



EMIDIO DIODATO,  
LEO GORETTI,  
VERONICA STRINA  
(edited by)

# SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IN THE CHANGING WORLD ORDER



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EDITED BY  
EMIDIO DIODATO, LEO GORETTI, VERONICA STRINA



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# POLIDEMOS

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EDOARDO MOLINELLI

# Preface

DAMIANO PALANO

When, in 1894, at the amphitheatre of the old Sorbonne in Paris, Baron de Coubertin announced his plan to revive the ancient Olympic Games, the reception was enthusiastic, but probably none of those present grasped the true meaning of the French aristocrat's words. Many thought he was referring to a theatrical performance – a kind of re-enactment of the games of Olympia. Only in the following years did the project take shape, and it was decided that the first Olympic Games would be held in Athens in 1896. The obstacles and mistrust that Baron de Coubertin had to overcome were numerous – from those raised by the individual sporting disciplines, whose practitioners often regarded other sports as harmful to health, to those coming from nation-states themselves.

To avoid political pressures, he proposed that the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) should reject the inclusion of delegates from any institution and should also refuse to accept subsidies from any source whatsoever. De Coubertin described this independence as the *armour of the poor*, as he later wrote in his autobiographical books of memories:

“The armour of the poor,” I said at the time, “is made of selflessness and freedom. Since we possess no riches, we can never be corrupted; and since we shall accept no subsidies, no one will ever have the power to command us. In this will lie the strength of the Committee: in its dignified poverty, in its absolute moral independence, in its freedom of judgment and

decision. Each member must act in the name of sport and the Olympic ideal, not as a representative of a government, a club, or any group of interests. The I.O.C. must remain above political and national rivalries, and equally beyond economic passions. It must embody not a power, but a conscience; not a material authority, but a moral principle. This spirit – fragile and pure – will be our only defence; yet, if we are able to preserve it, no power will ever destroy us.” (de Coubertin, 1931, pp. 21-22).

With the idea of the *armure du pauvre*, Pierre de Coubertin developed a kind of moral philosophy. The International Olympic Committee, in his view, was to be a disinterested community – poor in material means but free from any political or economic constraint. To the ideal of Olympism was also linked the conviction that all sports should be regarded as equal, and that athletics should be recognized for its positive potential:

I had to intervene to prevent the “secondary sports” from being simply harnessed to the chariot of “athletics” – something that, as it turned out, would happen often and for a long time thereafter. The reflection of these important decisions appeared in issue no. 2 of the quarterly bulletin, the publication of which I immediately began. From its chronicle, I extract the following passages: “We are asked to define clearly the nature of our enterprise. Here is the answer in a few lines. Our aim, in reviving an institution that disappeared so many centuries ago, is this Athletics has acquired an importance that grows year by year. Its role seems destined to be as considerable and as lasting in the modern world as it was in the ancient one; moreover, it reappears with new features: it is international and democratic, and therefore suited to the ideas and needs of the present age. But today, as in the past, its influence may be beneficial or harmful, depending on how it is directed and used. Athletics can stir the noblest as well as the basest passions; it can cultivate selflessness and a sense of honour, as well

as the love of gain; it can be chivalrous or corrupt, virile or brutish; finally, it can be employed to consolidate peace as well as to prepare for war. Now, the nobility of sentiment, the worship of selflessness and honour, the chivalric spirit, virile energy and peace are the foremost needs of modern democracies, whether republican or monarchical” (de Coubertin, 1931, pp. 22-23).

When de Coubertin conceived the revival of the Olympic Games, his dream was both educational and political – though political in a sense he hoped to cleanse of violence, nationalism, and domination. The French baron, raised in the values of liberal humanism and the nineteenth-century faith in progress, saw in sport a universal language capable of uniting nations through fair competition and mutual respect. The Olympic ideal, in his view, was to embody a kind of practical cosmopolitanism: a neutral ground where young people from all parts of the world could measure themselves according to common rules, beyond political divisions and differences of race or religion. For de Coubertin, sport was an extension of moral education – a school of civic virtue. Athletic competition did not represent war but its sublimation: a way to channel human energy and aggression toward symbolic and regulated forms of confrontation. That is why he looked with suspicion upon any attempt to politicize sport and resisted the notion that the Games might become instruments of national propaganda. Yet the history of the twentieth century would soon demonstrate how illusory it was to think that politics could remain outside that great collective performance which the Olympics were destined to become.

From the very beginning, the Olympic Games were an arena of rivalry among states and a stage for assertions of national identity. National symbols, flags, anthems, and opening ceremonies all formed a potent political repertoire in which

nations competed not only in athletic prowess but also in dignity and international prestige. Sport, far from being a simple pastime, became a ritual form of political modernity – a visual dramatization of power, pride, and the cohesion of national communities. The most emblematic – and perhaps the most revealing – instance of this tension between ideal and reality came with the Berlin Olympics of 1936. No sporting event had ever carried such intense symbolic weight. Conceived by the National Socialist regime as a grand celebration of the “new Germany,” the 1936 Games were intended to show the world the rebirth of the German people, the strength of their organization, and the alleged superiority of the Aryan race. Everything – from Albert Speer’s monumental architecture to the meticulously choreographed ceremonies – was designed to exalt the grandeur of the Reich and to consolidate the image of a disciplined, modern, and unified nation. And yet, as history often reminds us, propaganda can produce unintended effects. The victories of Jesse Owens, the African American athlete who dominated the track, became the symbol of an irreconcilable contradiction: a Black man who, with grace and determination, shattered the myth of white supremacy. The official narrative of the regime was undermined, and posterity would remember those Games not as the triumphant apotheosis of Nazism but as a moment when the Olympic ideal, even within the frame of totalitarianism, managed paradoxically to reaffirm the universal dignity of the individual. Still, the Berlin Olympics also stood as a spectacular machine of consensus for Hitler’s Germany – an event that demonstrated the regime’s ability to translate power into spectacle, fusing aesthetics, politics, and sport into a single representation of might (Prieur, 2017).

After the catastrophe of war, the Olympic Games again became a stage for world politics, albeit in new forms. During the

Cold War, sport turned into a perfect metaphor for the ideological conflict between the two blocs. Each medal was interpreted as a victory for the political system that had produced it: capitalism against socialism, freedom against planning, the individual against the state. National teams became ambassadors of their societies, and sporting success served as proof of the vitality of a given political and economic model. The reciprocal boycotts – the American one at the Moscow Games in 1980 and the Soviet one at Los Angeles in 1984 – marked the culmination of this politicization. Yet even beyond such acts, every edition of the Games was crossed by tensions and gestures that brought politics back to center stage: from the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at Mexico City in 1968, a symbol of the civil rights struggle, to the disputes over the inclusion or exclusion of certain nations due to wars, invasions, or regimes. With the end of the Cold War, one might have imagined that the political dimension of the Games would fade, dissolved in the logic of the global market and entertainment industry. Instead, politics has remained firmly embedded in the Olympic arena, though in transformed guises. Ideological conflicts have given way to debates over human rights, the environment, gender equality, and global governance. Every edition of the Games is now surrounded by controversy over the political significance of the host cities – Beijing, Sochi, Tokyo, Paris – and over the role of sport diplomacy in the broader competition among powers.

In this new context, the Olympics constitute a crucial chapter in the so-called “war of images,” where states compete not only (or not primarily) in military or economic terms, but in the symbolic and reputational sphere. Image management, media narratives, and the ability to associate one’s name with positive, universal values have become integral components of contemporary power. Sport, precisely because of its immediacy



and popular appeal, has thus become one of the privileged tools of this global competition. The volume *Sport and International Politics in the Changing World Order*, edited by Emidio Diodato, Leo Goretti and Veronica Strina, situates itself within this perspective, exploring the political dimension of the Olympic Games and, more generally, of sport as a device of power, representation, and legitimation. The collected essays examine, from different angles, the interconnections among sport, politics, and communication – reconstructing historical and contemporary cases, analysing the role of international institutions and the media, and reflecting on how sport contributes today to shaping the global imagination.

The aim is not simply to demonstrate that politics has always been present in the Olympics – an almost self-evident claim – but to understand “how” and “why” it has entered them, and how the political element has shaped their form, rituals, and public meaning. In other words, the challenge is to grasp the political significance of sport as a total social phenomenon, in the Maussian sense: a practice that mobilizes bodies, emotions, symbols, and institutions, standing at the crossroads of culture, economy, and power. For this reason, the volume invites readers to consider the deeply ambivalent nature of modern sport. On one hand, it is a universal language that fosters encounter, cooperation, and mutual understanding. On the other, it is a potent instrument of identity formation, propaganda, and symbolic domination. In this sense, sport functions as a controlled outlet for conflict, a ritualized performance that both expresses and restrains the antagonisms of modern societies. The Olympic Games, at their best, remind us of this fragile equilibrium: they celebrate discipline, effort, and human excellence, but they also mirror the tensions, inequalities, and rivalries that structure the global order. Perhaps, then, de Coubertin’s lesson should not be dismissed but reinterpreted in light of the

ambiguities of the contemporary world. His dream of an “Olympic truce” remains a precious ideal – provided one recognizes that every truce is relative, and that the sporting arena is also a symbolic battlefield. The Olympic Games continue to tell us, through the language of the body and performance, about the great tensions of our time: global inequalities, the quest for recognition, the struggle for prestige, the contradictions between universalism and sovereignty, between peace and power.

That is why the Olympics are much more than a celebration of sport. They are a lens through which we can observe the metamorphoses of world politics – a global mirror reflecting not only athletic excellence but also the passions, fears, and aspirations of humanity. And perhaps this is why, despite everything, we continue to await them with the same anticipation: because in that interval of days, between the opening and closing ceremonies, the dreams and conflicts of our world are once again condensed into ritual form.

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

EMIDIO DIODATO<sup>1</sup>, LEO GORETTI<sup>2</sup>,  
AND VERONICA STRINA<sup>3</sup>

**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 re-configurations 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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<sup>1</sup> Emidio Diodato, University for Foreigners of Perugia (Italy). E-mail address: emidio.diodato@unistrapg.it

<sup>2</sup> Leo Goretti, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), (Italy). E-mail address: l.goretti@iai.it

<sup>3</sup> Veronica Strina, Università di Salerno (Italy). E-mail address: vstrina@unisa.it

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-Orientatation" 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Gorette 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 Gorette, 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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# Contestation on the Playing Ground: The Russia-Ukraine War between Beijing 2022 and Paris 2024

LEO GORETTI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This chapter argues that international sport functions as a secondary institution of the international system whose norms are contingent on systemic politics. Focusing on the case of the Russia-Ukraine war from Beijing 2022 to Paris 2024, it traces how the International Olympic Committee (IOC) deployed two norms (that is, political neutrality and the Olympic Truce) to preserve organizational cohesion, and how the most directly involved state actors (Ukraine and Russia) responded. The chapter shows that neutrality operated primarily as a damage-limitation device, rather than as a value-oriented principle, and that it was intensely contested. Contestation unfolded in two modes: thin contestation (by Ukraine) sought to reprioritize values within the Olympic framework, elevating condemnation of aggression over neutrality, whereas thick contestation (by Russia and aligned actors) challenged the framework's legitimacy and incubated alternative events, raising fragmentation risks. Overall, the chapter highlights that a truly 'universal' sport arena is necessarily dependent on a functioning global international system at large.

**Keywords:** Olympic neutrality; norm contestation; secondary institutions; International Olympic Committee; Russia-Ukraine war; sports diplomacy; Olympic Truce.

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Goretti, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), (Italy). E-mail address: l.goretti@iai.it

## *Introduction*

*The fundamental idea behind the Olympic Games is to unite the entire world in peaceful competition. [...] At the Olympic Games, the athletes of the territories of all 206 National Olympic Committees and the IOC Refugee Olympic Team embody this peace mission. Based on our political neutrality, we welcome all National Olympic Committees of the world who respect our constitution, the Olympic Charter, without any discrimination for any reason. (IOC, 2024a)*

It was thus that, in May 2024, the then-President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Thomas Bach summed up the mission of the Olympic movement. With the Paris Olympics drawing near and no truce in sight for the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars, Bach seemed bent on stressing the peace-facilitating and bridge-building role of Olympism. To ensure as wide a participation as possible, the IOC reiterated its commitment to “political neutrality” and the rejection of “any discrimination” – provided, however, that its “constitution”, the Olympic Charter, was respected.

As Bach’s speech highlights, today’s international sport is governed by organisations (such as the IOC) that are grounded in a complex constellation of values (such as peace) and norms (such as neutrality) that are explicitly codified and formalised (as in the Olympic Charter). As I discuss in another paper (Goretti, 2025), the norms underlying international sport have been developed – and modified – over the more-than-a-century-long history of the Olympic movement, not only due to internal organisational needs, but also as a response to exogenous changes in the international system. They have both provided a source of legitimacy for the governing role of the IOC over international sport – as is the case for the supposed universal peace mission of Olympism – as well as a useful compass to navigate international tensions and conflicts that may

threaten the unity of international sport, causing fragmentation. This latter function has been played especially by the norm of political neutrality, which has been codified in the Olympic Charter only in 2018, admittedly as a response to “increased political and geopolitical and nationalistic pressures” encroaching on the IOC (IOC Media 2018, 1:09:06-1:10:01).

Within a very few years, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in a blatant violation of international law, posed very uneasy questions to the organisations in charge of international sport: first and foremost, whether to introduce sanctions – and how – against the Russian state, its officials and athletes (Goretti, 2022). Through a process-tracing approach, this chapter will interrogate what role the norm of neutrality has played in this debate: how it has been referred to and applied by the IOC<sup>2</sup>, whether and how it has been contested by state and non-state actors, and – more generally – to what extent it has proved effective in preventing fragmentation in international sport. More broadly, the discussion will focus on the degree of dependency or autonomy of sport in the international system, shedding light on its nature as a *secondary institution* of the international society.

### *1. International sport as a (contested) institution*

While sports history and sociology literatures have thrived since the 1970s, International Relations (IR) scholarship took a longer time to develop a substantial interest in sport. In the last two decades, however, a remarkable amount of research has

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<sup>2</sup> While acknowledging the relevance of FIFA as the other major organisation governing international sport, due to the scope of the analysis, the paper focuses on the IOC only, although occasional references to international football and its organisations are included as well.

investigated the nexus between international sport and international affairs: first and foremost, by focusing on the role of sport as a ‘soft power’ tool employed by democratic and authoritarian states alike, and of sport diplomacy an enabler or facilitator of interstate relations. A more recent stream of literature has highlighted how international sport can also become a site for what Stuart Murray (2018) defined as ‘anti-diplomacy’ and different types of contestation: from boycotts and other forms of protest, to public initiatives challenging the existing order, to media contestation (Diodato and Strina, 2023).

This chapter proposes a complementary, institutionalist approach. The underlying assumption is that sport should be regarded as an institution: that is, building on Keohane (1988, 383) and Hodgson (2006, 2), a *system of established principles, norms and rules, identifiable in space and time, that structure repeated human interaction*. More specifically, *international* sport should be considered a *secondary* institution of the international system: that is, as per Kilian Spandler’s definition (2015, 613), an institution that (i) refers to a “discrete section[n] of international reality and appl[ies] to a clearly defined set of actors” and (ii) whose existence is dependent and conditional on that of other, more fundamental and general institutions, such as state sovereignty and multilateralism. Indeed, *international* sport would simply not exist in the complete absence of common rules and institutions shared by and conducive to peaceful coexistence among sovereign states. To illustrate, one can simply refer to the cancellation of the most important international competitions – the Olympics and the men’s football World Cup – during the two world wars, for all the (wishful) efforts of sport bureaucrats to keep the flame alive.

A related consideration is that the international system and its dynamics have an impact on the institutions of international sport. This is certainly the case as far as the process of norm

emergence is concerned, as well exemplified by the recent codification of the norm of ‘political neutrality’ in reaction to a fraught international environment. Another poignant example is the development of the notion of ‘Olympic Truce’ in the early 1990s. The outbreak of the war in the ex-Yugoslavia led the United Nations Security Council to vote Resolution 757 on 30 May 1992, which invited all states to “Take the necessary steps to prevent the participation in sporting events on their territory of persons or groups representing the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)” (UN Security Council, 1992). As a result, the Yugoslavian team was banned from the European football championship 1992, while the IOC managed to include Yugoslav athletes in the Barcelona Summer Games as “independent Olympic participants”. Building on that crisis, IOC President Samaranch soon put forward the proposal for introducing a UN-sanctioned period of truce in correspondence with the future Olympic Games, which was eventually approved by the UN General Assembly with resolution 48/11 on 25 October 1993 and reiterated for all the subsequent Olympics (UN General Assembly, 1993; Waters, 2023). The IOC’s website explicitly states that the introduction of this norm was made “Taking into account the new political reality in which sport and the Olympic Games exist” (IOC, 2025a), highlighting the nexus between the norms of international sport and the international system. Notably, as will be discussed in the following, both political neutrality and the Olympic truce have been widely referred to in the debate over Russian participation in international sport that ensued the outbreak of the war against Ukraine.

At the same time, however, contestation in the international system may also lead to *contestation* of the existing institutional framework (in terms of values, norms and organisations) of international sport. This contestation can originate from

different subjects – state actors, non-governmental organisations, the media, athletes (Goretti, 2023), among others – and can take different forms. In this paper, we will distinguish between two different modes of contestation, building on both Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) and Wiener (2014). A first mode of contestation is ‘thin contestation’: what is contested is not the existing institutional framework per se, but rather the way in which its values and norms are applied (their scope) and hierarchised (what values/norms should take precedence if a conflict between them arises). This kind of contestation is therefore aimed at redefining priorities within the existing framework. Examples of thin contestation in international sport may be the (successful) campaign of African countries for the exclusion of apartheid South Africa in the 1960s (Booth, 2003) or the protest of the German men’s football team against the prohibition of the rainbow ‘OneLove’ armband at the Qatar 2022 World Cup (BBC, 2022a). In both cases, emphasis was put on the need to give priority to fundamental values (anti-racism, anti-discrimination and LGBTIQ+ rights) within the established structure of international sport.

A second mode of contestation is ‘thick contestation’: that is, the contestation of existing frameworks as such. Unlike thin contestation, this type of contestation can potentially lead to the emergence of alternative, competing institutional frameworks for international sport, implying the risk of its fragmentation. An example of ‘thick contestation’ in international sport was the establishment of alternative international sporting movements in the early 20th century, such as the two separate international Workers’ Sport movements that contested the ‘bourgeoise’ character of Olympic sport (based on amateurism) in accordance with the approach of the Socialist and Communist Internationals (Gounot, 2015). Another salient example was the (short-lived) organisation of the Games of the

New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) in Jakarta in 1963, in the context of decolonisation and as a result of the People's Republic of China self-exclusion from the Olympic movement: Indonesia's President Sukarno explicitly proposed "to mix sports with politics, and [...] establish the Games of the New Emerging Forces, the GANEFO [...] against the Old Established Order" (Connolly, 2012, p.1313). Arguably, in line with our general assumption about the relation between international sport and the international system, thick contestation in international sport is more likely to emerge at times of heightened tension in the international environment. The case of the Russia-Ukraine war, which will be discussed in the following, provides an apt testing ground for this hypothesis.

## *2. The Olympic norms vis-à-vis the war against Ukraine*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 immediately had a profound impact on international sport. The Beijing Winter Olympics had drawn to a close just four days before the invasion; heightened international tensions had reverberated through the Games, with the Biden administration embarking on a diplomatic boycott in response to the PRC's human rights violations, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping meeting on the sidelines of the Games to announce the alleged beginning of a new era of international relations based on 'just multipolarity' and Ukrainian athletes staging pro-peace demonstrations during the Games to call international attention onto the Russian threats of aggression. Within a few hours of the invasion, a debate started about the participation of Russian athletes in upcoming high-level sporting events such as the Beijing Paralympics (to be held 4-13 March) and the qualifiers for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, with



Russia set to face Poland in a play-off match scheduled on 24 March. Athletes, sport officials and government representatives from not only Ukraine, but also several Western (especially Nordic) countries, called for an outright ban of Russia and Belarus from international sport (Goretti, 2022; Kobierecka and Kobierecki, 2023).

For once, the organisations governing international sport, such as the International Olympic and Paralympic Committees and FIFA, were quick in reacting to the new reality. On the same day of the invasion, the IOC issued a statement where it “strongly condemn[ed] the breach of the Olympic Truce by the Russian government” (IOC, 2022a). Indeed, since the Truce started seven days before the beginning of the Olympic Games and would last until seven days after the end of the Paralympic Games, the Russian war could be framed as a violation of a fundamental norm of *both* international sport and the international system, as the Truce had been adopted by consensus within the United Nations General Assembly (2021). This became the normative argument based on which all subsequent *sanctions* adopted by the IOC against the Russian government and its officials were grounded. The day after the invasion, on 25 February, another communique was issued whereby all international sports federations were urged to cancel all the events to be held in Russia and Belarus<sup>3</sup>, as well as “to take the breach of the Olympic Truce by the Russian and Belarussian governments into account and give the safety and security of the athletes absolute priority” (IOC, 2022b). Finally, on 28 February, a new recommendation was published

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<sup>3</sup> Belarus was mentioned by the IOC due to its government’s “support” for Russia’s war; notably, however, FIFA and UEFA allowed Belarusian teams (both at the national and club levels) to compete, albeit playing their home matches at neutral venues without spectators (BBC, 2022b).

whereby two different sets of measures were taken: first, the Olympic Order was withdrawn from high-ranking Russian government officials – including President Putin – due to “the extremely grave violation of the Olympic Truce [...] by the Russian government”; second, the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international competitions was discouraged “in order to protect the integrity of global sports competitions and for the safety of all the participants” (IOC, 2022c). In the subsequent weeks, most (but not all) international sports federations adopted such recommendations (Heerdt and Battaglia, 2022).

Notably, while in the public debate all these measures were lumped together as ‘sporting sanctions’ against Russia, the IOC carefully distinguished between them and their underlying rationale. The measures targeting the Russian government and state (including a total ban on using its symbols, flags, anthems or colours at any international event) were indeed explicitly presented as “sanctions” against the Russian war of aggression, and were motivated by referring to the normative system of international sport (a result of “blatant violation of the Olympic Truce and [...] the Olympic Charter” on part of the Russian government). The exclusion of athletes was instead framed as a temporary “protective measure” that the IOC was forced to take due to widespread “anti-Russian and anti-Belarusian feelings” and, most importantly, “public and political pressure” by governments on national Olympic committees, with the latter being reportedly asked not to compete against athletes from certain countries (Russia and Belarus). This “exceptional” decision was admittedly taken by the IOC “with a very heavy heart” as a result of exogenous (governmental) pressures, supposedly to prevent an even greater fragmentation of international sport into opposing political blocs and thus its “full politicisation” (IOC, 2022d). The exclusion of Russian athletes was thus

portrayed as the ‘lesser evil’, necessary to “protect” the Olympic movement amidst a major crisis originating in the wider international system, testifying to the ‘secondary’ – and dependent – nature of international sport and its norms.

Not surprisingly, as the months went by, the IOC was increasingly at pains to find a pathway to lift the protective measures threatening its supposed neutrality and restore its self-claimed ‘universalism’. To this end, a key moment was the letter addressed to Thomas Bach by the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights and the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in September 2022. While recognising the legitimacy of the sanctions introduced against the Russian state, the Rapporteurs raised “serious concerns” that the recommendation to ban Russian athletes may instead be a form of discrimination based on nationality (Xanthaki and Achiume, 2022; see also Xanthaki, 2023). This opinion was constantly mentioned by IOC representatives in the process leading up to the revision of the recommendations on Russian athletes. Between March and December 2023, a set of criteria was outlined under which participation of individual Russian and Belarusian athletes under neutral flag could be reinstated, also looking towards the Paris 2024 Olympics. Strict eligibility conditions were defined: among them, a full ban on all those who actively supported the war or who were contracted to military or national security agencies. Notably, once again, the IOC motivated this decision by referring not only to its own normative framework (such as the “firm rejection of any political interference in the autonomous authority of sports organisations to decide on participation in their competitions”), but also to the opinion of an external actor in the wider international system: the UN, its resolutions and its Rapporteurs, on

whose authority “the IOC has to rely” (IOC, 2023a; IOC, 2023b).

Overall, the IOC claimed – in its usual self-aggrandizing way – to have navigated the “complex political situation” created by Russia’s war against Ukraine following a “values-based course of action” inspired by the Olympic Charter. Values such as “peace, unity, solidarity and non-discrimination” would have provided a “compass” to address a seemingly “intractable” situation in the right way (IOC, 2023c). Yet, the IOC’s approach and decision were repeatedly contested, for different reasons, from both the Ukrainian and Russian camps, which sheds further light on the degree of effectiveness of the normative framework of international sport in addressing the impact of major international crises.

### *3. Ukraine: “There is not such a thing as neutrality”*

As mentioned, Ukrainian sport took a firm stance against the Russian threats of war already during the Beijing 2022 Games. Following the invasion, on 27 February 2022, an open letter signed by Ukrainian athletes was sent to the Presidents of the International Olympic and Paralympic Committee calling for a ban of Russian athletes from international sport, referring to the breach of the Olympic Charter and the grave danger that the invasion was posing to Ukrainian athletes’ lives (Global Athlete, 2022). In the following months, Ukrainian officials and sportspeople campaigned against the presence of Russian competitors in some of the sports – especially tennis – where they had not been excluded. In their argumentation, they often referred to the death toll suffered by Ukrainian athletes due to the war as well as to the systematic politicisation of sport under Putin’s regime. As tennis player Marta Kostyuk put it,

“Sport has always been politics and always will be” (Kane, 2022; see also Burke, 2022).

Once it became clear that the IOC was looking for a pathway to reintegrate Russian athletes, President Zelensky himself repeatedly made a case against it. Russia deserves “complete isolation” in sport, the President argued in December 2022, pointing out that “184 Ukrainian athletes have died as a result of Russia’s actions, and Russia itself uses sports for propaganda purposes” (Shefferd, 2022). Faced with the perspective of Russian participation at Paris 2024, Zelensky went on to underline that “There is no such thing as neutrality when a war like this is going on”, that “that any neutral flag of Russian athletes is stained with blood” and that “Olympic principles and war are fundamentally opposed to each other” (President of Ukraine, 2023). In other words, the Ukrainian government contested the IOC’s decision by establishing a hierarchy of values and norms within the Olympic framework: in the context of a major conflict, rejection and condemnation of a war of aggression should supersede political neutrality; sanctions should be extended to individual athletes too as their participation would be “a symbol of violence and impunity” (Lasjaunias, 2023).

Although minoritarian, similar arguments against Russian participation were shared also by some (Western) sports officials. Especially notable was the stance taken by Sebastian Coe – the President of World Athletics – who refused to lift the ban on Russian athletes in his federation despite the IOC’s updated recommendations in 2023. Coe explained that this was a matter of “integrity” and of not being “on the wrong side of history”: faced with the dramatic consequences of the war on Ukrainian sport and people, “I can’t be neutral” (Rowbottom, 2023).

Coe’s position however was not shared by the majority of federations that instead started reintegrating Russian athletes

as individual neutrals through 2023. Not surprisingly, the Ukrainian reaction was very harsh. For several months, the government considered the possibility of an outright boycott of the Paris Olympics (France24, 2023); in parallel, on 30 March 2023, a policy was issued by the Ministry of Sport that required athletes officially representing Ukraine not to participate in events where ‘neutral’ Russian and Belarusian opponents were present (Melkozerova, 2023a). These initiatives, that would overall amount to a form of ‘thick’ contestation of IOC norms and decisions, were eventually dropped, as it became progressively clear that a boycott would not be joined by the majority of Western allies and that not attending events was overall harmful to Ukrainian athletes and not beneficial to Ukraine’s cause (Melkozerova, 2023b; Lloyd, 2023).

Instead, participation in international events, and especially the Olympics, could provide a platform to recall attention onto Ukraine’s war of resistance. As the official communique of the Ministry of Sport officialising Ukraine’s participation in the Paris 2024 Games clarified, “this time for Ukraine, the Olympics is primarily a big screen to the world. We need to remind the world that Ukraine exists, is fighting and is capable of winning. The very fact that the Ukrainian flag is flying in Paris is a great manifestation of willpower” (UNN, 2024). Even though President Zelensky did not attend the event, 140 athletes qualified for the Games, and the Ukraine House in Paris was described as “a gritty celebration of Ukrainian national identity” (VOA, 2024). In the same vein, when Olha Kharlan – who had been disqualified from the 2023 Fencing World Championship for refusing to shake hands with her defeated Russian opponent Anna Smirnova – won the first medal for the country in the Games, she underlined that her medal was above all “a message to all the world that Ukraine will never give up” (Ames, 2024). In parallel, the Ukrainian government and civil society

organisations carefully screened the profiles of potential Russian participants, preparing databases and dossiers that contributed to keeping the attention high on the issue (Hoy, 2024; Sabbagh 2024; Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine, 2025). Specific guidelines were provided by the Ukrainian Olympic Committee inviting their athletes to avoid any direct contacts – either in person or via social media – with Russian and Belarusian attendees (Australian Associated Press, 2024).

Overall, Ukraine’s contestation of the IOC policy toward Russia in 2022-2024 was of the ‘thin’ type: that is, trying to revise priorities within the existing normative framework, placing a greater focus on issues such as the rejection of war and the humanitarian situation in the country, including for sportspeople, rather than on neutrality. Even though the possibility of a boycott of the Paris Olympics was repeatedly raised and a non-participation policy was initially introduced for events featuring Russian participants, the final deliberation was to keep acting within the existing system, leveraging it to keep the attention high on the situation in the country. This did not mean endorsing the IOC’s rhetoric altogether, however: when French President Macron suggested the possibility of enacting the Olympic Truce on the Russia-Ukraine front during the Games, Zelensky was adamant that this was a non-starter for Ukraine, as it would just go to the benefit of Russia (Mathiesen, 2024). Once again, the hard reality of international politics superseded the idealistic normative framework of the IOC.

#### *4. Russia: the Paris Games as “a tool of gross, racist and ethnic discrimination”*

Russia’s reaction to the IOC’s “sanctions” and “protective measures” was, as one may expect, of radical and aggressive

contestation from the very beginning. The full membership of Russia in international sport had already been questioned for years: following the state-sponsored doping scandal in the aftermath of the Sochi 2014 Olympics, Russia's presence at all successive Games had been (mildly) tainted one way or another (Wallace and Giambalvo, 2022). President Putin, who since the inception of his Presidency had widely resorted to sport as a propaganda tool, repeatedly took issue with the international anti-doping authorities, whose accusations he described as part of their supposedly anti-Russian politics (Goretti and Mariconti, 2023).

After the February 2022 IOC recommendations were issued and Russia was excluded from the Beijing 2022 Paralympics, the Kremlin reacted quickly by organising an alternative Winter Paralympics in the city of Khanty-Mansiysk. In opening the Games, President Putin – who in the meanwhile had been stripped of his honorary titles by the IOC and the judo and taekwondo federations – emphasised the importance of the “fundamental values of sport, free of politics and discrimination”. In Putin's view, however, the true “spirit” of international sport had been desecrated as a result of a long-term drift that had begun with the 2016 Summer Games and had led to “double standards” and the “politically biased dictatorship of the anti-doping bureaucracy”, ushering in a “loss of authority and independence” for the organisations governing international sport. In his view, the recent exclusion of Russian athletes from the Beijing Paralympics represented a “violation of the Olympic Charter”, which mandates that “the Games are a competition between athletes, not between states” (President of Russia, 2022). In his argumentation, Putin was explicitly appealing to the principles of Olympism – although ‘peace’ was notably not mentioned – while concurrently organising an alternative



international event outside of the official framework of international sport<sup>4</sup>.

This approach based on highlighting the supposed gap between Olympic values and the IOC's unfair treatment of Russia and its athletes, paralleled by plans for organising alternative international competitions, continued through the Paris Games. The decision to re-allow entry of Russian athletes only as individuals under neutral flag was described by then-Russian Sport Minister Oleg Matytsin as “unlawful” and “openly discriminatory” (Barker, 2023a), and by heads of national federations as a “betrayal of the motherland” (Barker, 2023b). Although the channels of dialogue with the IOC and International Federations were not completely broken and the options for Russian participation were reportedly carefully weighed by the Kremlin (Daffunchio Picazo, 2024), the rhetoric became harsher as the months went by.

Another landmark speech was indeed delivered by Putin in October 2023, a few days after the IOC's decision to suspend the Russian Olympic Committee due to its annexation of the regional sports organisations in the occupied regions of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia (IOC, 2023d). The Russian President first reiterated his commitment to “the Olympic principles of solidarity, equality and an honest sports competition” – once again, ‘peace’ was absent –, then attacked the supposed political misuse of the Olympic Games by the IOC leaders as “a tool of gross and, in fact, racist and ethnic discrimination”. The IOC's exclusionary policy laid bare that the Olympic Charter “no longer has a universal character”, as “some sports officials have simply arrogated to themselves the right to determine who is covered by this Olympic Charter and

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<sup>4</sup> Participants reportedly included athletes from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (Berkeley, 2022).

who is not". Against this discriminatory backdrop, Russia was ready to "cooperate with everyone who shares the traditional values and principles of sports", with an explicit reference to Xi Jinping's China, the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Accordingly, Putin announced that Russia was set to organise a series of international events in 2024, such as the phygital "Games of the Future" in Kazan in February, the BRICS Games also in Kazan in June, and the World Friendship Games (a sort of counter-Olympics) in Moscow and Yekaterinburg in September. Overall, Putin's plans "for a multifold increase in the number of sports competitions" were clearly hinting at a possible split in international sport (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Botswana, 2023).

The conflict with the IOC further escalated in March 2024. The Olympic Committee established the panel that would review the eligibility status of each Russian and Belarusian athlete and clarified that the latter would not be allowed participation as a delegation in the opening ceremony in Paris (IOC, 2024b); furthermore, the Olympic Committee issued a declaration where it described the World Friendship Games planned by Russia as "purely politically motivated sports events", thus in violation of the Olympic Charter as well as of UN resolutions, and urged all its stakeholders and governments to reject the initiative (IOC, 2024c). The Russian government's reaction was spearheaded by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, according to whom "These decisions demonstrate how far the IOC has moved away from its stated principles and slipped into racism and neo-Nazism". IOC's request not to support the World Friendship Games was instead described as a form of "intimidation" (France24, 2024a).

Amidst these tensions, the following weeks saw the progressive hollowing out of Russian participation in the Paris Games. Once it became clear that the eligibility status of several high-

profile Russian athletes was not granted, especially in combat sports, many admissible athletes declined the invitation to Paris, prompted by the respective Russian sports federations. In the end, out of 36 eligible athletes who were invited to attend, only 15 eventually did so, with the Kremlin reportedly offering a monetary compensation to those who refused to participate (Meshcheriakova, 2024; Judo Inside, 2024). As a further testimony of the de-facto boycott of the event by Russian authorities, for the first time since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Russian tv did not broadcast the Paris Games (AP News, 2024a). In parallel, according to several sources, Russia-affiliated actors ramped up a disinformation campaign against the Paris Olympics, focused on discrediting the organisers and spreading concerns about possible outbreaks of violence during the Games (AP News, 2024b; Microsoft Threat Intelligence, 2024). While Vladimir Putin did not speak out during the Games personally, government spokespeople and lawmakers invited the IOC to “abandon its destructive anti-Russian course” (TASS 2024a) and claimed that “in case the International Olympic Committee is unable to learn anything and does not return the Olympic Games to an unbiased, non-politicized policy, does not revive the ideas of the Olympic Movement [...] this organization should simply cease to exist” (TASS, 2024b). A few months after the end of the event, Putin eventually commented that the 2024 Games had been “removed from the essence of a true sports festival [...] that embodies the values of equality, friendship, mutual respect for cultures and traditions, honest competition” – once again highlighting the supposed gap between sporting values and the exclusionary decisions adopted by the organisers (TASS, 2024c).

In all, Russia’s response to the IOC decisions can be considered a form of thick contestation. To be sure, the Russian government constantly referred to the normative framework of the

Olympic movement, especially the principles of non-politicisation and non-discrimination (but not that of peace), to contest the IOC's decisions. At the same time, however, Russian authorities took a number of initiatives that were aimed at establishing a counter-regime (or a 'sub-regime') in international sport, such as the announced organisation of international events like the World Friendship Games. Claiming to be the true defender of the original spirit of Olympism, President Putin called into question the legitimacy of its governing organisation, posing a threat of fragmentation to international sport. This was evidently the result of a wider fracture in the international system, as also highlighted by the Kremlin's focus on non-Western countries and fora (first and foremost, the BRICS and the SCO) in its attempt to create an alternative calendar of international sports events. Russia's 'thick' contestation of the existing framework of international sport overall offers another – more confrontational and radical – example of the impossibility to keep international sport and its norms shielded from international tensions and ruptures at times of major crisis and war.

## *5. Conclusion*

In his closing speech at the Paris 2024 Olympics, Thomas Bach celebrated the success of the event “despite all the tensions in our world”. During the Games, the Olympic Truce had dramatically failed to materialise, amidst Russian continued attacks on Ukraine, Kyiv's surprise counteroffensive in the Kursk region and the killing of Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran. Bach was therefore forced to admit that “the Olympic Games cannot create peace”, although he vented the hope that

“the Olympic Games can create a culture of peace that inspires the world” (IOC, 2024d).

In fact, the Paris Games highlighted once more the influence of world politics and contestation dynamics on international sport, especially as far as the Russia-Ukraine war is concerned. Not surprisingly, contestation from the Ukrainian side was overall limited. Although athletes, officials and authorities kept complaining about the (minimal) presence of Russian participants (Hodunova, 2024), they mostly leveraged the Olympic arena to call attention to their country’s dire situation and resistance. To be sure, the IOC did not loosen its neutrality policy and firmly deterred any demonstration of national pride beyond the strict rules provided by the Olympic Charter: for example, the International Canoe Federation prevented Ukrainian canoeist Anastasiia Rybachok from using a boat donned with the phrase “I am Ukrainian” (Rubryka, 2024). Nonetheless, Ukraine’s medals (twelve overall) were explicitly framed by athletes and government officials as the symbol of the fact that “Ukrainians know how to be strong and how to win” (@ZelenskyUa, 2024). In all, Ukraine’s approach was that of redefining priorities in the context of international sport to spotlight the country’s plight, resilience and needs.

Contestation from Russia, instead, became even harsher. This was especially the case of the virulent attacks against the Games and the IOC by the President of the International Boxing Association (IBA) Umar Kremlev. The IBA had been suspended by the IOC since 2019 due to its financial and reputational ills. In 2020, Kremlev took over the Presidency on the promise of bringing in a substantial sponsorship deal with Gazprom; this, however, was not enough to rehabilitate the Association, which was eventually expelled from the Olympic movement in 2023. An associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin and a member of the organising committee of the World

Friendship Games, Kremlin described the Paris Games as “outright sodomy and the destruction of traditional values throughout the world” (@umarkremlev, 2024). Most importantly, he played a major role in fuelling the controversy surrounding Algerian boxer Imane Khelif, which became part of the wider disinformation campaign promoted by Russian actors against the Games (Goretti, 2024). In sum, during Paris 2024, the narrative promoted by Russia focused on the supposed moral decadence of the IOC and Western organisers, paralleled by the idea of organising alternative events reviving the ‘traditional’ values of international sport.

On the whole, the way in which the IOC navigated the Russia-Ukraine conflict between the Beijing 2022 and the Paris 2024 Games highlights, on one hand, its continued attempt to appeal to political neutrality as a normative point of reference to protect international sport as much as possible from the turbulence of international politics; but also, on the other hand, the limited impact of such an approach in the context of a major international conflict, which de facto forced the Committee to take some kind of position (albeit cautiously and somehow half-heartedly). The IOC’s decisions, in turn, resulted in contestation (of the thin and thick type) from both warring sides and soured its relations with one of the world’s sports superpowers.

Sure, should the international scenario change (for instance, in the case of some kind of deal, truce or ceasefire in Ukraine), international sport may be one of the first areas where a rapprochement may materialize – indeed, some signals in this direction emerged in the months following the Paris Games, such as a change at the helm of the Russian Olympic Committee, with the new President Mikhail Degtyaryov stating that “it is time for us to stop the aggressive rhetoric against our international colleagues”, eyeing a Russian return to the

Olympic movement, and the indefinite shelving of the plans for the World Friendship Games (France24, 2024b). As then-IOC-President-hopeful Jose Antonio Samaranch Jr admitted, however, such a *rapprochement* would be conditional on “the reasons for the [Russian] suspension [being] removed” – reasons that, once again, directly refer to wider questions pertaining to international politics and law (the unlawful inclusion of sports organisations in the occupied regions under Russian authority) (Muñana, 2024).

To conclude, the case of the Russia-Ukraine war and its repercussions on international sport between Beijing 2022 and Paris 2024 demonstrates that the existence of a truly ‘universal’ sport arena is necessarily dependent on a functioning global international system (what we may call an *international society*); when the latter is fraught by wars or major tensions, sport’s calls for political neutrality are nothing but a strategy of damage limitation vis-à-vis contestation inevitably spilling over into the playing ground.

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# Making sense of international sport organisations in the global arena. The case of FIFA and Israel-Palestine

FRANCESCO BELCASTRO<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This chapter analyses FIFA's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, with particular reference to the International Football Federation's stance on Israel's assault on Gaza. It argues that international sports organisations like FIFA, far from being 'neutral', are themselves full-fledged actors in the international arena. Institutional aims, in particular promoting and protecting football and strengthening FIFA's control over it, shaped the organisation's approach to the issue. However, other factors, especially the 'political' stance of FIFA presidents Blatter and Infantino, are also crucial in explaining FIFA's role. Both presidents prevented the FIFA congress from voting on Israel's suspension from international football, in spite of the state's clear violations of FIFA's own rules. Infantino's interventions, amid what was clearly emerging as a genocide against the Palestinian population in Gaza, are entirely consistent with his broader position on regional politics and crucial in shaping FIFA's role on controversial issues.

**Keywords:** FIFA, International Sport Organizations, Israel, Palestine.

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<sup>1</sup> Francesco Belcastro, University of Derby (United Kingdom). E-mail address: f.belcastro@derby.ac.uk

*Introduction: International sports organisations, the international system and FIFA*

This chapter looks at FIFA, the International Football Federation, and analyses its role as an actor within the global international system. The study focuses on the case of FIFA's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, with particular reference to the Israeli assault on Gaza. The paper argues that international sports organisations (hereafter also ISOs) like FIFA, far from being 'neutral', are themselves full-fledged actors in the international arena. Their stance on sensitive political issues is not driven solely by the so-called 'institutional logic' (Broda, 2022), according to whom ISOs' behaviour is defined by their rules and aims, typically promoting and protecting the sport they manage and defending their control over it. International sports organisations (and their leaderships in particular) also have their own political aims and biases that can diverge significantly from the 'defence of the sport'. The case of FIFA's involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli issue shows how positions on controversial matters are shaped by factors such as leadership preferences and goals. The institution's drive towards 'stability' and aim to establish itself as the sole authority on the game initially led it to prioritise the relationship with the already established and Zionist-led Palestinian federation (later Israeli Football Association) against the Palestinian aspirations. Since the achievement of full FIFA membership by the Palestinian FA in 1998, however, FIFA's policy on the issue has been shaped by other factors and particularly by the political agenda and views of its leaders, Sepp Blatter and subsequently Gianni Infantino.

This chapter is composed of five sections. Section two places FIFA within the broader context of international institutions and the literature on international sports organisations, before

looking at FIFA's decision-making process. Section three focuses on the organisations' historical engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian issue and analyses how different aims shaped FIFA's position. Section four looks at FIFA's involvement in the Israeli war on Gaza. Section five contains some final remarks.

### *1. FIFA: unique or typical international sport organisation?*

Few topics have received as much attention in international relations as international organisations. This has produced countless classifications of typologies of institutions, and different views on how they work. In the last two decades, the institutions that regulate different sports, ISOs, their functioning and their role have been subject to more attentive analysis (Allison and Tomlinson, 2017). For the purpose of this chapter, theoretical debates over what approach better represents the working of ISOs will not be addressed systematically, but only referred to in the context of FIFA's role within the international system. It is however useful to note how this study draws from the broad approach to the study of institutions defined as historical institutionalism. Historical institutionalism is defined here as: *'an approach to studying politics and social change..distinguished from social sciences approaches by its attention to real world empirical questions, its historical orientation and its attention to the way institutions structure and shape behaviour and outcome'* (Steinmo, 2010, p. 118). Historical institutionalism<sup>2</sup> sits between rational choice theory, which sees actors as seeking to maximise benefits and minimise costs, and sociological institutionalism that emphasises the role of rules in shaping

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting how, while historical institutionalism is in some cases seen as close to path dependence theory, it is rather a broader approach to the study of change that can rely on 'path-dependence-like' mechanisms.

behaviour (Steinmo, 2010). A framework based on historical institutionalism will therefore allow the author to analyse both the impact of FIFA's rules and structures, and the agency of key actors within the organization itself.

As this study focuses on FIFA's role as a global actor, it is worth emphasising how the International Football Federation is both unique in terms of its global position and representative of ISOs' role as global actors. FIFA is unique because of its size and influence, being (together with the International Olympic Committee) significantly larger and more influential than any other ISO. The International Football Federation is not unique in its complex relationship with political neutrality. FIFA has often posed as the defender of the sport's interest and therefore neutrality, yet it has very much been an actor in the global arena. In the last decades in particular, the organisation has been consistent in its inconsistency, with its leadership alternating between assertive interventions on the political arena (Reuters, 2015) and statements on the importance of sport neutrality (Infantino, 2023). Perhaps unsurprisingly, FIFA has been the subject of as much attention as any other ISO. Several analyses have focused on FIFA's economics and its integration into the global capitalist market. Drawing on Archer (1992), Sudgen and Tomlison outlined how the International Football Federation had '*transformed itself from an INGO (International Non-Governmental Organisation) into a BINGO (a Business International Non-Governmental Organisation)*' (2005). While the focus of this chapter is on FIFA's role as a 'political' actor, it is important to know how the organisation's integration into the world economy and its drive towards economic profit are also central to understanding the ISO's position on the global stage.

This study argues that the role of ISOs in the international system stems from the interaction between institutional aims

(chiefly the defence of the sport and the organisations' role within it) and what will here be defined as 'political' aims<sup>3</sup>, based on leader preferences and interaction among different organs of the ISOs. The contrast between these two sets of aims is at the core of what we defined as the 'paradox of neutrality' of ISOs, the frequent claim to political neutrality of institutions that cannot be neutral.

In the case of FIFA, its chief institutional aim stems from the Statute's first articles, and it is to regulate and control the game of football (FIFA, 2003). Essentially, FIFA seeks to obtain two main goals: to expand the game, and to strengthen its control over it, particularly through the role of its national federations. The latter are the crucial mechanisms through which this control is achieved: *'Articles 1, 3 and 6 notably granted each national federation a monopoly on football in its territory'* (Broda, 2022, p. 78). FIFA's 'mission' has remained the same since its foundation in 1904, despite the organisation's expansion both geographically as the numbers of members increased, as well as in scope to include the women's game and futsal. This institutional logic is however not the only factor driving FIFA's actions on the global stage. The organisation has its own political dynamics that go beyond the simple institutional logic. The interaction between its different organs, and particularly the president and the Congress, represents this complexity well. The Congress, the organisation's 'parliament' where all federations have a vote, is FIFA's *'supreme and legislative body'* and represents the instances and views of the different national organisations. It is however the FIFA council, headed by FIFA presidents that *'defines FIFA's mission, strategic direction, policies and values,*

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<sup>3</sup> While institutional and political aims are presented as entirely separated and contrasting for the purpose of this analysis, it is worth noting how in some cases the two can and will overlap.



*in particular with regard to the organisation and development of football at worldwide level and all related matters.'* (FIFA legal handbook, n.d.).

FIFA presidents in particular have been at the centre of the organisation's development, but also represent the fulcrum around which FIFA's external relations develop. FIFA presidents build their election and maintain their power through the support of groups of federations, as shown by Joao Havelange's role in the organisation's global expansion (Vonnard and Sbeti, 2018). FIFA leaders bring their preferences and bias to the ISOs' external relations, 'steering the wheel' when the organisation appears to be going in a direction contrary to its own preferences. Increasingly, and in spite of their own appeals to the sport's neutrality, FIFA presidents played a crucial role in shaping what we could define as FIFA's 'foreign policy'. These changes see FIFA as a more assertive actor on the international stage, interacting with state leaders and assuming clear political stances on different issues. The region of the world where this approach has manifested itself more clearly has arguably been the Middle East.

The last two FIFA presidents, Sepp Blatter and Gianni Infantino, have both shown a clear interest in Middle East politics and (the latter in particular) a clear position in regards to Israel and Palestine. This interest could also be partially related to the increase in influence and relevance of non-Western players, and particularly of Gulf states, in global sports. Blatter, FIFA president between 1998 and 2015, grew increasingly ambitious in the latter part of his presidency. The FIFA president sought to use football as a tool to resolve some of the world's most intricate conflicts, and hoped that this would get FIFA (and himself) a Nobel Prize (BeIN Sports, 2017). His 'football for peace' initiative focused particularly on the Palestinian-Israeli issue (Reuters, 2015). Crucially, Blatter's proposal to hold

a match between Palestine and Israel came after the FIFA president had stepped to thwart the PFA's first attempts to suspend Israel from FIFA (Homewood and Lewis, 2015). Gianni Infantino was elected in 2016 to replace the disgraced ex-supremo. From the onset of its mandate, Infantino prioritised his '*extra-sporting role as an international actor operating in a globalized world*' (Beck, 2022). Infantino portrayed his role as using the power of football to resolve conflicts and bring upon positive change, in contrast with FIFA's previous toxic past<sup>4</sup> (Beck, 2022). His position on Middle East politics and the Palestinian-Israeli issue was clearer than that of his predecessor. Infantino attempted to throw FIFA's noticeable weight behind the Abraham Accords, the highly controversial US led agreements aimed at normalizing relations between Israel and Arab states in the region. These agreements were not only strongly denounced by Palestinians, but also an attempt to consolidate US/Israeli hegemony over the region at the expense of other regional powers. Infantino even floated the idea of a joint Israel-UAE World Cup bid (The New Arab, 2021). A brief account of FIFA's historical involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli issue will show how long-term institutional aims and the role of the two presidents shaped the organisation's stance on the matter, resulting in a clear (although controversial) position.

## *2. FIFA and the Palestinian Israeli issue*

FIFA's involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli issue shows both institutional and political aims at play. In the early years, the

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<sup>4</sup> Infantino himself was not an outsider to FIFA's previous past, having worked for UEFA from 2000, reaching the role of General Secretary in 2009, however the scandals that had hit FIFA towards the end of the Blatter presidency led the new president to paint himself as a discontinuity leader.

driving factor in FIFA's approach to the issue of football in Historical Palestine was the institutional need to impose itself as the sole controller of the beautiful game in the land<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, the fact that the Zionist movement managed to establish the first federation to be officially affiliated with FIFA gave it a significant advantage. Later on, when the Palestinian and Israeli federations were on equal footing from an institutional point of view, the preferences and views of FIFA leadership played a role in shaping the organisation's approach to the issue.

FIFA's involvement with football in historical Palestine dates back to the period of the British mandate. Even in those early days, some of the features of FIFA's approach to controversial and disputed political issues were evident. The first Palestinian Football Association was admitted as a permanent FIFA member in 1929 (Broda, 2022). Crucially, while the federation invited Arabs and British (as well as Jewish) clubs to participate in order to meet FIFA's requirement to represent all teams in a state, it was controlled by the Maccabi organisation<sup>6</sup> and particularly by the man driving the establishment of many Zionist sport institutions, Yosef Yekutieli (Broda, 2022, p. 81). This allowed the Zionist movement to achieve a certain degree of 'institutional' control over football in historical Palestine, despite the establishment of the Arab Palestine Sports Federation in 1931 (Khalidi, 2012). In effect, once a national federation was accepted by FIFA, it became effectively the sole controller of

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that in the earlier years of FIFA involvement its leadership did not have a stance or views on the issue, but rather that, as control of the game on the land was not consolidated, this was FIFA's focus.

<sup>6</sup> The Maccabi World Union is an organisation whose aim is to promote sport among the Jewish population in different parts of the world. Since its foundation, Maccabi has been strongly associated with Zionism.

the game in that territory, excluding therefore any potential 'challenger'.

This control was reinforced with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 (and conversely with the non-establishment of a Palestinian state). This 'lack of statehood' effectively resulted in the exclusion of Palestinians from world football *as Palestinians*, their participation mirroring their geopolitical predicament. Therefore, after 1948, when Eastern Jerusalem and the West Bank were controlled by the Kingdom of TransJordan, Palestinian and Jordanian football were considered one from an institutional point of view. The logic at play is confirmed by the Palestinian's federation's admission to FIFA in 1998. Palestine was admitted to FIFA during the Oslo process, whose stated goal was to establish an institutional structure that would have gradually developed into a future Palestinian state<sup>7</sup>. Here, the institutional logic of control over the game through national federations emerges clearly: as Palestine was to become a state, FIFA had to extend its control over the game by admitting the Palestinian football federation within its folder. After decades of denial, it was exactly the quasi-statehood that the Palestinians had obtained in the eyes of the international community that saw them admitted to FIFA.

The admission of the PFA started a new chapter in FIFA's approach to the Palestinian-Israeli issue. The international

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<sup>7</sup> Several scholars have noted how the ultimate goal pursued by key actors involved in the process might not have been the establishment of a Palestinian state, but rather the creation of a framework that would allow Israel to expand its control over the land and particularly expand its settlements policy in the West Bank. Regardless of what the real aims of the actors were, what matter from FIFA's point of view was that steps were taken towards the creation of a state, hence the 'institutional' attempt to extend control over the game in Palestine.

football federation was now involved in the relations between two fully fledged federations. Once the Palestinian federation was established, it was able to press the issue of Israeli violations of FIFA's rules against itself and Palestinian football more in general. As Broda (2022, p. 89) notes: "*The grievances varied but can be reduced to three: (1) the restrictions on the movement of Palestinian players, (2) the alleged racism against them – these two being linked – and (3) the participation of five Israeli teams from the occupied territories in competitions organised by the IFA*". Particularly relevant to understanding FIFA's behaviour is the third point, the presence of teams based in Israeli settlements. While all three sets of accusations are at least plausible, the presence of Israeli teams in occupied territory<sup>8</sup> represents a straightforward violation of FIFA's own rules and particularly of rule 76.3 of the FIFA statutes (FIFA, 2003).

While the PFA initially attempted to get FIFA to put pressure on its Israeli counterparts, by the early 2010s it was evident that the leadership was not willing or able to exercise pressure on the Israeli FA. Under the leadership of Jibril Rajoub, its president and high-ranking Fatah official, the PFA decided to pursue a more assertive strategy aimed at suspending the IFA from FIFA altogether. The PFA therefore brought the matter to the 2015 FIFA world congress, where only the intervention of FIFA president Sepp Blatter avoided a vote that could have resulted in the suspension of the Israeli Football Association (Home-wood and Lewis, 2015). In what would later become a common FIFA response, the then FIFA supremo managed to postpone a decision by appointing a committee entrusted with investigating the claim by Palestinian authorities, led by South African anti-apartheid activist Tokyo Sexwale. The appointment of the

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<sup>8</sup> Israeli settlements are widely considered illegal and part of Palestinian territory.

Sexwale committee allowed FIFA leadership to take the matter off the hands of the congress and under the control of the FIFA council (Warshaw, 2017). The outcome of this process explains well the developing position of FIFA leadership on the matter: with a short statement the FIFA Council declared that *'Given that the final status of the West Bank territories is the concern of the competent international public law authorities..(FIFA) .. must remain neutral in regards to political matters'* (FIFA.com, 2017). The Council (now led by new president Infantino) decided not to take any measures due to its assessment of the political situation on the ground, against the organisations' own rules (Belcastro, 2023). While nodding at institutional considerations by referring to *'the situation of football in the relevant territories'* (FIFA.com, 2017), FIFA's behaviour clearly shows the role of the leadership's political preferences in shaping the organisation's position.

### *3. The war on Gaza and FIFA*

While FIFA leadership managed to (at least temporarily) postpone the suspension of Israel, it was clear to external observers that the issue would not disappear from public debates. Football had, in fact, become an area of focus for the broad international network supporting the Palestinian cause. As Dart (2017) outlines, the Boycott Disinvestment and Sanctions movement was central in centring the arguments of supporters of the Palestinian cause on Israel's violation of international law. BDS Campaigns such as Red Card Israeli Apartheid (*Red Card Israeli Apartheid*, no date) focused on the violations of Palestinians' human rights and of FIFA's own rules. In the last few years, the BDS movement has achieved significant success in the area of sport boycott, notably contributing (or directly

leading to, according to some views) to German sportswear giant PUMA dropping its partnership with the Israeli Football Association (Al Jazeera, 2023). The most recent Israeli war on Gaza, started after Hamas' 7<sup>th</sup> of October attacks, brought the issue of Israel's suspension from international sport back to the forefront of public debates. It also meant that FIFA had to deal once again with increased pressure to address the issue of Israel's participation in world football

As the evidence of Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza mounted, many international sport institutions (including the IOC, with the Olympics taking place in Paris over the Summer) experienced significant pressure towards excluding Israel from international competitions. Campaigners asking for the suspension of Israel from sports and football in particular grew more vocal, focusing on the impact of Israel's assault on Gazan sport but also connecting the issue with the historical context of Israel's violation of international law and its impact on Palestinian '*right to play*' (DIEM25, no date). Given the popularity of football and the Israeli team's participation in UEFA competitions, FIFA was unsurprisingly the focus of many debates. The initial reaction by the organisation was muted. While FIFA president Infantino offered his condolences to both football associations in the first days of the war (Reuters, 2023), no official FIFA statements were made till the eve of the FIFA national congress in Bangkok, due to take place in May 2024. The congress was the opportunity for FIFA to re-examine its stance on the issue. The Palestinian FA, backed by other federations and particularly the Jordanian FA, called for the congress to vote on the exclusion of Israel from world football. In what was by then a predictable pattern, FIFA president Infantino stepped in and decided that the matter would be deferred to the FIFA council. An extraordinary meeting was called for the following July, where a decision would be made on the basis

of independent legal advice sought by the organisation (BBC Sport, 2024). Perhaps predictably, the July date was missed, with FIFA citing unconfirmed “requests for more time by both federations” (Inside FIFA, 2024b), as it was the following date of the 31<sup>st</sup> of August (Al Jazeera, 2024). Given the clear pattern of postponements developed since May 2024, FIFA watchers were not surprised when on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2024 FIFA decided to delay taking a decision even further by delegating the investigation to two of its committees:

“The FIFA Disciplinary Committee will be mandated to initiate an investigation into the alleged offence of discrimination raised by the Palestine Football Association.

The FIFA Governance, Audit and Compliance Committee will be entrusted with the mission to investigate – and subsequently advise the FIFA Council on – the participation in Israeli competitions of Israeli football teams allegedly based in the territory of Palestine.” (Inside FIFA, 2024a).

This latest move by FIFA council confirmed that Infantino and FIFA leadership aimed at preventing FIFA from having to make any decision, hoping that the pressure on the ISO would relent eventually. Furthermore, a recent precedent existed in the ISOs’ reaction to Russia’s assault on Ukraine in 2022<sup>9</sup>. It took FIFA (and UEFA, the European Football Federation) a grand total of four days from the invasion of Ukraine to decide to suspend Russian teams from all competitions (FIFA Media Release, 2022). Notwithstanding the differences between the two cases, FIFA’s willingness to swiftly decide in this case contrasts

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, FIFA president Infantino (and to a certain extent his predecessor Sepp Blatter) had showed a certain cosiness with Russia president Vladimir Putin in the past, with Infantino even awarded Russia’s prestigious Order of Friendship by the Russia leader in 2019 (Associated Press, 2019).



clearly with its position on the case against the Israeli Football Association.

Here, it is useful to note that FIFA was not the only ISO that had to negotiate the issue of Israel's participation in international sport. In particular, the Olympic Games that took place in Paris in the Summer of 2024 saw the participation of both Israeli and Palestinian athletes. The IOC adopted the (in)famous line of *'keeping sport out of politics'* (Walker, 2024). The Olympic committee, on the other hand, adopted the compromise solution of allowing a limited number of Russian and Belarusian athletes to participate under a neutral 'independent flag' if they met a set of (rather restrictive) criteria (International Olympic Committee, 2023). While this position did not spare the IOC from criticism, this had appeared to be more muted and less sour than the ones received by FIFA. While, to the best of the author's knowledge, no research has been done on this issue, different factors could explain this discrepancy. The IOC's significantly different structure from FIFA, without a congress that represents 'national views', accounts for the limited internal discussion, while the perception of the Olympic committee as having historically been more 'politically neutral' than FIFA on the Palestinian-Israeli issue could have also played a role.

Both FIFA's reaction to the Gaza war and the discrepancy with the swift action taken by the ISO after the Russian invasion of Ukraine show the complex interaction between institutional factors and leaders' preferences. FIFA's leadership chose to postpone the decision on Israel's suspension from the organisation and (crucially) take control of the process away from the FIFA congress and into the hands of the Council and therefore the FIFA leadership itself. Given the evidence against the Israeli FA on both longer term violations of FIFA rules and the impact of the current assault on Gaza on the population of

Gaza and its football infrastructures, players and coaches, the crux of the issue for FIFA's leadership appears to be that, would the organisation make a decision on the matter, it would be hard not to rule against the IFA. This choice does not reflect 'institutional' logic but rather FIFA's president and his cohort aim to avoid the organisation making any decision against the Israeli Football Association. Here, the standard explanation of 'keeping football out of politics' appears to be particularly weak coming from an organisation (and a leadership in particular) that had clearly thrown its weight behind some political actors in the past. FIFA's leadership attempts to prevent the expulsion of Israel from FIFA have to be understood in the context of the ISO's longstanding leadership position on the issue.

#### *4. Conclusion*

This paper analysed the role of FIFA as an actor on the global stage, with particular reference to its involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian issue and the assault on Gaza by the state of Israel. It showed how FIFA's behaviour on the issue cannot be explained exclusively according to FIFA's 'institutional' logic, which should see FIFA protecting the game and its role within it. Rather, the organisation has taken an active and political role on the issue, particularly through its presidents. Sepp Blatter in his last years of presidency has sought to use football to 'bring peace to the region'. Gianni Infantino pushed further his predecessor's football for peace strategy, often acting more like the leader of a country than the head of a ISO in his approach to the organisation's global role and to Palestine and Israel in particular. As such, Infantino threw his weight behind a particular vision of the Middle East region, promoted by actors such as the US and Israel. The FIFA presidents' (at least so

far) successful interventions aimed at preventing FIFA from suspending Israel despite its clear violations of FIFA rules are therefore clearly consistent with their previous stance on the issue. More broadly, these interventions confirm how presidents have been the driving force beyond the development of what we defined here as FIFA's 'foreign policy', the organisation's position on issues such as Palestinian-Israeli relations and more recently on the war on Gaza. The dynamic nature of the relation among FIFA's organs (particularly the presidency and the congress), however, means that presidents constantly have to work to impose their preferred stances on controversial matters. Furthermore, the potential (albeit remote) always exists for other actors to successfully challenge the leaders' stance and change the organization's position on issues such as the suspension of Israel from FIFA.

The analysis carried out also sheds light on a few aspects that apply to all ISOs. While the International Football Federation is unique (together with the IOC) due to its size and the popularity of the game it controls, it does share some key features with other International Sport Organisations. In particular, the existence of institutional and political aims is not unique to FIFA, and the global role of any ISO can in some cases be characterised by the tension between these two sets of goals. Therefore, in order to understand the global role of individual ISOs as well as ISOs collectively, the internal dynamics that define their 'political' aims are just as relevant as their institutional goals. While the aim of this study was to analyse the role of FIFA in relation to one specific issue, further studies taking a more theory-driven approach could expand our understanding of ISOs and their work by drawing on theoretical frameworks such as historical institutionalism. The use of comparative methods and of long-term historical analysis, both typical of historical institutionalism, would be particularly effective in

shedding light on the global role of International Sports Organisations.

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# Contesting the international order through the Olympics: from Sochi 2014 to Paris 2024

EMIDIO DIODATO<sup>1</sup> AND VERONICA STRINA<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract.** This chapter investigates the evolving nexus between Olympism and the liberal international order through a comparative analysis of the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games, situating their legacies within the context of the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics and the deepening fragmentation of the liberal international order (LIO). Building on the idea that contestation of the LIO can disrupt established institutional structures of international sport (Goretti, 2025), and that contestation within international sport may, in turn, unsettle the normative foundations of that order, this chapter examines how the two mega-events hosted respectively by Russia and China – widely seen as key challengers to the LIO – have functioned as platforms for the projection, negotiation, and contestation of competing visions of world order. By tracing both convergences and divergences in the Russian and Chinese approaches to Olympism, the chapter seeks to contribute to the growing body of International Relations literature on contestation by examining Olympic diplomacy both as a mirror of the often-overlooked multiplicity of contesting forces shaping global politics, as well as a catalyst in their unfolding.

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<sup>1</sup> Emidio Diodato, University for Foreigners of Perugia (Italy). E-mail address: emidio.diodato@unistrapg.it

<sup>2</sup> Veronica Strina, Università di Salerno (Italy). E-mail address: vstrina@unisa.it



**Keywords:** Olympism; liberal international order (LIO); contestation; Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics; Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics; Paris 2024 Summer Olympics.

### *Introduction*

Within an international order shaped by the structural condition of anarchy, contestation is “the rule rather than the exception in international relations” (Wiener, 2014, p.5). This equally manifests in the realm of international sport, which serves as a microcosm of international forces (Espy, 1979). Yet, major sporting events such as the Olympic Games do more than mirror geopolitical dynamics; the political developments surrounding them offer compelling evidence that international sport can also serve as a transformative force in global politics. Among the most salient examples at the national level are the political reforms that followed the 1988 Seoul Games and the positive effects of the boycott on the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Far from “mythologising” the transformative power of sport – and fully aware of its limited capacity to alter the course of domestic and international relations – this chapter argues that the need for a conceptual framework that positions international sport as a catalyst, or “driver,” of global politics should not be underestimated. Following Levermore and Budd (2004, p. 10), we maintain that the study of the dynamics occurring during international sporting events may foster a greater understanding of the international arena as well as of the domestic one, thus not only reflecting the normative contestation of the international order in place but also providing insights into how this is unfolding. In other words, whereas the Olympic Games should not be expected to produce peace or war, they possess the capacity to influence

rapprochement or splits that are already underway (Keys, 2009). In the context of the crisis of the Liberal International Order (LIO), which has come under mounting contestation in recent years, international sport, and the Olympic Games in particular, should therefore be regarded as an active arena and potential source driving such contestation.

Today's contestation is multifaceted, involving a diverse array of actors and targeting various principles and dimensions of the international order. Whilst there is no dearth of studies on how Russia and China position themselves vis-à-vis the US-led international order (see Morozov, 2023; Clunan, 2018; Buzan, 2010; Schweller and Pu, 2011; Johnston, 2019), significantly less attention has been paid to their strategic convergences and divergencies as well as potential alignments with the rise of the radical right as a global phenomenon. With regard to the Kremlin, three main perspectives emerge in International Relations (IR) literature: Russia as a "revanchist power" that seeks to overturn the very foundations of the liberal international order; Russia as a "defensive power" that works for incremental changes within the existing order; and finally, Russia as an "aggressive isolationist" power that deliberately plays a spoiler role in international affairs to boost its domestic legitimacy (Götz and Merlen, 2018). Scholarship, however, has also suggested that Russia's bid to reshape the liberal international order hinges on the type of liberalism it embodies, indicating that Moscow is ill-suited to a post-liberal order rooted in conservative nationalism and geopolitics (Trubina, 2019). As for Beijing, the debate tends to dichotomise between either status quo or revisionist predictions, although the reality appears to be more nuanced, existing in a space that lies somewhere between these two extremes (Breslin, 2018). In parallel, internal challenges to liberal internationalism have also intensified, with the rise of far-right and populist movements within

liberal democracies increasingly recognized as a force undermining its very foundations. Scholars have begun to explore how these domestic counter-hegemonic forces may contribute to the erosion of the international liberal consensus by promoting exclusionary nationalism and undermining multilateral cooperation (Abrahamsen et al., 2024). These dynamics, however, have rarely been examined in conjunction, and even less so through the prism of the Olympic Games.

It is precisely in this gap that the present article seeks to intervene, shedding light on how the Olympics have emerged as a prominent arena for what has been termed a “diplomacy of contestation” (Diodato and Strina, 2023). This phenomenon, on the one hand, has entailed the emergence of non-liberal hosting countries’ commitment to articulating a distinctive – if not outright alternative – normative system and vision of the international order within the Olympic arena, significantly displayed during the events’ opening and closing ceremonies. On the other hand, contestation has also arisen from ‘within,’ with the 2024 Paris Olympics serving as an exemplary case: unfolding amid a surge of the global far-right and deepening societal divides, revealing that challenges to the LIO are not confined to authoritarian regimes but also emerge among liberal democracies themselves, endangering the internal cohesion and resilience of the very order they claim to uphold.

The entire reflection is situated within what may be termed a ‘BRICS phase’ of the Games – marked by the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014, the Rio Summer Games in 2016, and a broader ‘re-Orientation’ of the Olympics toward the East, exemplified by the PyeongChang 2018, Tokyo 2020 Olympics, and the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022 – to a renewed emphasis of the West, as witnessed by the hosting of Paris 2024 Olympics and the upcoming Olympic editions in Milan-Cortina 2026, Los Angeles 2028, and the French Alps 2030.

Amid these developments, the analysis seeks to address two key questions: (i) To what extent does the ‘BRICS phase’ of the Games and in particular the Olympics held in Russia in 2014 and China in 2022 contribute to understanding the current contestation of the US-led international order while illuminating the points of divergence and convergence between these two actors’ approach to the LIO? (ii) How were these long-lasting legacies reflected during the 2024 Paris Olympics, marking a new phase of Olympic diplomacy as the Games shifted back to the West? To unpack these issues, the chapter first explores the theoretical nexus between liberal internationalism and Olympism, situating the Olympic Games within the ideological fabric of the liberal international order. Subsequently, it comparatively examines the extent to which the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics have proved to be additional platforms through which to advance the contestation of the order in place and how this has echoed in the context of the far right’s rise in Europe, particularly at the 2024 Paris Olympics. This investigation begins by moving beyond the treatment of *international order* and *contestation* as buzzwords, clarifying their meanings and theoretical contours – an analytical task to which the following section is dedicated.

### *1. Liberal internationalism and Olympism*

A well-established definition of “international order” frames it as “a *pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states*” and exists “*when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions*” (Bull 2002, pp. 8-13). By emphasizing

institutions, rules, and values that underpin states' conduct, any international order emerges as an ideational project rather than merely an equilibrium or balance of forces. From this perspective, the international order currently under contestation – established by the U.S. leadership after World War II – can be understood as an ideational project grounded in *liberal internationalism*. As Ikenberry (2018, p.7) observes, “What has united the ideas and agendas of liberal internationalism is a vision of an open, loosely rules-based and progressively oriented international order.” At the same time, the general “concept of LIO” (liberal international order) – used in political science to define the international order based on liberal internationalism – “suffers from theoretical weaknesses that render it unable to explain much about the interaction of the United States with its adversaries or its allies” (Glaser, 2019, p. 52). One fruitful way to engage with this concept is by considering how liberal internationalism has historically underpinned and shaped the international society, also materializing in the norms, symbols, and institutional practices of the Olympic movement, making it clearer why the LIO and Olympism are subject to contestation today.

Liberal internationalism has shaped the international order for over two centuries, from France's civilizing mission and the 19th-century British free trade imperialism to American manifest destiny, providing the ideological foundation of the post-war order (Barnett, 2021, p. 13). The globalization of the international order after the Cold War is indeed entangled with a set of underlying principles, rules, and values – what Gong (1984) calls the “standard of civilization,” which enabled inclusion and exclusion between those deemed inside and outside the liberal community. While cloaked in the rhetoric of progress and universal values, these iterations were often inseparable from coercive practices and asymmetrical power relations,

which justified imperial and colonial projects on the premise that they were uplifting so-called ‘uncivilized’ societies by introducing them to liberal norms and institutions. Just as the notion of civilization has long functioned as a legal and moral criterion for membership in international society, the contemporary turn to civilizations – what has been termed *civilizationism* – can be read as a counter-hegemonic reaction to the globalization of liberal internationalism and its “monistic universalism” (Bettiza et.al, 2023; Acharya, 2014, p. 649). In a similar vein, reactionary Western civilizationism articulates a conception of world order that, in contrast to liberal internationalism’s open and globalizing orientation, envisions a regionally bounded and integrative civilizational order grounded in the defense of a collective Western identity (Bettiza et.al, 2023). Against this background of ideological contestation, sport imaginaries condense rivalry’s intensity with its civilizing potential (Hoberman, 2004).

To examine the nexus between the contestation of Olympism and the contestation of the LIO, therefore, it is essential to unpack their shared foundational pillar: *liberal internationalism*, “the idea that we both are part of a broader community than that of the nation” (Halliday, 1988, p.187). Since its inception, this “was in many ways the twin of nationalism, the ideology of the modern nation-state, which also emerged as a political movement in the nineteenth century” (Ikenberry, 2020, p.66). The Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini was one of the first thinkers who tried to reconcile “love of the country” with “love of humanity.” By viewing other nations not as antagonists but as allies in the pan-European alliance against multinational and monarchical empires, “Mazzini became a forerunner of Woodrow Wilson’s later ‘liberal internationalism’ that called for national self-determination, international cooperation, and the formation of a League of Nations short of a world state”

(Rolf, 2023, p.104). True or sincere nationalism (the love for one's own country) and true or sincere internationalism (the love for humanity) constitute not only the core of liberal internationalism but also of Olympism. As underlined by Rolf (2023, p.105), "sincere nationalism and sincere internationalism – together with amateurism, athleticism and Hellenism – constitute the core of de Coubertin's ideological morphology." The nucleus of the Olympic idea was indeed a persisting individual effort integrated into a civilized nationalism and displayed in an international multi-sport event controlled by an independent organization, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (Horne and Whannel, 2020, p.118).

Whilst liberal internationalism inspires the fundamentals of contemporary Olympism – a "philosophy of life" based on "respect for internationally recognised human rights and universal fundamental ethical principles within the remit of the Olympic Movement" (IOC, 2025b, p.8) – there are two caveats to consider.

The first caveat precisely concerns the complex interplay between internationalism and nationalism within the Olympic arena – a tension well reflected in the way specific Olympic symbols, rituals, and myths are appropriated by nationalist narratives, to which the IOC responds by promoting cosmopolitan ideals (Rolf, 2023). Originally, Coubertin envisioned the Olympic movement to be explicitly framed by 'internationalism,' alongside other principles such as equality of opportunity, fair play, and peace (Preuss and Liese, 2011). The motto "All Games, All Nations" and the Olympic rings, symbolising the five continents, came to represent cross-cultural interaction and a form of "peaceful internationalism" (Guttmann, 2002). At the same time, Coubertin's vision was driven by patriotic concerns and the desire to strengthen French society through national cohesion and reform (Chatziefsthathiou and Henry,

2012). Despite becoming increasingly international in its institutional structure and meaning, the Olympic movement has historically relied on the differentiation of national identities for its success (Rowe, 2006, p. 431). Rooted in a shared cultural tradition and closely tied to national symbols and rituals that bind an ‘imagined community’ together (Anderson, 1983), the Games and sport in general function as an “invented tradition” inseparable from nationalism (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). The most visible example of the quest for an ideological compromise between these two orientations might be found during the 1930s, when the Olympic movement was *“understood as a rightwing internationalism that was effectively coopted by the Nazis (...). This cooptation was made possible in part by an ideological compatibility between the IOC elite and the Nazis based on a shared ideal of aristocratic manhood and the value system that derived from their glorification of the physically perfect male as the ideal human being”* (Hoberman, 1995, p. 17). While it is tempting, as Hargreaves (1992) suggests, to dismiss Olympism as either a relic of nineteenth-century moral code or an ideological device, it nonetheless operates as an active agent capable of shaping political agendas and being strategically mobilized by social actors in pursuit of their interests. It is within this historical interplay of nationalist expressions and cosmopolitan aspirations that the so-called ‘Olympic paradox’ arises: a tension between Olympism’s universalism and particularism, between symbolizing a moral order without demanding moral action, serving at once as a “social stimulant” and a “tranquilizer” (Hoberman, 1986, 36).

The second caveat is the development of Olympic internationalism towards a form of show business in the late 20th century, when the Games were predominantly a Western affair. The Los Angeles Games of 1984 constituted the tipping point of a phase of the politics of the Olympics marked by “neo-



liberalization,” with the Atlanta Games in 1996 held without any governmental support and thus leading to what is known as the “commercialization of the Games” (Horne and Whannel, 2020, pp. 147-8). The triumph of Olympism, in other words, was possible due to its economic success related to the show business of the Western capitalist world.

While contestation of the economic interests that distort the Olympic spirit remains rather marginal and does not seem to call the Games into question, contestation of Olympism, including the LIO, is intended as “a social practice that entails the objection to specific issues that matter to people” (Wiener, 2014, p.3). Given that norms represent the “legitimizing core of global governance” (2014, p.4), contestation is not confined to “notions of opposition, questioning or protest” but signals legitimacy gaps that might even lead to a more legitimate global governance (2014, p.viii). In this sense, beyond a destabilizing force, contestation constitutes the condition for a more shared understanding of the meanings of norms that may ultimately foster norm legitimacy (Deitelhoff, 2020). Following this reasoning, it might be claimed that just as the LIO must embrace contestation to evolve into a genuinely ‘global order,’ so too must Olympism, a global vision in scope.

Along with the contestation of liberal internationalism, we should consider two additional related forms of contestation that concern other social structures of the LIO, such as “regionalism” and “interdependence,” which facilitate cooperation and create capacities for states to make good on their domestic obligations (Alcaro, 2018). These structures, however, can be coherently situated within the broader framework of what John Ruggie (1992, p. 571) described as *multilateralism*: an institutional form that coordinates relations among groups of states “on the basis of generalized principles of conduct.” Accordingly, regionalism is nothing other than multilateralism on a

smaller scale, carrying additional advantages such as geographic proximity and cultural affinity; interdependence would represent the economic framework of liberal internationalism, understood as an obligation to pursue economic welfare in a multilateral and non-discriminatory fashion. Rooted in the assumption that all states, regardless of size or power, are entitled to representation and participation in international decision-making processes, the LIO advances multilateralism as a pathway toward a more just and democratic global order. To contest the LIO is, therefore, to contest this very pathway: its normative commitment to multilateralism, which also underpins the Olympic Games, convening states within a shared institutional framework grounded in rules, representation, and mutual recognition.

Despite manifesting in different ways and to different degrees, the contestation of Olympic internationalism is fundamentally anchored on its relationship with ‘idealistic internationalism,’ which places normative expectations to conform to the ideational principles of the IOC’s Olympism (Cha, 2009). Since the end of World War II, the state that hosts the Olympics has been expected to embrace the presumed universal ideals and values of the Olympic movement carried out under the authority of the IOC, that is, to place sport at the service of the harmonious and progressive development of humanity in order to promote peaceful and fair societies. Among these expectations, the imperative to organize the Games in an “environmentally sustainable manner” has gained increasing prominence. In 1994, environmental protection became officially included as a third component of Olympism, and a year later, the IOC Sport and Environment Commission was created (Krieger and Langenbach, 2018). Since 2014, environmental commitments have built on the principles of the Olympic Agenda, which place sustainability and sustainable development at the

heart of the Olympic Movement under the motto “change or be changed.” (IOC, 2025a). Today, as a core pillar of Olympic Agenda 2020+5, the growing urgency of achieving sustainable development has established the pursuit of ‘green Olympic Games’ as a central mandate for hosting nations. It follows that *environmentalism* – defined as a framework that “predicates environmental protection on the promotion and maintenance of a liberal economic order” (Bernstein, 2001) – emerges as a key site where contestation of the LIO extends to and emanates from the Olympic arena.

Building on these theoretical underpinnings, this chapter claims that just as the contestation of liberal internationalism entails a challenge to the very foundations of the international order, so too does the contestation of Olympism, which, grounded in liberal internationalist ideals, may contribute to questioning the fundamentals on which that order rests. *Internationalism*, *environmentalism*, and *multilateralism* are understood as the three core pillars underpinning the LIO and the Olympic ethos, emerging as key focal points through which their contestation is articulated. These dimensions constitute the primary focus of the analysis, which is guided by two critical questions: Has anything changed in the link between Olympism and liberal internationalism during the ‘BRICS phase’ of the Olympic Games, and in particular those editions hosted by Russia and China? What lessons can be drawn from the Paris 2024 Games as the Olympics made their way back to the West? The next section outlines the methodological approach adopted by this study, presenting the rationale through which the intersection between the contestation of the liberal international order and the Olympic Games is investigated.

## 2. Methodology

Drawing on these theoretical foundations, this study explores the modes of contestation of *liberal internationalism* within the Olympic arena by developing a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989) of the official narratives of the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Olympic Games developed in the context of the opening ceremonies. The decision to center the study on the Games' opening ceremonies stems from their role as "staged, embodied performances of statehood and nationhood" that operate as sites of negotiation between global norms and national intent (MacAloon, 2008, p.206). To explore how this interplay unfolds, this study focuses on the analysis of the declarations, speeches, and interviews given by the Games' artistic directors, Zhang Yimou for Beijing (both 2008 and 2022 editions) and Konstantin Ernst for Sochi 2014, acting as key agents in the symbolic articulation of the countries' national role conceptions and their international positioning.

Given that the Olympic stage functions as a proxy for the contestation of the *multilateral* rules-based order and as a key platform for advancing alternative visions of globalism, the chapter moves to investigate the significance of high-level meetings with foreign heads of state held during the mega-events under examination. In particular, it develops a critical discourse analysis of the joint statement *The International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*, signed by President Putin and Xi Jinping in the context of the Beijing 2022 Olympics. Notably, this landmark document articulates a vision of "true multilateralism" against Washington's alleged "fake" or "pseudo" version, advocating for the "democratization of international relations" and framing "Russia and China as world powers with rich cultural and historical heritage (that) have long-standing traditions of democracy." (President

of Russia, 2022). In claiming so, the analysis seeks to illuminate, through the Olympic prism, in which ways Russia and China may articulate their international positioning within a political order that they perceive as not of their own making.

Finally, the chapter comparatively examines how *environmentalism* has emerged as a fault line of contention in the context of the Sochi and the Beijing Winter Olympics. This pillar, as mentioned, has become inseparable from the Olympic brand and the philosophy of Olympism – and, therefore, to its contestation (Mincyte et al., 2009). As the IOC formally recognized sustainability as “the third pillar of Olympism” (IOC, 2005, p.43) and as “an integral dimension of Olympism” (IOC, 2014a), its centrality to the evolving mission and legitimacy of the Olympic movement has become self-evident. This is particularly critical in light of greenwashing practices that expose the disjuncture between the IOC’s rhetoric and the on-the-ground realities in Olympic host cities, risking undermining the Movement’s credibility (Boykoff, 2025). The observations emerging from this three-dimensional discourse analysis – focusing on *internationalism*, *multilateralism*, and *environmentalism* – will be finally discussed with reference to the 2024 Paris Olympics to examine the extent to which the legacies of these earlier Games have reverberated in the liberal democratic context of Olympic hosting.

### *3. Legacies of the 2014 Sochi and 2022 Beijing Olympics for Olympism*

According to the IOC’s definition, the “Olympic legacy is the result of a vision. It encompasses all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated by the hosting of the Olympic Games/sport events for people, cities/territories and

the Olympic Movement” (IOC, 2017). Prior to examining the impact of China and Russia’s visions on Olympism, it is necessary to make a brief yet fundamental premise about the sociopolitical context in which the Winter Games under examination have taken place. By hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics, Beijing became the first city in the world to organise both the Summer and Winter Games, which served as a unique opportunity to present China to the world and elevate its international appeal to a level commensurate with its growing economic stature, while also advancing the goal of becoming a ‘sport superpower’ (*tiyu qiangguo* 体育强国). The two events reflect the profound transformations that unfolded over those fourteen years, both domestically and in the international environment. Domestically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been facing mounting challenges stemming from widespread corruption among the ruling elite, the ideological vacuum deepened by decades of market reforms, and growing public discontent with the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at the local level. Internationally, the environment has become markedly more adversarial than in 2008, with the so-called ‘China threat’ theory gaining increasing traction in academic and political discourse and ushering in a phase of ‘de-risking’ across most Western democracies. As the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) diplomatic identity has gradually transitioned from a “low profile” stance characterizing Deng Xiaoping leadership towards a more proactive posture in international affairs resulting in an emphasis on ‘striving for achievements’ (*fenfa youwei* 奋发有为), so did the 2008 and the 2022 Beijing Olympics’ opening performances, moving from a “coming out party” of China in the modern world (Miles, 2016) to the contestation of that international order (the LIO) designed without Beijing’s inclusion (Cabula and Pochettino, 2023).

In a similar vein, the Sochi Olympics served as Russia's first major global coming-out party after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, signaling its re-emergence on the international stage. The event was comparable in significance to the Tokyo 1964 Olympics for Japan and the 1972 Munich Games for Germany, both of which marked the return of the erstwhile Axis countries to the community of "civilized nations" (Grix and Kramareva, 2015). Notwithstanding, the 2007 decision to award Russia the hosting rights for the Winter Olympics was met with wide skepticism by the international community, given the country's increasingly strained relations with the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) – tensions that had been amplified by President Putin's confrontational speech at the Munich Security Conference earlier that year, understood as a revisionist turning point in Russia's foreign policy conduct. These concerns proved well-founded in the context of the 2014 Sochi Games, when the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea delivered a serious blow to the values enshrined in the Olympic Charter and the international order itself. This marked the second instance in which Russia violated the spirit of the Olympic Truce, the first being its invasion of Georgia during the opening day of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics' ceremony. The pattern notably resurfaced during the 2022 Beijing Winter Games, held against the backdrop of the looming war in Ukraine. In response to the Kremlin's aggression, the IOC and international sports federations implemented a series of unprecedented measures, including the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from most international competitions and a ban on hosting events in Russia, raising fundamental questions about the alleged neutrality of international sports (IOC, 2022; Goretti, 2022).

As the geopolitics of the Games shifted eastward – a shift symbolically inaugurated by the 2008 Beijing Summer

Olympics and consolidating from the Sochi Olympic Games onwards – Olympism, and therefore liberal internationalism, has come under increasing strain. The following sections examine how China and Russia have each leveraged the Olympic stage, and in particular the Winter Games' opening ceremonies, as a platform to question the normative foundations of the liberal international order, albeit through different modes and extents, revealing the complexity and asymmetry of their respective engagements with the international society.

#### *4. China's ways of contesting liberal internationalism in the Olympic arena*

China's engagement with liberal internationalism is critically examined through the lens of Zhang Yimou's artistic direction of the 2022 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, as a symbolic articulation of the "narrative of the nation" (Hall, 1992, p.293). In framing his vision, Zhang himself stressed the need to differentiate the 2022 ceremony from the highly acclaimed spectacle of 2008, remarking that "the burden" was now "different," as China was "striving to be different from 2008" since "the era is different" (*China Daily*, 2022).<sup>1</sup> Echoing the broader contemporary political discourse of Xi Jinping's 'new era' (*xin shidai* 新时代), the artistic director envisioned the 2022 opening ceremony as the platform to present a new, confident China to the world (ibid). Unlike the 2008 ceremony, which celebrated China's millennial civilization achievements – seeking both to explain China to the world and foster a sense of national identity and cohesion – the 2022 opening event aimed primarily to highlight the cultural confidence of the Chinese people and their ability to inspire the world with their values and philosophy of life.



In this context, the artistic director repeatedly invoked the notion of “romance,” which he described as emblematic of such a renewed self-confidence, inspiring others to “view the entire world from a very tiny detail,” symbolised by the unique cauldron lighting (ShanghaiEye, 2022). As Zhang (CGTN, 2022) put it: *“By expressing a romantic feeling at such a grand opening, we are hoping to depict the romantic perspective which is in fact a perfect reflection of (China’s) cultural confidence,”* capable of “amazement of the world” and making the country proud. This newfound sense of confidence was already evident in the selection of the Olympic dates. While the 2008 opening ceremony was developed around symbols of good auspices, the 2022 Beijing Olympics were presented as a “sign from heaven”<sup>3</sup> for China to start “its new path as a mature international actor” (Cabula and Pochettino, 2023, p. 25) with the same ambition, courage, and strength symbolized by the Year of the Tiger (Olympics.com, 2022). This idea was reflected in the forward-looking tone of the 2022 Games, contrasting with the retrospective outlook characterizing the 2008 spectacle.

The Winter event began, in fact, with a luminous floral LED display, culminating in fireworks spelling out the word “spring,” signaling China’s technological prowess and symbolising a hopeful new beginning after the pandemic. Since the global pandemic has called for a fresh and robust vision of world order – inspired by new values and ethical commitments rooted in solidarity, mutual respect, and a shared sense of global responsibility – the Olympic ceremony sought to

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<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on auspicious symbolism in 2008 is visible in the deliberate choice of the opening date – 8 August 2008, with the number eight regarded as a sign of luck and prosperity in Chinese culture. Instead, the 2022 Games’ opening coincided with the *lichun* 立春 (the ‘Beginning of Spring’ in the traditional 24 solar terms) and the 24th edition of the Winter Olympics, thus being interpreted as a sign of China’s preparedness.

embody and project that vision (*Shanghai Eye*, 2022). This aspiration was echoed in the Olympic motto “together for a shared future” (*yiqi xiang weilai* 一起向未来) and Beijing’s contribution to the philosophy of Olympism, to which it added the term “together” to the traditional dictum “faster, higher, stronger” (IOC, 2021). By contributing to the ideals of Olympism with a message of unity and inclusivity against the pandemic’s divisiveness and amidst the diplomatic boycott led by the Biden administration, the 2022 opening ceremony projected China as a constructive force in global governance and as a catalyst for change at a time when human progress stands at a crossroads. This role was embodied by the innovative cauldron lighting, delivering the idea of a ‘shared future under low carbon,’ combined with the visual language of the Games. From the dominant red hues of 2008, the 2022 opening ceremony has instead embraced elemental tones – blue for water and green for earth – underscoring China’s projected role as a responsible global actor in ecological transition and the advancement of a new paradigm of ‘ecological civilization.’

Against a climate of external hostility, the Games were represented as the elevation of Chinese humanism rooted in its ancient philosophy and framed around the idea of *One World, One Family*. This was celebrated during the closing ceremony by fireworks displaying the Chinese expression *Tianxia Yi Jia* (天下一家), meaning ‘all under the heaven as one family.’ This message of unity was visually performed, among others, by the representatives of China’s 56 ethnic groups raising the national flag and by the snowflakes bearing the names of individual nations merging to form a larger snowflake illuminating the globe, to emphasize the need for solidarity to address global challenges. Central to this narrative is the above-mentioned *tianxia*, a notion recently revitalized by philosopher Zhao Tingyang (2021) and that has become a foundational concept

within the Chinese School of International Relations, sparking significant debate among IR scholars<sup>4</sup>. Regardless of its different interpretations, the revival of the *tianxia* hints at the Chinese leadership's aspiration to offer a philosophical contribution to the normative foundations of the international order, and Olympism as well.

In this spirit, the 2022 Olympics were conceived by Zhang Yimou as an occasion to stage a global, responsible, and confident China, grounded in its self-proclaimed '5,000 years of uninterrupted civilisation.' While this civilizational narrative might not appear entirely new, the 2022 edition shifted the emphasis. The 2008 Games indeed celebrated the country's monumental past and the contributions to the world's civilization, most notably through the four great inventions (paper, printing, gunpowder, and the compass). The 2022 ceremony, instead, projected a renewed sense of cultural and techno-scientific confidence, emphasizing themes such as technology (*keji* 科技), sustainability (*kechixuxing* 可持续性), and future (*weilai* 未来) (Chong and Cloet, 2024). Through these globally resonant issues, Zhang Yimou conveyed an image of unity and shared progress, challenging perceived unilateral approaches to global governance as symbolized by the U.S.-led diplomatic boycott of the Games. As Cabula and Pochettino note (2023), the Beijing Winter Olympics signals the transition from *advertising* Chinese culture to *legitimizing* China's approaches to

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<sup>4</sup> Critics have pointed out how this notion may conceal a revival of a Sino-centric world order, blending cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and hegemonism. See: Callahan, W.A. (2008) Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony? *International Studies Review*, 10(4), 749-761. Callahan, W.A., and Barabantseva, E. (Ed.) (2012) Tianxia, Empire and the World: Chinese Visions of World Order for the 21st Century. *In China Orders the World?: Soft Power, Norms and Foreign Policy*, pp. 91-117. Johns Hopkins University Press.

global governance by ‘telling China’s story well’ (*jiang hao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事). Whilst promoting an image of openness and harmony was at the center of the 2008 Games’ spectacle – as part of the Chinese leadership efforts to project China’s ‘peaceful rise’ and its contribution to the creation of an ‘harmonious world’ – the 2022 Games were rather framed through a ‘negative soft power’ discourse, highlighting the effectiveness of the PRC’s governance system against the Covid-19 pandemic and showing its ability in providing “simple, safe and splendid” Games (*jianyue* 简约, *anquan* 安全, *jingcai* 精彩), albeit the accusations of human rights’ violation coming from many Western democracies (ibid).

##### *5. Russia’s ways of contesting liberal internationalism in the Olympic arena*

According to Konstantin Ernst, the creative producer of the Sochi ceremonies, known as “the premier visual stylist of the Putin era” (Yaffa, 2014) and head of Channel One – Russia’s most-watched state-owned television network – the Sochi Games were meant to present a “cross-section of the best” of the Russian people (*Afisha Daily*, 2014). In this vein, the opening ceremony celebrated Russian historical achievements and cultural heritage proudly bearing the epithet “Russian” while seeking resonance with universal values (ibid). The Games were officially presented as the embodiment of peaceful and international dialogue, with Sochi as an “ideal location” being “the home of more than a hundred different European, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures.” (as cited by Edenborg, 2013). Yet, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet to order the entrance of participating countries and the space-themed elements of the ceremony – ranging from the Olympic torch’s journey to the

International Space Station and cosmonauts serving as flag bearers, to depictions of lunar rovers, rocket scientists, and national icons such as Yuri Gagarin – collectively symbolized an effort to project a national identity anchored in the legacy of “Great Russia” (Persson and Petersson, 2014).

References to national culture, literature, and history pervaded the Sochi Olympics’ opening ceremony. Across the interviews, Ernst repeatedly emphasized that, because of Russia’s frequent misrepresentation abroad, the Olympic arena was a crucial stage to showcase a “different, modern” country and to convey what he regarded as an objective portrayal of Russia’s cultural essence (Agapov, 2014). A central strategy for presenting such a ‘different Russia’ lay in breaking with tradition – for example, by moving the Parade of Athletes to the beginning of the ceremony and staging a vertical spectacle that departed from the horizontally oriented formats of previous editions (Afisha Daily, 2014). To be sure, among the reasons behind this choice was that competing with the sheer scale of synchronization and human interaction displayed in Beijing’s 2008 would have been, in Ernst’s view, “presumptuous, to say the least” (ibid). This did not mean, nevertheless, a lack of ambition; the creative director in fact declaratively aspired to “tell the story of the country in a way that no one has ever told it before” (Satarov, 2014), realizing the most technologically advanced ceremony in the history of the Olympics to highlight Russia’s innovative capacity and its uniqueness (IOC, 2014b). The event, however, took an unexpected turn when a technical malfunction during the performance prevented the final Olympic ring from opening – a moment that quickly went viral on social media, interpreted as an ironic symbol of Russia’s restrictive stance on LGBTQ+ rights, with the missing ring “afraid of coming out” (BBC, 2014). The glitch occurred indeed in the context of the campaign led by the United Russia party to ban

the propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations to adults and minors, prohibiting LGBTQ+ organizations from establishing a Pride House at the Olympics. The event has been widely interpreted as a performative repudiation of Western liberal norms. The enactment of the so-called “gay propaganda” law came in fact at a time when countries like the United States and the United Kingdom were expanding protections for LGBTQ+ rights. Among the harsh reactions from Western leaders, then-U.S. President Barack Obama voiced his disapproval by declaring that “nobody” could be “more offended” by the anti-gay legislation than the US (Smith-Spark, 2013) – words also echoed by the then British Prime Minister David Cameron, expressing “deep concern about the abuse of gay people in Russia.” (Associated Press, 2013).

Quite ironically, Ernst’s declared intent was to let the “people all over the planet” get to know, understand, and love Russia, so that they could see its “greatness and diversity” (Satarov, 2014). The opening ceremony’s performance sought to do so by narrating over a thousand years of Russian history through the eyes of Lyubov, meaning ‘love’ in Russian – a young girl representing, in Ernst’s words, the “feminine side of Russia” (Gibson, 2014). In this sense, the representation of the country through the 11-year-old girl would constitute, in the words of the creative producer, a “declaration of love for our Motherland” (Agapov, 2014). Notwithstanding, the opening ceremony unmistakably displayed a Russian “we” intrinsically exclusive, visually expressed by the inflatable structure of St. Basil’s Cathedral under the projected letter мы, “we” in Cyrillic alphabet. The representation of monastic images of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, as well as Moscow’s Orthodox Sretensky Monastery choir, performing the Russian national anthem, illuminate the mutually reinforcing relationship between the Orthodox church and Russia’s anti-gay laws. These images, along with the

constant reminiscences throughout the ceremony to Tsar Peter the Great and Russian national heroes, suggest that “Putin’s sport complex in Sochi” operated as an “imperial forum,” constituting the imposing setting for the people’s worship of him as the nation’s great masculine leader (Bonde, 2017, pp. 363-389). Aligning with this reading, some scholars have described the opening performance as an instance of a “state-sponsored homophobia” (Van Rheenen, 2014), conveying a nostalgic imperial narrative celebrating Russia’s national grandeur while falling short of fostering the emotional universality and sense of love it ostensibly aimed to evoke.

6. *Lessons from the 2014 and 2022 Winter Olympics on the contestation of liberal internationalism*

A comparison of the Chinese and Russian opening ceremonies, viewed through the perspectives of their respective artistic directors, reveals notable divergences in how each engages with its civilizational past. While Beijing draws on a form of ‘traditionalism’ rooted in Confucian principles, this reference is less about nostalgia for past grandeur and more about mobilizing tradition as a resource to express confidence in China’s modernization path and, by extension, in its contribution to a renewed global governance ethic. In the case of Sochi, the retrospective tone of the opening ceremony – imbued with nostalgia for the Soviet era – functioned not only as a symbolic reaffirmation of Russia’s historical might, but also as an instrument of domestic consolidation, aimed at cultivating a collective sense of national belonging anchored in the image of a resurgent state seeking recognition and legitimacy on the global stage. As argued by Grix and Kramareva (2015), the hosting of the Sochi Games and the annexation of Crimea were

mutually reinforcing events, exemplifying the integration of both soft and hard power resources to spur nationalism. Notably, in preparation for the Olympics, Putin introduced a special security regime in Sochi “that was similar to those imposed during emergency situations” (International Crisis Group, 2014, p.4). The military forces concentrated in the city for the security of the Games were deployed in neighbouring Crimea immediately after the closing ceremony. In effect, Putin and his closest inner circle, all former KGB agents, gathered on the morning of the Olympic closing ceremony and made the decision to invade Crimea (Ortung and Zhemukhov, 2017, p.82). The annexation and the ensuing backing of separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine, however, effectively undermined any efforts to reshape Russia’s global image and to enhance its soft power (Müller, 2015). The ceremony of the Olympic torch relay was a particularly illuminating performance of power politics, “largely covered as a showcase of symbolic vindication of Russia’s sovereignty in general and over its most politically sensitive territories (Kaliningrad, the Kuril Islands, the North Pole, etc.)” (Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2014, p.3). Failing to achieve the legacy promises made in the bid book and breaching the Olympic Truce, Russia’s contestation of liberal internationalism was articulated through a discourse of “civilizational specificity” and, presumably, impunity (ivi).

China’s approach to the 2022 Olympic event has rather emphasized the contribution of the country’s civilizational unicity as a means of “inject(ing) fresh energy into human development,” presenting its millennial history both as the foundation of its current global standing and as a resource for advancing a renewed ‘global civilization’ (State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2023). By portraying itself as a ‘responsible’ global actor and a provider of ‘Chinese solutions’ (*Zhongguo fang’an* 中国方案) in a world confronted by ‘grey rhinos’ (*hui xiniu* 灰



犀牛) and ‘black swans’ (*hei tian’e* 黑天鹅), the narrative of the Games was articulated as a symbolic response to the perceived spiritual and moral crisis of the liberal international order and the increasingly adversarial posture of Western liberal democracies toward China’s rise. In this light, the PRC’s commitment to “win the glory of the country” should be understood as intrinsically linked to “showing the world the spirit and the values of the Chinese people” and the country’s unique contribution to building a ‘shared future for mankind’ (New China TV, 2022). Through a ‘negative soft power’ discourse (Callahan, 2015) that differentiates an ‘inclusive China’ from an ‘exclusive West,’ Zhang Yimou has cast Beijing as a driver of transformation *within* the Olympic Movement and its philosophy. Seeking to enrich the Olympic spirit with the values of Chinese humanism, the 2022 opening ceremony has staged a sort of “humanistic Olympics,” set to the evocative notes of John Lennon’s *Imagine* (Hwang and Huang, 2023), inviting the world to imagine a future where the ‘Chinese Dream’ takes global form.

All in all, the two mega-events diverged significantly in their orientation. On the one hand, the Sochi Olympics positioned Russia as a trailblazer of an alternative sporting order, projecting a nostalgic vision of imperial grandeur that challenges the very nature of the Olympic values. On the other hand, the Beijing Winter Olympics operated within existing institutional frameworks, advancing a human-centered philosophy of Olympism and presenting China as an indispensable force shaping its future trajectory, as further echoed in the context of the 2023 Asian Games under the theme *Heart to Heart @Future*.

## *7. The Sino-Russian contestation of multilateralism in the Olympic arena*

The Sochi Games inaugurated a new chapter for multilateralism in the Olympic arena and, more specifically, for China's Olympic diplomacy, as they marked the first instance of a Chinese head of state participating in a major international sporting event abroad. Over 43 intense hours in Sochi, Xi Jinping engaged in 12 bilateral and multilateral meetings, highlighting the leadership's ability to leverage such events to advance multilateral and bilateral relations (People's Daily, 2014). The success of multilateral mechanisms in the context of the Sochi Games was also remarked during the 2022 Beijing Olympics, with the Chinese Foreign Minister and official discourse repeatedly emphasizing the external support for the realization of the mega-event. Liu Xianfa, for instance, described this participation as reflective of "where international justice lies and what the international community aspires for," ultimately "demonstrating the US government's failure to politicize the event." (Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC in the Macao Special Administrative Region 2022). At the Beijing 2022 Olympics, President Xi met with more than 30 foreign leaders from Central Asia countries, the Middle East, and South America, consolidating the PRC's bilateral ties, particularly with countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and from the Global South. Discussions focused on infrastructure investments related to the BRI and energy cooperation, with Argentina officially joining the initiative (NDRC PRC, 2022). Bilateral cooperation with Eastern European countries has also been upgraded, proving the limited effects of the US-led boycott on the European context (Strina and Goppel, 2023).

While it is not new that the Olympic Games provide an informal platform for world leaders to meet and engage in diplomatic dialogue (Trunkos and Heere, 2018), what is increasingly significant is the way in which such interactions have begun to serve as instruments of political contestation. The most vivid example lies in the joint statement released by the Russian Federation and the PRC in the context of the Beijing 2022 Olympics titled “*The International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.*” The document, which is the result of a three-hour discussion between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin just before the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony, includes no fewer than 15 references to “multipolarity” and “multilateralism,” revealing how both states strategically leveraged the Olympic moment to articulate and legitimize their shared vision of a reconfigured global order. In the declaration, Beijing and Moscow call on all states to “seek genuine multipolarity with the United Nations and its Security Council playing a central and coordinating role” and promote “the democratization of international relations” to “jointly build international relations of a new type.” Multilateralism is listed as the first of the “momentous changes” of this “new era,” condemning attempts at hegemony by certain countries that “pose serious threats to global and regional peace and stability, and undermine the stability of the world order.” This opposition towards those actors that “continue to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues” and “interfere in the internal affairs of other states, infringing their legitimate rights and interests, and incite contradictions, differences and confrontation” is clear-cut, explicitly targeting the US (President of Russia, 2022).

Russia and the PRC’s critics of what they see as the excesses of U.S. power and the destabilizing effects of unilateralism on the international order are not new. In the Chinese case,

Foreign Minister Wang Yi (2021) has long remarked that “the past few years saw unilateralism running unchecked” since “a superpower” – the US – “had chosen to put its own interests above other things.” American “pseudo-multilateralism,” accordingly, has been used as a “pretext” to “form exclusive blocks” and “to divide the world along ideological lines,” and thus must be countered with a “true multilateralism” that provides “a firm commitment to upholding the UN-centered international system.” (ibid). In the words of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the UN represents the “embodiment of true multilateralism,” with the UN Charter constituting “the necessary conditions for truly multilateral cooperation, which are regulated by universally recognised norms of international law” (Lavrov, 2023). All in all, the joint declaration issued at the Beijing Winter Olympics positions China and Russia as authentic, principled defenders of the international order, casting the United States – the very power long seen as its torchbearer – into its principal spoiler. Despite proclaiming to the world their “no-limits friendship” (President of Russia, 2022), important divergences have soon surfaced. As Wishnick (2016) observes, Beijing and Moscow are less genuine allies and more “partners of consequence,” united by shared skepticism of the Western-led order and a pragmatic need for cooperation.

The Olympic Games hosted by both China and Russia have consistently highlighted the complexities of their partnership and their pragmatic nature. For instance, in the context of the Beijing 2008 Olympics, China’s response to Russia’s military intervention in Georgia reflected a delicate balancing act between maintaining its strategic partnership with Moscow while upholding its image as a responsible global actor, as demonstrated by the cautious statement regarding the aggression and President Hu Jintao’s opposition to Russian efforts to secure recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia at the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization summit in Dushanbe (Leoni and Strina, 2024). Similarly, at the Sochi Games, while uneasy in the role of mediator between Russia and the West, China pragmatically advanced its strategic interests by concluding a historic 30-year, \$400 billion natural gas agreement between Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation for the construction of the ‘Power of Siberia’ pipeline (Reuters, 2014). This being said, from Sochi 2014 to Beijing 2022, the Olympic arena has evolved into a symbolic stage for the coordinated contestation of multilateralism. The record of 65 heads of state and international organizations participating in the Sochi Games, driven largely by Global South representation amid the symbolic absence of many Western leaders, only anticipated the trajectory by which the Olympics would increasingly serve as a platform for contesting multilateralism and advancing alternative visions of global order.

#### *8. The Sino-Russian contestation of environmentalism in the Olympic arena*

Since the 1990s, the connection between global mega-events and environmental responsibility has become increasingly institutionalized, prompting hosting countries, including China and Russia, to actively engage with sustainability issues within the Olympic platform. Rather than challenging environmentalism as a core norm of the liberal international order, both states have leveraged the Games to highlight national achievements and technological innovation in addressing climate change, positioning themselves as champions of sustainability on the global stage. As for Russia, the 2014 Sochi Games were meant to set the bar for sustainability primarily domestically (Müller, 2014a). The Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games were

presented as a mission “to efficiently integrate sustainable development principles into all aspects of Games preparation and delivery,” establishing new “barrier-free standards” for urban planning and construction in Russia (IOC, 2014a; International Paralympic Committee, 2014). The implementation of a sustainable mega-event was said to be possible thanks to the international expertise, which was “a unique asset to the Sochi 2014 Games legacy”. As declared by Alexander Zhukov (Sochi Organising Committee, 2012), the Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Sochi 2014 Organising Committee, “the best practices from all over the world are coming to Sochi, and they will then spread across the entire country, creating a sustainable Games Legacy” and “raising standards to international levels across the board.” Yet, ineffective governance, lack of institutional controls, and intense time pressure resulted in lasting environmental harm and excessive infrastructure development. The Sochi Olympics have gone down in history as the most expensive Games ever held – exceeding \$51 billion in costs, a number that would be even higher if operational expenses were included – turning the region into the world’s largest construction site (Müller, 2014b).

Analyses of the evolution of China’s environmental discourse in the context of the Beijing Games, instead, have shown how the PRC shifted from compliance with international standards at the 2008 Summer Games to its (self-) elevation on the podium of a symbolic “green medal” for sustainability during the 2022 Winter Olympics (Vomeri and Gregori, 2023). Hosting the 2022 Winter Games, Beijing aimed to “make newer and greater contributions to the Olympic Movement” by not limiting itself to following international rules as it had been in 2008 but setting new standards (Ministry of Justice PRC, 2022). For instance, the creation of an Advisory Committee responsible for the supervision of sustainability matters

was one of the signals of Beijing's willingness to present itself as a standard-setter, making the 2022 Beijing Olympics a new environmental benchmark for future Olympic Games (Beijing Organising Committee, 2022). Even artificial snow – among the focal points of environmental concerns surrounding the 2022 Beijing Olympics – became an opportunity to reaffirm China's commitment to environmental protection and guarantee the quality of Olympic performances (Li, 2022). Leveraging the visibility of the Games, China has promoted a new development concept centered on sustainability, advancing its quest for a 'harmonious' and 'beautiful' socialist country through ecological revitalization and decarbonization. From a rising power once intent on proving its credibility by complying to international practices, the PRC has sought to reposition itself as a proactive architect of a new ecological paradigm, reaffirming the Chinese leadership's commitment to multilateral climate action in the face of a fragmented global climate regime and growing U.S. retrenchment, most notably exemplified by President Trump's second withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Nevertheless, ecologically, the Games continued the trend of expansion through large-scale construction, and, despite some venue reuse, they were also characterized by budget overruns and limited fiscal transparency (Chen et.al, 2025).

Sustainability pledges by Olympic hosts have often revealed a wide gap between promises and outcomes. Yet, while in the Chinese case the Games were leveraged as a vehicle for advancing a vision of 'ecological civilization' (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明) as a normative contribution to humankind, Russia's approach to Olympic sustainability has instead largely produced overambitious commitments that ultimately fell short in practice, not only exposing a persistent gap between rhetoric and reality but also amplifying it to a greater degree than in previous editions (Müller, 2014a).

## *9. Back to the West: the 2024 Paris Games*

As the host of the Games in 1900 and 1924, Paris became the second city to host the Summer Olympics three times (after London, which hosted the Summer Games in 1908, 1948, and 2012). To secure its bid to host the Olympic Games in 2017, Paris built a global coalition that reflected a newfound collaborative spirit in international sports, culminating in a deal with Los Angeles that guaranteed the 2024 Olympics for Paris and the 2028 edition for the U.S. – a diplomatic compromise that capped a fervent French campaign and garnered unexpectedly broad international support (Krasnoff, 2017). Since the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the Games have been held outside the West, highlighting the rising prominence of the East in the global sporting arena. In many ways, Paris's venue after London in 2012 appeared to be a return to the origins of the Games invented by de Coubertin. However, the Games unfolded against a backdrop of acute geopolitical tensions, including the protracted Russia-Ukraine war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One month before the opening ceremony, the French Service for Supervision and Protection from Foreign Digital Interference released a document denouncing a Russian “Matryoshka campaign” to target the French support of Ukraine and the Paris 2024 Olympics (Viginum, 2024). The shadow of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict loomed over the Paris Olympics, too. Fearing terror attacks, French authorities massively ramped up security for the Games, flooding Paris streets with up to 45,000 police and soldiers armed with assault rifles (Leicester, 2024). With reference to the context of domestic politics, the Olympic Games served as a litmus test for the government's stability. President Emmanuel Macron seized the opportunity presented by the Games to delay the appointment of the Prime Minister, while the far-right capitalized on the enhanced security



measures to propagate their vision of public tranquility through an augmented police presence (Leroy and Anibaldi, 2024).

The opening ceremony was the embodiment of Macron's ambitions. It combined landmarks like the Eiffel Tower with fashion representations of modern France, including members of LGBTQ+ communities. During the Olympic Games, the French president posted "This is France!" several times on his social media platforms. Meanwhile, those from the extreme right contested Macron's vision of diversity and modernity. This was evident in reactions to the opening ceremony's reference to Leonardo da Vinci's painting, *The Last Supper*, which featured drag queens, a transgender model, and a naked singer. France's Catholic church condemned the sketch as a "mockery of Christianity" (CNA, 2024). The Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova described the opening ceremony as "an LGBT mockery of a sacred Christian story" and the President of the International Boxing Association (IBA), Umar Kremlev, as "pure sodomy" (as cited by Goretti, 2024, p.2). Within a few days, the controversy over LGBTQ+ moved from the opening ceremony to the sporting ground. Five days after the opening ceremony, IBA released a *communiqué* stating that two women participants in Paris 2024 – Lin Yuting and Imane Khelif – had been disqualified from the IBA Women's World Boxing Championships New Delhi 2023 after they had been "subject to a separate and recognized test, whereby the specifics remain confidential" (IBA, 2024)<sup>5</sup>. Two

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<sup>5</sup> Since 2022, the International Boxing Association (IBA) has been one of the few international sports federations still led by a Russian citizen, and the only one to permit athletes from the Russian Federation to compete under their flag and with their anthem, despite having been suspended by the IOC since 2019 over governance and integrity concerns. Kremlev, its president, is

days afterwards, commenting on the boxing match between a “female athlete” and a “transgender boxer,” Putin’s Spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, lamented that the International Olympic Movement was “losing face, becoming a victim of these pseudo-liberal manifestations, which sometimes border on perversion” (TASS, 2024). After Khelif won the gold medal, French prosecutors opened a probe into cyberbullying by claiming that several prominent figures had taken part in online harassment over her gender. Prosecutors said X owner Elon Musk and former US President and presidential candidate Donald Trump were named in the complaint filed by Khelif’s lawyer (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Important differences emerge when compared to the Chinese conduct. Khelif beat China’s Yang Liu to take the gold medal in women’s welterweight boxing, while Lin Yu-ting, the Taiwanese boxer who likewise failed the gender eligibility test, gained the gold medal in the featherweight category. Chinese authorities refrained from reviving the controversy fuelled by the pro-Russian IBA and the global far right. Nor did China show any willingness to follow Russia in its attempt to discredit the Olympic Games and replace them with the organisation of alternative Games, despite explicit Russian overtures positioning China as a potential partner in this effort. In fact, when Russia’s exclusion from the Paris Games was looming, in October 2023, Putin announced that Russia was set to organise a series of alternative international sports events, including a re-launch of the Soviet-era World Friendship Games, first staged in 1984 as a response to the U.S.-led boycott of the Moscow Olympics. Although the initiative did not materialise, the proposal of hosting the 2026 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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reportedly a close associate of Vladimir Putin, having built a fortune in construction and security while also running a taxi business (Saintourens, 2022).

(SCO) Summer Games still remains on the table. Initially floated by President Putin at the SCO summit in September 2023, the idea entails a multi-sport event hosted across several cities, including Moscow and St. Petersburg. In January 2025, Russian Sports Minister Mikhail Degtyarev (May, 2025) claimed that China had expressed support for the initiative, explicitly stating that “a session of SCO high-ranking officials is scheduled to be held in China this year.” In parallel, Russia has also sought to revive the BRICS Games, with President Putin presenting them as part of the bloc’s expanding political and humanitarian cooperation – an effort that has received cautious backing from China, avoiding any direct challenge to the Olympic movement.

As noted in the analysis of the contestation of liberal internationalism in the context of the 2022 Olympics, Beijing has continued to exploit the flows of the US’s leadership by asserting influence from ‘within’ the existing order while avoiding the direct confrontational path taken by Russia. Whilst the latter imposed a “de facto boycott” by refusing to broadcast the 2024 Paris Games, China embraced the mega-event as a platform to strengthen its global competitiveness. Chinese state-run media prominently celebrated the nation’s gold medal tally, tied with the United States at 40, as a symbolic assertion through Olympic performances of China’s growing global power (Bloomberg, 2024). Evidence of this can also be found in the issue of doping. The Paris Games were notably marked by a media war between the Chinese anti-doping authorities (CHINADA) and their American counterparts (USADA), with the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) as the third player in the game. The two sporting super-powers, both vying for topping the medals ranking – doubling the third-placed, Japan – accused each other of organized doping (Lepeltier, 2024). In this contentious climate, Chinese swimmer Qin Haiyang and

his relay teammate Sun Jiajun – both part of the men’s 4x100m medley relay team that claimed a historic victory over the U.S. – faced a slew of doping allegations, followed by contentious claims from the U.S. side that WADA was complicit in covering them up.

Amid the escalating media storm, an article published by the China Daily stressed that the “Confucian values – emphasizing hard work, respect, perseverance, continuous learning and humility” were “evident in Paris, where Chinese athletes not only secured victories but did so with grace and sportsmanship, earning the admiration of competitors and spectators alike.” (Flores, 2024). More in general, the article continues, “Asia’s resurgence in sports mirrors its broader renaissance in economic, cultural and social development, with China as the prime mover and dynamic catalyst”, because “sports victories symbolize a continent reclaiming its rightful place in a new multipolar world, not just as a participant but as a leader” (ivi). Overall, the 2024 Paris Olympics have contributed significantly to elevating China in public discourse as a responsible global and ‘green’ actor.

Framed as the “most sustainable” Olympics in history, Paris 2024 introduced ambitious green measures – including making one-third of the food plant-based and limiting meat options, leading to rationing and prompting some delegations, like Great Britain’s, to bring their own chefs. Organizers also chose not to install air conditioning in the Olympic Village, despite rising athlete frustration amid unseasonably hot weather. In many ways, the Games became a moment of “performance anxiety” for a city long associated with global climate leadership. Yet the ambitious sustainability agenda quickly produced a boomerang effect, as practical shortcomings – from event cancellations due to pollution to athletes falling ill after swimming in the Seine – undermined the credibility of the Games

as the ‘most sustainable’ ever. Against this background, Thomas Bach, president of the IOC, praised the role of Chinese technology in making the lives of athletes highly comfortable, in particular the contribution of companies such as Alibaba for “greatly increasing the efficiency and sustainability of Olympic Games operations” (IOC, 2024). In a further showcase of its growing technological footprint in the sports arena, China-manufactured hydrogen refueling equipment was also hailed as making a significant contribution. In particular, Houpu Clean Energy Group, a leading Chinese enterprise in this sector, supplied advanced hydrogen solutions and co-developed hydrogen stations for the mega-event, continuing the ‘carbon goals’ trajectory established during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and the Chengdu Universiade (Zhao, 2024).

The Paris 2024 Games offered Chinese technology a further window of visibility, showcasing the country’s growing capacity to shape the future of international sporting events through innovation and sustainability – even as a non-host nation. Quite on the opposite, the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from the mega-event under the banner of protecting the “integrity” of international sport provided Russia with an opportunity to denounce what it views as the instrumentalization of sport for political ends. The Russian Olympic Committee condemned the IOC’s suspension as a “counterproductive decision with obvious political motivations,” framing it as another example of Western bias and exclusion practices (Chiappa, 2024). In this contrasting landscape, where China capitalized on the 2024 Games to enhance its global standing, Russia has further entrenched its resistance vis-à-vis international sport authorities, likely deepening the divergence with the PRC in their respective approaches to global sports diplomacy and the international society.

## 10. *Conclusions*

Viewing the Olympic Games as catalysts of international politics allows for exploring the potential of sports mega-events as arenas where the international order is both negotiated and contested. Far from being mere reflections of global politics, this contribution illustrates how the Olympic Games may act as a magnifying glass through which the interplay of norms, power, and legitimacy can be critically examined and interpreted. The comparative analysis of the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Winter Games has served as a litmus test for decoding the contestation of the international order in place, offering insight into whether and how Russia and China have sought to advance the construction of an alternative sport and world order, both individually and through coordinated efforts.

Designed to showcase inclusivity, technological innovation, and bolstering Russia's soft power both domestically and internationally, the Sochi Games fostered a significant "lost in translation" moment between Russia's self-representation and the expectations of the liberal world. The annexation of Crimea, the enforcement of Putin's "gay propaganda law," and a pronounced emphasis on Russia's civilizational uniqueness all signalled its confrontive stance vis-à-vis Olympism and internationalism. As for Beijing, the 2022 Winter Games presented a more confident and proactive posture, portraying China as a leader in sustainable development and an emerging – albeit contested – global power capable of contributing to Olympism and, more broadly, to global governance through a Confucian-inspired humanism.

Convergences were highlighted through the analysis of Sino-Russian Olympic diplomacy during their respective turns as Olympic hosts. In particular, the joint statement issued during the Beijing 2022 Olympics positioned both China and

Russia as leading advocates of multilateralism, leveraging the Olympic platform to articulate a shared vision of a multipolar world no longer dominated by a hegemonic power and unilateral approaches to global governance. However, the “no-limits friendship” between the two, celebrated in the context of the 2022 Olympics, soon revealed its constraints, resonating with earlier episodes in the 2008 and 2014 Olympics. While in the context of the Games, Beijing tacitly endorsed Moscow’s actions – be it the military intervention in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, or the war in Ukraine in 2022 – this convergence stems less from ideological alignment and more from strategic cooperation rooted in a shared dissatisfaction with the US-led order.

Fundamental disalignment in contestation modes was further crystallized in the context of Paris 2024, as Chinese authorities refrained from engaging with the controversies like those fueled by the pro-Russian IBA or endorsing co-sponsoring alternative sporting events, such as the proposed World Friendship Games, despite Russian pressures. This strategic restraint reflects China’s broader approach of asserting its influence from ‘within’ the existing framework of international sport, in contrast to Russia’s increasingly confrontational stance. It can be claimed that the Sochi Olympics catalysed Russia’s challenge to the very fundamentals of the international order and Olympism. China has rather leveraged the ‘BRICS phase’ of the Games and its recent return to the West as an opportunity to showcase its technological prowess and advance multilateral and bilateral cooperation, particularly with countries in the Global South. By blending the ideals of Olympism with its Confucian philosophy of harmony and unity, the Beijing 2022 Olympics have presented a synthesis for the creation of an ‘Olympism with Chinese characteristics,’ exemplified by the addition of the term “together” to the official Olympic motto.

While framed as a return to the roots of Olympism, the Paris 2024 Games were marked by challenges and controversies reflecting the fractures within the liberal international order itself, suggesting that the contestation of liberal internationalism is not confined to illiberal states but also arises from within the liberal West. This underscores the need for further inquiry into how Olympic diplomacy may shed light on the internal tensions of the LIO. The return to Olympism's cradle has fundamentally raised the question of whether contemporary developments are steering us toward a *post-Olympism*, shaped less by universal ideals than by the fractures and voids of a changing world order.

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# Racial Discourses and the Popularization of Football in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

ANA PAULA DA SILVA<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract.** This chapter aims to reflect on racial discourses in Brazil that contextualize the emergence of Edson Arantes do Nascimento, known as Pelé, one of the greatest football players of all time. The study considers Brazilian racial theories at the turn of the 19th century and understands how these influenced Pelé's emergence in the 1950s as a 'Black man'.

**Keywords:** Brazil; football; modernization; race; nationalism.

*Friends, I always say that, before [19]58 and '62, Brazil was a mongrel among nations and Brazilians were mongrels among men<sup>3</sup>.*

Nelson Rodrigues (2002)

## *Introduction*

Football is often seen as something that is almost “natural” to Brazil. Today, it is hard to imagine Brazil without “the English

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Thaddeus Gregory Blanchette.

<sup>2</sup> Ana Paula da Silva, Federal Fluminense University (UFF, Brazil). E-mail address: anpaulasilva@id.uff.br.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Thaddeus Gregory Blanchette.

sport” leaping immediately to mind: five World Cup victories (and Brazil’s shameful 7:1 home ground loss to Germany in 2014), Maracanã Stadium, Ronaldinho, Romário, Pelé... In spite of this, it was neither smooth nor inevitable that football would become Brazil’s national sport.

At the beginning of this process, many Brazilian intellectuals saw football as foreign and viewed its expansion as a threat to national sovereignty. By contrast, the eugenicists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries believed that football would “discipline” Brazilians to the demands of modernity<sup>4</sup>. During the *Estado Novo* period in Brazil (1937-45), soccer underwent a process of centralization like what was then occurring with samba. Both became symbols of Brazilianness, although they were initially considered to be somewhat marginal activities. They became part of daily life and emblems of national pride. The “Brazilianization” of football was finally narrated by leading Brazilian intellectuals. In 1947, Mário Filho published the first sociological treatise on the sport, complete with a preface by anthropologist Gilberto Freyre. His *O Negro no Futebol Brasileiro* [The Black in Brazilian Football] became a classic. The book illustrates the transformation of football into *futebol*, with Brazilian elements incorporated into the game through the inclusion of black and mixed-race players who, according to the author, had not previously been accepted because it was an elite (read “white”) sport. Mário Filho’s work has produced a discourse of how football is spoken about that is recurrent in Brazil to this day. Filho suggested that the incorporation of “genuinely national” elements produced a new way of practicing the sport, later called “football-art”. According to the author, this was the result of Brazilian intermixture, with the national

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<sup>4</sup> See Pereira, L.A. de M. (2000) *Footballmania: uma história social do futebol no Rio de Janeiro, 1902-1938*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira.

elements creating a transformation of the “repressed and technical” form of the game.

As Antonio Jorge Soares (2001) put it, Filho’s work became *the* explanation for the origins of Brazilian football. Soares argues that hardly any scholars have analyzed the context in which Mario Filho’s book was written. The interpretation that Mário Filho gave to the facts thus turned into the official version of the sport’s history.

1. *Football and Afro-Brazilian rites: a comparative analysis of symbols of Brazilianness*<sup>5</sup>

One of the problems in thinking about football sociologically lies in the fact that notions about the game have become naturalized, as if there were no historical, social, political and economic contexts in which it was formed. Roberto DaMatta (2006), one of the pioneering anthropologists in the analysis of this subject, once wrote that football is a “metaphor for life itself”. To critically analyze football is to reflect on the various dimensions of Brazilian social life. Ironically, DaMatta’s metaphor is understood as self-explanatory and not as if *futebol* were subject to constant (re)construction. Simoni Guedes (1999) has pointed out this phenomenon in her article “O povo brasileiro no campo de futebol” [The Brazilian people on the football pitch], remarking that talk about the history of sport in Brazil often represents it as a “zero institution,” limited to technical analyses which do not produce social meaning (Guedes, 1977).

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<sup>5</sup> Brazilianness is defined following Thaddeus Blanchette (2002) as the set of socially forged *sui generis* symbols that constitute elements for the formation of a national identity.



When Brazilians talk about the sport, we portray it as being detached from the historical process and symbolic struggles that led to its formation. People still believe the story that Anglo-Scots-Brazilian Charles Miller was the “Brazilian inventor” of football, promoting it throughout the country. According to Mário Filho’s book, the game was introduced by Miller and was adopted by elite clubs that practiced another sport at the time: cricket. Football was thus initially promoted by Brazil’s ruling elite. Only later was the sport appropriated by the working classes.

According to Filho, there was initially a formal prohibition on poor and black people’s participation in football. Some football scholars disagree, however. They claim that the development of the sport is related to the modernization of Brazil’s cities and that football became popularized through social processes. In his article “A capital irradiante: técnica, ritmos e ritos do Rio” [The radiant capital: Rio’s technique, rhythms and rites], Nicolau Sevcenko (1998) discussed the importance of sports in early 20th-century Brazil. He claims there was a “sports fever” during this period, in which the cult of the body became predominant in a changing society. For Sevcenko, the electricity that ran along the wires in Brazilian cities also metaphorically infected bodies in the search for new ways to relate to the world. New technologies gave rise to a notion of modernity according to which the body should be in tune with the life of the city. The search for a healthy life and an athletic body contributed to discourses that preached sports as a means of “disciplining and sanitizing” the population.

Leonardo Affonso de Miranda Pereira repeated similar arguments in *Footballmania* (2000). He reports that hygienist theories of the early 20th century advocated the practice of sports to stay free from the diseases that ravaged the Brazilian population and to produce a “disciplining” (Foucault, 1977) of body

and mind. Pereira pointed out that many theorists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as educator Paulo Lauret, believed that sports were fundamental to the Brazilian civilizing process (Elias, 1998).

In a similar vein, Simoni Guedes (1999) reports how in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, football was part of the disciplinarization and sanitization of the workforce in Rio de Janeiro while, at the same time, the city was shaken by a reurbanization promoted by Mayor Pereira Passos. This restructured the urban environment of Brazil's federal capital. According to Nísia T. Lima, Ricardo V. Santos, and Carlos EA Coimbra Júnior (2005), Passos' policies arose from the "sanitarian movement," which surveyed sanitary and socioeconomic conditions throughout Brazil.

This process was not limited to Brazil. In *The Pursuit of Excitement*, Norbert Elias (1992) demonstrates how sports began to play a relevant role in England from the 18th century onwards. As English society produced new political and economic models, sports were expanded and exported to other countries. The urbanization process promoted by industrialization created the need to discipline individuals according to contexts imposed by the new orders. The "sportsification"<sup>6</sup> of English society and the exportation of this model to other countries were related to changes in political, social, and economic codes stemming from industrialization.

We might say that Brazilian reality was influenced by the winds that blew in from industrialized Europe. There was a "sportsification" of the national context along with the growth of cities. This phenomenon expanded across all social classes.

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<sup>6</sup> The author defined the process of "sportsification" as the transition from exercises to pastimes to regular sports activities from the 18th century onwards.

Nonetheless, the dominant view of the origins of Brazilian football is still very much guided by the discourse established by Filho. Antonio Jorge Soares (2001) argues the impulses that led blacks and mixed-race people into Brazilian football coincided with the ideals of “racial mixing” that were popular in Brazilian intellectual circles when Filho published his work.

One of the reasons for this persistence of belief in Mário Filho’s “myth of origin” is that the ideas about the Brazilian people that underlie it still exist. Miscegenation is one of the elements that is present in today’s analyses of football in Brazil. Even those who use the history of football to denounce Brazilian racism take Mário Filho’s version as “gospel”. Leonardo Afonso de Miranda Pereira (2000) comments on what Mário Filho’s work meant in his time by stressing that:

[...] However correct it may be, if viewed from the point of view of sports journalists or members of the city’s elegant clubs, such periodization is not without limits. Although he defined the foundations upon which many later analyses of the game would be built, he focuses his attention primarily on the way in which the presence of blacks and the poor was perceived by those who saw this as a great inconvenience. His book provides, in an exemplary manner, a history of the acceptance of the black presence by these groups, without taking into account other possibilities of perceiving this process of the game’s consolidation in Brazil... (Pereira, 2000, p.15).

In this passage, Pereira (ibid.) argues that Mário Filho’s impressions about the sport’s beginnings were connected to his role as a member of Rio’s elite – the same elite which Filho said prohibited “poor whites, blacks, and mixed-race people” from playing football. According to Pereira, Mário Filho transferred many of his own ideas about Brazil and Brazilians to his written work.

Many other scholars question Mário Filho's view. One of them, Gilmar Mascarenhas (1998), argued that it is not possible to determine when or where football began in Brazil. Its emergence depended on several different factors and also occurred outside the Rio-São Paulo axis. In the south of the country, for example, the emergence of football was not linked to the British presence or a local Brazilian elite.

## 2. *The "sportification" of Rio de Janeiro*

As analyzed by Pereira, the great majority of the Carioca elite did not prohibit the practice of sports by the masses. Football, in fact, became an instrument for promoting their evolution. However, sports were practiced in separate clubs for the rich and the poor. This did not prevent some teams formed by common workers – composed of blacks, mixed-race people and poor whites – from occasionally playing against or with the so-called *sportmen*.

To broaden the debate on the "sportification" of Brazil's urban centers, one must look at other aspects of urban life at the beginning of the 20th century. In her book *O medo da bruxa* [Fear of Witchcraft], Yvonne Maggie (1992) describes legal proceedings from 1890 onwards to understand how the Brazilian State repressed Afro-Brazilian cults. According to Maggie, the State sectors created to repress these practices actually regulated and organized the *terreiros*<sup>7</sup> urban spaces. Parallels can be drawn between the processes of "sportification". The prophylaxis and sanitation promoted during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century produced a selection of cultural aspects that were allowed

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<sup>7</sup> Afro-Brazilian religious temples.

to coexist in urbanized spaces, removing those considered undesirable.

The Estado Novo period expanded and consolidated these processes. According to historians Thomas Skidmore (1969) and Bóris Fausto (2006), the main characteristic of this regime was the centralization of power and the homogenization of national daily life through government propaganda and the use of mass media. The “sportification” of Brazilian society is therefore an example of the active choosing of which cultural characteristics should be emphasized as “hygienic” and “national”, to the detriment of others.

### *3. Theories of whitening and miscegenation*

With the abolition of slavery and the establishment of the Republic, debate intensified about how to create a Brazilian people and nation. Evolutionary theories that classified human beings based on their physical differences became popular within this project. The “sportification” of Brazilian society was deeply influenced by these racialisms.

According to Nísia T. Lima and Gilberto Hochman (1996), the social Darwinism of Gobineau, Agassiz and Le Bon produced a belief among Brazilian intellectuals that racial “disparities” condemned the country to an uncivilized existence. The sanitation movement sought solutions to this supposed situation, focusing on destroying that which condemned the Brazilian man to inferiority: disease. In this context, “sportification” became an essential component of hygienist discourses. For hygienists, sports were an instrument for creating a healthy Brazilian race, ridding individuals of the plagues and bad habits that harmed their productivity.

Another part of the hygienist discourses of the time were ideas regarding miscegenation. According to anthropologist Giralda Seyferth (1996), these began to appear in the mid-1850s. Debate centered on the foundation of a “national type” through a “selection process aimed at whitening the population” (Seyferth, 2000, p.43). A national immigration policy was established with a hierarchy of so-called “desirable immigrants.”

Sports played a key role in this context, providing solutions by reinforcing discipline, physical prowess, team play, and “clean living.” The popularization of football, however, cannot be explained solely by these processes. Many other sports (such as swimming and crew) were part of the “sportification” trend and are not recognized as synonyms of Brazilianess. As Pereira highlights, football not only incorporated the projects of nationhood proposed by the physicians and intellectuals of the time, it spread nationalism among the population. This may be one of the most important reasons why football became *the* Brazilian sport.

#### *4. Football and national sentiment*

According to Pereira (2000), matches between Brazil and other countries attracted large numbers of spectators in the early 20th century, bringing the country together around the national team. Interest in football was widespread before the Estado Novo. Pereira argues that a game between Brazil and Argentina in 1908 attracted not only those fans of Rio’s Metropolitan League, but also a wide variety of ordinary people. This popularity surprised Carioca intellectuals of the time.

The South American Championship of 1919 attracted four times the audience of the 1908 matches. This event had an

enormous impact on the media, which considered it a “landmark of national sports” (Pereira, 2000, p. 135). The day after the final match between Brazil and Uruguay was declared a public holiday, and businesses closed at noon. The championship was organized by the Brazilian Sports Confederation (CBD), created in 1916 (more than two decades before the *Estado Novo*) to represent national football and promote a Brazilian Championship. During this period, football was not seen as a profession. Amateurism guaranteed rich and well-born young sportsmen a certain exclusivity in the sport.

The Brazilian team that participated in the 1919 South American Championship was made up of white men from the elite. Although the audience that filled the stadium was black, poor and mixed-race, the participation of these groups on the field was limited, especially when it came to representing Brazil against other nations. The nationalist sentiment that football channeled did not, therefore, erase inequalities of class and color. However, the blacks and the poor were not completely excluded from the practice of football. Suburban leagues proliferated in the Federal Capital. Interest in the sport spread across the entire population, who filled stadiums and watched matches.

Hermano Vianna (1995), states that the policies of the *Estado Novo* of the 1930s and '40s were concerned with centralizing social life, seeking to homogenize and produce cultural characteristics that expressed a singular Brazilian identity. As analyzed by Pereira, football already existed on the national scene. Popular interest in the sport had been a fact since the end of the 19th century and its expansion process cannot be credited solely to the power of Getúlio Vargas' state. Mário Filho's views about the popularization and massification of football, with the entry of blacks and mixed-race people into the sport at that time, thus do not so much describe as *prescribe*

reality. They only make sense when we analyze elite nationalist discourses on race from the 1930s and 1940s.

### 5. *Casa Grande & Senzala on the football pitches*

The Vargas government saw the emergence of a new racial discourse. Many scholars have identified this movement as culturalist, with Gilberto Freyre at its center. It is no coincidence that he was the one who would write the preface Mário Filho's *O negro no futebol brasileiro*.

Freyre's *Casa Grande & Senzala*'s main goal was to demonstrate how the characteristic elements of the three races (black, white, and red) made up the formation of the Brazilian "national character." In the face of this new interpretation of Brazil, ethnic cultural characteristics were cast as threats to the national project: only the combination of the country's "foundational elements" would allow for the emergence of an original "national type," alleviating conflicts in Brazilian society. At the time of its publication, Freyre's work was widely accepted in the Brazilian and international intellectual scenes.

Against this backdrop, *O negro no futebol brasileiro* portrayed the trajectory of black Brazilians in football. The complimentary preface by Gilberto Freyre (Filho, 2003, p.24) revealed its usefulness in contributing to the history "of Brazilian society and culture" then being promoted by Vargas's Estado Novo. The book has had several re-editions, all with new texts added by the author himself Antunes (Antunes, 2004). One of the editions, the one that will be discussed here, was produced shortly after Brazil's defeat in the 1950 World Cup.

In his preface, Freyre presented *O negro no futebol brasileiro* as a valuable contribution to understanding Brazil's transition from a "predominantly rural to urban life." In his view, football



was an important part of the construction of modernity, aligned with other symbols seen as belonging to Brazilian identity:

[...] Mário Filho presents us with the conflict between these two immense forces: rationality and irrationality in the behavior or lives of men. In this case, men from Brazil. Men from a hybrid, mixed society, full of Amerindian and African roots and not just European ones. I believe I am not saying anything new by repeating that behind the considerable institution that football has become in our country, old psychic energies and irrational impulses of the Brazilian man, in search of sublimation, have been condensing and accumulating for years (Filho, 2003, p.24).

Freyre considered Mário Filho's analysis of football to be an important milestone in understanding how the sport served to create a national identity. Freyre was also the first to say that football served to alleviate conflicts in Brazilian society:

[...] The development of football... into a true Brazilian institution made it possible to sublimate several of those irrational elements of our social and cultural formation. Capoeira and samba, for example, are very present in the Brazilian style of playing football [...] With these residues, Brazilian football moved away from the well-ordered British original to become the dance full of irrational surprises and Dionysian variations that it is (Ibid, p.25).

Here, Freyre specifies that football is essentially Brazilian. It is the result of race mixing, based on a convergence of the diverse characteristics that supposedly come from the racial matrices that make up the Brazilian people.

Freyre believed, in short, that his model of miscegenation was demonstrated by Mário Filho's writings, portraying how football helped shape Brazil's national identity based on the

characteristics provided by Brazilian racial mixing. *O negro no futebol brasileiro* was like *Casa Grande e Senzala* in describing racial relations. Both Freyre and Mario Filho portrayed the acceptance of racial mixing as positive, affirming that the Brazilian people are the result of such a mixing and asserting an expectation that mixing was the key to the nation's future greatness. The modern Brazilian utopia was conceived here as a perfectly harmonized society, shaped by its racial and sociocultural composition.

In the chapter entitled "The Field and the Pick-up Game," Mário Filho recounts the myth of how blacks and mixed-race people began to enter the sport. In Brazil, soccer started out as an amateur sport and the big clubs – such as Flamengo, Fluminense and Botafogo in Rio – were elite institutions. Mixed-race and black people were initially recruited for textile factory teams formed by English workers who invited black employees to play, since there were not enough English to make up the sides.

This supposedly occurred with teams such as Bangu Athletic Club and América, among others, which later became professional organizations. Mário Filho describes a transition from players who were "from good families" to "working-class players" who came from factories. He also notes that this division was simplistic and that "one or another black player" was occasionally accepted into the so-called "rich clubs". However, he never clarified under what circumstances this happened.

The turning point in this situation was the 1922 Championship, with the entry of Clube de Regatas Vasco da Gama into the First Division. This was a team that, according to Filho, was entirely black and mixed-race and which became a sensation, losing to no one. In Filho's view (again, following Freyre's line of thought), Vasco followed the Portuguese tradition of race

mixing and, for this reason, became the first club to employ black and mixed-race players.

Admixture had to be positive and justified in view of the Brazilian colonial past – a colonization with tropicalist and Portuguese origins. In this sense, Filho established a foundation for analysis on which all further discussions about Brazilian football would be built. As Freyre states in his preface, it was thanks to Mário Filho's study that Brazilian football began to be understood as something composed of *ginga*<sup>8</sup>, dance, capoeira and samba. The result of Mário Filho's work was demonstrating how the constituent elements of the Brazilian racial formation promoted a "genuinely" national football:

[...] The poor white man, the mulatto, the black man, established the difference between the big and the small club. [...] The white man from the field, from the big clubs, having on top of that a coach, a team captain shouting non-stop in English. The black man from the pick-up games, from the streets, having no one. The only thing that helped him was his intuition. The certainty of a vocation that made him create a ball out of a sock. To play, to learn. Trying to remember what he had seen. (Filho, 2003, pp. 73-74).

Here we see Mário Filho arguing that the lower race/class expropriated cultural characteristics of their social betters. Black people, forbidden from participating in the large clubs where football games took place, watched and memorized the games so that they could play on improvised fields.

The veracity of the above ideas can be interrogated by looking at a similar alleged appropriation process outlined in Hermano Vianna's book (1995), *The Mystery of Samba*. Vianna questions the notion that samba, of black origins, was restricted to the favelas of Rio, and that this cultural characteristic was

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<sup>8</sup> TN: swing or jive.

“stolen” over time by the city’s white elites to become a national symbol. Vianna argued that this understanding of samba is part of a classic view of the miscegenation process as disseminated by Freyre. Vianna instead demonstrated that samba had always been a joint creation (Vianna, 1995, pp. 19-20).

I argue here that *O negro no futebol brasileiro* is a work that produces the same sort of legend, but in an opposite direction. Here, it is the black and mixed-race masses who “stole” the sport from elite whites. This trajectory was possible, according to this perspective, because it resulted from the Brazilian racial mixing inherited from Portugal:

[...] The English jokes are for Domingos [a black football player from the 1930s] what Sterne was for Machado de Assis. [...]. English on the outside, Brazilian on the inside. Above all, from Rio. The more he tried to be English, the more Domingos betrayed himself as a Carioca. Like old Machado. [...] White Englishmen quickly tried to Brazilianize themselves when they dressed up as football players. [...] The case of Charles Miller, the “Charles” being the first Brazilianism in football (Filho, 2003, pp. 217).

Here, Mário Filho recounts how soccer became Brazilian when it stopped being English and that even the person “responsible” for introducing this sport to Brazil had to imitate the Brazilian way of playing. Miscegenation is presented as characteristic of all Brazilians and, therefore, demarcates the territorial space of the nation, exemplified by an Englishman becoming Brazilian.

## 6. *The 1950 World Cup*

The 1950 World Cup in Brazil was a major event for the nation and Rio de Janeiro. It triggered countless expectations. For

Mário Filho, it was an opportunity to prove to the world his newly forged knowledge about the history of football in Brazil.

Europe, the continent that hosted World Cups until 1950, could not be chosen to host another championship. The Second World War and the events that followed had completely devastated and traumatized the continent. Brazil represented a neutral space. As stated by Gisella de Araújo Moura (1998), the political scenario favored this option. At the time, Brazil's acting President was Eurico Gaspar Dutra, who was busy trying to remove from his government anything that resemble the semi-fascist Estado Novo. In 1948, FIA granted Brazil the right to host the competition, which brought together 13 countries from Europe and the Americas.

One of the main supporters of the World Cup, who worked hard to promote the construction of the host stadium – what would eventually become Maracanã Stadium – was Mário Filho. Moura (1998) discusses his role in the birth of the largest stadium in the world. Initially, Pacaembu stadium in São Paulo was considered as the event's venue. This was rejected by Mário Filho, who campaigned for the construction of a new stadium in Rio. At that time, there was already a rivalry between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and this rivalry naturally transferred to football.

According to Mário Filho, the construction of Maracanã represented the affirmation of Brazilian entrepreneurial capacity. Additionally, it demonstrated the superiority of Rio de Janeiro over São Paulo. In his analysis of the chronicles written by Mário Filho in the *Jornal dos Sports*, Moura (1998) demonstrates the journalist's insistence on the importance of having a space in Rio dedicated to soccer. Here is an excerpt from a column written by Filho on the inauguration of the stadium:

*The beginning of a new era for Brazilian sport*

[...] The stadium is before everyone's eyes. It is a mass of iron and cement that defies time. Honoring the work of man. In this case, the Brazilian man. Every time I go to the stadium, I feel proud. Not only because I believed in the stadium, but because I fought for it. But I am also proud to be Brazilian. It was a Brazilian who built this work that, in the words of engineer Bonassi, honors humanity. [...] The suspended grandstand, projecting into space without a single visible column, supporting forty thousand people seated or sixty thousand standing, and the thirty-meter-wide by nine hundred and forty-meter-circumference marquee have never been attempted in any construction in the world. Brazilian architects made them possible, Brazilian engineers and workers built them (Filho, 16/06/1950 as cited by Moura, 1998).

In Filho's view, Maracanã was a demonstration of what Brazilians were capable of. The stadium's success was due to the "extraordinary" entrepreneurial power of the national man, whom Mário Filho extolled in his book as the mixed-race man who played soccer.

Nonetheless, Brazil did not win the World Cup, being beaten by Uruguay in the final game. Numerous analyses have been written about the game, probably the most significant in the history of Brazilian football.

According to Simoni Guedes (1977), Brazil's defeat in the final against Uruguay can only be understood contextually. The political and social events that occurred in the 1950s are part and parcel of the collective memory of the disastrous episode that unfolded in Maracanã. The "tragedy of 1950," as it became known, had several episodes that were described by sports writers. According to Fátima Antunes (2004), these writers constructed meanings about Brazil's defeat in the 1950 World Cup that are reproduced to this day, such as the notion that Brazil is an eternal loser country. The resurgence of racial

conflicts between whites and blacks after the game also appears in reports that point to darker-skinned people as being responsible for the defeat. There was yet another idea, widespread at the time, that Brazilians were emotionally unstable when faced with decisive situations.

Mário Filho wrote about 1950 fourteen years after the event. The journalist added two chapters to a new edition of *O negro no futebol brasileiro*, analyzing the consequences of the defeat. Between 1950 and 1964, Brazil was twice crowned world champion (1958/1962) and the stars of these victories were Pelé and Garrincha. The discourse constructed by the Filho about the 1950 defeat in the second edition of his book was permeated by these two more recent episodes, as analyzed by Moura (1998).

In 1963, Mário Filho released his biography of Edson Arantes do Nascimento – *Viagem em torno de Pelé* – which tells the story of the Santos Futebol Clube star from his childhood until his ascension to the Brazilian national team. Filho highlights the role this athlete played in Brazil's 1958 World Cup victory, praising his qualities in being "black". Supposedly, Pelé's greatest virtue lay in the fact that the athlete did not deny his color when he became famous at the age of 17 with his first World Cup victory. All "blacks" were to be proud of Pelé, according to Filho, because he represented the race with dignity, professionalism, and talent in the most important moments of Brazilian football.

Mário Filho thus posed the 1950 loss in opposition to the positive values arising from the 1958 and 1962 wins. For Filho, the "tragedy of 1950" was the resurgence of racism in soccer. According to the author, the Brazilian national team at the time was based on players from Vasco da Gama, who had performed spectacularly in previous years, winning three consecutive national championships. This group became known as the

“Victory Express”<sup>9</sup> and was mostly composed of blacks and mixed-race players. As Mário Filho pointed out, this team was “a Brazilian team”, but its black players were immediately blamed for its 1950 defeat.

There were few who did not cry, sitting in a numbered chair, on a step in the stands, in a corner of the general area, their heads on their chests, desolate. Or they would shout, beating their chests, pointing at the field. Some accused Flavio Costa. But almost everyone turned against the blacks on the team: – Bigode was to blame! Barbosa was to blame! (Filho, 2003, pp. 287-289).

According to Filho, most of the Brazilian fans accused the black players for the defeat. This view was widespread at the time. For example, Simoni Guedes (1999) researched João Lyra Filho’s book about the 1954 World Cup (of which Lyra was the president of Brazil’s delegation). Lyra wrote his impressions regarding the psychological reactions of black and mixed-race athletes. One of his conclusions was that Brazilians, as a mixed race, did not have the emotional balance as the European players and were thus unable to withstand pressure.

One finds similar arguments in the reissue of Mário Filho’s book. However, Filho suggests that this was only one of the accusations that people made against the black athletes of the 1950 team:

[...] And then came the Brazilian accusations against the Brazilians [...]: “The truth is that we are a sub-race, a race of mixed-race people. An inferior race”. “When it came time to endure the worst, we would shit ourselves. Like Barbosa when he

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<sup>9</sup> Data taken from the website of Clube de Regatas Vascoda Gama. Available at: <http://www.crvascodagama.com/?display=HISTORIA-4> (Accessed: 1 June 2025).



debuted on the Brazilian team”. “As long as we depend on the black man, it will be like this.” (Filho, 2003, p.290).

As Filho points out, this reaction began in the popular revolt in the stands of Maracanã. It revived 19th-century racial theories regarding Brazil’s mixed racial composition.

These accusations persisted until the 1958 World Cup, according to Filho. That victory became the redemption of the Brazilian man in the face of supposed European superiority. Finally, the black and mixed-race Brazilian had shown his true worth! From the first World Cup victory onwards, what had been negative characteristics began to be revalued as “emotion, art, body movement, and creative irrationality”, in the words of Gilberto Freyre (Filho, 2003, p. 25), transforming these attributes into the defining Brazilian characteristics that won the World Cup. As Mário Filho put it:

[...] Until then, no one believed in Brazil’s final victory. Russia was the big favorite. It had just launched Sputnik. How far would Russian science go? In Russia, football had become a laboratory subject. Those who loved the most popular sport in the world hailed Brazil’s victory over Russia as the salvation of football as art. What laboratory could produce a Didi, a Garrincha, a Pelé? Those artists were born in the open fields, in the street games, out of love for the ball, for football. I[...] Then, in splendor, the most beautiful football in the world was seen. The Brazilian team with its definitive physiognomy, all or almost all (since Djalma Santos, known as Nariz, was missing) dark-skinned, neither black nor white, coffee-with-milk, had become irresistible (Filho, 2003, p.326).

Mário Filho thus constructed a model that contrasted the 1950 World Cup with the 1958 World Cup. This discourse is still hegemonic today. National characteristics became a pendulum oscillating from negative to positive, which moved according to

the victories and defeats of the Brazilian national team. Filho's brother, Nelson Rodrigues, coined the term "complexo de viralata" ("mongrel complex") to describe these emotional shifts. When Brazil won, the complex had been overcome. In defeat, feelings of inferiority internalized in Brazilians due to their mixed-race origins came to the surface.

## *7. Conclusion*

The cultural meanings associated with football in Brazil can be understood as part of the discourses and policies of modernization. The "sportification" of Brazilian society was related to the growth of urban spaces, which produced new meanings regarding the relationship between the body and modernity.

Sports were quickly incorporated into the hygienic discourses that dominated Brazil. The search for an acceptable "national type" could only be achieved by eradicating the biggest problem facing Brazilians: disease. Physical exercise was seen as a cure for the ills of a black and mixed-race population. According to the scientists of the time, Brazilians would gradually become "civilized" as they became whiter because of immigration policies. Sports would be part of the daily lives of Brazilians so that they would not contaminate the newcomers who would save them from barbarism.

One of the consequences of these policies was the development of "sports fever" in Rio de Janeiro. Clubs and associations spread throughout the city, from the richest to the poorest areas. Hygiene discourses produced a "cleansing" of the population's old habits and customs and created new ones. Against this backdrop, several factors contributed to the popularization of football. As early as 1908, it was already attracting a diverse audience to the stadiums. Nor was its practice restricted to

whites and the rich. National sentiment in favor of football, as noted by chroniclers of the time, was impressive.

However, despite the commotion caused by the Brazilian team, the players who wore the national jersey were white and came from the wealthiest classes. The racism of the time prevented poor, mixed-race and black people from representing the country. Black and mixed-race Brazilians might indeed be playing soccer, but they weren't doing it at the highest levels of the game.

The entry of blacks and mixed-race people into football needs to be analyzed carefully and cannot be precisely defined. Black and brown Brazilians had been present in soccer for some time. Mário Filho's interpretation of this process can only be understood in the context in which it was put forward, as influenced by Gilberto Freyre and the intellectuals who created explanations that valued supposedly Brazilian national characteristics.

The Estado Novo expanded, institutionalized and homogenized Brazilian nationalism. It is no coincidence that Gilberto Freyre's sociological explanations about Brazil were so successful during this period. Indeed, *O negro no futebol brasileiro* tells the story of football in Brazil drawing on these discourses. Mário Filho applied Freyre's assumptions to explain the development of the sport in Brazil and its consequent Brazilianization with the progressive entry of blacks and mixed-race people into the sport. The *ginga* of Brazilian players supposedly originated in the innate characteristics black players brought to the game, incorporating these into the "Brazilian" way of playing football and leading to the success of the game as our national sport.

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# Contesting global hierarchies through football. Diego Armando Maradona and the Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels

EDOARDO MOLINELLI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** Diego Armando Maradona is unanimously considered the best player of all time, alongside Pelé. However, while the Brazilian has always represented the establishment, Maradona positioned himself as the critical consciousness of world football, fiercely criticising the most important football institutions. Many aspects of Maradona's life have been extensively explored, both journalistically and academically. There is, however, a lesser-known event that serves as a perfect metaphor for his relationship with power: the establishment of the Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels (AIFP), which he founded in 1995. Despite having generated significant media attention, AIFP ultimately failed to challenge the role of players within the global football system. This chapter aims to investigate the development of AIFP, as well as the factors that contributed to its dissolution. Moreover, it attempts to show how the agency of top-level athletes can expose structural injustices within sports organisations and contribute to institutional change.

**Keywords:** Diego Armando Maradona, Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels, footballers' union, FIFA, contestation.

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<sup>1</sup> Edoardo Molinelli, University for Foreigners of Perugia (Italy). E-mail address: edoardo.molinelli@studenti.unistrapg.it



## *Introduction*

In early September 2024, several Italian newspapers reported that the mural dedicated to Diego Armando Maradona in the Quartieri Spagnoli of Naples was the second most visited site of interest in Italy, following the Colosseum in Rome (Corriere del Mezzogiorno, 2024). Despite the lack of official sources and accurate data on attendance, being the mural an open work of art, the news confirms the huge impact that Maradona continues to have, 27 years after his retirement from football and four years after his death.

This is primarily due to the exceptional sporting status of the Argentinian, who is unanimously considered the best player of all time, alongside Pelé. However, there are also other elements that have made Maradona a key figure in contemporary pop culture. From his political ideas to his off-field controversies, from his complex relationship with the media to his role as “voice of the voiceless”, the *Pibe de Oro*’s impact on global culture and society is undeniable. While Pelé has always represented the establishment, both in his country and internationally, Maradona positioned himself as the critical consciousness of world football. On many occasions, in fact, he fiercely criticised the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), the Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol (CONMEBOL), the Asociación del Fútbol Argentino (AFA) and their top executives.

Many aspects of Maradona’s life and career have been extensively explored, both journalistically and academically. His political beliefs, his relationship with the media system, his role as redeemer of Argentina, Naples and the many “Souths” of the world, his closeness to Central and South American socialist leaders (Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales), and his 40-

years battle against FIFA and other football governing bodies have been subjects of books, newspapers articles and academic essays<sup>2</sup>.

There is, however, a lesser-known event that serves as a perfect metaphor for Maradona's relationship with power, made up of fierce criticism, controversy, great advances and sudden retreats: the establishment of the Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels (AIFP), a footballers' union which he founded in 1995 and chaired until 1998. The Argentinian always advocated for greater player involvement in decision-making within football organizations, which he believed were too distant from the needs of football's true protagonists. However, his attempt to establish a strong international footballers' union capable of negotiating with the top executives of FIFA, UEFA, and other major federations quickly faded from memory, despite having generated significant media attention and involving many top players at the time.

This chapter aims to investigate the genesis, formation, and development of AIFP, as well as the factors that contributed to its eventual dissolution. Moreover, it attempts to show how the agency of top-level athletes, such as Maradona, can expose structural injustices within sports organizations, thereby contributing to institutional change, albeit to a limited extent.

### *1. The establishment of AIFP*

The inspiration to create a footballers' union probably came to Maradona during the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, which made him a true sports legend. During the tournament, Maradona and teammate Jorge Valdano repeatedly protested FIFA's

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<sup>2</sup> A complete bibliography on Maradona can be found in Brescia and Paz (2023, pp. 254-261).

decision to have some matches played at unsuitable times (for example, noon) to satisfy the requests of European television stations. The day before the beginning of the World Cup, Maradona stated that “it is a mistake to play at midday and Havelange [FIFA’s president at the time, ed.] should know it [author’s translation]” (El Mundo Deportivo, 1986). Scott (in Brescia and Paz, 2023, p. 238) reports another controversial declaration of the *Pibe de Oro* during the tournament: “If they make me play at noon in a searing heat that gives me a splitting headache, then I have the right to say it. I’m the one who puts himself on the line in the field. No one pays to see Havelange”.

In his autobiography, Maradona (2005, p. 122) recalled the beginning of his clashes against FIFA: “To make matters worse matches were being played in the morning, at noon, at any old time just to please European TV schedulers. [...] I always went to bed late before a match, and woke up at eleven, but when we played at midday I had to get up at eight in the morning. [...] But it was a more serious matter than just a personal habit. That’s why we kicked up such a fuss, Valdano and me”.

Although Alabarces (2021, p. 176) refers to these minor protests as a form of proto-politicization, it is evident that Maradona was beginning to structure his thinking on the power of FIFA and the marginal role assigned to players in the decision-making process. However, nearly a decade passed before his vague intentions expressed in Mexico materialised into a concrete proposal. The first time he publicly discussed the idea of a footballers’ union was during his acceptance of the Ballon d’Or for Services to Football, at a ceremony held in Paris on 3 January 1995. At that time, he was serving his second ban for doping, having tested positive for ephedrine at the 1994 World Cup in the US. During the ceremony, he said to the press: “I have the word of Bebeto, Romario, Stoichkov, Francescoli, Negrete, who is the president of the Mexican players. I will speak

with Gullit and with the Italian players who I am good friends with. From there, we will begin to organise what will be known as the Football Players' Defense Union [author's translation]"<sup>3</sup>.

A couple of months later, on 18 September 1995, Maradona announced a press conference at the Hotel Le Meridién Etoile in Paris to present the international players' union, officially named Association Internationale des Footballeurs Professionnels. This is how he recalled the event in his autobiography (Maradona, 2005, p. 232):

In Paris, on Monday 18 September, an old dream became reality: I founded the World Union of Footballers. I was supported by a gang, a serious gang, with Eric Cantona at the head of it. He was suspended at the time, like me, and was the first to add his voice to mine. Also there were George Weah, Abedi Pelé, Gianluca Vialli, Gianfranco Zola, Laurent Blanc, Rai, Thomas Brodin, Ciro Ferrara, and Michel Preud'homme... a first-class team. Our aim was simple but impossible because of the attitude of the directors: we wanted to be heard. Footballers have a voice and a vote and we wanted them to listen once and for all.

Burns (2010, pp. 235-238), who wrote one of the most complex and thorough biography of Maradona, gave an accurate description of the event:

Maradona arrives at Paris's five-star Hotel Le Méridien [...]. While Maradona receives a massage in his room, Didier Roustan, a journalist with the French TV Station 2, a friend of Eric Cantona, huddles in a corner with two of Maradona's lawyers, Bolotnicof from Buenos Aires and Sinischalsci (sic) from

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<sup>3</sup> The declaration is in the video "Un día 3 de enero pero de 1995 Diego Maradona era premiado con el balón de oro en Francia". Available at: [https://youtu.be/i9\\_D5jga1mU?si=p3P8rZ5JvoKPsTv](https://youtu.be/i9_D5jga1mU?si=p3P8rZ5JvoKPsTv) (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

Naples. [...] The debate, never fully resolved, is whether the founding stars, some of them millionaires, should each put up \$7,000 as a sign of good faith in the brotherhood of soccer. While Roustan seems to take the idea of the union seriously<sup>4</sup>, Bolotnicof and Sinischalsci see it as a simple marketing exercise for their client. [...] Later, in a crowded press conference, Maradona and Cantona [...] claim to want to set the seal on a new charter for footballers' rights. Cantona explains that football is a sport that brings joy to millions and that therefore footballers deserve to be treated with respect. Maradona extends the meaning of respect to cover sympathy for those players 'unfairly' subjected to drug tests whose consequences are out of all proportion to the act itself. [...] Maradona conveys a sense of being genuinely enthused with his project. He declares his hope that his 'union' will act as the channel for the frustrations and grievances of rich and not-so-rich footballers worldwide who feel that club owners and FIFA officials need to have their power checked.

Vincenzo Siniscalchi, Maradona's Italian lawyer cited by Burns, gave his version to an Italian radio on 29 May 2015. In the interview, Siniscalchi referred to the union's statute, which he claimed to have created together with a French colleague, and listed some of its points:

In the statute [...] there were evaluations of the protection of the footballer, not of corporate protection, in fact there was a reference to the existence of local unions which was in no way intended to be overridden by this world union of footballers. [...] Point 3: safeguarding the rights of the players' personalities, supporting the values of football in the complete development, and therefore not only sporting, of the player's personality. Point 5: aid to players from developing countries, [...] development of the ethical and social principles of football, with

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<sup>4</sup> Roustan was appointed general secretary of the union.

reference to the principle of solidarity between players throughout the world. [...] Point 7: the player is central to the world of football, and this centrality must be matched by rights and duties that must always be upheld. This was a politely but firmly polemical proposition towards Blatter's absolute patronage [author's translation]<sup>5</sup>.

Somewhat surprisingly, neither Maradona nor Burns referred again to AIFP in their books. Burns (2010, p. 238) merely noted that "the announcement of the union has in fact thrown the world of football's governing body into a slight panic. The men of Zurich do not like revolutions. Only when word comes back to them from Paris do they relax, satisfied that there is more mouth than muscle in Maradona's revolutionary army". Also, Siniscalchi in his interview did not add any details about the fate of the union.

## *2. The rise and fall of AIFP*

It seems that, at least in the memories of its founder and the people around him, AIFP came to an immediate end after the press conference in Paris. It is true that there were many doubts about its real effectiveness. Valente (1995) underlined the lack of clarity regarding the financing of the association, while Ceaux (1995) criticised the difficulty to know more about the union's aims.

The history of AIFP, however, continued for at least three years. This is stated by the Union of International Associations

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<sup>5</sup> Transcript of the interview given by Siniscalchi to Radio Radicale. Available at: <https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/443650> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

(UIA), which affirms not only that the last news about AIFP dates to 1998, but also that it ceased to exist in 2004<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, the association gained a certain importance following the Bosman ruling, which had a shocking effect on football. Jean-Marc Bosman was a Belgian footballer whose contract with RFC Liege expired in 1990; he then moved to French club USL Dunkerque, which refused to pay the transfer fee requested by Liege. Claiming that this system prevented him to exercise his right to freedom of movement guaranteed by article 48 of the Treaty of Rome, Bosman took his case to the European Court of Justice. On 15 December 1995, the Court ruled in favour of Bosman, giving to all EU footballers the right to a free transfer at the end of their contracts (Antonioni and Cubbin, 2000, pp. 158-159). The Belgian player paid dearly for his victory. When his transfer to Dunkerque was off, he was suspended by Liege. From 1990 to 1995, when he officially retired, he only played a couple of games for the French club St. Quentin, the Réunion Island club Saint-Denis FC, and the Belgian team Olympic Charleroi. He then faced financial, personal and mental issues, which led him to depression and alcoholism, and left him bankrupt.

AIFP, however, tried to help him and was at his side since the approbation of the Bosman ruling. Moreover, the footballer's union chaired by Maradona saw the opportunity to gain more prominence in a context revolutionised by the Bosman ruling: "The association argues that the current structure of the European unions is not adapted to the new reality of football. [...] Its idea is that world football figures represent the group in negotiations with FIFA and UEFA [author's translation]" (Valente, 1996a).

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<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://uia.org/s/or/en/1100021930> (Accessed: 10 May 2025).

On 7 October 1996, the first general assembly of AIFP was held in Paris. Maradona did not attend for personal reasons, even if he sent a letter which was read by one of his lawyers, Daniel Bolotnicoff. The assembly decided to organise a friendly match for Bosman on 1 April 1997<sup>7</sup>. Italian player Gianluca Vialli was the spokesperson at the press conference: “We have learned from the mistakes we made this year, and we will be more active from now on [author’s translation]”, he said (Valente, 1996b).

Maradona was still the president of AIFP and was deeply involved in its activities, as showed by the press conference given after the union’s meeting in Barcelona on 24 February 1997. Facing the Real Federación Española de Fútbol (RFEF) refusal to authorise the match and provide a referee, Maradona officially confirmed his participation in the match on 27 April at the Estadi Olímpic in Montjuïc, Barcelona, and harshly criticised Blatter and Havelange for their handling of the Bosman ruling (Román and Segura, 1997). However, due to the protests of the Spanish players, who were convinced that the Bosman ruling would prejudice them by opening their local ‘football market’ to all EU players, AIFP decided to withdraw support for Bosman and turned the friendly game into a match in support of the union itself (Aguilar, 1997).

Despite being a nearly retired footballer (he had only 7 official matches in his last 2 seasons at Boca Juniors, 1996-97 and 1997-98), Maradona played in the game, being substituted in the second half. The Rest of the World won 4-3 against Europe, but the match was a clear failure: as underlined by Cordovilla (1997a), “Maradona, Cantona, Stoichkov, Vialli, Karembeu and a long list of world-class players were not enough to attract

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<sup>7</sup> The match was postponed various times, until it was definitively scheduled on 27 April 1997.



the Barcelonans to the Olympic mountain. The organisation generously spoke of 5,200 spectators [author's translation]". Just over 5,000 spectators in a stadium capable of holding more than 50,000 people was certainly not a good result. Organisational problems, opposition from FIFA, UEFA and RFEF, and the lack of adequate promotion were certainly the main reasons for the failure of the initiative, although Maradona was still able to draw media attention to himself and the match. The president of AIFP spoke the day after the game, stating that "the media have echoed this event because I did not attend the press conference to present the match, and they did not want to understand that I was very tired after fourteen hours of flight. [...] There is a certain journalistic sector that prefers to be on the side of the executives [author's translation]" (Artús and Roca, 1997).

Some months after the match at the Montjuïc, AIFP took part in an event of the European Year Against Racism. As stated in an official European Commission press release (1997), "on Sunday evening next October 12, three of history's greatest footballers, Diego Maradona, Georges Weah and Eric Cantona will lead three teams of top international football players onto the pitch for a game with a difference. The all star 'Football Against Racism' kicks off in the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid as one of the biggest events of the European Year Against Racism. [...] Three games of forty minutes will be played in front of a crowd of over 100,000 and a televised audience of millions worldwide".

Despite being listed as one of the captains of the three teams, Maradona did not attend the game. The media had anticipated that the Argentinian did not agree with the organizers (that is, the same union of which he was the president) about some undefined aspects (Cordovilla, 1997b), but the day after the matches he said that he was not in Madrid "because we have

a problem with a Frenchman who we put in charge of the union to manage the income and he is making a very big mistake: he charges each player 6,000 dollars as a contribution and that is outrageous [author's translation]" (Durrels, 1997). The Frenchman was Didier Roustan, the general secretary of AIFP, who answered that "Maradona is unpredictable; talking about him in terms of logic is impossible [author's translation]" (Durrels, 1997).

Although 'Football Against Racism' was a big success, with more than 90,000 people attending the game (Cordovilla, 1997c), it was the last significant event promoted by AIFP. On 12 May 1998, the match held in honor of Jean-Marc Bosman was finally played at the Villeneuve-d'Ascq stadium near Lille, but it went almost unnoticed. Maradona and Cantona did not attend. While there were some famous players, such as Michel Preud'homme, Vincenzo Scifo and Gheorghe Hagi, only around 5,000 people watched as a selection of veterans won 3-1 against a younger team (Cherruau, 1998).

From this moment on, AIFP's activities ceased permanently. Maradona had already shown that he no longer agreed with the union's board; apart from his testimonial role as president and his show press conferences, in fact, the real leader had always been Roustan. As Essindi (2003) claims, "Didier toured European clubs at his own expense, shook the hands of Vialli, Weah, Pelé, Waddle, Maldini and rallied them to his brown panache. Quickly, this king of the opposite left his position on France 2 to take care of the union full time. Due to lack of resources, the experiment ended in 1998". Villepreux (2006) adds: "The union leader leads a double life. At France 2 during the day, resistant at night. He exhausts himself defending the rights of billionaires who disappear as soon as his back is turned. 'Three years of suffering.' But the artificial existence of this union that he will have embodied alone will have an

indirect effect, the reactivation of FIFPro, a place where player representatives will be consulted”.

Several causes contributed to the disappearance of AIFP. First, the footballers gradually began to disengage and move away from the project. The lack of concrete results certainly had an influence, as did the strong opposition of FIFA, which became even more threatening the closer the 1998 World Cup in France got. There were also huge economic problems. Right from the presentation press conference, the promoters failed to clarify the union's financing system; Maradona himself protested against the self-financing required of members, which he claimed would prevent footballers from South America, Asia and Africa from joining AIFP. Moreover, the footballers' union did not have a well-defined structure. This led to a series of organisational problems that were evident in the match on 27 April 1997, when a lack of promotion and clarity about the objectives of the association resulted in a very low attendance.

Finally, it was probably the rebirth of FIFPro that put an end to the AIFP. FIFPro was founded on 15 December 1965 in Paris by representatives of the French, Scottish, English, Italian and Dutch footballers' associations. Its first congress was held in London in June 1966, leading to the approval of the statutes. After some decades of decline, FIFPro gained again its role as main representative of the footballers thanks to the Bosman ruling: in fact, it was accepted by UEFA and FIFA as the official players' union and grew from a European organization into a global network (Dabscheck, 2003, pp. 97-98). This recognition reduced AIFP's claims to be the main international players' union and undoubtedly quickened its disappearance from the global football scene.

### *3. Conclusions*

Although born with the best of intentions, the union envisioned and promoted by Maradona ultimately failed to significantly challenge the role of players within the global football system. However, it played a crucial role in drawing attention to several critical issues, particularly the lack of democracy and the complete exclusion of the players not only from the decision-making process but from any form of negotiation or dialogue. While it may be an overstatement to claim that the battles fought over three years by the AIFP, especially in relation to the effects of the Bosman ruling, brought about a radical shift in the relationship between governing bodies and athletes, it is not coincidental that FIFPro was officially recognised shortly after the creation of this alternative union. It is likely that FIFA and other federations preferred to negotiate with FIFPro rather than with a group of 'rebel' footballers.

As regards Maradona, the fact that he only briefly mentioned the union in his autobiography probably reflects the disappointment resulting from the unsatisfactory outcome of this initiative, which left minimal impact on both the Argentinian's biography and the broader history of football.

There is no doubt that AIFP's limited success was partly due to Maradona's own limitations. As president, he could certainly have done more for the union, at least in terms of promotion. However, it is also true that at the time of the union's founding, the *Pibe de Oro* was facing an exceptionally challenging period in his life: banned from football and labeled a doper by public opinion, he was uncertain about the future of his career and was physically and mentally weakened. Moreover, Maradona was never known for the consistency of his behavior. Nevertheless, he remained a figure far removed from the image of the neutral sportsman, one who was unafraid to take a stand on

contentious issues. As noticed by Agafonova (2021, p. 81), “amidst all the eccentricities and controversies in his biography there is a firm position aimed at altering the governing landscape of sport towards a more democratic model and at providing a level playing field for all the parties”.

The same concept was expressed in a more literary manner by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano (1998, pp. 198-199), which gave probably the most incisive portrait of Maradona as a non-aligned sportsman:

Maradona said things that stirred up the hornets’ nest. He wasn’t the only disobedient player, but his was the voice that made the most offensive questions ring out loud and clear. Why aren’t the international standards for labour rights applied to football? If it’s usual for performers to know how much money their shows bring in, why can’t the players have access to the books of the opulent multinational of football? Have-lange, busy with other duties, kept his mouth shut, while Joseph Blatter, a FIFA bureaucrat who never once kicked a ball but goes about in a twenty-five-foot limousine driven by a black chauffeur, had but one comment: “The last star from Argentina was Di Stéfano”.

Maradona, however, was not just a generic challenger to the hierarchies of world football and politics. He was also a visionary and a forerunner, as shown by the recent controversy over the indiscriminate increase of matches and the near-exploitation of players. In mid-September 2024, Manchester City midfielder Rodri openly discussed the possibility of going on strike in protest against the unsustainable number of matches, after two of his colleagues (Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker and teammate Manuel Akanji), as well as Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti, complained about the problem. In July, FIFPro (2024a) announced that European Leagues and FIFPro Europe will file a formal complaint to the European Commission

against FIFA: “The international match calendar is now beyond saturation and has become unsustainable for national leagues and a risk for the health of players. FIFA’s decisions over the last years have repeatedly favoured its own competitions and commercial interests, neglected its responsibilities as a governing body, and harmed the economic interests of national leagues and the welfare of players”.

Furthermore, the recent European ruling regarding the Diarra case has the potential to disrupt the football world as the Bosman did in 1995 (MacInnes, 2024). In 2014, French player Lassana Diarra unilaterally terminated his contract with Lokomotiv Moscow after being excluded from the team and placed on a reduced salary following an argument with the coach. The Russian club accused him of terminating the contract without ‘just cause’ and filed a complaint with FIFA’s Dispute Resolution Chamber, which ruled in favor of Lokomotiv and ordered the player to pay €10.5 million in compensation. Diarra subsequently appealed to the European Court of Justice, which, on 4 October 2024, overturned FIFA’s decision and ruled in his favor (James, 2024). The decision of the European Court of Justice, according to FIFPro (2024b), “states central parts of FIFA’s player transfer rules are incompatible with European Union law”. It could deeply transform the system of player transfers and the validity of contracts, at least within Europe. At present, the consequences and implications of this ruling remain uncertain, and no comments have been made by players regarding the Diarra case.

The potential players’ strike and the Diarra case show how Maradona’s legacy is still very strong today, even indirectly as in these cases. Sports history is full of examples of athletes who advocated for social progress or contested the status quo – sometimes directly opposing sports governance bodies – because of their individual influence. As Kaufmann and Wolff

(2010, p. 158) note, there is “a long, albeit small, tradition of individuals who have used the playing field to advocate for political and social justice”. Maradona’s legacy fits into this tradition, although his role as the main contestant of major international football institutions has not always been consistent. As Agafonova (2021, p. 89) underlines: “On different occasions, the Argentinian acted as SGBs’ ambassador, counterweight to their powers and the loudest critic of their decisions and policies”. However, he was able to revolutionise relations between players and football institutions, forcing FIFA and other international bodies to stop viewing players as mere accessories and to treat them as stakeholders: “Maradona set the trend to deal with big organisations standing on equal footing with them, as partners. Maradona’s style can serve as an inspiration for many athletes in order to build truly ‘horizontal relations’ with SGBs” (Agafonova, 2021, p. 91).

It is undeniable that Maradona was one of the first global sports icons to take inconvenient stances against the establishment, anticipating a trend which, according to O’Neill et al (2023, p. 1), has been steadily growing: “Athlete activism, advocacy, and protests are an increasingly visible and influential feature of contemporary sport, as more elite athletes use their platform to speak out on social and political issues”. During his career, the Argentinian criticised the excessive commercialization of contemporary football, the subservience of international federations to television networks, and the limited influence of players in decision-making process. Thanks to his status as the best footballer of the world, he did not experience significant repercussions for these outspoken stances. However, many still believe that he was punished by FIFA with his ban for doping during World Cup 1994, a claim he denied in his autobiography: “The truth, the only truth about the World Cup ’94 is that my personal trainer, Daniel Cerrini, made a mistake and

I took the brunt of the fallout. [...]. Some people went around saying that FIFA had left the road clear for me to do whatever I wanted and then they betrayed me with the drug test. That's a lie" (Maradona, 2005, p. 201).

While it is true that he was regarded as a global football icon and a valuable 'asset' for FIFA, he had anyway the courage to speak out loud and clear and to put his career at risk. Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, despite being exceptional talents and far more successful than the *Pibe de Oro*, have sometimes been criticised for their passivity in matters unrelated to football. Maradona, on the contrary, has always been considered as a popular hero who fought against the powerful to right the wrongs of past injustices. Most notably, it was his famous brace against England during World Cup 1986 that turned him into a living legend. In that match, which Argentina won 2-1, he first used his hand to pass Shilton – a goal famously remembered as *la Mano de Dios*, the Hand of God – and then scored what is widely regarded as the greatest goal in World Cup history, dribbling past five English players, including the goalkeeper, before placing the ball into the net. This performance occurred exactly four years after the Falkland/Malvinas war and was seen by many as a symbolic act of vengeance by the Argentine people against the English. More broadly, it has been interpreted as a triumph of the colonized over the imperialist colonizers (Ferrari, Vandenberg and Diana, 2021, pp. 62-63).

In conclusion, the history of AIFP shows the importance of individual agency in contesting sports governing bodies, especially when it comes to top-level athletes. Although acting instinctively and with limited organizational capacity, Maradona deeply felt the need to oppose the structural injustices perpetuated by major football institutions. He knew that his status could enable him to take a stand, and he acted accordingly. For this reason, there is a clear distinction between the pre- and



post-Maradona era, both on and off the pitch. His ability to take uncomfortable stances and to consistently assert his freedom of thought set a standard that no footballer after him can escape. Whether or not to take a stand is a choice, and Maradona showed that even the most famous player in the world can do so.

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# POLIDEMOS

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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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Emidio Diodato is Professor of Political Science at the University for Foreigners of Perugia. He has held teaching and research positions at several international institutions, including the University of Damascus, Boğaziçi University (Istanbul), Universidad Nacional de Cuyo (Mendoza), Odessa Law Academy, BTU Cottbus, Yaşar University (Izmir), and the University of Rhode Island. His research, which examines foreign policy and geopolitics from both theoretical and comparative perspectives, has been published in leading international journals such as *Italian Political Science Review*, *Contemporary Politics*, *The International Spectator*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, and *Contemporary Italian Politics*. He is the author or co-author of more than seventy scholarly publications, including numerous essays and books. He has also served as the scientific coordinator of three research projects funded by the European Union.

Leo Goretta is Head of the “Italian foreign policy” programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), and editor of *The International Spectator* as well as of IAI's series *IAI Commentaries*, *Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*. Leo holds a PhD in History from the University of Reading (UK). He has published extensively on Italian history and politics, in peer-reviewed journals (*Modern Italy*, *Passato e presente*, *The International Journal of Sport and Society*), for international think tanks (*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, *DGAP*) and in IAI's own editorial series. He regularly provides expert insights to international and Italian news outlets such as the *BBC*, *Foreign Policy*, *Politico Europe*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *la Repubblica*.

Veronica Strina is a lecturer of Chinese language, culture and institutions at the University of Salerno. Her research interests focus on China's public and cultural diplomacy, with particular attention to the influence of Confucian thought on the PRC's foreign policy behavior and its implications on the international order. She holds a PhD in Diplomacy and International Cooperation from the University for Foreigners of Perugia. During her doctoral studies, she has been a visiting PhD fellow at NATO Defense College, the Defence Studies Department of King's College London, and the School of Education at Shanghai International Studies University. She has a background in international relations and sinology, with study experiences in China, particularly at Peking University and Fudan University.

## SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IN THE CHANGING WORLD ORDER

EMIDIO DIODATO, LEO GORETTI,  
VERONICA STRINA (EDITED BY)

EDUCatt - Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario  
dell'Università Cattolica  
Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215  
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