Sport and Diplomacy: From De Coubertin’s utopia to the Millennium Declaration
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In dealing with the topic “Sport and diplomacy” we discuss one of the most fascinating, current and effective topics in the world of international relations.

No doubt this is a fascinating subject: both for the prime actors, such as those who practice it but also for the secondary actors, the viewers, the supporters and so on.

This is a new theme, a new challenge since it literally exploded in the last 20-30 years. This doesn’t mean that it did not exist before - De Coubertin’s Memories teaches us much about it. However, what I mean is that its potential was manifested and was the subject of structural and not sporadic actions in the previous two decades, accompanying - and this is not a coincidence - the changes we have witnessed in official diplomacy.

The binomial sport and diplomacy is very important for its effectiveness: this combination works, produces significant results, as evidenced in recent years and, above all, as witnessed by the most important results achieved in the past: the Olympic Truce, revived with great force from 1993, and the Millennium Declaration of the UN, which introduces the concept of sport as a tool and not simply a pastime.

If we want to discuss the topic of sport and diplomacy, it means that we have taken for granted that we can see a relationship between the two terms.

To understand exactly the potential that sport offers to the context of international relations, and in particular to diplomatic relations, we must start from the characteristics of this activity comparing it to the numerous other activities at the international level.

What distinguishes sport? What does sport have more than other activities? In my opinion some elements strongly characterise it.

First of all sport is a natural human activity and for this reason it is common to all people. Of course, we will not be able to understand the rules that characterise each sport, but we all have the basic skills and are able to understand without translation and brokering the value of a spectacular athletic movement.

Secondly, sport has what Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General, described as the ability to get individuals involved. Sports has a magical impact on people. Let me give you two examples. If you give a ball to a group of children suddenly they’ll play (even if they don’t know each other). In the prison camp of Zonderwarter in South Africa, where more than 400,000 Italians were interned, sport was an incredible tool to survive, buy dignity and create a “social” structure.

Third: sport is expressed through a universal language, a transnational one: its message passes beyond the borders of countries and people, without translation.

Fourth: sport requires and demands respect for the rules and equal conditions of departure, which are immediately comprehensible to and accepted by all those who want to engage in a sporting activity. Such rules are universally accepted and respected. All people, all athletes accept the same rules that are seen as necessary and not limiting the freedom of the individual. In this context, authority and participation are balanced.

Fifth: sport requires fair play, demands an animus open to challenge, contact, dialogue and confrontation. The starting conditions must be equal and the result is never taken for granted and must be accepted. This is a fundamental desired in diplomacy as well.

Sixth: sport is very popular all over the world. Two examples: there is no television broadcast viewed more that the Olympic Games; second to the Christian Cross, the most famous and recognisable symbol all over the word are the Olympic rings!

All these characteristics, in my opinion make the sport unique.

I’d like to mention in this regard the example given by a professor at the University of Chicago who asked his students in diplomatic science what was the best environment and best possible contest for diplomatic negotiation considering that they need some basic conditions: possibility of interacting with the other party, starting from an equal basis, neutrality, few clear rules, and the least possible degree of politicisation. The answer to this question is: the Olympic Games.

This example should serve to understand what concept of sport we have to accept. When we talk about sport it is necessary to clarify the term because over the last fifty years it has became a large part of different contexts of social life.

By way of example one only need to think that, in 1957, in a text published by the Brookings Institution on social activities of the UN, the word sport did not appear, but if we scroll the website of the UN fifty years later, we find the word sport several thousand times: sport and apartheid, sport and health, sport and solidarity, sport and peace, sport and culture, sport and human rights.

The UN, the Vatican, the European Community and INGOs now talk about sport: but what kind of sports do they refer to?

We need to ask which kind of sport we have to consider because all too often the term sport has not only been used but also “abused”. This is possible because sport is a “neutral” activity, detached from political, social and economic connotations. It’s a human activity that is well suited for its immediacy and popularity to be used for good or evil, depending on who uses it and for what purpose.

Sport, at the states level, is mainly used in four ways:

1) To demonstrate the strength of a nation; as an indicator of well-being, health, good social and economic conditions, not to mention gender policies and social policies to assist the disabled, the elderly, women and children. It’s a good internal gauge;
2) At the same time it is also a good external indicator, easy to use to compare various regimes. During the Cold War there have been memorable US-Soviet disputes. If we think about Beijing 2008 we recall the tons of ink used to highlight the fact that China beat the US in the medal order for the first time. How important is the order of the Olympic medals?

3) Sport is used as a form of demonstration aimed at the international community, very often sport is used as a first form of legitimacy in the aftermath of independence.

4) Sport is a weapon used to hit a country without directly touching the political or economic relations between countries. Sport has become a new type of embargo and sanction.

Why can countries use sport for such purposes?

This is possible because sport at an international level passes through the Olympic organisation that is directly linked to the borders of the states and their jurisdiction (the National Olympic Committees).

In other words, sport duplicates the political geography facilitating the transposition in sport of tensions and conflicts that exist in the policy.

If sport itself is neither good nor bad, and its moral connotation depends on the use made of it and the context in which we include it, what is the correct starting point that allows us to say which kind of sport we should consider?

The right context in which we should read this reality is undoubtedly from the philosophy of the Olympic Movement.

In the late nineteenth century, thanks to Pierre de Coubertin, the Olympic Movement gave international sports relations, almost non-existent at the time, the task of utopian change of how to make the world a better and more peaceful place.

With the birth of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), de Coubertin did not want to repeat simple sport competitions, in imitation of the ancient Olympics. He wanted to launch, first of all, a new philosophy, a state of mind, an “école de noblesse et pureté morales”, which combines the universal values of sport for a new mission.

The Olympic Movement, in other words, uses the Games as “moyen pour réaliser son but élevé” which is to promote the development of physical and moral qualities, bring together athletes from around the world. This stimulates encounter, mutual respect, and mutual cooperation, all qualities that can help build a better world.

Sport, international and democratic, inspired by a core of strong intellectual, religious and moral values, was intended to give humanity a new pedagogical point of view: sport to educate man, and hence the whole world, to the values of democracy, tolerance, understanding and peace. Based on these considerations, and by placing sport in this context, it is natural to understand the value and function of sport in the diplomatic context.
Sport calls athletes on to the field to compete at par, according to the same rules, without exception and without discrimination. But when athletes from different countries take the field, the weight of these simple rules becomes extraordinary.

Modern Olympism, moving from the community level to that of the cities of the community of nations, proposes a model of behaviour that requires respect for human rights for all, regardless of race, religion and politics.

Thus the Olympic philosophy becomes an “international peace-maker”, whose main characteristic lies in the ability to bring together people who would otherwise remain divided because of "political entanglements”.

From this perspective, the Olympic Games- the maximum expression of exchange of international sports- takes the form of "a work of world peace," the basis for the end of international discord, the consecration of the international understanding that de Coubertin hoped to help achieve.

Olympism highlights the educational mission and moralising of sport through a new policy area and aggregation at the international level: a gap, originally rather restricted, but that would prove, it is correct to assume increasing in size through the growth of sport, and convey universal principles such as peace, friendship among peoples and mutual respect.

In this lies the greatness of de Coubertin’s intuition.

Sport is for the first time framed in a new dimension, as the focus of a new education project; a utopian project because de Coubertin is not only thinking about educating young people, but all peoples, all nations, the entire international community.

However, since the birth of the IOC, sport has provided an organised and international structure which has had to deal with problems of diplomacy. The IOC has had to live with the world that it wanted to change.

Therefore, for organisational reasons, it had to duplicate inside the political geography of the world, a system of National Olympic Committees that coincide with the boundaries of its country of origin. The coincidence between sport geography and political geography has lent alongside the political exploitation suffered by the Games since their birth.

Having passed through two world wars, colonialism and post-colonialism, the Cold War, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, wars, and boycotts, the thinking behind Olympism keeps alive the Olympic Movement and its rules proposing a utopian model of the international community in which human rights, peace and sport live together despite everything.

Olympism cannot erase the problems at the table, but it offers a model of good behaviour which allows athletes from both Russia and Georgia to hug on the podium while their countries are at war.

In recent years the international community, the UN, UNESCO, and the Vatican, have increasingly accepted the perspective of the Olympic philosophy, recognising in its model an
efficient and effective way to promote internationally recognised values shared by most countries.

While on the one hand we have the issue of sport, on the other we identify the issue of official diplomacy equally representative of the international relations dimension in state: the UN.

Over the past 18 years (I consider the official date to be 1993, with the resolution 48/11) when two parties meet, a new path is formed leading to sport which officially becomes a tool in the service for the good of humanity.

The theme of sports initially was at the forefront of the UN with the issue of human rights (the policy of Apartheid in South Africa), then with reference to the activities that can promote and facilitate relationships between young people around the world, to contribute to the achievement of a better and more peaceful world by educating the youth of the world through sport and culture in order to develop a harmonious development of humanity.

The UN recognises sport as inspired by Olympic values, through which it shares a mission: the maintenance of international peace and understanding. And the list of subjects of collaboration is very broad indeed: development, humanitarian assistance, health promotion and education, refugees, education, science and culture, and also fight poverty, AIDS, the use of drugs, violence and juvenile delinquency.

The UN, therefore, take note that sport can be grounds for meeting and collaboration on issues that were unthinkable a few years earlier. Issues on which, however, sport can bring a personal contribution when inspired by a basis of shared humane principles.

Since Pope Pius X, the Vatican has gradually approached the theme of sport by recognising its characteristics that promote brotherhood and peace. In 2004 John Paul II wanted to give an important signal in this direction by creating an ad hoc department, "Church and Sport" which recognises sport as playing an important role in contemporary culture: a medium for the growth of the whole person, a "school of virtue and an instrument of peace between peoples."

The two organisations have worked ideally and concretely to have the definition of a right to sport enshrined in the Olympic Charter and reaffirmed by the UN system before UNESCO (1978) and then, in more recent year, with a series of additional documents.

In the "right to sport" the right to participation is synthesised without discrimination, for men and women of any race, religion, political ideology, the right of disabled people to compete, the right to health through the fight against doping, the right to education for all because sport educates, the right to peace, as a condition to compete, the right to non-violence.

In recognising the "right to sport" according to Olympic rules we have a free pass to enforce a strong core of inviolable rights for the person.

In relation to the past, we can say that sport, especially through the great showcase of the Olympic Games, has made an important mark in the field of international relations; it has been shown to be able to open cracks where there were no possibilities of contact, it has stimulated
cooperation and aid to countries in the southern hemisphere where it was clear that no help could not be given. It has provided a model for relations between people.

The strength of this approach is perhaps in having shown that, starting with the correct relationships between individuals and transferring this behavioural model at higher levels of aggregation, the model was viable.

Pierre de Coubertin had imagined utopia possible under the banner of the five rings. The human dimension, if respected in its essence, in its fundamental rights, in its needs, is able to support applications in the largest land, even within an international dimension.

If we consider the individual, we will not lose sight of the needs of the international community. If we consider the individual, we will not lose sight of fundamental rights. Sport is a dimension that requires us to have a vision that stems from the individual. The revolution carried out by the Olympic philosophy has been to impose the individual above all, its physical dimension as well as technical, sporting and relationships.

The challenge for the sport at the international level is to know how to keep the individual at the heart of its activities, and with it, the fundamental rights of the person.

The UN has officially recognised this role, placing not only the Olympic message, but also the Olympic structure at the service of world peace. We have passed the stage of mere subdivisions of values by adopting a practical approach which sees the international sports facility as a person to be involved in this fight for a "better world".

Peace is the first value retrieved but sport has shown that its forces and energies can conveniently also extend into other areas: education, the promotion of sustainable development, assistance.

Sport is an integral part of society, yet we must not think that it should address all issues at the table. Sport does not, and should not solve problems that are not sport, but when sport is conducted according to Olympic rules it can undoubtedly serve as a role model to the rest of the world. Which are the factors that have encouraged sport diplomacy?

Why can sport today be an effective diplomatic tool?

As we have said, sport provides a pattern of behaviour shared universally, but this is not enough. What gives it strength to be found even in changes which occur in the overall picture of international relations, which are now the result of diplomatic actions at various levels?

We can no longer think of the states and the IGO’s (International Governmental Organisations) as the only actors able to influence diplomacy. We must accept that a broader range of subjects can influence official diplomacy. These subjects range from INGO’s, citizens' groups, communities and individuals.

The era of globalisation in which we live has led many to break down boundaries causing geographical divisions which somehow weigh less, are no longer a limit and can be overcome easily. It has opened new spaces and contexts of mediation outside of a logic state and sport has
been ready to fit into this space of mediation, offering an opportunity for dialogue on an equal basis, shared, regardless of factors like race, religion, political ideas etc.

The use of sport in the diplomatic field allows you to see the logic applied to the so-called interstitial wedge, as defined by Antonio Papisca, a leading expert of Italian human rights. This vision is the new and revolutionary perspective of Pierre de Coubertin.

This man before being a great devotee of Olympism was certainly a man of enormous diplomatic skills. He managed to find in sport a powerful new ally in the cause of peace and internationalism which are the two key points of his creed, around which he built the entire Olympic Movement.

Try to imagine what the concept of peace and internationalism meant 100 years ago. It’s impossible to compare them to what they are today. Olympism introduces and supports internationalism as a tool in contrast to nationalism, as an instrument of peace opposed to violence.

From the outset, de Coubertin did not think of Olympism as a phenomenon limited in time and space, but as a dimension that was not intended to be transitional, but durable and long lasting: improving social education, from the individual to the masses, by the athlete to the team, the community to the state.

Sport takes advantage of a vacuum, a space of action left empty at the end of the Cold War. The IOC was ready to take advantage of it thanks to its president Juan Antonio Samaranch, who being a diplomat by profession, opened a new phase of life for the IOC.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War that had affected political relations between east and west, north and south, a new dimension of international politics arose.

Wars are global wars, battles for human rights are global battles, the problems of a country have repercussions on the world, regardless of where they are. For this reason the tools used in the new diplomacy must be global instruments.

This new dimension obliges us to reinvent the institutions that operate in the new scenario and go from a state (governments and IGOS) to a sub state (INGOs and citizens) broadening the range of actors, but it is also a dimension that seeks new unconventional weapons to throw punches.

We think the use of the embargo, for example, or what UNESCO, in 1995, defined as a culture of peace indicate three characteristics: a culture based on freedom, justice, democracy, tolerance and solidarity; a culture that bans violence and seeks to prevent conflicts and solve problems through dialogue and negotiation; and a culture which guarantees everyone the full exercise of all rights and allows everyone to participate actively in society.

Sport, by its very nature is ready and willing. It is so global and has shared its message so widely that the IOC collected together 204 National Olympic Committees, a representation of a world community that is greater than the number of members of the UN (193). This is an important initial fact.
Sport has the characteristics that world diplomacy in particular has shown through the UN system as a model for diplomatic relations between countries.

From 1993 IOC-UN bond has become narrower. Since then, the UN resolutions introduced two lines of action: the launch of the Olympic Truce and the project “Sport as a tool to promote peace education and health development”.

We have witnessed no more sporadic unstructured interventions which were not included in a project or established plan. Since 1993 the right to sport is not only a right for everyone, but also an instrument that can be used at the international level.

Sport is no longer just an educational activity from which no one should be excluded but it is a tool that goes beyond being an instrument of embargo and sanction to become an instrument for the realisation of the goals of the UN system.

Through resolution number 55/2 of 8 September 2000 entitled United Nations Millennium Declaration, 191 UN Member States have set eight ambitious and fundamental objectives, which they have pledged to achieve by 2015: eliminate extreme poverty and hunger; universal primary education; equality between the sexes; reduce child mortality; improve health of mothers; combat HIV / AIDS and malaria; ensure environmental sustainability; develop global partnership for development.

In this important document sport is also called to play its part.

Section II, dedicated to Peace, Security and Disarmament, art. 10, states: "We urge Member States to observe the Olympic Truce, individually and collectively, now and in the future, and to support the International Olympic Committee in its efforts to promote peace and human understanding through sport and the Olympic Ideal."

Also as an outcome of this statement, in October 2002, then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan assembled a task force from the various agencies for the purpose of strengthening the role of sport in the UN system.

The task force, chaired by the executive director of UNICEF and Adolf Ogi, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General for Sport, has produced an important document: Sport for Development and Peace: Towards the Millennium Development Goals.

The conclusions of the report states that sport is one of the most effective ways and most cost effective to continue the journey towards the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals.

This concept is well-expressed in the report by the Secretary General of the UN, 3 October 2008, entitled Contribution of Sport to the Millennium Development Goals, which are enumerated in the MDGs.

Sport doesn’t resolve the problems of the world but it can provide a new perspective in solving them.