

Sport politics and the Olympics

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Sport and politics have long been linked, but the Olympic Games represent the most political sports event of all. The following article focuses on two of the most important aspects of the Olympics (and sports 'mega-events' in general) that students of politics and international relations could make a major contribution towards: the use of the Olympics by states to showcase the host nation and the hoped-for 'legacies' that arise from them. Both aspects are, of course, interlinked: the 'legacies' are often put forward as the key rationale for the bidding for, and hosting of, the Olympics.

Keywords: sport politics; Olympic Games; soft power; leveraging; legacies

Allen Guttman, in his masterful account of the history of the Olympics, points out that the very inception of the modern Olympic Games in Athens, 1896, was political (Guttman, 2002). Little has changed since to refute this view – the world's greatest sports mega-event has been used and manipulated by states of all political hues as a means to further their own interests in a variety of different ways. The event itself has impacted on states, their sports policies and systems of sport and has been the driving force behind sports funding by governments seeking to finish higher up the Olympic medal table. There are, of course, a wide variety of topics that could be discussed in which politics are integral to the bidding for, staging of, protesting against, reporting on and even – on occasion – taking part in, the Olympics. Martin Polley, for example, in his review of recent Olympic politics texts, mentions the topics of central and local governments, regeneration, social inclusion, housing, infrastructure, health promotion and policy making by supranational bodies, before himself focusing on security and performance-enhancing drugs (Polley, 2012, p. 3). John Horne and Garry Whannel (2012, p. 128), on the other hand, pick three broad categories of work on the politics of the Olympics: boycotts, 'reputation promotion' (that is, image enhancement) and the 'neo-liberalisation' of the Olympics. Clearly then it is not possible to discuss *all* of the political aspects of sport politics and the Olympics and do justice to each topic. For this reason, the following is focused on two areas that ought to be of interest to political scientists and international relations scholars

(1) the rationale behind states hosting the Olympics; and (2) the (hoped for) Olympic legacy arising from them. These themes cover what could be considered some of the most salient questions that students of politics ought to be asking themselves. Why do governments invest so much into elite sport and sports mega-events? What kind of legacy an Olympic Games produce? A final section considers (briefly) how the underlying values of Olympism – that is, an emphasis on peace and the educational and moral value of taking part in sport (McFee, 2012, p. 37) – can be reconciled with the commercialisation of the Games.

Interestingly, Polley (2012, p. 2) celebrates the move away from the early literature on this area with its narrow focus on ‘international relations and diplomacy’ by such scholars as Richard Espy (1979) and John Hoberman (1984). The immediate ‘post-Espy literature’ (Polley, 2012, p. 2) saw Christopher Hill (1992) at least branching out to include international sports organisations and Barrie Houlihan (1994) offering some theoretical insights, albeit still from the discipline of international relations (IR). Lincoln Allison (1986; 1993; 2005), in a series of edited works, paved the way for the diversity of sport politics topics that dominate the more recent literature. While plurality of approach is indeed to be celebrated, including within disciplines (see Marsh and Stoker, 2002, p. 3), the situation today is that the very people one might expect to turn their attention to such a political event as the Olympics, and the political use of sport in general – political scientists and international relations scholars – are noticeable by their absence. In particular, there is a dearth of analyses on the politics of sport by political scientists. Given the tales of corruption, political intrigue and backbiting; the ability of sports events (momentarily) to bind national communities; the knack of sports events to mirror real-world rivalries; and the power of unelected and undemocratic organisations to grant global events that have far-reaching implications for sovereign states, you would have thought that the political science community would have had a field day studying sport, but very little has been produced in the field of political science. This holds for the US too – apart from some excellent work by Andrei Markovits around the emergence of a global sports culture (Markovits and Rensmann, 2010), or using sport as a testing ground for theoretical development (Sala *et al.*, 2007). It would appear that IR and the study of sport still suffer from a case of ‘mutual neglect’ (Taylor, 1986). As Roger Levermore and Adrian Budd have pointed out, IR (and political science) has barely had an impact on the study of sport in general and on the political use of sport by states in particular (Levermore and Budd, 2004). What has happened recently, however, is that there is a nascent literature developing within IR that is taking as its focus many of the issues discussed below, above all the political use of sports mega-events by states (see, for example, Black, 2007; 2008; Black and Van Der Westhuizen, 2004; Cha, 2009; Cornelissen, 2011; Darby, 2002; Finlay and Xin, 2010). The majority of scholars in the works spawned by London 2012, and those involved in ‘Olympic studies’ more broadly, are, nonetheless, sociologists, historians or communications experts (see, for example, Bairner and Molnar, 2010; Horne and Whannel, 2012; Miah and Garcia, 2012; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2012).¹

Hosting the Olympics: In Search of the ‘Twin Suns of Prestige and Profit’²

The rationale behind states bidding for and hosting the Olympics is very similar to that for hosting the FIFA World Cup (as the most watched global sport spectacle) and even so-called ‘second-order events’ such as the Commonwealth Games (Black, 2008), often a precursor to an Olympic bid.

The first observation to be made about the Olympics – and that other global sports mega-event, the FIFA World Cup – is that such events are increasingly going to ‘new lands’ (Blatter, 2011). There appears to be a clear shift from what could be termed developed democratic states to ‘emerging’ democratic and non-democratic states. Between the Beijing summer Olympics (2008) and Qatar World Cup (2022), some eight major sports events will have taken place in ‘emerging’ states, with the next winter Olympics taking place in Russia (Sochi, 2014), the summer Olympics in Brazil (2016) and the 2018 winter Olympics in Pyeongchang (South Korea). Establishing such a trend is one thing and understanding the motives of the

¹ In addition, more critical research is needed. The general thrust of much work on the Olympics, including the majority of reporting and press coverage, is positive, celebratory and uncritical. Those who ask difficult questions about the Games – for example, whether the vast resources states allocate to building new stadia and urban ‘regeneration’ projects would not be better invested elsewhere – are often grouped along with anti-Olympic protesters and looked upon as pessimistic cynics or simply moaners (see Lenskyj, 2000; also Bairner and Molnar, 2010, pp. 13–4).

² Guttman (2002, p. 175).

international governing organisations deciding on them is relatively clear (i.e. the International Federation of Association Football [FIFA], the International Olympic Committee [IOC], and so on), as they wish to broaden their markets, and spread their brands further afield. But what about the motives of the states themselves and how do they differ from developed democratic states? Despite the potentially infinite number of contextual reasons behind a state wanting to bid for, stage or excel at an Olympics, a few generic reasons appear to stand both the test of time and the differences in regime type. Without wishing to underplay the complexity and variety of state strategies geared towards the Olympics, many state strategies – and much of the rationale this section seeks to uncover – can be captured by the concept of ‘soft power’. In the broader ‘mega-events literature’ ‘soft power’ is often mentioned, but rarely if ever explicitly explained or worked through with empirical examples. This is clearly an area in which political science and international relations scholars could make a key contribution.

‘Soft power’ is linked to, and bound up with, states’ public diplomacy and image management strategies. It offers an overarching term to capture a state’s strategy, *inter alia*, to improve its international standing – not by influencing ‘the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants’ (coercive power), but rather by attracting them and co-opting ‘them to want what you want’ (Nye, 2004, p. 2). For Joseph Nye the changing nature of international relations after the end of the Cold War, and the risk attached to deploying traditional military forms of power, has led to ‘intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions’ becoming more important in inter-state relations (Nye, 1990, p. 167). Nye does not, however, advocate the replacement of traditional ‘hard power’ with ‘soft power’ in international relations; what he does advocate is that states ought to make more use of the ‘soft’ variety and, if possible, in combination with ‘hard power’ to develop what he terms ‘smart power’ (Nye, 2004, p. 32). Sport is clearly part of a ‘soft power’ strategy and hosting sports mega-events – especially the Olympics – is clearly considered by states to provide a major contribution in the process of improving their nation’s image, profiling and showcasing themselves globally and ‘attracting’ others through inbound tourism, increased trade and a growing sense of national pride through the often experienced, but under-researched ‘feel-good’ factor that accompanies major sports events (see Chalip, 2006, for an exception). The contest around the bidding process – increasingly evident in the last fifteen years or so – attests to states’ desire to draw on the resource of sports ‘megas’. If cultural resources are part of the new ‘politics of attraction’ or ‘new diplomacy’ (Melissen, 2005), the Olympics can be understood as part of a soft power strategy – alongside the spread of a host’s language, heritage and broader culture – wielded to showcase nations on the international stage. A recent example where this was a key priority is China, which used the Beijing Games to enhance its image on the world stage (according to some scholars – Cull, 2008, p. 134; Tomlinson, 2010, p. 14 – China was equally interested in the Olympics as an internal, domestic tool for its own credibility).

The example of China is instructive in indicating the Janus-faced nature of staging sports mega-events. On the one hand, if your state happens to suffer from a poor image based on the past then a major sports event *could* be the best way to change that image for the better. On the other hand, however, showcasing your nation to a global audience and intense media scrutiny may not provide the ‘Olympic effect’ (DeLisle, 2008, p. 45) you are after and may not always be the best way to improve your image and increase your influence on the world stage. Beijing’s opening ceremony, offering a mix of ancient tradition and the new, modern nation, can be read as an attempt to project China’s power to a global audience (the difference in style and funding of the opening ceremony from London 2012 – £64 million spent in Beijing as opposed to London’s £27 million – could not have been starker). Weixing Chen (2010, p. 815) offers a gushing description of China’s use of the event which ‘through the imposing opening ceremony of the Beijing Games ... displayed to the world a Chinese-style narrative, highlighting the theme of harmony’. Susan Brownell offers a much more sober reflection of what the Games mean for the most populous nation in the world and the one ‘farthest from the political centres of the

West both geographically and culturally' (Brownell, 2009, p. 1; see also Brownell, 2008). Brownell, a sinologist, has shown how the attempt to understand China through the 'Western liberal orthodoxy' has led to a number of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. For example, Brownell cites the mechanics of the important 'host-guest relationship':

In accord with the Confucian tradition, hosting the Olympic Games was said to be similar to inviting a guest to one's home: the host's hospitality should help forge a relationship of trust that facilitates an honest exchange of opinions afterwards ... Only an uncivilized guest would start criticizing the host before he even arrived, and this was how many Chinese people viewed the Western criticism of China during the lead-up to the games (Brownell, 2012, p. 310

The successful bid to host the 2008 Olympics itself needs to be understood as part of China's rise in prominence in recent years. It is clear that Beijing has done for China what elite sport success achieved for another authoritarian regime, East Germany: international recognition (see also Dennis and Grix, 2012; Xu, 2006, p. 104). Despite the difficulty in measuring the impact that Beijing has had on China's international influence, Michael Hall (2006, p. 64) is correct in arguing that internationally the ability to attract events is often regarded as a performance indicator in its own right of the capacity of the city or region to compete.

Wolfram Manzenreiter, however, doubts whether the attempt to leverage the Olympics in 2008 as a 'public diplomacy tool in shaping the image of China abroad' (Manzenreiter, 2010, p. 30) succeeded. He suggests that post-Games surveys tended towards seeing China in a worse light than before, although this could be due to other factors (Manzenreiter, 2010, p. 40). Nevertheless, domestically the Chinese authorities described the Olympics as their 'coming out party' (Cha, 2009, p. 3).

In the Western press, Beijing (Olympics, 2008) and the 'second-order' events of Delhi (Commonwealth Games, 2010) and Ukraine (2012 co-host of the Euro 2012 UEFA football championships) are examples of where a soft power strategy can have the opposite to its intended effect. China, although a more 'closed society' than most, still operates in a 'world of the Internet and global satellite news' which means that the nation will be 'known as it is, not as it wishes to be' (Cull, 2008, p. 137) – or, as Brownell believes, as the West wishes to see China, producing a constant stream of bad press around human rights issues. The disastrous preparations and subsequent media exposure leading up to the Delhi Commonwealth Games – images of crumbling building work, wild monkeys and child labour were beamed across the world – have probably put paid to India's aspirations of becoming an Olympic Games host in the near future.³ Ukraine too has experienced the scrutiny of the world's press. Instead of its co-host status catapulting the ex-communist dictatorship into line for EU accession, the global media attention and scrutiny have focused closely on the negative aspects of racism and political intrigue. Even London 2012 had a few weeks of pre-event poor coverage: the M4 motorway, the main artery from Heathrow airport to the Park, was closed due to deterioration; G4S, the private security firm employed to secure the Games, admitted that it would not be able to provide the requisite number of staff needed on time and so the army were, quite literally, sent in to secure the event. In general, however, once a sports mega-event starts, sport takes centre stage and the mistakes made in the run-up are quickly forgotten in a 'manufactured consent' that surrounds such big events. Only after the event do we see people considering whether it was wise to invest upwards of £20 billion (when security costs are included) of public money into an event that is likely to impact little on the majority of British citizens (aside from any ephemeral 'feel-good' factor).

In the history of the manipulation of sport for political means it is worth briefly mentioning the central role Germany has played. Germany's contributions to sport politics and

³ See <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/604196.aspx> [Accessed 22 June 2012], for an assessment of India's chances of staging an Olympic Games prior to the Commonwealth Games.

the Olympics include hosting the first real sports mega-event, the so-called 'Hitler Games' of 1936 to showcase Germany and the Nazis. Ironically, perhaps, the Nazis introduced the torch relay, the inception of which was to propagate the Nazi regime, a tradition nowadays seen by some as the very symbol of community engagement of the Olympic movement (Miah and Garcia, 2012). The Berlin Games were clearly a precursor of modern-day sports mega-events or 'the pinnacle of Olympic spectacle' as Christopher Young (2010, p. 96) states, comparable to the 'Hollywood show' of the Los Angeles Olympics (1984) and Beijing's bombastic affair in 2008 discussed above. Despite Berlin's 10,000 dancers performing a play and a 3,000-strong choir (Senn, 1999, p. 60), the event appeared to do little to add to Germany's soft power or change perceptions of the country abroad, despite the intense propaganda that accompanied it (Young, 2010, p. 101). Seventy years later Germany pulled off what most commentators (see Fan, 2006; Manzenreiter, 2010) would consider rather difficult: altering its image abroad through hosting a sports mega-event. The German soft power strategy around the 2006 FIFA World Cup consisted of a long-term, carefully planned and focused set of campaigns to improve Germany's standing and image abroad coupled with a fan-led approach to putting on the tournament that portrayed to the world a Germany that was party-loving, carefree and fun, while retaining the ability to put on an extremely efficient, smoothly run event. The German leveraging strategy – specific media campaigns, the introduction of specific 'Fan Zones' for up to 20 million people – resulted in a very well-received event that impacted positively on people's view of Germany and the Germans (see Federal Government, 2006; Grix, 2012; Infratest, 2006).

Importantly, Germany's (2006) case points to leveraging tactics to get the most out of sports mega-events. In the literature on soft power, including from Nye (1990; 2004; 2008) himself, little is discussed about any universal mechanisms or tactics that states can use to maximise the long-term benefits in their soft power strategies. Hosting an Olympics is clearly one such tactic; however, how the event is managed, 'signalled' to the international stage (Preuss and Alfs, 2011) and how an increase in global exposure actually plays out in international relations needs further research (see Hayden, 2012). Nye speaks cryptically of 'enabling conditions' created by soft power (Nye, 2008, p. 101); work is needed on clarifying how a state's influence can be enhanced through such 'conditions' and how hosting a successful Olympics impacts on, creates or accelerates this process.

Olympic Legacies and the Commercialisation of the Games

'Legacy' is a concept that has a multitude of meanings and in combination with 'sports mega-event' or 'Olympics' it does not become any clearer (see Preuss, 2007). Hoped-for Olympic legacies range from an increase in the number of people participating in sport or physical activity due to the Games ('participatory legacy'), to urban regeneration, economic growth, an increase in tourism, a 'feel-good' factor among citizens and a boost to the nation's image (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006). In the run-up to 2012 concerns about an Olympic legacy became more and more pronounced. The reason for this was simple: a 'legacy' (or 'legacies') is what we get in return for our investment and the hoped-for legacies generally double up as the rationale for staging the event in the first place. As sports mega-events become ever more bombastic, the expectations of a 'legacy' rise accordingly and the IOC now insists that a 'legacy strategy' is in the bidding document.

A 'legacy' can also be how a Games is remembered. Berlin (1936) and Munich (1972) – in which eleven Israeli Olympic team members and one West German policeman were killed by the Palestinian Group Black September – have their own 'legacies'. Los Angeles 1984 has gone down in sports history as the 'most commercialised' yet, although London 2012 looks set to assume this title (see below). Thomas Carter (2012, p. 56) credits the LA Olympics with 'transforming the Olympics from a celebration of the human spirit into a money-making machine'. Montreal (1976) is usually trotted out as the classic example of the 'white elephants' that can be left once the Olympics move on (taxpayers finished paying for it in 2006), although

Athens (2004) is probably a better example of how an over-investment in subsequently under-utilised sporting infrastructure can exacerbate financial ruin. In addition to the definitional problems of the concept 'legacy', its application to a wide variety of contexts renders its meaning difficult to pin down. These include the environmental, social, cultural, educational, health, economic and urban legacies and citizens' psychological well-being. Laurence Chalip, Danny O'Brien and Mike Weed (Chalip, 2004; 2006; O'Brien, 2007; O'Brien and Chalip, 2007; Weed, 2009) are correct to suggest that too much academic interest has been in the area of legacy and the attempt to measure it in *post hoc* 'impact studies', but far too little effort has been put into studying 'leveraging' strategies, that is, the mechanisms by which states seek to and successfully leverage the sports mega-events for social, economic, environmental and, as discussed above, reputational or 'image' benefits. Effectively, 'leveraging' is taken to mean 'those activities ... which seek to maximize the long-term benefits from events' (Chalip, 2004, p. 228), that is, the means of obtaining a 'legacy' from an event. These range from campaigns promoting the event and the host location, usually with the purpose of stimulating incoming tourists and direct investment to the host nation, to enhancing business relationships between a variety of stakeholders, for example, the IOC, the host government, sponsors of the event and so on.

Of all the promised 'legacies' for London 2012, the participatory legacy (especially among the young) is the one the UK coalition government is convinced will materialise. The problem is that there is no evidence to suggest that elite sport events inspire non-sporty people to take up sport. No previous Games has set out to 'inspire a generation' to physical activity like London; some evidence exists which indicates that lapsed sports people or those already involved in sport can be inspired even further (Weed *et al.*, 2009), but these are not the hard-to-get-at groups that need to be mobilised. Ironically, perhaps, the coalition government has taken resources out of schemes that have been shown successfully to promote sport participation among children (the School Sports Partnerships) and put them into a controversial annual Olympic-style sports event, the School Games (Jefferys, 2012, pp. 262–3; Keech, 2012, p. 93).

One legacy that London is certain to leave is that of a 'security' Olympics. Events like those in Munich in 1972 haunt organisers; security concerns since 9/11 have seen Olympic security grow in both scale and complexity. This process was compounded by the July 2005 London bombings which took place the day after the announcement that London would host the Olympics in 2012. It is relatively clear why terrorist groups would target the Olympic Games: it is the largest sporting event in the world, attracts a (cumulative) global audience in excess of 4 billion (in Beijing, for example [Horne, 2010, p. 29]), with over 200 nations present, and it represents the most potent and symbolic arena in which many states attempt to increase their national prestige through winning medals and enhancing their position in the medal table. London, then, is set to be remembered as the most 'securitised' Games to date, with some commentators referring to the event as 'lockdown London' (Milne, 2012, p. 31; see also Coaffee, 2012). The scandal around the private security firm G4S, charged with securing the event, raises central questions for the student of politics: the strategy of outsourcing security to a private firm had to be brought back on track by public services (police and army) which, at the same time, are undergoing major cuts in their budgets in order to reduce public spending to allow the employment of more 'efficient' private sector providers.

The Neo-liberalisation of the Olympics?

The Olympics are big business. The hard-hitting, straight-talking Helen Lenskyj (2000) talks of the 'Olympic industry', refusing to engage with the 'fluffy' IOC terms 'Olympic family' or 'Olympism'. Lenskyj criticises the IOC for its claim to be 'the moral authority for world sport' and the 'supreme authority' over the staging of the Olympics (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 23). She points to the extraordinary examples of the IOC effectively conferring political recognition on states (for example, East Germany), despite having no diplomatic status to speak of (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 23). The 'Olympic industry' is evident in the 'neo-liberalisation' of the Games in general (Horne

and Whannel, 2012, pp. 135–6). John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson go so far as to state that ‘The most compelling and fundamental change is the way the Olympics have moved steadily and inexorably away from being an amateur, peoples’, sporting festival towards a state-choreographed, commercially driven, internationally controlled, media mega-event’ (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2012, p. 243).

Both of these descriptions are relevant for 2012. While ‘legacy’ promises are made, founded on hope rather than any tangible evidence or clearly spelled out leveraging strategies, the ‘corporate’ side of the Games is a reality. The majority of arguments in favour of the commercialisation of the Olympics also cite the ‘legacies’ that will accrue by virtue of staging the event. However, how do we reconcile the call for us to ‘inspire a generation’ of youngsters through elite sport to take up physical activity and reduce our increasing rates of obesity (the latest figures indicate that some 31 per cent of boys and 28 per cent of girls between the ages of two and fifteen are classified as ‘obese’ in the UK – NHS, 2011), while taking money from the transnational companies often linked with the obesity crisis in the first place, and who play an increasingly large role in Olympic internationalism (Coca Cola, McDonald’s – see Finlay, 2008, p. 379). The Olympic Park had already broken records before the Games even began: the Australian-owned Westfield shopping centre is the largest in Europe and the site boasted the largest McDonald’s outlet in the world. As part of the IOC stipulations, the Olympic Park acted as a quasi-tax haven for the ‘core sponsors’ selling their merchandise, so that no tax was paid on transactions within the Park and no money went back into the public purse that paid for it.⁴ For Horne the compliance by hosts with the IOC’s increasingly long list of demands leads to the Olympics becoming ‘“fat cat” projects and media spectacles benefiting mostly the corporations that sponsor the Games, property developers that receive public subsidies, and the IOC which secures millions of dollars from television corporations and global sponsors’ (Horne, 2010, p. 28).

Only two key areas of sport politics and the Olympics have been touched on in this section: the legacies of the Olympic Games and the commercialisation of the event. For the student of politics and international relations, such themes offer a rich seam of work with which to gain a clearer understanding of how the state interacts with sport.

Conclusion

As the Olympics becomes bigger, more expensive and expansive it would appear that sport is taking more of a back seat to politics, the wishes of multinational corporations and the conditions and stipulations set by the Swiss-based organisation, the IOC. While the diversity of approaches from a wide range of academic disciplines to the study of sport politics is welcome, it is time for political scientists to follow the burgeoning group of IR scholars in turning their attention to an increasingly complex area of study: sport politics and the Olympics. The Games offer an ideal test case in questions around resource allocation, political intrigue and corruption, hegemonic and ‘manufactured consent’ about the positive aspects of such events, private versus public service provision, the corporatisation of publicly funded sports events, and the ability of an unelected, non-transparent organisation to impose legislative changes on the host state relating to tax, regeneration and sponsorship – in short, much more than simply the study of sport. The two areas focused on here – the Olympics as part of a state’s soft power strategy and the need for work on understanding how best to ‘leverage’ legacies from the Games – are ones in which political science and international relations can make a major contribution.

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⁴ Some of the main sponsors opted to pay tax after a large-scale online protest.

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