

Faster, Higher, Stronger : A Critical Analysis of the Olympics

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For two weeks this summer London will play host to the Olympic Games. Against a backdrop of austerity-driven public spending cuts, thousands of athletes from more than 200 countries will contest 26 events, competing ‘in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honour of our teams’¹. Awash with brands and corporate logos, the Olympics have become the quintessential mega-event; a global, neo-liberal, five-ring circus. Those five rings of the Olympic symbol adorn everything from soft drinks cans to aircraft, the product of billion dollar sponsorship deals. To ‘protect’ the Games the UK government is deploying 13,500 troops, locating surface to air missiles on the rooftops of residential housing, and stationing the warship HMS Ocean on the River Thames. London can expect a ‘sporting jamboree of militarised corporate banality’².

Yet the popularity of the Olympics remains unparalleled. A combined global audience of 845 million watched the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Games in 2008³. The Olympic brand is recognised around the world and marketed as a festival of humanity, blind to gender, creed or colour. As a spectacle the Olympics claims to stand above politics, transcending the divisions and affairs of

states. Its history, however, tells quite a different story, one in which the Games have long been a site of political, as well as sporting, contestation.

Nationalism, Communism and Fascism

The Games of ancient Greece ran for more than a thousand years before the Roman emperor Theodosius I called time on the heathen contests. Although a number of subsequent sporting festivals described themselves as ‘Olympic’, it is Baron Pierre de Coubertin who is commonly held responsible for the ‘renovation’ of the Games and the birth of the modern Olympic phenomenon⁴. An educationalist and keen sportsman, Coubertin was born in France in 1863 into a life of aristocratic privilege, growing up in the shadow of the Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune. These two events had a profound effect on the young Baron who set himself the goal of restoring his nation’s status. Coubertin ardently believed that the dominance of British imperialism was founded on the English ‘public’ school system’s dedication to team sports. After all, had the Duke of Wellington not claimed that the Battle of Waterloo was ‘won on the playing fields of Eton’? Physical competitive games would

⁰Thanks to Lee Sprake, Harri Sutherland-Kaye, David Renton and Joe Ruffell for comments on an earlier draft.

¹These words are taken from the Olympic Oath, which reads in full: ‘*In the name of all the competitors I promise that we shall take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, committing ourselves to a sport without doping and without drugs, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honour of our teams.*’

²China Mieville (2012) *London’s Overthrow*

³Initiative Sports Futures (2009) *Viewer Track: The Most Watched Sporting Events of 2008*, London

⁴Given the differences between the ancient games and those modern times, it is commonplace to refer to Coubertin as the renovator of the Olympics.

help to raise a generation of French children who would never again suffer military defeat. ‘Sport,’ said Coubertin, ‘can be seen as an indirect preparation for war. In sports all the same qualities flourish which serve for warfare: indifference towards one’s wellbeing, courage, readiness for the unforeseen. The young sportsman is certainly better prepared for war than his untrained brothers’⁵. For Coubertin sports would also play a role in reconciling the contending classes, ensuring no repeat of the Commune, when Paris had been ‘in the hands of a contemptible insurrection, formulated by cosmopolitan adventurers’⁶. While others, such as the right wing sociologist Le Play, had argued that the roles played by religion and the family had to be strengthened if France were to avoid class confrontation, Coubertin stressed the importance of sports⁷.

With his views largely ignored by the French establishment Coubertin, an admirer of classical Greek culture, turned his attention to resurrecting the Olympics. After much wrangling the first modern Olympic Games took place in Athens in 1896, an attempt to inspire and educate the youth of the world through sport. However, the invitation extended to only one half of the world’s populace as Coubertin deemed the participation of women ‘impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic,

and incorrect’, insisting that they ‘have but one task, that of crowning the [male] winner with garlands.’⁸ Although women were allowed to compete in a minimal programme of exhibition events in Paris 1900, St Louis 1904 and London 1908 they were again excluded from the games in Stockholm 1912⁹. Such was the intransigence of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that European sportswomen felt compelled to form their own organisation, the *Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale* in 1921, and the first Women’s Olympics were held in Monte Carlo in 1922 with subsequent Women’s World Games in 1926, 1930 and 1934. In his memoirs the Baron would continue to argue for the ‘suppression of the admittance of women to all competitions in which men take part’¹⁰.

Coubertin, unperturbed by charges of discrimination and elitism, saw the Games as embodying more than mere sporting competition. In a rapidly changing, uncertain time they were an effort to foster mutual understanding between countries, seeking ‘to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity’¹¹. John Hoberman cites Coubertin’s vision as an example of the ‘idealistic internationalism’ run-

⁵ Quoted in Arnd Kruger (1993) ‘The Origins of Pierre de Coubertin’s *Religion Athlete*, p93

⁶ Pierre de Coubertin, (1900) *France Since 1814*

⁷ Considerations of class also brought out a distinctly paternalistic streak in the Baron. By his mid-twenties he had attempted (unsuccessfully) to establish Workers’ Universities, which were to be run by workers themselves.

⁸ Quoted in Adrienne (1988) *Blue, Faster, Higher, Further: Women’s Triumphs and Disasters at the Olympics*, p1

⁹ Unsurprisingly the women who contested these events were drawn from the upper classes of society

¹⁰ Pierre de Coubertin (1979) *Olympic Memoirs*, p721. Athletic contests for women were not included in the Olympics until 1928. The attitude that female athletes would not be able to cope with the rigours of physical competition persisted throughout the 20th century; the women’s marathon, for example, was not included in the games until 1984. To this day it is evident in the disparity between the men’s decathlon and women’s heptathlon.

¹¹ The Olympic Charter - Fundamental Principles, IOC Lausanne, p10 2011

¹² John Hoberman (1995) ‘Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism’

ning through sections of the ruling class at the time¹². The resurrection of the Olympics came in an era when numerous attempts were made at international organisation, some of which were influenced by the peace movement¹³. Coubertin's conception of internationalism, as embodied by the Olympics, was based on the inviolability of the nation state, a reflection of his 'conviction that patriotism and internationalism were not only not incompatible, but required one another'¹⁴. As such he saw no contradiction in dedicating the inaugural Games of 1896 to both patriotism and world peace. Unfortunately his was an internationalism only in times of peace, and he enlisted in the French army during the First World War¹⁵.

The idealistic internationalism of the Olympics did not find universal acceptance or approval. Following the Russian Revolution the Bolsheviks refused to send competitors to the bourgeois Games, which they viewed as an attempt to 'deflect workers from the class struggle and to train them for imperialist wars'¹⁶. But nor could they simply ignore the fact that sport occupied an ever-growing place in the leisure time of the European working class. During the Third World Congress of the Communist International in 1921 the Red Sport International (RSI) was formed, not only in opposition to the cultural imperialism of the official Olympic movement but also as a counterweight to the social demo-

cratic Socialist Worker Sport International (SWSI). In comparison with the sports of capitalist nations the worker sports movement placed a premium on festival-like activities, using sport to build international solidarity that transcended, rather than respected, national divisions.

Through the 1920s both organisations attempted to influence workers across Europe; the SWSI organised three Workers' Olympics and the RSI held its first Spartakiad in Moscow in 1928. The most famous, and tragic, example of such events came in Barcelona in 1936. Five years previously the Catalan city had been defeated by Berlin in the bid to host the 1936 Olympics. Its response was to organise the Barcelona Popular Olympics. A day before the People's Olympics were due to begin Franco's military uprising signalled the start of the Spanish Civil War. Many of the worker-athletes who had gathered from across Europe stayed in the city, effectively forming an advance party of the International Brigades.

Two months after fascist guns brought the People's Games to a premature end, the Olympics began in Nazi Germany. Adolf Hitler had at first been hostile to the idea of staging the Games, taking the position of Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg who had denounced the Olympics as a crime on the grounds of their international character¹⁷. It was only the intervention of Josef Goebbels that persuaded

¹³The Red Cross had been formed in 1863 while the International Peace Bureau (1891) and Scouting and Esperanto (1908) all appear in this period.

¹⁴John J. Macaloon (1981) *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympics*, p112

¹⁵In fairness to Coubertin, he was not the only person preaching internationalism who would succumb to the chauvinism of imperialist war. Infamously, large sections of the Second International betrayed their internationalism to lend support to their respective ruling classes. The International Peace Bureau fell apart after many supporters felt they could not support peace at a time of war! However, while one may characterise the latter examples as cases of betrayal or confusion, Coubertin's enthusiasm for the war was a logical conclusion of his bourgeois internationalism.

¹⁶J. Riordan (1993) 'The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions', p25

¹⁷John Hoberman, 'Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism', p24

the Führer of the enormous propaganda potential of hosting an event of worldwide interest. Echoing Coubertin's rhetoric, Hitler proclaimed his conversion to Olympism:

'The sportive, knightly battle awakens the best human characteristics. It doesn't separate but unites the combatants in understanding and respect. It also helps to connect the countries in the spirit of peace. That is why the Olympic Flame should never die.¹⁸'

It soon became apparent that the Nazi regime was discriminating against Jewish athletes, barring them from competition and the possibility of qualifying to represent Germany at the Games. The IOC dispatched representatives to investigate, meeting with Carl Diem, a historian and administrator, who had for many years played a leading role in German sports. Although not a party member, Diem was a nationalist who collaborated with the Nazis, setting aside whatever misgivings he may originally have had to persuade the IOC that the Berlin Games would in no way contravene the Olympic commitment to equality.

Avery Brundage, an American IOC member who would later become its president, was one of those who visited Germany to assess the situation. Not only was he satisfied there was no evidence of anti-Semitism, he also eulogised about the organisational zeal of the Third Reich. Others were not as convinced. Ernest Lee

Jahncke - like Brundage an American IOC member - told the *New York Times* that it was a 'plain and undeniable fact that the Nazis have consistently and persistently violated their pledges.¹⁹' Consul General George S. Messersmith concluded:

'Should the Games not be held in Berlin it would be one of the most serious blows which National Socialist prestige could suffer within an awakening Germany and one of the most effective ways which the world outside has of showing the youth of Germany its opinion of National Socialist doctrine'²⁰.

A campaign in the United States to boycott the Berlin Olympics quickly gathered support and the Amateur Athletic Union collected over half a million signatures in favour, though it was dismissed as the work of Communists and Jews. Brundage used increasingly anti-Semitic language in his private correspondence, claiming criticism was 'obviously written by a Jew or someone who has succumbed to the Jewish propaganda'²¹. In public he went on the counter-offensive, repeating the mantra of Olympic neutrality:

'All the real sport leaders in the United States are unanimously in favour of participation in the Olympic Games which are above all considerations of politics, race, colour, or creed'²²

¹⁸Quoted in Chris Weigant (2008) *The Olympic Torch Relay's Nazi Origins*

¹⁹ Quoted in Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On*, p74

²⁰Quoted in George Eisen, 'The Voices of Sanity: American Diplomatic Reports from the 1936 Berlin Olympiad', p68-69

²¹Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On*, p72

²²Guttmann, *The Games Must Go On*, p72



Eventually the USA did compete in Berlin, as did the half-Jewish German fencer Helene Mayer, whose selection amounted to little more than a cynical attempt to placate international opinion. The undoubted star of the Games was African-American athlete Jessie Owens who took gold in four events (the 100m, 200m, long jump and 4x100m relay), and demolished Hitler's theories of Aryan superiority in the process. His success is often used as evidence against those who would have boycotted the Games, but it is worth bearing in mind that contemporary opinion was far from unanimous. The Nazis pointed to the fact that Germany topped the medal table, ahead of a USA team larger than any that had before competed at an Olympiad. W.J. Baker records, 'The Olympic Games held at Berlin in 1936 were an unprecedented success: as a sporting spectacle as much as a triumph of propaganda for the National Socialist regime. Such were the opinions at the time'²³. This was certainly the feeling of Coubertin, who claimed Hitler had 'magnificently served, and by no means disfigured, the Olympic ideal.'²⁴ The IOC was equally impressed

by the Nazi Olympics. The format of the Berlin Games - with its opening and closing ceremonies, its Olympic torch, its two week duration, its pageantry and spectacle - have served as a template for all subsequent Olympiads.

Cold War, Boycotts and Protest

After the Second World War the Games resumed, staged in a war-ravaged London, with what is often dubbed the 'Austerity Olympics'. The IOC again attempted to position itself at the head of a movement based on 'redemptive and inspirational internationalism'²⁵. The IOC's official film of the London Olympics urged: 'V for victory, not in war, not in wealth, but in sportsmanship and peace.' The appeal to a common humanity without political division was an aspiration to which many could subscribe. Yet it was destined to fail as the realities of the Cold War ensued. It was inevitable that the relative success of East and West would be measured in gold, silver and bronze, no matter how much the IOC might protest that the 'Olympic Games are competitions between athletes in individual or team events and not between countries'²⁶.

Although initially ambivalent in its relationship to the IOC in the immediate post-war period, the Soviet Union was increasingly drawn into international sporting competition - on the strict understanding that defeat was unacceptable. Nikolai Romanov, the chairman of the Committee on Physical Culture and Sport, recalls: 'To gain permission to go to international

²³WJ Murray, 'France, Coubertin and the Nazi Olympics: The Response', p46

²⁴Quoted in WJ Murray, 'France, Coubertin and the Nazi Olympics: The Response', p53. The Nazi Foreign Office had spent much time courting Coubertin and had even nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

²⁵John Hoberman, 'Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism', p1

²⁶Olympic Charter, Chapter 1, section 6

tournaments I had to send a special note to Stalin guaranteeing victory.²⁷ A Soviet resolution of 1949 recognised the propaganda value of victories over competitors from the West:

‘The increasing number of successes achieved by Soviet athletes is a victory for the Soviet form of society and the socialist sports system; it provides irrefutable proof of the superiority of socialist culture over the moribund culture of capitalist states.’²⁸

In its first foray into Olympic competition at the 1952 Helsinki Games the Soviet Union finished second in the medal table behind the United States. In Melbourne 1956 and Rome 1960 these positions were reversed. It was a situation that did not go unnoticed by politicians in the United States. In July 1964, in the run-up to the Tokyo Games, Attorney General Robert Kennedy highlighted the increasingly important political role of the Olympics: ‘Part of a nation’s prestige in the Cold War is won in the Olympic Games. In this day of international stalemates nations use the scoreboard of sports as a visible measuring stick to prove their superiority over the ‘soft and decadent’ democratic way of life’²⁹. Senator Hubert Humphrey, soon to be Vice President, preferred more hyperbolic Cold War rhetoric, warning: ‘Once they have crushed us in the coming Olympic battle the Red propaganda drums will thunder out in a worldwide tattoo, heralding the ‘new Soviet man

and woman’ as ‘virile, unbeatable conquerors’ in sports - or anything else.’³⁰

The Games continued as a proxy for the Cold War, culminating in tit-for-tat boycotts of Olympic proportions. The US led a 62-nation boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games, ostensibly in protest at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Soviet Union reciprocated by refusing to participate at the 1984 Los Angeles Games. This was far from being the first or only time that the Games had been used to register a political protest. Twenty-two African nations boycotted the Montreal Games in 1976 in protest at the New Zealand rugby union tour of apartheid South Africa. The 1956 Games in Melbourne witnessed three separate boycotts from seven nations, including Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon refusing to participate following the Suez crisis³¹. At the same Olympiad, Hungary met the Soviet Union in the men’s water polo semi-final, less than a month after the crushing of the Hungarian revolution. The infamous contest, remembered as the Blood in the Water match, ended as the pool turned red. Hungary won 4-0.

It is the Mexico Games of 1968, however, that will long be remembered as the moment when sports and politics collided. In a year of protests stretching across the globe, 10,000 people had gathered in the Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City ten days before the Olympics were scheduled to start. Demonstrating against the cost of the Games and for democratic change they carried banners proclaiming, ‘We Don’t Want Olympic Games, We Want Revolu-

²⁷Quoted in J Riordan, ‘The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions’, p26

²⁸Quoted in J Riordan ‘Russia and Eastern Europe in the Future of the Modern Olympic Movement’

²⁹ T Hunt (2006) ‘American Sport Policy and the Cultural Cold War: The Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Years’, p275

³⁰T Hunt (2006) ‘American Sport Policy and the Cultural Cold War’, p275

³¹ Spain, the Netherlands and Switzerland all boycotted the games because of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. China boycotted following the inclusion of Taiwan who at that time were competing as the Republic of China.

tion!' Within half an hour the army moved in and opened fire and 325 protestors were murdered³².



In the United States the civil rights movement resonated inside the sporting world, finding its organisational expression in the shape of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR). Spearheaded by Harry Edwards, an African-American academic, OPHR sought to highlight the issues of racism faced by black athletes and attracted a number of high profile supporters, pushing strongly (though ultimately fruitlessly) for a boycott of the Mexico Olympics. They also called for the removal of IOC president Brundage, who they quite correctly labeled a racist. He responded by

dismissing the group as 'irresponsible publicity seeking agitators' and issued one of the most comically ill-fated injunctions in the history of sports:

'We must never permit the Olympic movement to be used as a tool or a weapon for any ulterior cause nor the Olympic Games to be a forum for demonstrations of any kind.'³³

Black American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos finished first and third in the men's 200 metre final respectively. On the rostrum at the medal ceremony both men bowed their heads, and raised gloved hands in black power salutes. Muhammad Ali, no stranger to either the Olympics or racism, described it as 'the single most courageous act of the century'. Smith explained the symbolism of the gesture:

'The right glove that I wore on my right hand signified the power within black America. The left glove my teammate John Carlos wore on his left hand made an arc with my right hand and his left hand also to signify black unity. The scarf that was worn around my neck signified blackness. John Carlos and me wore black socks, without shoes, to also signify our poverty.'³⁴

The pair were censured by the US Olympic committee and expelled from the Olympic village before being vilified by the press and receiving death threats on their return home. Other black American athletes would also use their Olympic success as a platform to make political statements. Bob Beamon wore black socks and Ralph

³²Chris Harman (1988) *The Fire Last Time*, p129

³³Quoted in Maynard Brichford (1998), 'Avery Brundage and Racism'

³⁴Damien Johnstone and Matt Norman (2008) *A Race to Remember*, p44

Boston went barefoot at the medal ceremony for the long jump. Lee Evans, Larry James and Rob Freeman, who completed a clean sweep of the medals in the 400m all wore black berets when collecting their medals. But it is the iconic image of Smith and Carlos, captured in a moment of dignified rage, which remains ‘arguably the most enduring image in sports history.’³⁵

The Neoliberal Games

The IOC likes to talk of the Olympics as being a ‘family’ or a ‘movement’, as though, to borrow a wretched phrase, we are all in this together. Yet its elitism is evident from the people it has placed at the head of its organization. Christopher Shaw notes: ‘Of nine actual or acting presidents, the IOC has put three barons, two counts, two businessmen, an overt fascist and a fascist sympathiser in its top job.’³⁶ The overt fascist of whom he wrote was the Spaniard, Juan Antonio Samaranch. As a teenager Samaranch had joined Franco’s National Movement, later becoming the President of the Barcelona Regional Council. Following Franco’s demise, Samaranch attempted to reinvent himself as a statesman in the world of international sport. As the investigative journalists Simson and Jennings describe:

‘like the astute politician he was for twenty-five years, Samaranch has not only reinvented himself, he has refashioned the Olympic movement in his own style of politics: the leader grants and accepts audi-

ences with heads of state; the leader issues orders; the leader selects new IOC members and imposes them on the movement; the leader knows best; the leader’s will is carried out; the leader appears at press conferences flanked by the banners of the movement.’³⁷

The IOC was transformed into the nerve centre of a rapidly developing corporate monolith, commanding an extraordinary budget. Jules Boykoff records that, ‘the IOC made a profit of \$383 million on the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, after routing a very substantial share of the \$2.4 billion total revenue to other parts of the ‘Olympic Movement’³⁸.’ Unsurprisingly the IOC has made tax dodging into an art form. The Host City Agreement stipulates that the IOC should pay no tax on money made through the Olympics, and in their Swiss base they are recorded as being a ‘non-profit’ organisation!³⁹ Like so many other corporate entities its members have been embroiled in bribery and corruption scandals, most notably before the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics when members of the IOC were found to have accepted ‘gifts’ from potential host cities in return for their votes. Despite assurances of reform, the IOC remains a singularly unaccountable group. In 2008 the British think-tank, One World Trust, ranked the IOC the least transparent of the 30 transnational organisations in its survey, below such luminaries of democratic accountability as the European Central Bank, Halliburton and Goldman Sachs⁴⁰.

³⁵Dave Zirin (2005) *What’s My Name Fool: Sports and Resistance in the United States*, p73

³⁶Christopher A Shaw (2008) *Five Ring Circus: Myths and Realities of the Olympic Games*, p67

³⁷Vyv Simson and Andrew Jennings (1992) *The Lord of the Rings: Power, Money and Drugs in the Modern Olympics*

³⁸Jules Boykoff, (2011) ‘The Anti-Olympics’, p42

³⁹Christopher Shaw, *Five Ring Circus: Myths and Realities of the Olympic Games* pp71-72

⁴⁰One World Trust, *2008 Global Accountability Report*

It was Samaranch who oversaw the explosion of Olympic sponsorship in the 1980s. In the previous decade the sale of television rights had been the IOC's main source of income, amounting to 98 per cent of their operational budget. The television rights for the 1968 Mexico Games, the first to be broadcast around the world via satellite, were sold for \$10 million. By the time of the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 the cost of purchasing the TV rights had skyrocketed to \$225 million. As the sums involved grew ever larger, Samaranch was eager to ensure that the IOC's revenue streams were not exclusively bound to the whims of television executives. To do that the Olympics had to be transformed from a mere sporting event into a global industry. The estimated 2.5 billion people who had watched the LA Games represented a monumental captive market, as Michael Payne, former IOC marketing director, explains, '*Nothing has provided sponsors with a stronger or more powerful unified global platform to connect with their customers than the Olympics.*'⁴¹

Paradoxically, Samaranch fulfilled his mission of Olympic profiteering, through The Olympic Partners (TOP) program, by *reducing* the number of official sponsors. The TOP sponsorships have generated massive revenues, \$279 million in 1993-1996, \$579 million in 1997-2000 and \$663 million from 2001-04⁴². It was inspired by the event in Los Angeles. In 1976 there had been 628 official Olympic sponsors and suppliers. The LA Games - the first purely privately financed Olympiad - cut these numbers substantially, to 34 sponsors, 64 suppliers, and 5 licensees. For the duration

of the Games the five ring Olympic symbol featured on TV programmes and advertisements, products were licensed and endorsed for the first time, corporate hospitality centers were introduced. It was the perfect example of the fusion of international sport with Reaganomics. However, not all of the IOC was enamoured of the corporatised vision. Sir Reginald Alexander, an IOC member from Kenya, rounded on Peter Ueberroth, head of the Los Angeles Olympic Committee:

'You, Mr Ueberroth, represent the ugly face of capitalism and its attempt to take over the Olympic Movement and commercialise the Olympic Games.'⁴³

The LA Games represented a watershed moment in Olympic history producing a profit in excess of \$232 million. At a time when many people, including some of those in the IOC, feared for the future of the Olympics, the success of Los Angeles made the hosting of the Games an attractive proposition once again, with governments motivated by the lure of the 'P' triad: publicity, pride and profit⁴⁴. Prior to the 2008 Games Chinese marketing officials concluded, 'The Beijing Olympics will not be about sport, it will be about creating a super brand called China'⁴⁵. In somewhat more circumspect fashion, Prime Minister David Cameron says:

'We're going to show that Britain is one of the very best places to live, to work, to invest, to do business and we're going to show that ours is

⁴¹Michael Payne (2005) *Olympic Turnaround*, p95

⁴²Christopher A Shaw (2008) *Five Ring Circus: Myths and Realities of the Olympic Games*, p70

⁴³ Michael Payne (2005) *Olympic Turnaround*, p11

⁴⁴ Robert K. Barney (2008) 'Some Thoughts on the General Economies of Cities/States/Provinces after Hosting the Olympic Games'

⁴⁵ S Kronick and D Dorne (2008) 'Going for an Olympic Marketing Gold' <https://www.chinabusinessreview.com/public/0501/ogilvy.html>

a proud, forward-looking and confident country⁴⁶,

The costs of London 2012 have already increased from an initial estimate of 2.4 billion to a figure of 11 billion. Both the Athens and Beijing Olympics ran over budget, and the 1976 Games in Montreal resulted in a deficit of more than \$1 billion. Before the opening of those Games the city's mayor, Jean Drapeau, had said, 'The Olympics could no more produce a deficit, than a man a baby'⁴⁷. In fact, it took Montreal 30 years to clear its eventual \$2 billion Olympic debt. To legitimise hosting an event that effectively nationalises organisational and infrastructure costs whilst ensuring maximum profitability for multinational corporations, governments have turned to the narrative of 'legacy'. In response to those dissident voices who have raised concerns over the cost of the London Olympics, the organisers have repeatedly claimed that not only will the Games 'inspire a generation', they will also result in inward investment and job creation.

In fact the effects of staging the Olympics have proved disastrous for the poor and 'threaten the basic rights and freedoms of residents in host cities, with particularly serious impacts on the lives of low-income and homeless people'⁴⁸. The promised employment opportunities have been temporary and poorly paid, while the urban regeneration has been little more than the gentrification of urban areas housing prime real estate that would, in normal times, be off limits to property developers. Estimates suggest that between the late 1980s and 2008 the Olympics have

been responsible for the displacement of 2 million people⁴⁹. This figure rises to 3.5 million with the inclusion of the Beijing Games⁵⁰. At recent Games every effort has been made to ensure 'undesirables' are removed from sight, in particular targeting ethnic minorities and the homeless. The Atlanta Games of 1996 saw 9,000 arrest citations written for the city's homeless population, while the Vancouver authorities made sleeping rough illegal before the Winter Olympics in 2010. London has engaged in its own programme of social cleansing, targeting prostitutes and relocating residents in Newham to the city of Stoke-on-Trent, over a hundred miles away. It is little wonder that every recent Olympiad has witnessed groups springing up in host cities in protest at the intrusion, effects and cost of the Games. As Helen Lenskyj observes:

'Most anti-Olympic groups had well-developed analyses of the links between Olympic sport and global capitalism, most notably the complicity of Olympic corporate sponsors in environmental destruction and human rights abuses, and the problem of the widening gap between rich and poor countries.'⁵¹

It would be fair to say that the protests in London have not, as yet, reached the levels seen before the Sydney or Vancouver Olympics, perhaps understandable given the unanimous support of politicians and the uncritical coverage the event has received in the media. The IOC, however, is

⁴⁶ Taken from David Cameron's speech to mark the opening of the Olympic Stadium in 2010

⁴⁷ Michael Payne (2005) *Olympic Turnaround*, p9

⁴⁸ Helen Lenskyj (2008) *Olympic Industry Resistance*, p28

⁴⁹ Helen Lenskyj (2008) *Olympic Industry Resistance*, p16

⁵⁰ John Harris, 'London 2012's Stupendous Insanity Leaves Sport As An Also-Ran', *The Independent*, 30 April 2012

⁵¹ Helen Lenskyj (2002) *International Olympic Resistance: Thinking Globally, Acting Locally*

not one to leave these things to chance. Rule 61 of the Olympic Charter states: 'No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in the Olympic areas'⁵². In practice these 'areas' are not restricted to sporting venues but stretch across the entirety of a host city. Vancouver saw the banning of any posters that did not celebrate the Games, with the police given the right to enter homes to remove any offensive material.

Resistance, however, has not been entirely silenced. Occupy London set up camp on Leyton Marsh, the site of a proposed Olympic training center, before being forcibly evicted by police. Meredith Alexander resigned from the *Commission for a Sustainable London 2012* in protest at the increasingly cavalier attitude the organisers were taking in their responsibility towards the environment. Without a hint of irony BP, the company responsible for the Deepwater Horizon explosion in 2010 that saw 20 million gallons of oil pour into the Gulf of Mexico, have been selected as the chief sustainability partner of London 2012. Equally controversial has been the choice of Dow Chemicals to provide a wrap for the Olympic stadium. As the owners of Union Carbide, Dow has failed to take responsibility for the 1984 Bhopal disaster in India that killed 25,000 people. Campaigners have shown that the inclusion of such companies makes a mockery of the IOC's claim to see the environment as the third pillar of Olympism, behind sport and culture.

London transport workers have threatened industrial action over the Olympic period, despite the offer of a derisory 'bonus' for the extra work the event will entail. This comes after Len McCluskey, general secretary of the Unite union, had refused to rule out strikes during the Games. Meeting

universal condemnation from all the main parties, McCluskey was derided as unpatriotic. The coalition government in the UK is invoking its own version of the Olympic Truce - the temporary cessation of hostilities between city-states for the duration of the ancient Games - by attempting to suspend our side of the class war in the national interest. Yet the Olympics is in itself a site of confrontation, having become both the justification and mechanism for the pursuit of a barely disguised neo-liberal agenda. As Ashok Kumor succinctly summarises:

'Any reading of Olympic history reveals the true motives of each host city. It is the necessity to shock, to fast track the dispossession of the poor and marginalised as part of the larger machinations of capital accumulation. The architects of this plan need a spectacular show; a hegemonic device to reconfigure the rights, spatial relations and self-determination of the city's working class, to reconstitute for whom and for what purpose the city exists. Unlike any other event, the Olympics provide just that kind of opportunity.'⁵³

Countries of the World Unite - You Have Nothing to Lose But the Race

How may we explain the undoubted popularity of the Olympics? Strangely the answer has little to do with its profile as a sporting event. Of the most watched sports on a global scale (soccer, cricket, American football, baseball, Formula 1,

⁵²Olympic Charter

⁵³Ashok Kumor (2012) 'Want to cleanse your city of its poor? Host the Olympics'

athletics, rugby) only athletics and soccer appear at the Games - and very few people take the men's football seriously, although the women's competition is another matter entirely. The popularity of the Games cannot be explained by the inclusion of sailing, table tennis or Greco-Roman wrestling. Part of the explanation lies with the mass marketing of the Olympics which, as we have seen, has become one of the most recognisable global brands. In addition, our rulers eagerly encourage the petty nationalism that is part and parcel of the Games. But neither of these factors can be said to apply exclusively to the Olympics.

To fully understand the appeal of the Games it must be recognised that the Olympic ideals of mutual understanding, respect and solidarity strike a chord with millions of people around the world - no matter how flawed and hypocritical these ideals may be under scrutiny. In a world stained and scarred by poverty, war and bigotry the Olympic Games has become an event that 'nullifies political and social realities, creating a dream world, if just for a few moments, an illusion of peace, goodwill and harmony'⁵⁴. John Carlos recalls how, as a child growing up in Harlem, the Games had a huge impact on his life:

'When I first learned about the existence of the Olympics, my reaction was different than anything I ever felt. The sheer variety of sports, the idea of the finest athletes from around the globe gathering and representing their countries: it was different, and the fact that it only happened every four years just made it feel like an extra kind of special.'⁵⁵

Combining spectacle and myth the Olympics invoke a spirit of internationalism that, although never challenging the structures of capitalism, hints of a world in which people come together in shared humanity and culture. Fleeting they touch on a human aspiration that transcends the mundanities of everyday life, but simultaneously they are subsumed within a tidal wave of flag-waving nationalism. It is this tension, reformist and idealistic in character, which lies at the heart of Olympic Games. It goes without saying that the internationalism of the Olympics is far removed from the internationalist tradition of revolutionary socialism, and was understood by Coubertin himself. After the carnage of the First World War, and in the light of the Russian revolution, he wrote:

'There are two ways of looking at internationalism. One way is the way of the socialists, of the revolutionaries and in general of the theorists and utopians. They think of a gigantic egalitarianism, which will turn the civilized world into a state without borders and barriers, and transfer the organisation of society into one of the dullest and most monotonous tyrannies. The other way is the way of those men who know how to observe objectively and who take reality into account instead of following their own favorite ideas. They have realised for quite some time that national peculiarities are an indispensable prerequisite for the life of a people and

⁵⁴George Eisen (1984) 'The Voices of Sanity: American Diplomatic Reports from the 1936 Berlin Olympiad' p56

⁵⁵John Carlos & Dave Zirin (2011) *The John Carlos Story*, p13

that contact with other people will strengthen and enliven them.⁵⁶

The Baron's description of socialism may be pure caricature but the division he highlights is real. Yet, much of the criticism leveled at recent Olympiads, has revolved around its accompanying neo-liberal circus; its over-commercialisation, the woeful environmental and human rights records of the sponsors, the lack of democracy and accountability. It is a most valid and useful critique but all too often its proponents leave the Games themselves unchallenged. A socialist critique must not only rage against the corporate takeover of the Olympics but also the premise on which they rest. It is a critique that was at the centre of the workers' sport movement, which rejected the artificial divisions of imagined communities to emphasise the common bonds of workers in all countries.

Professional sports - competitive, aggressive and so often seen in a national (indeed nationalistic) context - are well suited to function as a transmission belt for capitalist ideology. The Olympic motto, *Faster, Higher, Stronger*, could easily be the slogan of a major corporation. And, of

course, it is. Sports are shaped by and reflect the society in which they are born, so it comes as no surprise that the Olympics have assumed an increasingly neo-liberal visage over the past 30 years. Similarly it is inevitable that the political struggles of nation states and competing ideologies will manifest themselves in sporting contests - no matter how much IOC presidents may preach the supposed non-political purity of their Games. Crucially, as Mike Gonzalez explains, 'Sport, like every other cultural activity, is a contradictory space where there is a struggle for appropriation. Sometimes, our side can take it back⁵⁷.' When the struggles of the oppressed and exploited erupt then they too can overflow and find expression in the sports stadium, as the actions of Tommie Smith and John Carlos demonstrated at the 1968 Olympics. The London Games will take place in a period of global dissent, protest and revolution rivaling the famous year of the Mexico Olympiad. What chance is there at these Olympics, a Games of illusory ideals decked out in dollar signs, that we might witness an athlete climbing the medal rostrum to reveal a t-shirt proclaiming, '**OCCUPY**'?

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⁵⁶Quoted in D. Quanz (1993) 'Civic Pacifism and Sports-Based Internationalism: Framework for the Founding of the International Olympic Committee', p18

⁵⁷ Mike Gonzalez (2002) *The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game*

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