

Introduction: The Olympic Scholarship of John J. MacAloon

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This special collection is inspired by, and intended to carry on the legacy of, Dr. John J. MacAloon, the world-renowned Olympics expert and newly minted emeritus professor at the University of Chicago.¹ It is made possible by a generous page allotment from Matthew Llewellyn and the editorial team of this journal, as well as the determination and staunch commitment of the contributors (and anonymous reviewers) who answered the call on a tight timeline in the middle of a global pandemic.

My coeditor Amy August and I have been career-long students of Professor MacAloon, starting from our days at the University of Chicago, the storied institution where MacAloon has spent the vast majority of his professional life. We were both advised by MacAloon in the Masters of Arts Program in the Social Sciences (MAPSS)—a program he helped to build and served as its long-time director. It was in MAPSS that MacAloon introduced us, albeit in different eras, to the life of the mind and the grand, uncompromising traditions of social science at the University of Chicago. MacAloon was—and remains—a dazzling classroom teacher, a master interpreter of texts, and an endless font of wisdom and knowledge. (There is, in fact, a whole volume to be written on MacAloon's vision of liberal arts education and social science pedagogy—for a start, see *General Education in the Social Sciences*,² edited and introduced by MacAloon himself.) More to the point of this volume, however, MacAloon also showed us that it was possible to build a career studying sport and provided us the intellectual foundations and a template on which to build.

In shepherding this volume into being, August and I were driven not only by our desire to pay tribute to Professor MacAloon for his mentorship and long-term

support. More importantly, we wanted to highlight and begin to synthesize the multiple insights, innovations, and foundational contributions to the study of the Olympic Games and to sport studies more generally to be found in MacAloon's research and writing for future generations of scholars. This was no easy task.

MacAloon's contributions to the field are multifaceted and run deep. His ideas are not easily confined to any single area, nor prone to simple categorization or generalization. His scholarship includes books, edited collections, and journal articles as well as book chapters, speeches, reports, working papers, and extended interviews. Some work has never appeared in print, not yet fit for MacAloon's own exacting standards. While MacAloon sees the world in global scope and grand historical terms, his written work is often quite empirically grounded, specific, and intricate. His writing can require more layers of knowledge and reference than are available to the general reader or sport specialist. And because he often writes for very specific purposes, audiences, or outlets, the vision and overarching synthetic orientation that is MacAloon's hallmark only takes shape as one reads across the trajectory and full body of his work.

Nevertheless, an organizing framework is needed. In putting together the proposal and call for this volume, August and I (with a little help from friends, some of them the authors included in this volume) came up with the following five-category outline to capture and convey MacAloon's primary themes and contributions over the years:³

(1) *Modern Olympic and Sport History*

MacAloon announced his arrival as an intellectual and Olympic scholar with the publication of *This Great Symbol*, his study of the origins of the modern Olympic Games and its founder Pierre de Coubertin. The book remains a definitive source and, as MacAloon himself describes in the post-script to the second edition, paved the way both intellectually and in terms of access and credibility for the rest of his career.⁴ A great student of history, MacAloon worked on many other historical projects and pieces on various Olympic and modern sports events, incidents, and issues over the years, including the pathbreaking edited collection *Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds*.⁵

(2) *Social and Cultural Theory*

Outside of Olympic and sport studies circles, MacAloon is probably best known for his work on ritual, ceremony, festival, and drama following in the tradition pioneered by his teacher and mentor Victor Turner, the great Scottish anthropologist. This emphasis is reflected in his theory of spectacle in modern culture, his framing and reworking of notions of liminality and hyperstructure, and his career-long engagement with the Olympic torch relay. In writing and teaching, MacAloon was ever on the cutting-edge of trends in theory ranging from dramaturgy, sociobiography, and psychoanalysis to poststructuralism and the semiotic revolution, globalization, and

humanism. Among sport sociologists (at least), MacAloon's brief introduction to Pierre Bourdieu's well-known "Program for a Sociology of Sport" remains the lens through which the great social theorist is still taught and learned.⁶

(3) *Research Methods and Epistemology*

Extending from his vision of theory as practice, MacAloon has a long, ongoing commitment to reflection on and the revitalization of social scientific research methods and epistemology. Much of this work is directed primarily to scholars of sport and the Olympics, and includes writing on ethnography and cultural studies, comparative and historical methods, and the introduction and refinement of team-based fieldwork. As an anthropologist studying one of the world's preeminent global institutions, MacAloon also served as an interlocutor at various international conferences, symposia, and collections on timely and timeless research topics in the social sciences, including intercultural exchange, the challenges of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary work, and the role of identities, subjectivities, norms, and values in global, multicultural contexts.

(4) *Sport in Socio-Political Processes*

The role of sport and the Olympic Games (if not popular culture and cultural movements more generally) in politics, global institutions, and other social processes is never far from MacAloon's interest and gaze. Some of his ideas about the broader social significance and political function of sport were sketched in a series of pieces written in the late 1980s and 1990s on political discourse, state legitimacy, and nationalism in global and domestic contexts. But these ideas were developed and applied most systematically in pieces that use international sport and the Olympic Games as both model for and microcosm of all of the complexities of intercultural exchange and ways of knowing in the contemporary global world.

(5) *Olympic Movement, Institutions, and Governance*

Perhaps no other scholar in history has taken the origins, evolution, structures, and ongoing inner-workings of the contemporary International Olympic Committee (IOC) and related international sports organizations as seriously as an object of study as MacAloon. His knowledge of Olympic leadership and administrative structure, Olympic study centers and training programs, and various Olympic protocol and processes is legendary, enriched (if also complicated) by his many roles within the movement as historian, institution builder, advocate, critic, and conscience. His periodic commentaries and reports on various Olympic developments, processes, and trends track the contemporary history of the Games; his distinction between the Olympic industry and the Olympic Movement remains ever-enlightening as an analytic device; and his insistence on the fundamental significance of the torch relay—embodied in the volume *Bearing Light: Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement*—is both beacon and barometer of the Movement's grandest hopes, aspirations, and claims.⁷

We did not ask our contributors—a veritable all-star, international cast of Olympic scholars—to address all of these topics, much less offer an overarching synthesis or global assessment of MacAloon’s output. Instead, we suggested that they reflect and write on those themes in MacAloon’s work that they knew best and (if possible) that they themselves were most directly influenced by or in dialogue with. The result is a wonderfully rich and eclectic collection that, we believe, spans the scope and does justice to the depth of MacAloon’s own corpus.

Argentinian philosopher Cesar Torres, currently a professor at the College of Brockport, State University of New York, is perhaps most comprehensive and global in his approach, organizing MacAloon’s contributions in three main areas—the history of the IOC; the anthropology of the Games; and the ethical and political challenges of the Movement. But what is most significant and original about Torres’s treatment is his explication of how ideas about *communitas*, derived from MacAloon’s mentor Victor Turner, can be seen at the root of all of MacAloon’s Olympic theory, research, and practice.

Bruce Kidd’s reflections on various research and Olympic advocacy collaborations with MacAloon over the years takes us deep into the team-based research approaches that MacAloon introduced in a range of Olympic settings. Kidd—himself recently retired from a long and distinguished university career in Canada and one of MacAloon’s own athletic, academic, and activist heroes—also captures the passion, idealism, energy, and utter seriousness that both of these pioneering Olympic scholars bring to all their work.

Beatriz Garcia, director of international academic research at the University of Liverpool and member of the IOC’s Culture and Olympic Heritage Committee, focuses on the role of the culture and the arts in Olympics events, institutions, and the movement as a whole. Garcia’s focus is obviously indebted to and in direct dialogue with MacAloon’s meta-level ideas and reflections about the ever-expanding meaning and significance of sport and the Olympics in global culture and thus captures both the possibilities and complications of the Olympic Games for intercultural education, knowledge, and understanding.

The final contribution comes from Jean-Loup Chappelet, an emeritus professor of public management at the Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration (IDHEAP) at the University of Lausanne and a member of the ASOIF (Association of Summer Olympic International Federations) Governance Taskforce. Chappelet’s deceptively straightforward documentation of the evolution, growth, and scope of the IOC as an administrative entity is testament to MacAloon’s ongoing insistence that to truly understand the Olympics and the Olympic Movement one must know the often-backstage organizational structure and dynamics that, for better or worse, make the Games what they are today.

How to summarize all of this? Provide some final last words? We almost did not dare. It seemed like there was only one semi-safe way to even attempt this task. Indeed, August and I hit upon asking MacAloon himself to participate in a format he has utilized and championed over the years: a wide-ranging, no-holds-barred epilogue edited together from multiple conversations and extended email exchanges between August and MacAloon (and occasionally myself). He was more than up for the challenge. The result, we believe, is broad, synthetic, and wide-ranging; thoughtful, inspirational, and occasionally cantankerous. Hopefully it is a useful representation and overview not only of MacAloon's published work but of John MacAloon the intellectual, the thinker and teacher, the ever-engaged Olympic scholar, advocate, and critic.

Notes

1. John J. MacAloon is a long-time professor in the Social Sciences Graduate Division and The College at the University of Chicago, director emeritus of the Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences (MAPSS), and associated faculty in the Department of Anthropology. Dr. MacAloon holds a BA in philosophy from Catholic University (where he was a Division I scholarship track athlete), and an MA and PhD from The John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought at Chicago. An anthropologist and historian, MacAloon's research focuses theoretically on cultural performance theory and substantively on the modern Olympic Movement and Olympic Games. He was awarded the Olympic Order in 2000. He has taught the history of modern social theory to Chicago graduate and undergraduate students for over thirty years, winning the Quantrell Award for teaching excellence. He has also taught at Emory University, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and the University of California, San Diego. In addition to his extensive Olympic-focused research and writing (the focus of this volume), MacAloon edited and introduced *General Education in the Social Sciences: Centennial Reflections on the College of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
2. MacAloon, *General Education in the Social Sciences*.
3. For what it is worth, August and I also used this scheme to organize the reading list that appears at the end of this collection. Far from a complete bibliography, it is perhaps better understood as a collection of greatest hits or works representative of the broad range of his thinking and contributions, both theoretical and practical, across the full range of his intellectual trajectory and career. Also, for what it is worth, or perhaps what it reveals, August and I originally intended to limit ourselves to three-to-five works in each of these areas—but in discussing the list and soliciting feedback from others, that quickly became untenable.
4. John J. MacAloon, "Postscript: History as Anthropology," in *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).
5. John J. MacAloon, ed., *Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2007).
6. John J. MacAloon, "A Prefatory Note to Pierre Bourdieu's 'Program for a Sociology of Sport,'" *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5, no. 2 (1988): 150–52.
7. John J. MacAloon, ed., *Bearing Light: Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2013).