

SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES



Bearing Light: Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement

Edited by John J. MacAloon



Bearing Light: Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement

In recent decades, five to ten times as many persons have turned out for the Olympic flame relay as have watched Olympic sports contests live. *Bearing Light: Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement*, the first anthropological analysis of the contemporary torch relay, exposes and interprets the transformation of the ritual across a 25-year period, from Los Angeles 1984 through the IOC's 2009 announcement that, in the aftermath of the politically contentious Beijing performance, there will be no more global relays. This volume offers a rare case study of continuity and change in a leading transnational and trans-cultural ritual form.

Through data publicly revealed for the first time, the reader is carried fully backstage and into the conflicts and negotiations among Olympic organizing committees, the Greek Olympic movement, national governments, and transnational actors like the IOC, commercial sponsors, and operations management firms. Readers will come to know the leading flame relay authorities and practitioners, gaining a deeper understanding of the Olympic managerial revolution with its characteristic 'world's best practice' language. Analysis of the transnational flow of Olympic operations management offers important corrections to much existing globalization theory by demonstrating both how powerful and how culturally and politically parochial world's best practices can turn out to be. The dialectic between the cultural performance genres of ritual and spectacle provides a further intellectual architecture for these studies posing the question of whether the Olympic Movement will be able to survive the successes of the Olympic Sports Industry.

This book was previously published as a special issue of *Sport in Society*.

John J. MacAloon is Professor and Academic Associate Dean in the Social Sciences Graduate Division and Professor in The College at The University of Chicago. His anthropological and historical studies of the modern Olympic Movement and Olympic Games have earned a global reputation. He was an executive member of the International Olympic Committee 2000 Reform Commission and has advised many Olympic bid and organizing committees and National Olympic Committees.

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Contents

<i>Series page</i>	vii
<i>Olympics subseries page</i>	xi
<i>Citation Information</i>	xiii
1. Introduction: the Olympic Flame Relay. Local knowledges of a global ritual form <i>John J. MacAloon</i>	1
2. <i>This flame, our eyes</i> : Greek/American/IOC relations, 1984–2002, an ethnographic memoir <i>John J. MacAloon</i>	21
3. Olympic Flame Relay operations under a ‘world’s best practices’ regime: a conversation with Steven McCarthy <i>John J. MacAloon</i>	62
4. ‘My programme became very strict’: a conversation with Athanassios Kritsinelis <i>John J. MacAloon</i>	100
5. The 2004 International Relay: a Greek around the world with the Olympic Flame <i>Pinelopi B. Amelidou</i>	126
6. Struggling to celebrate: management of the 2004 Olympic Flame Relay segment in Greece <i>Spiros Spiropoulos</i>	139
7. American media, intercultural stories and the 2004 Olympic flame ceremonies <i>Marianthi Bumbaris Thanopoulos</i>	154
8. Hybridity and subversion: the Olympic flame in India <i>Boria Majumdar and Nalin Mehta</i>	170
<i>Index</i>	186

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SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY –
CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

Series Editor: Boria Majumdar

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Chapter 1

Introduction: the Olympic Flame Relay. Local knowledges of a global ritual form

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Chapter 2

This flame, our eyes: Greek/American/IOC relations, 1984–2002, an ethnographic memoir

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Chapter 3

Olympic Flame Relay operations under a ‘world’s best practices’ regime: a conversation with Steven McCarthy

John J. MacAloon

Sport in Society, volume 15, issue 5 (June 2012) pp. 636-673

Chapter 4

‘My programme became very strict’: a conversation with Athanassios Kritsinelis

John J. MacAloon

Sport in Society, volume 15, issue 5 (June 2012) pp. 674-699

Chapter 5

The 2004 International Relay: a Greek around the world with the Olympic Flame

Pinelopi B. Amelidou

Sport in Society, volume 15, issue 5 (June 2012) pp. 700-712

Chapter 6

Struggling to celebrate: management of the 2004 Olympic Flame Relay segment in Greece

Spiros Spiropoulos

Sport in Society, volume 15, issue 5 (June 2012) pp. 713-727

Chapter 7

American media, intercultural stories and the 2004 Olympic flame ceremonies

Marianthi Bumbaris Thanopoulos

Sport in Society, volume 15, issue 5 (June 2012) pp. 728-743

Chapter 8

Hybridity and subversion: the Olympic flame in India

Boria Majumdar and Nalin Mehta

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Introduction: the Olympic Flame Relay. Local knowledges of a global ritual form

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This article introduces and contextualizes an anthropological study of the Olympic Flame Relay across 25 years, from Los Angeles 1984 through the aftermath of Beijing, punctuated by the announcement by the International Olympic Committee Executive Board in March 2009, that there would be no more global relays. This extended ethnological research offers a rare case study of continuity and change in a leading transnational and transcultural ritual form. It also further exposes the managerial revolution, with its characteristic language of ‘world’s best practice,’ that has succeeded the commercial revolution in international Olympic affairs. Analysis of the transnational flow of Olympic operations management offers important corrections to much existing globalization theory, demonstrating both how powerful and how culturally and politically parochial world’s best practices can turn out to be. Finally, this extended case study offers a further development of the author’s theoretical work on complex cultural performance systems, in particular the dialectic between the performative genres of ritual and spectacle that indexes the wider Olympic Movement’s struggle to preserve itself from the successes of the Olympic sports industry.

Mise-en-scène

On 4 August 2008, during the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Session in Beijing, senior IOC member Richard Pound forcefully asserted that the global flame relay for the Beijing Games should never have taken place.¹ ‘This came very close to being a disaster. The risks were obvious and should have been assessed more carefully. The result is that there was a crisis affecting the Games.’ Only the diversion of attention caused by the Sichuan earthquake saved the Beijing Games, according to Pound, because after the international torch relay, ‘many countries . . . were in full boycott mode’. Pound demanded to know from the IOC leadership, how this global flame relay had ever been approved and its risks so poorly assessed.²

Among its several purposes, this volume offers a thorough answer to Pound’s question. It will not be a simple answer. Even if the specific events of the 14 March 2009 uprising in Lhasa and the Chinese government’s ensuing crackdown could ever have been anticipated, the IOC was already contractually, administratively and organizationally committed with certain international partners to a structure of Olympic Flame Relay (OFR) practices that had come into being across the 25 year period analysed in this volume.³ In the first years of the twenty-first century, these behaviours became normalized as ‘world’s best practice’ in the newly dominant managerial discourse of the IOC administration and in its instructions to Olympic Organizing Committees (OCOGs). Among other merits, this OFR model was believed to insure complete ritual security against all externalities.

Discrete events depend upon predetermined contexts; here, a structure of OFR practices that will be exposed for the first time in these pages, including the crucial backstage roles of transnational operations contractors and commercial sponsors whom neither Mr. Pound nor President Jacques Rogge mentioned in their public debate about the Beijing relay.

Contemporary globalization theory has overwhelmingly focused on political economy and especially multinational corporations, but even within these domains, it has paid scant attention to the field of operational management. In Olympic studies, we now have a substantial scholarship on the commercialization and the new organizational sociology of the Olympics,⁴ but we have barely begun to analyse the transnational labour flows increasingly characteristic of Olympic Games production at all levels. These scholarly shortcomings are to a large extent a methodological artefact, in my judgment, and the ethnographic studies in this volume aim to help alleviate them.

In Beijing, Dick Pound's challenge was not a simple *post facto* response to the attacks on the 2008 OFR (Figure 1) in major cities around the world by pro-Tibet and human rights protesters against Chinese government policies. Indeed, as early as the 2003 IOC Session in Prague, the report of the Olympic Games Study Commission (OGSC) that Pound chaired contained an explicit recommendation that international torch relays not be permitted and that relays instead be confined to host countries of the Games. 'The Commission had noted the high costs of an international relay, the more complicated logistics, the political risks and the minimal benefits to be derived from "cameo" events in various countries.'⁵ The OGSC's report was passed unanimously by the Session and, therefore, should have had the force of law in Olympic governance. Nevertheless, the IOC Executive Board under President Jacques Rogge and with the support of the IOC administration, most notably the Olympic Games Department and its Executive Director Gilbert Felli, subsequently permitted an international flame relay for Beijing. Either they chose to ignore the Session's 2003 action or else judged that the acceptance of the Beijing bid in 2000, a bid explicitly mandating an international relay, 'grandfathered' Beijing's plans against the Session's later resolution.⁶ Pound complained directly to Rogge in a July 2008 memo that the latter rationale had no basis in the *Olympic Charter*. The Rogge administration itself had already announced that no global relays would be permitted for the Olympic Winter Games, and in the Beijing Session debate, Rogge countered that even the domestic relay for Torino had been briefly attacked (see Figure 2).⁷

Organizational and factional tensions among the IOC members and between the membership and the IOC's professional administrators were therefore deeply implicated in creating the context in which the contingent events of Beijing were occasioned and received by key stakeholders.⁸ For social scientists, *histoire événementielle* is of interest chiefly as a means to shed light on such organizational and cultural structures and transformations of them, structures that in turn help to generate future events. In this volume, close analyses of the OFRs for Beijing 2008, Athens 2004, Atlanta 1996 and Los Angeles 1984, supplemented with fieldwork materials from Torino 2006, Sydney 2000, Lillehammer 1994, Barcelona 1992 and Seoul 1988, are deployed to this end. The OFR has long been an object of truly global awareness. These studies of its globalization as a ritual practice over the past quarter-century offer an opportunity not only to bring backstage operational practices into ethnographic light but also to help globalization theory overcome its admittedly inadequate treatment of indigenizing cultural forms and phenomena in deference to exogenously measurable political economic ones.⁹



Figure 1. In the ancient Olympic stadium, the priestess delivers the 2008 Olympic flame to the first torchbearer on the relay to Beijing. Source: IOA.

Greeks, Americans and the ‘world’s best practice’ model

The apparent success of the first global OFR for Athens 2004 – regional multinational relays having been held for Berlin 1936, London 1948, Tokyo 1964, Munich 1972 and Sydney 2000 – emboldened both the Chinese authorities and IOC administrators (who actually saw the 2004 relay firsthand only during its brief passage through their own



Figure 2. Anti-globalization protestors attempt to seize the Olympic flame in Torino 2006. Source: TOROC.

cities). In fact, as the papers and most especially the extended interviews with Athanassios Kritisnelis and Steven McCarthy, the two most important figures in contemporary OFR history, will herein reveal, the 2004 OFR was an epic backstage struggle in both the planning and the execution phases. The protagonists were long-time guardians of Greek public and Hellenic Olympic Committee (HOC) official flame relay traditions and the transnational corporate agencies, commercial and operational, that were now able with IOC administrative support to present themselves as progressive providers of ‘world’s best practices’ for all relays, regardless of their national cultural locations or potential intersections with local politics and transnational social movements.

In the end, the Athens Olympic Organizing Committee (ATHOC) leadership, with IOC encouragement, largely acceded to this new model, citing the competencies of non-Greek operators necessary to pull off their ambitious global OFR plan. This innovation was intended to reinforce in a spectacular way Greece’s special importance in the Olympic Movement, while serving Greek pride and ambitions on a global stage. Because the project was so large, it was also very expensive. Therefore, corporate sponsors who had been pressuring the IOC and the Greek authorities for privileged access to the Athens flame relay would eventually be welcomed in at the ‘presenting partner’ level by ATHOC for both the global and domestic segments. Old-timers who had been through the flame relay battles of the past, wherein Greeks prided themselves as the sole bulwark against others’ (notably American and IOC) commercial depredations against the purity of the Olympic flame, were shocked at the rapidity and thoroughness with which Coca-Cola and Samsung were allowed to insert themselves into the Greek OFR process.

As will be richly documented in these pages, Greek traditionalists within ATHOC were neutered or swept aside, including, in a crude and tragic way, the internationally cherished doyen and senior ‘priest’ of contemporary OFR ritual. The 2004 global relay did

indeed create magical encounters, moments of utterly moving conjuncture of the symbolic values of the Olympic flame and the ideology of Olympism with local histories of global significance, including in the human rights field. At the same time, the Athens relay was marked by a daily battle against sponsor activation teams, particularly Samsung's, violating the rules of ritual protocol and good taste, threatening to trivialize the whole phenomenon. The operations management contractor – the US-based firm Além International, in this case – was again placed in the contradictory position of being the chief on-the-ground defender of the rules of sponsor engagement and ritual integrity, while simultaneously being tasked by the OCOG and the IOC with insuring sponsor satisfaction with returns on investments that paid for hiring the operating company in the first place. This fundamental contradiction has grown to be the central fact of contemporary OFR organizational life.

During the Greek domestic segments of the 2004 relay, the general euphoria was mixed with confusion and consternation on the part of older Greek publics confronted with the introduction of certain elements from the new 'world standard' model (or 'the American model', as Greek critics persisted in calling it). A caravan of up to 20 vehicles, rolling sponsor platforms full of cheerleaders and blaring pop music, uniformed sponsor promotion teams trying to 'rev up' the crowds, continuous motorcycle security, the permanent presence of an ungainly media truck blocking the public's view of the flame, torchbearers of all ages and states of fitness to accommodate a huge percentage of sponsor-selected flame bearers, the sale of torches to torchbearers, giant video boards at celebration sites: none of these things had ever been seen in Greece in the 66 years flame relays had been passing through its streets and country roads.

However, nothing would be more inaccurate than to suggest some monolithic 'Greek' reaction to these locally novel OFR practices imported into Greece from supposedly global practice. As already noted, there were extreme contradictions of interpretation and judgement within the ATHOC leadership itself, and attitudes also varied among younger cadres of educated and professional Greeks whom ATHOC, under Gianna Angelopoulou-Daskalaki, prided itself in recruiting largely outside of the normal Greek clientelism of family political affiliation. As a more mediatized and cosmopolitan cohort – moreover, one frequently seeking permanent employment in the transnational sport and event management industries, a possibility unknown to their elders – these young people might be expected to evaluate events from a different interpretive baseline. This is why I have thought it imperative to include in this volume the voices of three academically trained Greek and Greek–American professional participant observers on the 2004 OFR. Pinelopi Amelidou literally grew up in the HOC, and she analyses the global relay from her perspective as one of only five Greeks who travelled the world with this flame.¹⁰ An employee of a main ATHOC domestic sponsor, she was 'on loan' to Além International Management Inc., the contracted global OFR operator, and she also carried the flame in Maroussi on the final day of the domestic relay. Spiros Spiropoulos analyses the Greek relay from his insider's standpoint as an advance and events team member of the ATHOC torch relay department, and he also carried the flame as nearly all staff are mandated to do in the newly standard model. Marianthi Bumbaris Thanopoulos worked on the relay as both an independent and NBC-contracted video producer, and she provides an account of American and Greek media practices with respect to the flame-lighting ceremonies in Olympia and in the Athens atmosphere as the flame approached for the Opening Ceremonies.

The Athens 2004 OFR itself can never be understood or properly evaluated without contextualizing it first of all in a history of tension between the IOC and the HOC over

‘ownership’ of the OFR during the Samaranch presidency, and second in the specific social dramas of relations between Greek authorities and publics and the American leaderships of the Atlanta 1996 and Los Angeles 1984 Olympic Games. Greek public opinion had been so inflamed by the loss by Athens to Atlanta of the rights to host the Centennial Olympic Games that there was a very real question as to whether Atlanta could even get an Olympic flame at all. The eventual success of the 1996 OFR in Greece was one of the most remarkable stories of intercultural diplomacy in recent Olympic history. In achieving it, the Atlanta Olympic Organizing Committee (ACOG) took as its absolute anti-model the 1984 Los Angeles OFR in which the actions of that American Organizing Committee under Peter Ueberroth created an intercultural imbroglio and a risk of public violence even greater than what would occur a quarter of a century later for Beijing. On the domestic side, the ACOG OFR team transformed certain innovations from Los Angeles and Barcelona relays into what would emerge as the ‘world’s best practice’ model for the subsequent relays in Sydney, Salt Lake City, Athens and Torino, a model now enshrined as canonical in the IOC’s OFR technical manual that is imposed on all OCOGs.¹¹ This story is told for the first time anywhere in the next chapter and is elaborated in the extended interviews with Kritsinelis and McCarthy that follow it.

Hidden actors, operational scripts, public protests

The IOC has rarely seemed as bereft of leadership or options as it did during the Beijing OFR demonstrations in major cities of several continents, and the historical and anthropological context exposed in these pages makes it possible to better understand this incapacity. For their own marketing and client-relations purposes, Coca-Cola and Samsung had pushed hard for a Beijing global relay in the first place¹² and, despite IOC administrators’ early misgivings, the sponsors had won the day.¹³ Indeed, Coca-Cola cared so much about the issue that it had secretly extracted from the Rogge administration a right of first refusal for all future relay sponsorships for the duration of the company’s latest master contract with the IOC, a fact published here for the first time.¹⁴ The OFR ‘presenting partners’ had made elaborate plans for their client torchbearers and ‘activation strategies’ for their sponsorships in many cities on the 2008 global relay, matters of contractual guarantee by BOCOG and the IOC. Even after the March events in Tibet, the sponsors were loath to compromise these arrangements, and they pressed the IOC and BOCOG to persevere. In global cities where impending protests led to radical OFR route alterations and security measures, sponsor torchbearer programmes were severely disrupted. Other activation practices went ahead, however, leading to the bizarre – some would say obscene – spectacle, as in London and Paris, of open vehicles full of Coke and Samsung cheerleaders passing through crowds of screaming and weeping pro-Tibet demonstrators whose boldest members were gearing up to break through the police to try to seize the flame and disrupt the relay (see Figure 3).

The newly standard or world’s best practice model specifies that flame and flame bearer security inside a narrow envelope is the responsibility of OCOG/contractor supplied security personnel.¹⁵ These ‘accompanying runners’ wear official OFR running togs, regularly assist flame bearers with lighting and extinguishing torches, and are intended to be indistinguishable from other relay personnel. In the 1996, 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006 (Anglo-Saxon or European) relays, these security figures did indeed largely ‘pass’ for ordinary ritual personnel among casual observers. Even where they were in fact foreign nationals, there was little to demarcate them from surrounding host city or OCOG demographics. However, BOCOG and the Chinese government were not about to let their