brazilian Government invited the Latin American governments, thus legitimating national representations. Therefore, the lack of international eligibility criteria for calling upon athletes in Latin America was compensated by a direct and explicit Governmental intervention.

Out of the fifty events included in the Exhibition Program, ten were sports events, a figure only equal to that of receptions and balls, which shows the outstanding importance of the Games and other sport activities during the 1922 Independence Centennial Festivities of the host country. The Exhibition Executive Commission also appointed an 'Athletic Games Commission', as opposed to the other activities which were grouped by segments and whose hierarchy followed decisions from the management executive group.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 460.

¹⁹ Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro, Programa de Comemoração e Regulamento Geral da Exposição de 1922." Arquivo - Centenario da Independência 1922, Rio de Janeiro.

²⁰ Uruguay Sport, Juegos Atleticos Latino - Americanos a Efectuarse en Rio de Janeiro en Setiembre de 1922, Montevideo, octubre 1922 (identification of author and pages not available in this source).

²¹ Ibidem, first page of the magazine, under the title "Antecedentes de la Intervencion del Uruguay en Ellos".

Geopolitics versus power politics

In the following year, another issue of the 'Uruguay Sport' published the verbatim report written by the Count of Baillet-Latour, who had come to Rio de Janeiro as the IOC official representative for the Games²². The Count, who would become the IOC President in 1925, begins his narrative by stating how honored he was for having substituted for the then president in his visit to Latin America, thus disclosing that it was Coubertin himself who would have come. Baillet-Latour, then, summarizes his impressions declaring that "the Games in Rio were also responsible for giving birth to a true wish to maintain the Latin American Games, considered to be the best way to prepare for the Olympic Games"²³.

Before what the report classifies as "the Steering Committees's lack of organization", it praises 'Dr. Trampowski', the Brazilian organizer of the Games who passed away during the event, as well as "Messrs. Jess Hopkins and F. Brow, Y.M.C.A Physical Education directors in Montevideo and Rio, respectively"²⁴. Even so, "despite the competency of the Centennial Festivities", Baillet-Latour presents a brief plan to "introduce the Olympic idea in Latin American peoples because although with very few exceptions, their ignorance was absolute... before trying to fix the deficiencies which were not taken into account by the Games". He thus suggests "the creation of a National Olympic Committee... and a Steering Committee for the Latin-American Games" as a complement for both national and international affiliations of each type of sport²⁵.

The IOC representative also announced the call of a Congress in Buenos Aires, which would still be held in 1923, to reinforce a deal

with respect to the Latin-American Games consolidation, including "Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay", and bringing forward Peru's surely and Bolivia's possible inclusions. The Games would take place every four years "sponsored by the IOC" and directed by the "Sports Confederation of the country where the Games will be held". Among other guidelines (the plan was unfolded into Articles), there would be a "technical counselor appointed by the IOC... and elected by the YMCA Physical Education Directors". This confirms the narrator's excellent impression of the latter international organization both during the Games in Rio and the physical education developed in Montevideo (directed by the YMCA in South America), this one "being superior to those of almost all countries in the world"²⁶.

It should be noted that Baillet-Latour's main concern was related to the affiliation of each sport to their confederations and federations, and simultaneously, to the IOC, thus presenting a double-management problem which resulted in a conflict in the 1921 Congress in Lausanne, and which still occurs these days²⁷. Therefore, the "under the IOC sponsorship" expression had a more reactive than hegemonic meaning in the years of 1921, 1922 and 1923.

Moreover, Baillet-Latour recommends that the Regional Games be maintained in order to give "the young people the sportive education they lack and prepare them to intervene in the Olympic Games in the short run", as well as get the necessary support from local governments and local press, "the latter being more interested in sports than the European one". According to the report, such an orientation would request a double

²² Uruguay Sport, Informe Presentado por el Conde de Baillet-Latour sobre la Missió que se Cometiera el C.I.O. en America, Montevideo, agosto 1923, pp. 1-7.

²³ Ibidem, pp. 1 - 2.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 1.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibidem, pp. 3 - 4.

²⁷ See Mueller, N., One hundred years of Olympic Congresses, 1894 - 1994. IOC, Lausanne, 1994, pp. 103 - 109 (for the 1921 Congress); pp. 191 - 192 (present-days situation).

representation of the IOC in the South-American countries: a local one and another in Europe so as to prevent “the IOC influence from escaping completely as a result from the absence of its representatives”. In the report, such a solution is considered appropriate to Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, countries in which the IOC local representatives would already deserve more support and attention, just like “a child who has been raised, has grown up, and now claims for a tutor”²⁸.

Ultimately, Baillet-Latour’s report reinforces the historical importance of the 1922 Exhibition Games, mainly because they became a milestone which has strengthened the past and built up the future. Besides, as the 1922 Games turned out to be a successful experience by having the IOC directly involved, and presenting the opportunity for contacts among countries they led to the formal creation of National Olympic Committees (NOC) in the Latin American continent. The NOCs replaced those representatives considered unstable and who were not always recognized by the local governments.

This being settled, Argentina, Uruguay and Mexico created their NOCs in 1923; Peru, in 1924; Bolivia, Chile, Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia, between 1932 and 1936 successively; and Ecuador and Paraguay, after the II World War²⁹. As a result, there was an increase in the number of South American nations in the Olympic Games held from 1924 to 1936. Their former problem had been solved: the representations were made official by their governments and legitimated by the international organizations responsible for sports, as it could be seen in the formation of national representations for the 1922 Games.

Allies and rebels with a cause

Such a successful intervention of the IOC in South America meant, at the end, a simple expansion of new National Olympic Committees in that continent. Looking more closely, the expansion occurred as having the side effect of reducing locally far reaching sport developments as the YMCA internal documents suggested. Historically speaking, Coubertin had officially set up an agreement with the YMCA in 1920 in order to promote the values of the Olympism in worldwide terms as well as the organization of Regional Games. Before that, in 1913, the YMCA had organized the Asian Regional Games in Manila, Philippines, and later, in 1922, the Games became official in South America (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)³⁰. However, when the creation of the NOCs was given priority, the South American national sport relationships with the IOC became direct, with no intermediaries.

Nevertheless, Da Costa & Miragaya (2002) found primary sources in the YMCA headquarters in Montevideo, showing that this organization not only still disseminated the Olympic Ideal by the end of 1920s, but also insisted on the creation of an educational base which would reach its peak with the Games. At this point, it is worthwhile quoting an excerpt from the “YMCA Physical Education Program in South America” as published in 1927³¹:

“According to the IOC, the ‘Games for All’ still exist, and therefore, the Association is somehow morally responsible for promoting future Games in this continent. However, these Games should not be imposed in South America too early; they must appear as a logical consequence of a physical participation in all kinds of competition.”

²⁸ Uruguay Sport, Op. Cit., pp. 5 - 6.

²⁹ See “Repertoire du Movement Olympique”, CIO, Lausanne, 1995, pp. 111 - 176.

³⁰ On the YMCA impact on Olympic Movement expansion see Mueller, N. & Tuttas, R., The role of the YMCA: especially that of Elwood S. Brown, Secretary of physical education of the YMCA. In the worldwide expansion of the Olympic Movement during Pierre de Coubertin’s presidency. Paper presented at the 5th International Symposium for Olympic Research, Sydney, 2000, Proceedings pp. 127 - 134.

³¹ Hopkins, J.T., Quince anos de educaci3n f3sica en las asociaciones de America del Sur. Editorial Mundo Nuevo - Asociacion Cristiana de Jovenes, Montevideo, 1927, pp. 41 - 42.

And right below that statement, a justification comes between quotes implying also in criticism³²:

“The ancient Greek Olympic idea was based on the fact that every man should always be physically able. The Olympic Games occurred in order to direct people’s attention to the magnificence of the human body and the need for it to be taken care of and exercised, as opposed to demonstrations of professionalism and improper glorification of the winners.”

Before IOC’s hesitation regarding their objective to give the Olympic Movement worldwide dimensions and quit promoting the Olympism in favor of its expansion, we should consider it as a trade-off, that is to say, the Movement would have to grow in its earliest phase in order to survive; however, it should, simultaneously, give priority to making the Olympism universal for coherence purposes. Under such circumstances, historical records of that time suggest that the IOC’s option was pragmatic. Indeed, there was an option for both growth and control of the affiliations even though jeopardizing the dissemination of the Olympic Ideal.

Again, the above hypothesis may be verified in the South American scenario where the matter of the affiliations had been a conflicting status since the creation of the IOC in 1894. South America had turned itself into a laboratory not only for IOC’s conflicts, when an institutional order was imposed, but also for the difficulties in promoting the Olympic Ideal.

As a matter of fact, the South American geopolitical approach in the sportive area was launched with Coubertin when he included Jose B. Zubiatur in the original 1894 governing council of the IOC. In accordance with a recent revision written by Argentinian sport historian Cesar Torres, Zubiatur was selected because of arrangements which would give

support to the different regions of the world as well as meet the expectations that the educator “would advocate the Olympic Ideal in South America”³³.

However, due to further events, Coubertin and the other members of the IOC became disappointed during the two decades following the creation of the International Olympic Movement. To begin, Zubiatur was always absent from the IOC’s meetings, and never took the initiative in disseminating the Olympism either in his country or in South America³⁴.

On the other hand, Argentina and Chile showed great initiative in organizing the “South American Olympic Games” in 1910 and 1920 without the IOC appointment. With respect to the 1910 Games, Coubertin himself strongly opposed them and the IOC reacted favorably to the dismissal of the Argentinian member, who happened to be Zubiatur’s substitute. The 1920 Games made Coubertin insist on forbidding the use of the “Olympic Games” expression and rethink the practice where the South American Regional Games were associated with the YMCA, as previously reported here³⁵.

In summary, the pendular movement between idealism and pragmatism appears to be a natural and typical characteristic of an organization such as the IOC, which had always worked through globalizing developments and geographical areas for its actions. Apparently, however, the IOC’s faults come up when pragmatic decisions are made and kept in the long run, favoring practice and maintenance of power.

In this context, the lessons recovered from the IOC’s actions in South America at the beginning of the last century are symptomatic and still meaningful nowadays. Therefore, we agree with Mueller & Tuttas (2000) when they state that the YMCA “was the driving force for the success of the Olympic Movement”.

³² Ibidem, p. 42.

³³ Torres, C. T., Tribulations and achievements: the early history of Olympism in Argentina. In Mangan, J. A. & DaCosta, L.P. (eds), Sport in Latin American Society - Past and Present. Frank Cass, London, 2002, p. 60.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 64.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 70.

Together with these two researchers, we also understand that “the role of the YMCA was much more significant than scholars had thought”³⁶.

In final remark, during the political actions which took place in South America in the 1920s, the IOC lacked a perception of a

“sport geography”, as figured by Coubertin in his early intellectual conceptions. And considering the aforementioned MacAloon’s advice, such a perception still lacks today – when the world is becoming a single place with multiple cultures.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 127.

OLYMPIAN INFLUENCES

By Don Anthony

In March 1894 Pierre de Coubertin wrote to his friend, Charles Waldstein:

“The enclosed programme... has been widely circulated in England and America. It is likely to be a success... item no. 8 on the Agenda... reflects our ambitions for the future”.

Items 1 to 7 were concerned with money and its abuse in sport; item no. 8 was the proposal to renovate the Olympic Games.

The letter goes on:

“Having interested in the matter such as Jules Simon, Gladstone, Harris, etc... will you mention others who might take initiatives...”

For English – speakers the role of Jules Simon is nicely chronicled by John J. MacAloon in his book *This Great Symbol*. But who were Gladstone and Harris – and “the others”?

Herbert Gladstone was the Member of Parliament (M.P.) for Leeds; the youngest son of W.E. Gladstone, Prime Minister of England in his time. W.E. was noted for his scholarship – as well as his liberal politics. In his home library of some 10,000 volumes, he had one table for work and another for leisure – his ‘Homer Table’.

William Penny Brookes includes a letter from W.E. Gladstone in his collection; this gave

him moral support in his crusade for sport and physical education. Herbert Gladstone was reputed to “share his father’s views”.

Herbert, putting himself where his mouth was, became President of the National Physical Recreation Society [NPRS], which was formed in 1885. The NPRS followed the National Olympian Association [NOA], which expires two years earlier, as a British national sports body; it even borrowed the same motto – “Civium vires Civitatis vis”.

Furthermore, Dr. Brookes was coopted on to the Executive of the NPRS in 1886, thus cementing the Wenlock – NOA – NPRS continuum.

The NPRS attracted the support of such as the following:

- The Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIIth, as Patron; he to be a Honorary Member of Pierre de Coubertin’s Sorbonne Congress in 1894.
- As its President, Herbert Gladstone, throughout most of its life.

As Vice-Presidents:

- The Earl of Meath, who managed the first Bill through Parliament in the 1890’s, calling for compulsory physical education in schools. Meath was also given Honorary Membership in the Wenlock Olympian Society in 1891, at the same time as Pierre de Coubertin and Lord Charles Beresford.