

SPECIAL ISSUE: LEISURE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19. A RAPID RESPONSE
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CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

Hosting the Olympics in Times of a Pandemic: Historical Insights from Antwerp 1920

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ABSTRACT

Postponing the Tokyo 2020 Olympics due to the global outbreak of COVID-19 marks a unique moment in the history of the Olympic Movement. For the first time since the cancellation of the Olympic Games during both World Wars, the Olympics will not take place as scheduled. This unprecedented postponement strongly impacts the Olympic Movement. Although only the future can tell exactly, the Antwerp 1920 Olympics can offer certain historical insights. Exactly 100 years ago, the Antwerp Olympic Games were the first Olympics organized after World War I and the Spanish flu pandemic. Their value in terms of rising the Olympic Movement from its ashes is vital. Profoundly promoting its identity, newly introduced Olympic symbols then helped avoiding the collapse of the Olympic Movement. Acknowledged as the “Games Reborn”, the Antwerp 1920 Olympics were strongly about recovery, helping to heal a wounded society. How could Tokyo 2020 fulfill the same role?

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Introduction

On the 24th of March 2020, the IOC and the local organizing committee released a joint statement regarding the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics because of the global outbreak of COVID-19 (Rich, Futterman, & Panja, 2020). Approximately one week later, the new timing of the Tokyo Olympics was communicated. Tokyo 2020 – which will not be rebranded into Tokyo 2021 to avoid additional costs – will now take place from the 23rd of July until the 8th of August 2021. Although critiques contend that this postponement should have been declared earlier, one can also argue that such unprecedented decision should not be taken lightly and unprepared (Rich et al., 2020). After all, even though the Olympic Movement has been confronted with both internal and external crises on a regular basis (e.g., the hostage taking during Munich 1972 and the Cold War boycotts during the 1980s), no rescheduling of such nature has ever occurred since the start of the modern Olympic Games in 1896.

COVID-19 is however not the first pandemic that impacts the modern Olympics. Hundred years ago, the 1920 Antwerp Olympics were organized shortly after an

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extremely deadly and interconnected duo of calamities. In parallel with the final stages and the aftermath of World War I, the Spanish flu terminated the lives of tens of million of people all over the world in 1918–19 (Mitschang, 2012). COVID-19, today's society, and the Olympic Movement are significantly distinct compared to the situation of a century ago. However, it can be of great contemporary interest to examine the symbolic role and legacy of the Antwerp Olympics in revitalizing the Olympic Movement as well as helping to heal a wounded global society. Three important Olympic symbols were introduced during the Antwerp Olympics (i.e., the Olympic oath, the Olympic flag, and releasing pigeons). These symbols highlighted the relevance of the Olympic Movement in stimulating international peace and uniting the world. The aim of this commentary is to look back to Antwerp 1920 to consider how Tokyo 2020 can be of similar relevance, as solidarity between nations in reviving the world will be of fundamental importance in the forthcoming years.

Looking backward: Antwerp 1920

The organization of the 1920 Olympic Games was granted to the Belgian city of Antwerp during an IOC session in April 1919. Both before and after this allocation, doubt was raised on behalf of different actors whether Antwerp would be capable of delivering such a complex financial and logistical organization at the start of an early peace (Renson, 1996). World War I had only come to an end with the armistice of the 11th of November 1918. A somehow similar kind of doubt is currently circulating in regards to Tokyo 2020. Today, there is great uncertainty about whether and how the Olympic competitions should and could take place when social (i.e., physical) distancing has become the new global norm. Rather than financial and logistical concerns (as in relation to Antwerp 1920), current critiques strongly relate to safety and public health issues. Yet, the Antwerp Olympics were also confronted with a public health crisis. The planning of the Antwerp Olympics started in a world that experienced the final outbreaks of the horrendous Spanish flu pandemic, which raged over the globe from 1918 until 1919 and resulted in an estimated death toll of 50 million people (Mitschang, 2012). Amplified by malnutrition and a weak health, countless soldiers and civilians died due to the Spanish flu rather than because of direct war violence (De Smet, 2005). Being partly “overshadowed” by the simultaneous First World War and wartime censorship, the Spanish flu can be considered a somehow “forgotten” pandemic (Honigsbaum, 2013). It is therefore no surprise that historical sources refer little to potential or direct consequences of the Spanish flu on the 1920 Olympics.

Nonetheless, the 1920 Olympic Games have clearly operated as a comforting factor for a world that was heavily hurt by the interconnected war and pandemic (Mallon & Bijkerk, 2003). The Antwerp Olympics are symbolized as the rebirth of the Olympic Movement from the ashes of the war (Renson, 1996). At the same time, their value in support of the recovery of the global society (including participating nations and athletes, representing all five continents) should be acknowledged. During the first centuries of the 20th century, the IOC was criticized for being insufficiently inclusive toward women, working class people, and certain ethnic groups (Chatziefstathiou, 2005). With the Antwerp Olympics, the IOC slowly yet meaningfully tried to be more inclusive,

while helping the world to find comfort with regards to a recent trauma (Mallon & Bijkerk, 2003; Truyens, 2020). In a similar vein, Tokyo 2020 could unite the world to some extent in dealing with the sorrow caused by COVID-19. As further discussed in this commentary's final section, the Tokyo Olympics can also be used by the IOC to counteract current critique on its operation.

As only a few months had passed since the end of World War I, its impact was seeping into the preparations for the 1920 Olympics (Kluge, 2014). National delegations organizing their departure for Antwerp were continuously confronted with the sore reality of early post war time. The case of the American delegation is telling in this regard. A large part of the American athletes had to travel to Antwerp in a vessel that had shortly before been used to return the bodies of fallen American soldiers back home. Athletes were complaining about the pungent smell of formalin that was still strongly observable (Renson, 1996). Although current obstacles to plan for the Olympics are of course not entirely similar, today's national Olympic Committees (NOC's) have to work in times of uncertainty and difficult preparations. For example, it is unclear whether there will be a vaccine and/or effective medication to fight COVID-19 by July 2021. As such, Tokyo 2020 might get canceled anyways. In addition, a heavy task awaits NOC's in keeping Olympic athletes motivated with their years-long goal being postponed, whilst reassuring them it will be safe to engage in physical contests during the Olympics (bearing the recent cases of COVID-19 infections during Olympic qualifiers in mind, see Panja, 2020).

Little certainties were also present when national delegations arrived in Antwerp in 1920. The impact of the war was still heavily observable when the Antwerp Olympic Games were taking place. Many competing athletes had served their country in the war trenches themselves (Renson, 1996). All official speeches emphasized the peace creating value of the Olympic Movement, in contrast to the horrors of recent war times (Mallon & Bijkerk, 2003; Renson, 1996). During the opening ceremony of Antwerp 1920, athletes carried their national flags "to victory over there on the battle fields of peace, just as they carried our flag to victory on the battlefields of war" (Lucas, 1983, p. 35). One can wonder whether those Olympic athletes wearing their national flag during Tokyo 2020s opening ceremony will be referred to in a similar way. Will these Olympians think about their country's fight against COVID-19 and the human losses caused by this disease? Although it would be naive to merely think of Tokyo 2020 as a celebration of international understanding after having (hopefully) beaten the new coronavirus together, the IOC could use Tokyo 2020 in a strategic manner to promote its underlying values of unity and solidarity.

In summary, the entire 1920 Olympics were symbolized by the societal need to deal with the war and find peace with the horrible things that happened over the past years. Beautifully phrased by Mallon and Bijkerk (2003, p. 12), the Antwerp Olympics "helped the world to recover from the war, and perhaps allowed them to enjoy a sporting spectacle again, instead of having to worry about the future of mankind (sic)". At the same time, the 1920 Olympics helped to restore the Olympic Movement. Eight years had passed since the last Olympic Games of Stockholm 1912, as those of Berlin 1916 had been canceled due to the war. In case the Olympics of 1920 would also not take place, the IOC feared losing the relevance of its movement (Renson, 1996). Nevertheless, the

IOC seized the opportunity and used the 1920 Olympics to strengthen its identity. The peaceful and uniting character of Olympism (i.e., the philosophy guiding the Olympic Movement) was highlighted, whereas new Olympic symbols were introduced. Such are the Olympic flag, the Olympic oath, and releasing pigeons (by soldiers). Although Olympic crises were prevalent during the 1920–30s, these symbols set the stage for a new era of an amplified Olympic Movement (Chatziefstathiou, 2005; Renson, 1996). In the remainder of this commentary, we will analyze more closely how Tokyo 2020 could as well aid to recover a wounded society and strengthen the Olympic Movement.

Looking forward: Tokyo 2020

Although innumerable things have changed when it comes to both the Olympics and society at large, certain aspects of the 1920 Olympics might be interesting to assist our thinking when considering the nature and role of Tokyo 2020. Amply illustrated by the communication of world leaders and by press metaphors, the world is currently “at war” with COVID-19. After considerable external pressures and internal discussions, the IOC and the local organizing committee took the joint decision to postpone the 2020 Olympics (Rich et al., 2020). The Tokyo Olympics will now take place in 2021, which accounts for a rescheduling of exactly one year. Even though its past is laced with crises, a postponement of such size is unseen in the history of the modern Olympic Games. “The Games must go on” as scheduled has long been functioning as one of IOC’s leading principles, both before and after its then president Avery Brundage formulated his now infamous words in regards to the Munich 1972 terrorist attack.

This unprecedented decision to postpone the Olympics has been taken in a time in which the Olympic Movement is under heavy fire. Over the past years, the IOC is criticized for its seemingly ever increasing focus on commercialism and gigantism. Canceling instead of postponing the Games appeared impossible because of the associated multibillion interests, while each edition of the Olympics appears to be more profitable for the IOC than its predecessors. Moreover, although more attention has lately been dedicated to sustainability and environmental aspects, and a total new procedure for allocating the Olympics (called “Continuous Dialogue”) has been developed, hosting cities and nations are still often facing post-Olympics cost overruns and abandoned infrastructures. Both practitioners and academics also argue in favor of more transparent and democratic decision making processes, illustrated by a plea for strengthening the voice of the athletes (Chappelet, 2020). Some critiques even go as far as claiming that the Olympic Games are “an idea whose time has gone” (Gammelsaeter, 2019). In addition, critiques now also contend that time, energy, and financial resources should be used for societally more important things, instead of planning the Olympics when the new coronavirus is still spreading around the globe. In 1919–20, similar voices were casted in times of worldwide recession and austerity. For example, the British public opinion showed negative feelings toward the allocation of public funds to pay for the participation of a national team in so-called aristocratic and inappropriate Olympic Games (Llewellyn, 2011).

Whilst the entire world is experiencing the harmful consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Olympic Movement is also facing an existential identity crisis. Yet, each crisis offers opportunities. Nonetheless, if the IOC fails to take the opportunity that lies

in an adapted, health focused, and downscaled business model, the Olympic Movement might lose its worldwide recognition. Whereas IOC's founding father Pierre de Coubertin insisted that the Antwerp 1920 Olympics would not go down in history as the games of war winners versus losers (although war "losers" such as Germany were not invited, see Kluge, 2014), the current Olympic Movement and society face one clear enemy: the new coronavirus. Today, there is no guarantee at all that the COVID-19 pandemic will be totally under control by the start of the Tokyo Olympics in July 2021. However, an additional year of planning, preparation, and consideration can safeguard the future of the Olympic Movement. Even when no effective COVID-19 vaccine or medication is available by the start of the Tokyo Olympics, the IOC and the local organizing committee can develop a downscaled version of the Olympic Games, yet with a magnified Olympic message to the world. Hence, rather than waiting (in vain?) for the return of old habits that allow a mega sport event, the Olympic Movement can inspire by its strength and resilience with adapted Games (e.g., partly virtual or with spectator limitations). Reinforced by the idea that the ideology of Olympism is in essence about celebrating international understanding, excellence, friendship, and respect, the Tokyo Olympics could play a vital role in uniting the (sporting) world in dealing with a (hopefully then) past trauma (Kidd, 2020). These values were already guiding the Olympic Movement before 1920 (Chatziefstathiou, 2005). However, despite the crisis caused by the First World War, the Antwerp Olympics made some of them more visible (Renson, 1996).

As demonstrated during Antwerp 1920, a revived Olympic Movement needs to be supported by strong symbols. Little brands in the world are as broadly known as IOC's logo with the five rings, which was first shown on the stage of the Olympics during Antwerp 1920 (Ferrand et al., 2012). Symbolizing the colors of all national flags and the five continents, this logo has a strong and global uniting potential that can again be implemented during the Tokyo Olympics. Besides the intrinsic symbolic value of the Olympic logo, developing new Olympic symbols and practices will be required in dealing with recent societal losses and accompanying sorrow. Antwerp 1920 was relatively small in number of spectators but great in symbolism (Renson, 1996). A downsized Tokyo 2020, in which the voice of the athletes and the health of everyone involved is put at the forefront of attention, could give the Olympic Movement a new élan of international meaning and relevance. Looking 100 years back and returning to the early roots of Olympism would certainly contribute to an enhanced understanding of the healing potential of (new) Olympic symbols. By showing massive resilience, the IOC and the local organizing committee of Tokyo 2020 might realize the same legacy as Antwerp 1920 in killing two birds with one stone: offering societal comfort while revitalizing the Olympic Movement.

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