

# An Olympic Mosaic

Multidisciplinary Research and Dissemination of Olympic Studies  
CEO-UAB: 20 Years

## Editors

Emilio Fernández Peña  
Berta Cerezuela  
Miquel Gómez Benosa  
Chris Kennett  
Miquel de Moragas Spà



Centre d'Estudis Olímpics  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona



Ajuntament de Barcelona

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# The Academic Reasons for an Olympic Studies Centre at the University

**Miquel de Moragas**

**Professor of Communication Theory; CEO-UAB Founder and Director, 1989-2009**

## The earliest influences. The first ideas

In 1983, I received a proposal from Professor Michael Real to participate in UNESCO research on issues related to international public opinion and the Los Angeles 1984 Olympic Games (Real 1985). In truth, I doubted very little the relevance of the object of study. The interest by the media made me understand that sport and the Olympics could be of great interest for studies of communication and semiotic analysis that, at that time, particularly interested me. On the horizon there was also the possibility that all this could one day happen in Barcelona. The candidature application also began in 1984 and culminated in October 1986 with the nomination of Barcelona as the host for the XXV Olympiad.

In February 1987, the University of Calgary (prior to their winter Games in 1988) organised the academic conference *The Olympic Movement and the Mass Media: Past, Present and Future Issues* (Jackson and McPhail 1989). I thought that this was a great opportunity for the transfer to our university of knowledge of great strategic importance for the process that had started with Barcelona's nomination. I could not attend the conference due to a lack of resources, but I still remember perfectly the faces of amazement, of incredulity, that I saw in academic and sporting institutions in response to my unusual request for help to attend an Olympic symposium.

A few months later, I received an invitation, surprising to me, from Korea to participate in the First International Conference on the Olympics and East / West and South / North Cultural Exchange in the World System, which was organised in August 1987 by Professor Kang Shin-Pyo and supported by John MacAloon and with the participation of important intellectuals concerning the social sciences such as Arjun Appadurai, Edith Turner, Alex Inkeles and Roberto da Mata, among others. In this symposium, I met James Larson and Nancy Rivenburgh, with whom I published some years later, in 1995, the book *Television in the Olympics* (Moragas, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995).

The organisers, who were looking for a speaker from Barcelona, identified me through the aforementioned UNESCO publication on Los Angeles'84. Later my speech in Seoul was entitled *Local Culture. Worldwide Audience. Challenges of Barcelona '92*, a dilemma or a problem that marked my subsequent research on the Games and on communication.

I returned from Korea with a letter from the participants addressed to the then mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Maragall, because the city was receiving the torch of intellectual initiatives related to the study of the Olympics from the socio-cultural perspective.

With this momentum, and in the context of an Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) specially adapted to interdisciplinary studies, the idea was born of the Olympic Studies Centre, which was crystallised in 1989 as a consortium, in which different parts of Catalonia's public administration and the Spanish Olympic Committee were involved.



Later, in January 1995, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) signed a specific agreement of collaboration to create the International Chair in Olympism. This agreement allowed for broad collaboration of our centre with the Olympic Museum in Lausanne and, consequently, leading international academic activity (see the chapter by Muriel Ladrón de Guevara in this book).

## Modernising and widening the objectives of Olympic studies

The relationships between academia and universities on the one hand, and the Olympic Movement, on the other, have their remote origins in the celebration of the founding congress of the International Olympic Committee at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1894. I am not referring solely to the formal use of the university auditorium, but rather to Pierre de Coubertin's criterion that the Olympic Movement as a sporting and cultural phenomenon, had to find in university knowledge its identity and adapt itself to the contemporary world.

The concept of an Olympic Studies Centre was formulated by Pierre de Coubertin shortly before his death in 1937: "I think an Olympic Studies Centre [...] can help, more than any other initiative to preserve and advance my project, protecting it from deviations that could affect it" (Landry and Yerlès 1996, 318).<sup>1</sup>

In that era, Olympism was concerned with the combination of three core values – the classical Greek (humanism), the practice of sport to form youth (education) and new international relations in an industrialising society (modernity) – and the early experiences of universal exhibitions were transferred to the Games.

This tradition inspired Carl Diem's creation in 1938 of the International Olympic Institute and somewhat later in 1961 to the foundation of the International Olympic Academy and the corresponding national Olympic academies, including the Spanish Olympic Academy founded in 1968, "with which Olympic principles are spread on a national scale" (Durántez 2003, 11).

In the 1960s, as succeeding Games took place, a major development to historical studies occurred, which highlighted the interest of researchers in international relations and political circumstances of the Olympic experience.<sup>2</sup> At that time, several university professors (Fernand Landry, Karl Lennarz, Norbert Müller, John MacAloon) developed significant research on Olympism and the philosophy of Pierre de Coubertin (Landry and Yerlès 1996, 330-338).

These scholarly contributions have not always been sufficiently recognised as crucial contributions regarding the configuration of the identity of the Olympics as a major global cultural phenomenon.

## The new players in Olympic research

In the 1980s, with the growing importance of acquiring the Games (Moscow'80 Los Angeles'84, Seoul'88), and especially Barcelona'92, there was a large expansion and diversification of research on the phenomenon that began to be described as a *mega-event*: new players, new activities and new research topics, with a greater institutional involvement of universities.

The organisation of the Games started to demand a large applied research activity (in terms of R&D), both by the International Olympic Committee and the Organising Committee of Olympic Games (OCOG), and the institutions involved (media, sponsors, licensees and public organisations of organising countries). Part of this research relied on private con-

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1. Letter written by Pierre de Coubertin.

2. This activity was crystallised in 1991 with the creation of the International Society of Olympic Historians (ISOH) (<http://www.isoh.org/>).

sultants, but another part (not always acknowledged) was done by, or born of research conducted at universities.

It is not only issues related to the organisation that were the focus of Olympic research. New phenomena such as commercialisation, beyond the transition from amateurism to professionalism, the advent of sponsorship, the challenges posed by boycotts as a weapon of confrontation between political blocs, the political and cultural implications of the host city, the emergence of media and new technologies, and urban and environmental implications are all the subject of university research (Moragas and Botella 1995).

## The creation of Olympic Studies Centres at universities

Universities have responded in different ways to these challenges and opportunities. In the majority of cases, research groups have been created or individual research devoted to different branches of social sciences (historians, sociologists, anthropologists, economists etc.). Many centres specialising in sports science have also contributed to research programmes specializing in studying the Games.

At the same time as the creation of CEO-UAB (the Olympic Studies Centre at the Autonomous University of Barcelona) in 1989, another Olympic Studies Centre came into being at the University of Western Ontario: the International Centre for Olympic Studies. Some years later, following the impetus of these two pioneering universities, other initiatives took place, especially in Olympic cities: the Australian Centre for Olympic Studies in Sydney, the Olympics and Mega Events Research Observatory in Turin, the Centre for Olympic Studies and the Humanistic Olympic Studies Centre in Beijing and the Centre for Olympic Studies & Research at the English University of Loughborough. CEO-UAB's *OlympicstudiesNet* collected a total of 28 experiences, mostly concentrated in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

The UAB model constitutes one of the most representative types of such centres, both in terms of the range of participation in its institutions by government agencies and of the number and type of activities undertaken or activity indicators.

The defining characteristic of these centres is, firstly, that they have a university character. This does not only mean they have their base in a college or university campus, but the academic status of their governance with a president coinciding with the rector and a director and a management team consisting of strictly academic personnel. This academic authorship is complemented by the collaboration and participation in the organisation of political and administrative institutions related to the Olympics and sport.

Thus, university activity related to Olympic studies implies a large number of actors, formal and informal, some with a clearly Olympic orientation and others with a more casual relationship with the Games, which results in a variety of initiatives, with varying degrees of institutionalisation.

Therefore, CEO-UAB can be considered as a centre of reference, because for 20 years it has undertaken a variety of activities (activity indicators) that can be carried out in these types of centres:

- Research (research projects, participation in international projects).
- Documentation Centre (availability of library services, video library, archive, documentary work).
- Education and training (training programmes at different levels: undergraduate, postgraduate and professional training).
- Dissemination (organising seminars and conferences, both nationally and internationally).

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3. For more information about University Olympic Studies Centres, see OlympicstudiesNet at <http://ceo.uab.es/olympicstudiesnet/>.

- Publications (own publications, joint publications).
- Website (self-produced content, links, networks of cooperation).

The fulfilment of all these indicators means a high level of institutionalisation, impossible without the strong support of the university, Olympic institutions and public administration of each community. This explains why the further development of these initiatives occurs precisely in the Games' host cities or countries with a greater Olympic cultural tradition.

These centres are just huge icebergs in the critical mass of international university researchers dedicated to Olympic studies. Researchers, it is important to underscore, that find in these centres the necessary platforms from which to disseminate and above all produce their own research.

All these players, regardless of the platforms that the Olympic institutions can bring, have so far brought about rather spontaneous forms of organisation and exchange, by means of independent academic channels that are increasingly important thanks to the use of the Internet and their networks.

## **What explains the interest of universities in the Olympic Games?**

The interest of universities in the Olympic Games can be explained by several factors, among which I propose to point out the following:

1. Multiple impacts on the host city (economic, political, cultural, urban etc.).
2. Transversal nature of the phenomenon and the need for an interdisciplinary approach.
3. Uniqueness of the Olympics as a case study to understand the processes of globalisation and localisation.
4. Multicultural character of the Olympic experience.
5. Challenges of innovation to organise these mega-events.
6. Ethical values and social commitment inherent in the object of study.

### **1. The impact of the Games on the host city**

Olympic research, without losing interest in the historical dimension (ancient and modern), has expanded its reference as the Games have been transformed into mega-events and have been multiplying their impacts: social, cultural, economic, political, on communication, on urban development, environmental etc.

The Games currently represent the main mega-event of our time, with a large international participation and significant impacts on the host city and an unprecedented complexity each time. No other event, except, unfortunately, war, arouses a similar interest in the media world. Nobody can be surprised, therefore, that this event has attracted attention from various fields, especially in communication.

### **2. Transversal nature of the phenomenon and the need for an interdisciplinary approach**

The modern Olympic Games involve a wide variety of sectors and a framework of activities, which makes them a privileged observatory for the study of modern society.

In the table below, I propose a classification of the variety of operational issues that Olympic studies have tackled and that show the relevance of this object of research for social sciences.

## Olympic Studies. Research topics

Economics / Marketing Games management Planning and bid process	Politics and international relations History (ancient and modern) Legacy
Environment Urban planning and architecture Technology Transport and mobility Tourism Employment	Culture (identity, diversity, rituals etc.). Social aspects (participation, gender, exclusion etc.) Communication, media and the Internet Art and design
Sport and physical activity Health / Medicine (doping control) Legal and regulatory	Ethics and philosophy of Olympism Olympic education

### 3. Uniqueness of the Olympics in the globalised world

But it is not only the size and thematic wealth of the Games that arouses the interest of university researchers. This interest is heightened by the complexity of the logics that characterise the phenomenon and the possibility to analyse some key issues in the contemporary world.

The modern Games challenge some key values of our culture and our society. They are a privileged observatory for interpreting the opportunities and contradictions of what we call the ‘global world’, communication, culture, politics, economics, and they do it with the great incentive of permanently changing their host, from Seoul to Barcelona, Barcelona to Atlanta, Atlanta to Sydney, Sydney to Athens, Athens to Beijing, Beijing to London, and London to Rio de Janeiro, in a way that facilitates analysis of the local-global relationship characteristic of our times.

The Games challenge some key concepts of modern society: a culture of peace and Olympic truce, nations, nation states and international relations, sustainability and environment, diversity and cultural identity, inequality and solidarity, gender equality and social inclusion, tourism and sport, urban renewal and social exclusion etc.

The Games can be considered a paradigm of the knowledge society. Hardly do we find any such explicit example of ‘material’ transcendence of ‘immaterial’ elements. Although the framework is based ultimately on symbols and rituals associated with athletic defeat or victory.

### 4. Multicultural character of the Olympic experience

The conditions in which the Games are currently being developed, unprecedented international participation (204 national Olympic committees in Beijing in 2008) and the attention of international media constitute a major cultural challenge for the Olympic Movement.

Four examples:

- Coexistence phenomena in the Olympic village.
- Interpretation of the event by the media.
- Conceptualisation of the Cultural Olympiad and the ceremonies.
- Ongoing review of the Olympic philosophy from new concepts in current debate about cultural diversity.

In this regard, we highlight the opportunity to contribute positively to the objectives of UNESCO concerning the protection of cultural diversity, giving an example and leading the world of sport in this direction.

### **5. Challenges of innovation presented by the organisation of these mega-events**

The Games are a great laboratory to investigate different areas of innovation, e.g. innovations in communications systems (Moragas 1992). In this sense, the paradigmatic process of implementing the Internet in the organisation and Olympic Games communication, emerging from the experience of Atlanta in 1996, to new platforms to be used for the London Games of 2012 (Moragas 1999).

### **6. The ethical value of the study**

Finally, it must be noted that we have to add to these factors of attraction another which transcends the epistemological aspects and that corresponds to the ethical aspects of research: the identification of professors and researchers (hundreds) with Olympic ideals, in an altruistic way for a social imperative. Consequently, research is easily transformed into a task of disseminating values, also a critical task with the contradictions of the real Olympics. The line bordering Olympic research and Olympic education throws up many forms of exchange.

## **What good is academic research to the Olympic Movement?**

So far we have reflected on the reasons for academic interest in Olympism and the actual Games. Now we complete the analysis with a second question: what is the use of all this (university) activity to the Olympic Movement?

Firstly, it must be noted that the main contribution of universities to the Olympic Movement, including to the host cities, should not be exclusively thought of in terms of immediate functional utility. This does not mean that universities should not also be committed to the production of functional skills and strategic interest. It is also true that Olympic organisers or their consultants, use the work of universities, which is mostly freely accessible to the public, as a basic source for their reports. In many cases, unfortunately, they do so without adequately recognising the source, and without recognising that the ideas applied often stem from basic and general ideas.

In the paper I presented at the Fifth World Forum on Sport, Education and Culture of the International Olympic Committee, held in Beijing in October 2006, I summarised these academic contributions to the Olympic Movement as the following new main features of research:

1. Interpretative function: to define and identify functions and values of the Olympic Movement in the modern era.
2. Prospective function: to analyse endogenous and exogenous trends that will affect sport and the Olympic Movement in the future.
3. Applied function: to advise Olympic institutions on their functional and organisational needs.

4. Historical Function: to research and document Olympic history as a fundamental resource to know the identity of the Games.
5. Critical function: to analyse the deviations, contradictions and dysfunctions of real Olympism.
6. Informative function: to provide knowledge for the different needs of disseminating the Olympic system (media, Organising Committee, Olympic museums, publications etc.).
7. Educational function: to apply knowledge about the Olympics and its impact on educational programmes, especially education programmes on values.
8. Cultural function: to reinterpret the Olympic Movement in a non-Eurocentric way, which is open to diversity and intercultural dialogue.
9. Role of legacy: to substantiate the memory of the Games as an intangible heritage of humanity, facilitating the exchange of experiences.

As an example of the application of these categories and functions, we can consider the many potential synergies between the host cities and their universities: from feasibility studies prior to considering the nomination to the final interpretation of the legacy, passing through volunteer training programmes, impact assessments (economic, social and labour) or cultural studies on which cultural programmes and rituals (ceremonies, torch relay, etc.) are based.

## **And vice versa: What is the purpose of university research on the Games?**

The Olympic Movement is benefiting directly and indirectly from the existence of hundreds of researchers distributed in a variety of countries and continents. This academic contribution, which is largely a voluntary donation, among the most altruistic, should be considered an invaluable contribution in terms of innovation and adaptation of the Olympic Games to the modern world. This however is not always the case. The disregard towards university researchers by not inviting them, in part at least, as observers to the XIII Olympic Congress “The Olympic Movement in Society” (IOC 2008), which took place in Copenhagen in October 2009 was a significant example of the remaining gaps.

Olympic institutions should commit themselves to their own policy of research and development, respecting the autonomy of universities and research centres that know how to channel this valuable production of knowledge towards the goals. To do this, researchers should provide the necessary information for the study related both to archives (history) and events (accreditation of scientific observers of the Games).

The existing distribution and documentation platforms for the Olympic Movement (IOC Olympic Studies Centre, International Olympic Academy, Olympic Museum Lausanne, Olympic Congresses) should be strengthened, and the existing bridges with the independent academic university system be widened.

The host cities of the Games, in accordance with these platforms, should promote Olympic studies (research, documentation, publication, training, conferences) as basic activities of their educational and cultural programmes or ‘Cultural Olympiads’ without limiting their own applied research projects (like that of OGGI - Olympic Games Global Impact).

In turn, universities should incorporate into their research programmes subjects relating to sport and Olympism considering them as great cultural and social phenomena of our time, incorporating into their curricula, undergraduate and postgraduate courses related to sport and the Olympics; and consider as priorities research into the most urgent problems of modern sport, such as sustainability in sport management mega-events, cultural dimensions and in short, how they adapt to the new global and knowledge-based society.

University Olympic Studies Centres should ensure the continuity of Olympic research programmes by setting up inter-university collaboration programmes that would relay to the universities in each new location to ensure the transmission of the legacy of the Games. To do so, they have available autonomous forms of publication, conferences and lectures, now optimised with the use of information and communication technologies.

Because of their global dimension, the Olympic Games represent an invaluable opportunity for comparative studies. Our experience in the comparative study of the coverage of the Games of Barcelona'92 by 27 international broadcasters was an example, unlikely to be repeated, of such investigations, necessary however as a form of support for a new understanding of Olympism from the perspective of cultural diversity (Moragas, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995).

The challenge will remain the same, namely to establish processes for collaboration and dialogue between Olympic institutions, agencies of the Games' host cities and universities. Valuing and respecting their autonomy, their critical independence, and also their demanding and rigorous research and training activities, because we share the same ethical commitment: to help ensure the continuous updating of the values of Olympism around the contemporary world.

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