

OLYMPIC GAMES: A METAPHOR FOR GLOBALIZATION

29 August 2004, Athens. The maxi screen in the Olympic stadium displays the image of the latest, most beautiful race: the marathon, a very special marathon close to the steps of Philippidis. Runners numbering just over one hundred are representing sixty countries. Cosmopolitanism and national pride: the Olympic competition is able to merge feelings that we sometimes assume to be the dialectic terms of an irresolvable conflict.

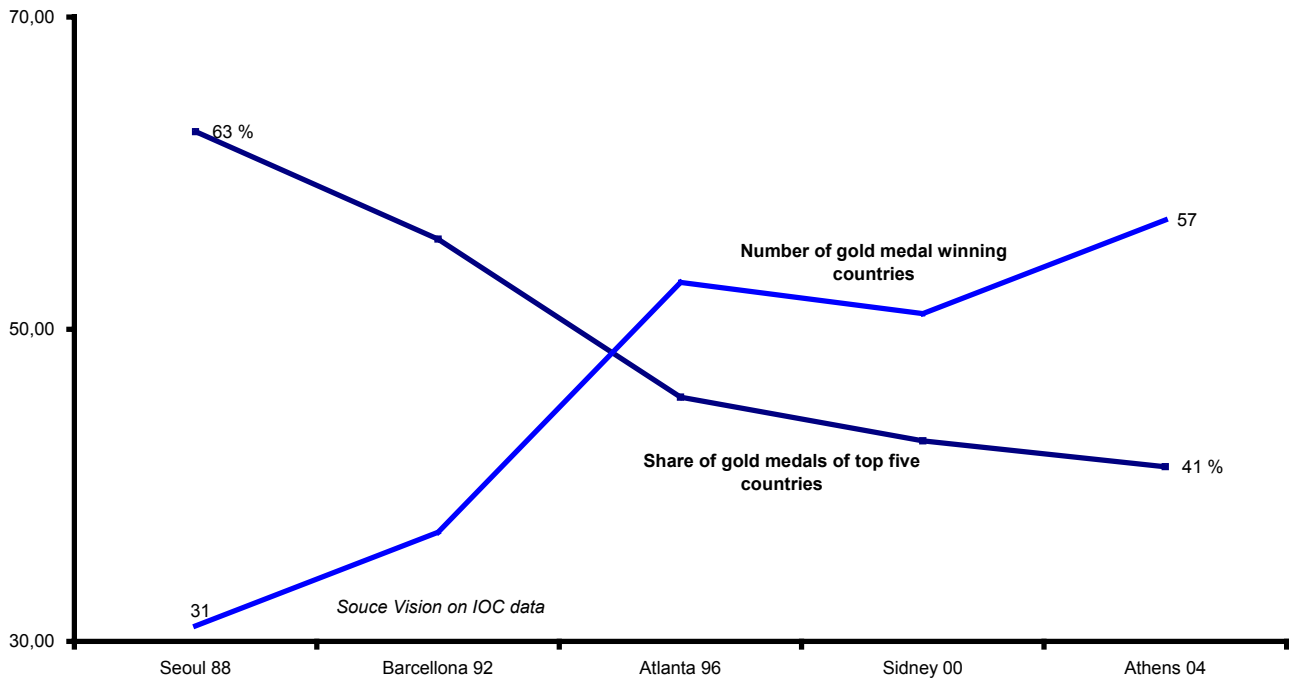
Once upon a time, sports were said to be a metaphor for life, and this was also most frequently suggested as the explanation for their popularity. In fact, the Olympics (as also soccer's "World Cup", see earlier Vision article at www.vision-forum.org) have demonstrated that they are able not only to breathe life into individuals' stories but also to provide a language for historical, and political processes that are changing the world: they offer a different semantic which contrasts the obsolete one usually offered by economics and politics, and which may even be more effective.

What story does Athens tell about how the world is changing? What kind of "metaphor for globalization" do the latest games propose?

AN OTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

During the final of the basketball tournament one of funniest spectator placards of all those seen during the games read: "Olympics, an other world is possible". An "other" world was, in fact, materializing under the eyes of the supporter holding up the sign, and for the millions of TV viewers all over the world. The US basketball "dream team" - the most celebrated squad of the "empire" - had been defeated in the semi-final, with victorious Argentina going forward to compete for the Olympic title.

Evolution of olympic gold medals distribution



The chart above shows, for the last five Olympic games, the percentage of medals won by the top five gold medal-winning countries, and also the total number of countries winning at least one competition - as indicators of the “concentration” of medals amongst nations.

Both measures suggest that the Olympics are becoming more “egalitarian”. Whereas in Seoul the five strongest national teams left little more than a third of all victories to the “rest of the world”, by this year in Athens their share had shrunk to 40 per cent. Accordingly, a greater number of countries are now experiencing gold medal victory: in 1988 only 31 countries were outright winners; 15 years later, with 57 gold-medallist nations, this number has almost doubled.

Undoubtedly, one major factor has been the passing of the Cold War era: the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, and the subsequent proliferation of new states, has increased the number of IOC members. But only 7 of Athens’ 57 gold medal nations were states born in the last 15 years. Older states, too, were claiming historic “firsts”: François Mbango Etone took the first ever gold for Cameroon in the triple jump; while windsurfer Gal Fridman dedicated Israel’s first Olympic victory to the victims of the 1972 terrorist attack in Monaco.

The numbers show that the world of sports is today becoming more “equal”, less “concentrated” and with more opportunities to succeed for a growing number of competitors.

And it is not only the “olympics” that tell this strange story. If the USA is no longer an unreachable planet in basketball, the last World Cup showed, on the other hand, the precarity of yesterday’s soccer elites, when the US reached the quarter-final and only a single goal took the opponent Germans on to challenge against Brazil in the final.

And even population does not prevent results to be open to any outcomes, like in the most recent European Cup, where the four semi-finalists happened to be smaller in aggregate than the smallest of the EU’s Big Four.

In sports, so it seems, the trend is therefore that (almost) everybody can win (nearly) everywhere. Of course, “everybody can win everywhere” is not exactly the same as being “equal”. Rather, it is a

matter of establishing a “competition” which is fair among many more possible actors. It affirms not of an egalitarian world, but a world more closely following the contours of competition as conceived by Adam Smith.

But how credible is this message apparently conveyed by recent worldwide sporting events? How can countries be growing more equal when globalization is said to produce new inequalities at an unprecedented rate? How far from wider reality is this universe where, almost invariably, students beat their masters: Senegal opens the World Cup, beating France, and four years later Puerto Rico does the same with the NBA stars? Is sport just a conjurer of fairy tales, of the sort of illusions that empires need to make their subjects more nicely accept their condition? Or, instead, do the Olympics say something new – and in a different language – that economics and politics are overlooking?

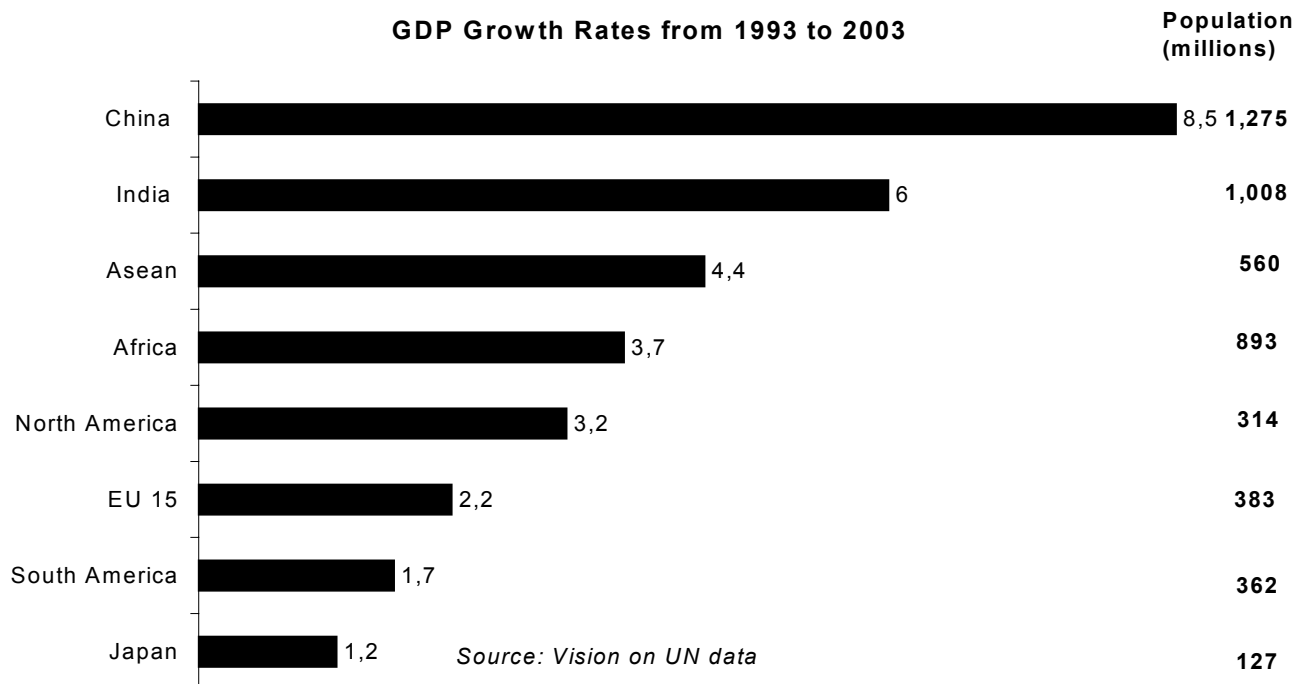
THE MATHEMATICS OF GLOBALIZATION

If we look at indicators like GDP growth rates, we discover that, at least on some points, “Olympic Mathematics” may be right.

Inequalities among nations are diminishing, and the trend (though with certain qualifications, discussed below) is substantial - so much so, that it prompts the question “how could anti-globalizationists claim the opposite?”

Globalization certainly brings other problems, and some may well be of dimensions beyond our individual and collective problem-solving capabilities. Nonetheless, it cannot now be said that the process we are witnessing today is still one of widening gaps between nations. The evidence weighs heavily for the opposite conclusion:

1. China and India have consistently ranked amongst the top ten countries in terms of growth rates for the last five years (with annual growth of 8.5% and 6.0% respectively). This is not a mere detail: these are, by a very large margin, the world’s most and second-most populous nations (the smallest of the two is still five times bigger than the world’s third-most populous nation, and together India and China represent almost 40% of total world population). Though many display surprise at China’s topping the medal tables for more than half of the olympic period, there should be, in fact, even greater surprise to India taking home just one silver medal for more than a billion inhabitants and presenting a delegation four times smaller than much smaller countries like France .
2. If we consider a long enough period (say, from Barcelona 1992 to Athens 2004, see chart), we find that, amongst the the world’s macro-regions Japan (1.2%), the European Union (at 2.2%, before enlargement) and North America (3.2%) occupy the last positions in terms of capacity to grow. Most of the third world (like South East Asia with big nations like Vietnam and Indonesia with 4.4% in the latest fifteen years and much more more recently) are growing much more and even Africa (3.7%) is, in fact, “running” faster. Like in the night of one of the most fantastic 10,000 metres of all time.



- On a smaller scale, within Europe, and only fifteen years ago (a little before the Barcelona games) “affluence” was largely restricted to the Europe’s core of the Community’s founding members, plus Great Britain and a few central and Nordic countries (coincidentally, Olympic achievement largely followed the same pattern).

Evidence is that “integration” (in some sense a much more intense version of globalization on a smaller scale) has brought more advantages to the “periphery” (Spain, Portugal, Ireland, until 2000, and the “new member states”, afterward) than to the “centre”. And the very organizational success of Greece should demonstrate that certain achievements are not limited any more to only few super powers.

“Economic convergence” has been underway for a long time. And its magnitude is in fact even bigger than the convergence in Olympics achievement.

This could mean, on one hand, that even greater “convergence” is imminent. On the other, it could suggest that there GDP growth rates don’t tell the whole story - both when we try to explain Olympic prowess and when we are analysing globalization.

THE LIMITS OF GDP

Inequalities between nations are – by and large - decreasing. This is important headline news, even if the headline needs strong qualification in at least four different ways. While inequalities are, in fact, falling in percentage terms:

- they are still increasing in **absolute** terms (because of the simple maths that increases of 10% of 100, and 2% of 1100 will yield a difference between the two that has increased in absolute terms);
- Yet more importantly, inequalities are growing **within** nations (India, for instance), between regions, and between different categories of workers (skills differentials are causing greater divisions);

3. You can still have a booming economy where **public services** are being dismantled (as is true for healthcare in China; though some suggest this phenomenon is an *effect* of globalization, the precise nature of the relationship remains far from obvious);
4. Last, but not least, the fact that inequalities are falling, or - in a different phrase - that “the poor are becoming richer” does not change, and may reinforce the point that globalization is still creating enormous pressure on the demand side of **the global environment and energy balance** equations.

These qualifications are significant. But establishing the correct definition of the problem remains important for its impact on the choice of policies to be adopted. If, for instance, we can agree that globalization’s main defects lie elsewhere than in producing greater inequality *between nations*, then this has the consequence, amongst others, that development funds should bypass national governments and reach down to the sub-national level. By the same token, if we realize that the determinant of “inequality” experienced by individuals is effective access to education, rather than nationality, we then try gradually to move from other forms of aid to investment in schools specifically.

Amongst the qualifiers listed above, that based on the limits of GDP is particularly important. We should not overestimate the significance of national economic performance as traditionally understood and, going back to sports, even less can we assume a straightforward relationship between GDP and Olympic medal tables¹. GDP clearly cannot explain why India secured one solitary silver medal or, on the contrary, how Japan - for much of the last fifteen years the “sick man” of the G8 assessed in terms of growth rates - has managed to escalate its position from 27th to 5th in between Atlanta and Seoul.

The reality is that sports performance and sports diffusion depend on equally important “soft” variables that are not easily quantifiable: the existence and effectiveness of national policies to promote sports and nurture native talent (where India is currently falling down); the rise and fall in national pride, or the lifting away of psychological complexes that inhibited performance in the past (one of the reasons for Japan’s rise in Athens); “quality of life” considerations that are associated, for developed countries, with individuals having the facility to practice and enjoy sports (as in Australia, for instance); and the role of individual or team competitiveness, and the value attached to competing fairly, within the overall system of values a given society expresses (of fair competitiveness and perhaps this explain Europe’s fading glories in both economic and Olympic terms).

However, together all these factors still suggest that more “convergence” is on the way. In countries, like Senegal, with half the population under twenty years old, jogging and playing football are fast becoming almost universal pastimes. In Vietnam, soccer – or more precisely, the shirts of the (almost bankrupt) European soccer teams are one of the most evident signs of globalization’s continuing forward march - and that in some ways it is increasingly a party that nobody wants to miss.

At the very least this must have been the message of the Marathon run last night at the Panathinaiko.

The Olympics, if “an other” world, is not a perfect world. Doping and country-switching have made significant in-roads into the Olympic spirit (forthcoming research by Vision Associates will investigate the latest developments in policing activity connected with these phenomena, and the

¹ The limits of GDP as an indicator have been comprehensively demonstrated by the “mistakes” of the econometric model employed by two economists – Andrew Bernard at Tuck and Meghan Busse at Berkely - to forecast medal distributions in Athens.

reasons why they are so detrimental to sport). The advancement of biotechnologies and the possibility of genetic programming cast an even darker shadow on the future of sports. But this world is one which is no less true than that described by geopolitics. It probably reflects the ambitions of human beings and their fears in an even more realistic and direct way. It is a story we should listen to and that can tell us much about the direction and speed of worldwide changes affecting us that we have still to fully understand.