

# Politics, not sport, is the purpose of the Olympic Games

Chris Berg

On the March 26 1938, six months after he died, Pierre de Coubertin's corpse was exhumed from its grave in Lausanne, Switzerland.

His heart was cut out and transported to Olympia in Greece. The heart of the founder of the modern Olympics was then reburied in a ceremony attended by his long-time friend, Nazi bureaucrat, and organiser of the 1936 Berlin Games, Carl Diem.

The tomb of Coubertin's heart has remained a spiritual centre of the Olympic movement. The tomb was the first destination of the Beijing torch relay—after the torch was lit with the sun's rays and a parabolic mirror by an official Olympic 'Holy Priestess', of course. And late last year the tomb was the site of a ritualistic olive tree planting, to symbolise the Olympic movement's appreciation of the environment, and to demonstrate the support of Coca-Cola for the Games.

These bizarre rituals, performed around the decomposing body organ of a dead Frenchman, are emblematic of the sometimes odd, sometimes deeply disreputable, and always lumbering and heavy-handed symbolism that has soaked the Olympic Games for a century. The torrent of symbols, emblems and rhetoric that accompanies the Olympics is supposed to convince us that the Games have a moral and ethical stature beyond reproach.

But all this pageantry obscures the Olympics' essential purpose—first and foremost, the Games are designed to shine glory upon the nations that hold them. National politicians and government use the Olympics to achieve their individual or national goals.

Certainly, the politics lying behind each Olympics may often be diffuse, but it is overt. Sport may be the style of the Olympics, but nationalism and geopolitics are the content.

## The ideology of 'Olympism'

For such a long-running institution, the Olympic Games to a remarkable degree still reflect of the idiosyncratic vision of the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the French baron Pierre de Coubertin.

Coubertin was born into a Catholic and Royalist family in 1863, but in the turbulent ideological climate of the French right-wing in the Third Republic, his political views quickly diverged from the traditional. From a modern perspective, his politics were quirky, even contradictory; he described himself as a democrat, yet at the same time nominated the 'triumph of democracy' as one of the four political innovations which humanity could have gone without. But he was in many ways typical of his era—a conservative aristocrat whose political and moral views had much in common with the left-wing progressives of the time. While conservatives like Coubertin rejected the utopian dreams of their socialist counterparts, they shared with progressives and socialists an antipathy towards individualism, a belief in the power of experts, a deep faith in the state, and an obsession with proto-totalitarian concepts like 'moral hygiene,' 'national fitness' and eugenics.

In sport, the conservative progressivist Coubertin found an outlet where he could express all of his political and moral views. While many were searching for national meaning after the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Coubertin argued that 'sports can provide the virile formula on which the health of the state can be founded.'

But most importantly for the development of the Olympic ideology, Coubertin complemented this nationalist ethos with a staunch internationalism. Coubertin founded the Olympic movement with a doctrine of 'universalism', which as it appears in the most recent Olympic Charter is described as 'any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement.' But as John Hoberman writes in *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics and the Moral Order*:

What this has meant in practise is that the IOC has turned a blind eye to any sort of political crime committed by a member of the Olympic movement. In September 1978, the President of the IOC Lord Killanin, made this claim: 'I am not for one moment saying we have any right to tell what governments should do in the interests of their own country...' Such a disclaimer is made to preserve the 'universality' of the movement. What is thereby forgotten is that another side of universality is the failure to discriminate.

It is this failure to discriminate that led the Olympic movement to proclaim its support for 'universal fundamental ethical principles' while at the same time throwing its support behind the three largest dictatorships of the twentieth century—Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and now Communist China. Certain-

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Protesters are led away from Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico City on October 3, 1968. In the lead up to the Mexico City Olympics, the 'Massacre of Tlatelolco' claimed up to 300 lives, although the Mexican army reported only 27 deaths.

ly, this is slightly unfair to China—in 2008 its human rights record is poor, but is markedly better than it was during the Great Leap Forward—but the country is still a dictatorship with at least 4000 domestic political prisoners. This would, however, have been fine by Coubertin, who dismissed ethical questions with a trite affirmation of moral equivalence. In an interview during the 1936 Berlin Games, he argued that:

It is good that each nation of the world be granted the honour of putting on the Games and of celebrating them in their own manner, in accordance with its own creative powers and by its own means. In France they are disturbed by the fact that the Games of 1936 were illuminated by a Hitlerian force and discipline. How could it have been otherwise?

This doctrine of 'universality' above all other considerations was also the lynchpin upon which the Soviet bloc was able to hang their claims that the communist world was being unreasonably ignored by the IOC.

After all, for Coubertin, a nation's political system is merely a reflection of its culture. For the Olympic movement, totalitarianism is not an aberration, but

an accepted part of the international cultural patchwork.

As a consequence, there is very little in the Olympics' doctrine of universalism that suggests any allegiance to 'fundamental ethical principles'.

### Pagentry and politics

For the cities and corporate sponsors of the games, Olympism and its doctrine of universality are not much more than a philosophy of convenience; a pre-packaged ideology ready to be adopted when the Olympics come to town. Few outside the IOC share Coubertin's views on the moral neutrality of political systems, or, indeed, the IOC's view that politics has nothing to do with the Olympic ceremony. Instead, for the host nations, the games represent an easy opportunity to conduct domestic and international politics without the distraction of being accused of doing so.

Even the athletes, standing on the winners podium, draped in their national flag and singing their national anthem, must realise that politics, not sport, is the dominant Olympic event.

For much of the life of the modern Games, politics was defined by the Cold War, which divided participating nations into clearly delineated factions. The nationalistic passions inflamed by this international and ideological rivalry

became the primary characteristic of the Games in the second half of the twentieth century.

Australians may remember Melbourne 1956 through sepia-tinged nostalgia, but the political circumstances of those Games were controversial and impassioned. They were held in the international atmosphere created by the Suez crisis and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. The then President of the IOC, the American Avery Brundage, in an attempt to separate the Melbourne Games from the fragile international situation, argued desperately that 'the Olympic Games are contests between individuals and not between nations.' The President of the Netherlands Olympic Committee, which boycotted the Games responded bitterly: 'How can sports prevail over what has happened in Hungary? How would we like it if our people had been atrociously murdered, and someone said that sports should prevail?'

His questions are surely more morally clear than any of the vague platitudes contained in the lavish Olympic Charter.

The IOC's pleas for calm had little effect on the political aggression displayed during the contests. A water polo match between Hungary and the Soviet Union was a violent blood bath, but Hungary managed a 4-0 victory.

The attitude described by an Ameri-

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can contestant at Helsinki (the site of the 1952 Olympics) was characteristic of many of the Olympics during the early Cold War period:

[Russians] were in a sense the real enemy. You just loved to beat 'em. You just had to beat 'em. It wasn't like beating some friendly teams like Australia. This feeling was strong down through the entire team, even [among] members in sports where the Russians didn't excel.

Not only has the international political context of the Games undermined its claim to the moral high ground, but the Olympics have themselves been affiliated with state violence. As Hoberman writes, 'the world of sport has given rise to more bizarre, violent, aberrant, and even criminal behaviour than its faithful public is disposed to recall.' The most notorious example of this was the Tlatelolco Massacre, which occurred just ten days before the 1968 Mexico City Games, where the Mexican government fired upon a demonstration of 5000 students demanding greater human rights. Some estimates of the death toll at Tlatelolco range up to 300 people.

And quite apart from the failure of the IOC to influence China's poor human rights practices in the lead up to Beijing, critics of the communist regime can point to mass home evictions to make way for construction. One left-leaning human rights group, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, claims that there have been over 1.25 million Chinese forced to resettle, although the group has not made their report public, apparently to protect their sources. The Chinese government only acknowledges 6,000 homes seized, all with adequate compensation. Nevertheless we know that like many other previous host cities, Beijing has launched a program to 'clean up' the city of beggars, hawkers and prostitutes before the tourists arrive.

Much of the pageantry of the modern Games was developed by the totalitarian hosts. Nazi propagandists invented the torch relay in order to ferry Western journalists around idyllic German villages, in support of the Nazi's rural ideology.

And the opening ceremony to the Moscow Games was reportedly the most expensive ever held, a gigantic billboard for the social superiority of Soviet communism, setting the stage for the lavish 'cultural' ceremonies of the coming decades.

The Olympics offer totalitarian or otherwise oppressive governments an opportunity to repurpose the publicity accorded to sport for the benefit of the state and its ideology. The official website of the Chinese Olympic Committee is unambiguous about Beijing's ideological content, advertising its National Fitness Program, which has been hard at work since 1995 'promoting mass sporting activities on an extensive scale, improving the people's physique, and spurring the socialist modernisation of our country'.

The same website laments the attempted politicisation of the Beijing Games by 'some Western forces' and 'separatists'.

For democratic states, the political purposes may be different, but they are still clear. In Sydney 2000, the government emphasised Australia's tourist potential. Politicians wanted their country to be seen as more than just a 'good source for raw materials—a perpetual cry of Australia's economic interventionists.

## Economic distractions

Part of the reason we be can sure that it is politics that is at the centre of governments' relationship with the Games is because they cost a great deal but provide little economic benefit. Politicians eager to host the Olympics talk up their financial and social benefits—rhetoric which the IOC is more than happy to encourage.

The Olympic movement has had a turbulent economic history. For most of its history, the Games have been overwhelmingly supported by government finances, with corporate sponsorship and the sale of television rights playing a supportive role. This model of Games funding reached its zenith with the Munich 1972 and Montreal 1976 Olympics. But the City of Montreal ended its closing ceremony with a deficit of 2.7 billion dollars (in 2000 terms) which it only managed to finally pay off in 2006.

After Moscow 1980, the next Games held in a democratic nation were the Los Angeles Games of 1984, and following a significant protest movement, the citizens of LA refused to provide any public funds for staging the Olympics.

In 1984 there were no formal organisational links with the city, and the United States Olympic Committee managed to skirt IOC regulations which would have otherwise compelled them to provide public funds. As a consequence, the 1984 Games were the first to be fully paid by the private sector, with only minimal infrastructure upgrades and sport facilities provided by the city.

Successive games have managed to slowly reinvolve public financing, and the Sydney Games set a new standard in government involvement, when the NSW government and Commonwealth provided US\$1 billion (in year 2000 dollars). For Beijing 2008, the Chinese government's habit of trying to take credit for private investment makes it hard to properly account for the taxpayer's contribution, but the Belgian analyst Gilbert Van Kerckhove conservatively estimated a figure of roughly \$5-6 billion.

But what for? Supporters of the Games can cite a myriad of potential benefits of staging the Games. Few of them stack up.



Nazi soldiers salute the lit Olympic flame during the opening ceremony of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

Tourism is the most common perceived benefit from the Olympics. Tracking the long term impact of the Games on a city's tourist market is tough. In *The Economics of Staging the Olympics*, Holger Preuss argues that it is impossible to prove that the Sydney Games increased Sydney's tourist market, as the impact of September 11 on the world's tourist market muddies the evidence. But September 11 occurred more than twelve months later and had worldwide, not Australia specific, impacts.

Furthermore, as Preuss concedes, local tourism markedly decreased during the Games period. As an example, Sydney Zoo saw a 300 per cent decrease in tourism. Certainly, many studies—often commissioned by governments seeking to defend their policies—proclaim long term tourist increases to be in the hundreds of thousands.

But the causal link between a city hosting the Games is far from established. Calgary, site of the 1988 Winter Games, saw a 12 per cent decrease in tourism immediately following the

Games, and a 10 per cent decrease the following year.

An increasingly common benefit claimed from the Olympics is infrastructure improvement. As the argument goes, staging the Games allows a city to conduct widespread infrastructure upgrades, avoiding the normal political bargaining required to achieve even modest investments. From this perspective, the hosting of the Olympics is merely an excuse to conduct the normal business of municipal government, allowing the city to upgrade its airports, road and rail networks and telecommunications services.

Undoubtedly, hosting the Olympics sparks a frenzy of big infrastructure projects.

But a study by a group of RMIT University economists demonstrated that while overall the market did not respond to the announcement that Sydney was to host the Games, the only sector that did respond positively was the construction industry. Building firms—and politicians interested in

basking in the bright light of political glory—are the only unambiguous beneficiaries of the Olympics, outside the athletes themselves.

But infrastructure disasters are common in the history of the Games—many projects, like the Montreal-Mirabel International Airport, while initially praised, are quickly revealed to be little more than boondoggles.

At their best, the Olympics are a government supported circus provided by politicians from democratic countries who want the world's media to flock to their most attractive city.

But at their worst, the Olympics have provided totalitarian regimes with pre-packaged marketing programs, allowing them to paper-over serious human rights issues while they pretend to be enlightened members of the international community. The moral authority that the International Olympics Committee continues to claim has been repeatedly shattered by the experience of 100 years of the Olympic Games.

