



**EMIDIO DIODATO,
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(edited by)

**SPORT AND
INTERNATIONAL
POLITICS IN THE
CHANGING
WORLD ORDER**



Sport and International Politics in the Changing World Order

EDITED BY
EMIDIO DIODATO, LEO GORETTI, VERONICA STRINA



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EDOARDO MOLINELLI

Reassessing the Institutions, Actors and Politics of International Sport amidst Global (Dis)-Order

EMIDIO DIODATO¹, LEO GORETTI²,
AND VERONICA STRINA³

Abstract. Modern sport has evolved into an international institution increasingly and intrinsically intertwined with the dynamics of global politics. This article traces the historical internationalisation of sport, from the universalist ambitions of the early Olympic movement to contemporary geopolitical reconfigurations reflected in the shifting geography of mega-events, showing how transformations in global power are inscribed into sporting arenas. It also examines the mounting challenges to the Olympic ethos posed by commercialisation, technological transformation, and intensifying politicisation. By analysing these developments, particularly in light of the recent Olympics and the upcoming Milano-Cortina 2026 Winter Games, the article foregrounds the key tensions, actors, and normative struggles that the subsequent contributions in the volume explore in greater depth. In doing so, it underscores how sport has become an ever more tightly interwoven component of the contestation and rearticulation of the emerging world order.

Keywords: International sport; international politics; global order

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Modern sport constitutes an inherently international phenomenon, giving rise to autonomous organizations that have established it as a global institution. Prominent among these are the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). Sport plays a critical role in shaping both the international image of states and the construction of national identities. Equally significant is its function in the socialization of youth within an increasingly global society. Individual athletes frequently serve as de facto ambassadors of their nations, even as the global sports economy commodifies their performances and personas. National teams, meanwhile, symbolically embody statehood on the world stage, and their achievements or failures often exert a significant influence on collective national (self-)perception, including in terms of legitimacy and effectiveness of political regimes.

More broadly, modern sport fulfills multiple societal functions. It offers a space for leisure and physical well-being, while simultaneously facilitating symbolic enactments of identity, competition, and role differentiation. It also contributes to the construction of collective imaginaries, mirroring prevailing issues related to gender and ethnicity. On the international stage, sport has increasingly become a platform for geopolitical contention, as visible in phenomena such as acts of terrorism, boycotts, normative disputes, and rivalries among global powers. By encompassing not only processes of self-representation but also the strategic portrayal of the “Other,” it involves the intentional dissemination of negative discourse of foreign nations, aimed at galvanizing domestic political support and undermining the existing international order. The international history of modern sport, much like global politics itself, is marked by fluctuation and contestation.

The revival of the Olympic Games in 1896 marked a foundational moment in the internationalization of modern sport. In *You Must Change Your Life*, political theorist Peter Sloterdijk (2013) characterizes Pierre de Coubertin – the founder of the modern Olympic movement – as a paradigmatic figure of sport as a form of universal, secular religion. The Olympic Games were imbued with symbolic and institutional features that underlined their global aspirations: a fixed four-year cycle that functioned as a new civilizational calendar; the centralized, quasi-monarchical leadership of the International Olympic Committee (IOC); and a guiding ideology of internationalism encapsulated in the principle of *pax olympica*, or Olympic truce. Yet, the contemporary landscape reveals increasing strains on this universalist vision. Rising political fragmentation and resurgent national chauvinism challenge the cohesion and legitimacy of global sporting institutions, casting uncertainty on the cosmopolitan ethos that underpins events like the Olympics or the World Cup.

A historical example of these developments can be seen in the case of Japan. Operating within the same era of global transformation as de Coubertin, Horace Wilson – an American educator and foreign advisor involved in the modernization of Japan’s education system during the Meiji Restoration – introduced baseball to Japan in 1872. In a symbolic moment of reversal and affirmation, that same year of the inaugural modern Olympics in 1896 saw a Japanese baseball team defeat an American one, a victory that was quickly framed as a national accomplishment. This event signaled Japan’s gradual integration into both international sport and the global political order. Japan’s trajectory in the international arena continued through the turbulent periods of imperial expansion and postwar reconstruction. After the cancellation of the 1940 Tokyo Olympic Games and following its defeat in World War II, Japan

reemerged as a democratic nation and, in 1964, became the first Asian country to host the Olympic Games. Whilst marking a sporting milestone, the event constituted a geopolitical statement, celebrating Japan's reintegration into the liberal international order and its commitment to democratic norms.

Until 2014, European countries and North America hosted 40 of the 48 Olympic Games, reflecting the historical dominance of the West in the organization of global sporting mega-events. The geography of the Games then began to change: first with the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, followed by the Rio de Janeiro Summer Games in 2016, and finally the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022 – together signaling what has been termed the 'BRICS phase' of the Games (Diodato and Strina, 2023). This period also included two other editions hosted in Asia: PyeongChang in 2018 and Tokyo in 2020 (actually held in 2021), pointing to a "re-Orienta-tion" of the Games. Within this geopolitical rebalancing of Olympic hosting, the 2024 Games in Paris represented a symbolic return to the West. They will be followed by the Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics in 2026, the Los Angeles Summer Games in 2028, and the French Alps Winter Olympics in 2030, further reaffirming Europe and North America's enduring centrality in the global sporting order. These shifts reveal not only how the geography of Olympic hosting reflects the evolving configuration of global power and its contention, but also how that very configuration can be understood through the dynamics of international sport.

The nature of modern sport itself is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by shifting cultural norms, technological innovation, and economic imperatives. A salient illustration is the growing debate surrounding the classification of some e-sports (such as competitive video gaming) as a legitimate sporting activity, particularly following their inclusion as an official discipline in the 2022 Asian Games hosted by China in 2023.

This development challenges some foundational elements of the Olympic ethos, notably the presumed equivalence among diverse physical disciplines and the principle of rotational hosting as a symbol of international inclusivity. Some e-sports mirror several structural features traditionally associated with modern sport, including organized competition, institutional governance, recreational value, and widespread social acceptance. However, others deviate from classical definitions by lacking the central component of physical exertion. Nonetheless, the software used in video gaming is often owned by private companies. This raises critical questions regarding the role of economic interests in reshaping the conceptual boundaries of sport. Parallel concerns emerge with regard to technological advancements, especially the integration of artificial intelligence into athletic performance, training, and governance.

Among the earliest principles to be contested within the Olympic framework was the ideal of amateurism, which began to erode significantly during the 1970s and 1980s. In its place, especially since the Los Angeles 1984 Olympics, sport has increasingly become a multi-billion-dollar global industry deeply enmeshed with mass media and corporate sponsorship. This commercialization introduces new dynamics (such as the commodification of events and athletes themselves) and new actors (multinational corporations and the global media) into the international arena. In turn, the ever-increasing global attention to mega-sporting events further increases their public and political significance.

It is by now well established that events such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, or the Asian Games serve as focal points for the entanglement of sport and politics. These mega-events share defining characteristics: global media reach, significant economic investment and the capacity to attract mass tourism. As such, they are not only arenas of athletic

competition but also platforms for soft power projection and strategic narrative construction. Yet what deserves closer attention is how the geography of these mega-events, together with the political narratives forged around them by host nations and global media, is shaping not only the future trajectory of global sport but also the contours of the emerging world order.

At first glance, it may then be somewhat puzzling that the public debate surrounding the upcoming 2026 Milano Cortina Winter Olympics has so far almost completely neglected the political dimension. The primary focus has instead been on sustainability (both financial and environmental) and the legacy of the Games at the spatial and local levels, also due to the geographical spread of the hosting venues, with the involvement of no fewer than two different regions (Lombardia and Veneto) and two autonomous provinces (Trento and Bolzano). While the opinion of the local populations on the expected impact of the Games has been mixed, highlighting concerns about their environmental consequences and skyrocketing cost of living, at the national level, the Milano Cortina Games have been framed as a testing ground for Italy's organizational and infrastructural capabilities. For example, when the idea was vented that bobsled, luge, and skeleton events may be relocated abroad due to the delays, uncertainties and local opposition surrounding the Cortina sliding track, Italy's Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani talked about this possibility as a "national surrender" (*il Sole 24 ore*, 2023).

Much less attention has instead been paid to the fact that the run-up to the Games has been marked by the exacerbation of two major wars in Europe (in Ukraine) and its neighbourhood (in Gaza and the Middle East at large). Public statements by Italian authorities on the international environment surrounding the upcoming Games have been few and far between, and limited to generic hopes about the "message of peace and

freedom” that the Games may bring to the warring zones (*Milano Today*, 2025). This reluctance to acknowledge the linkage between international sport and international politics, even at a time of heightened global tension, should not be surprising. Through the 20th century, sports officers and organisations have been at pains to foster the myth that sport is “apolitical” and “neutral” – a sort of idyllic, peaceful ‘safe heaven’ amidst the turbulence of global politics. This narrative has been functional in trying to preserve the autonomy and leeway of international sport and its bureaucracy. However, it has proven untenable at times of major international tensions, such as during the two world wars or at especially tense moments during the Cold War (such as Russia’s invasion of Afghanistan), highlighting the intimate connection between international sport and the international system (Goretti, 2025).

The latest Olympic Games of Paris 2024 are a case in point. Not only was a major sports power such as Russia not able to participate with a national team, with its athletes being allowed entry only as ‘individual neutral athletes’ and the Russian government outlining plans for staging ‘alternative events’; but the Games also became the platform for a bitter international row about gender identities and rights, actively fuelled by Russian misinformation and the global far-right mediasphere, which explicitly attacked the IOC and its supposed adherence to “woke ideology” (Goretti, 2024).

Due to starting on 6 February 2026, it seems unlikely that the upcoming Winter Olympics will be completely shielded from dynamics spilling over from the realm of international politics. At the time of writing, the International Olympic Committee – now headed by Kirsty Coventry, the first female President in its history – has confirmed its policy of allowing entry of Russian and Belarusian participants in Milano Cortina 2026 only as individual neutral athletes – a decision that will have

substantial implications for the event given Russia's longstanding tradition in winter team sports such as ice hockey (and that will also lead to the exclusion of National Hockey League superstar and all-time top scorer Aleksandr Ovechkin) (IOC, 2025). In parallel, for the first time European officers have made an opening to the widespread calls for a possible ban on Israel in international sport due to the war crimes and human rights abuses perpetrated in Gaza (Starcevic, 2025), while protests against the participation of Israel-affiliated teams have profoundly hit major sports competitions such as the Vuelta Espana 2025, resulting in exceptional security measures (Al Jazeera, 2025). Although an exclusion of Israel from the upcoming Winter Olympics seems out of question, its delegation will, in all likelihood, attract attention and contestation despite its very limited size (6 Israeli athletes competed in three disciplines at Beijing 2022). Finally, the Italian government itself, while refraining from acknowledging the political nature of the Milano Cortina Olympics, seems to be keen on leveraging its diplomatic potential, as evident in the invitation to the event that has already been extended to US Vice President JD Vance (Ansa, 2025). In a nutshell, international politics will continue to simmer beneath the snowy surfaces of Milano Cortina.

A reflection on the nexus between sport and international relations, as the one provided in this volume, is thus all the more urgent. The volume brings together five chapters that, albeit with diverse empirical focus and methods, converge on this central premise: sport is not merely a reflection of international politics but an arena in which global power is articulated, contested, and reshaped. The first two contributions examine the role of International Sports Organisations (ISOs), with a focus on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) – arguably the two most influential organisations in global sport

governance. These chapters critically assess how such organisations position themselves within the international society, navigating tensions between neutrality and politicisation, and responding to the shifting geopolitical landscape in ways that reveal their embeddedness in world politics. Together, they foreground the limits of institutional neutrality in moments of crisis, particularly in the context of the Ukraine war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, showcasing how ISOs – far from being apolitical actors – actively shape, and are shaped by, the currents of power politics.

The first chapter by Leo Goretta contributes to this debate by adopting an institutionalist approach that regards sport as a secondary institution of the international society. To shed light on its nature as such, the chapter interrogates the role of the norm of political neutrality invoked by the IOC in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. Focusing on the period between the 2022 Beijing Winter Games and the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics, the chapter traces how the IOC attempted to uphold neutrality amid mounting geopolitical tensions and direct challenges to its authority, assessing to what extent it has proved effective in preventing fragmentation of the international sport order. The analysis illustrates Russia's engagement in what is identified as 'thick contestation,' invoking Olympic norms such as non-discrimination and non-politicisation to delegitimise the IOC's sanctions, while simultaneously trying to promote an alternative regime of international sport by 'reorienting' it towards the Global South. Conversely, according to Goretta, Ukraine's contestation of the IOC's policy towards Russia between 2022 and 2024 can be characterised as a 'thin contestation,' seeking to recalibrate normative priorities within the existing framework and emphasising the condemnation of war and its impact on athletes over neutrality. Positioned uneasily between its formal role as custodian of peace and its

embeddedness in international power politics, the IOC was ultimately forced to take stances that strained its relationship with Russia and challenged the ideal of a universal, apolitical Olympic movement. All in all, Goretti's article shows that the idea of a universal sporting arena depends on a well-functioning international society. When that foundation breaks down, sport cannot remain above the fray, becoming a stage on which the fractures of world politics are both exposed and intensified.

This interplay is further explored in the following chapter by Francesco Belcastro, which delves into FIFA's 'foreign policy' in the context of Israel's war on Gaza, revealing how the organization's decision-making cannot be understood solely through an 'institutional logic' but must also be situated within the personal politics and political alignments of its leadership. Far from adhering to a strictly neutral stance, the chapter argues that FIFA engages as a full-fledged actor in the international arena in politically charged decision-making shaped by leadership agendas and external pressures. It claims so through a detailed analysis of FIFA's expanding role under the last two presidents, Sepp Blatter and Gianni Infantino, exploring their particular interests in Middle East politics. FIFA's selective enforcement of its statutes, especially in the face of Israeli violations, points to dynamics common across all ISOs: the perpetual tension between institutional mandates and political ambitions.

The third chapter, co-authored by Emidio Diodato and Veronica Strina, focuses on the role of the Olympic Games as key arenas and catalysts of normative contestation of the liberal international order (LIO). The chapter develops a comparative analysis of the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Winter Games, with their legacies read in the context of the Paris 2024 Olympics. By doing so, the study shows how Russia and China have mobilized the Olympic arena to articulate alternative visions of

internationalism and Olympism while revealing that Olympism's contestation is no longer exclusively arising from authoritarian powers but endemic to the very order liberal democracies claim to defend. Through the prism of the Winter Games hosted by Russia and China, the authors illustrate a pragmatic convergence rather than a deep ideological alignment on how the two actors contest the LIO's pillars, in particular internationalism, multilateralism, and environmentalism. These divergencies reverberated in the context of the 2024 Paris Olympics, which, while framed as a return to the roots of Olympism, exposed internal fissures within liberal democracies themselves, as populist and far-right movements increasingly question the universalist values that undergird both Olympism and liberal internationalism. The chapter anticipates a likely transition towards a 'post-Olympism,' with the Olympic Games constituting a contested space mirroring and intensifying the plural, fragmented, and increasingly polarized nature of the changing international order.

The fourth and fifth chapters turn to the interplay between the domestic and international dimensions of sport, reflecting on athletes' roles in both sustaining and contesting global sport hierarchies. Together, they examine how football and renowned football players have served as pivotal agents in processes of nation-building, whether by embodying and naturalizing racial and cultural ideals, as in the case of Pelé, or by challenging institutional hierarchies and power structures, as exemplified by Diego Armando Maradona. In particular, Ana Paula da Silva's contribution offers a socio-historical analysis of football's popularization in Brazil, tracing how racialized discourses shaped the sport's evolution from a foreign, elite pastime into a central symbol of national identity. Situating this transformation within broader dynamics of urban modernization and hygienist ideologies in early 20th-century Brazil, the

chapter explores how sport was initially mobilized to “civilize” and “whiten” the population. It does so through a critical engagement with the work of journalist Mário Filho, particularly his influential text *O negro no futebol brasileiro*, showing the extent to which this narrative not only cemented football’s role in the national imaginary but also continues to inform dominant understandings of race and ‘Brazilianness.’ The figure of Pelé is cast as the symbolic culmination of this discourse: a living embodiment of the racial harmony and national pride that Filho’s football narrative sought to construct.

Finally, the fifth chapter by Edoardo Molinelli revisits Diego Armando Maradona’s efforts to challenge global football hierarchies through the foundation of the Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels (AIFP). In contrast with Pelé’s alignment with establishment politics, it situates Maradona as a symbol of resistance against elite institutions such as FIFA and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Although ultimately unsuccessful, Maradona’s attempt is presented as a powerful expression of athlete agency and as a critique of the structural injustices embedded in global football governance, laying the groundwork for greater recognition of players’ rights, evident in the eventual legitimization of the Fédération Internationale des Associations de Footballeurs Professionnels (FIFPro). The article frames Maradona not just as a “disobedient player,” but as a forerunner of athlete activism. His symbolic actions, most notably during the 1986 World Cup, are therefore read as expressions of postcolonial defiance and Global South empowerment.

Collectively, the chapters included in this volume dismantle the notion that sport is merely a peripheral or apolitical domain, instead presenting it as an arena in which power and global hierarchies are continuously contested and negotiated. Across institutional and ideological dimensions, as well as

through individual agency, sport emerges as a site where national identity, legitimacy, political values and norms are constantly rearticulated. From the normative tensions surrounding neutrality of international sport organisations and the universalism of Olympism in an age of political fragmentation, to the roles of athletes in embodying or challenging nation-building myths, the volume offers a multilayered understanding of sport as a constitutive force in world politics. In doing so, it invites scholars and practitioners alike to take the political work sport performs seriously, as a performance through which the future of the emerging world order is enacted and reimagined.

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The approach of the Milano-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics offers a timely occasion to reconsider the intricate relationship between sport and political power. Far from being mere sporting spectacles, the Olympic Games belong to a broader category of global mega-events characterized by extensive media visibility, substantial financial commitments and a strong capacity to mobilize international tourism. As such, they function not only as stages for athletic performance but also as politically charged arenas in which power is projected, national identities are negotiated, and competing narratives of legitimacy and international order are advanced and contested. This volume explores the Olympic Games – and sport more generally – as a lens through which to observe the evolving dynamics of world politics, highlighting how the sporting arena operates as a site of power, symbolic representation, and political legitimization. Drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives, the contributions examine historical and contemporary cases of international sport politics by foregrounding actors, institutions, norms, and governance structures, interrogating claims of neutrality, and assessing sport's role in today's global order.

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SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IN THE CHANGING WORLD ORDER

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