

Design Flaws

of the Olympics

Brian Martin

The modern Olympics were established with the highest ideals, including fostering international reconciliation. Yet in practice the Olympics have become the plaything of powerful interest groups, especially governments and corporations. So great is the divergence between rhetoric and reality that it makes sense to examine the assumptions underlying the design of the games. Help in explaining the Olympic trajectory may be found by looking for 'design flaws', namely problematical assumptions inherent in the conception of the games.

A casual spectator might be forgiven for thinking that problems with the Olympics are relatively minor. There are scandals involving drug-taking, nepotism and bribery, to be sure, but this does little to tarnish the overwhelming spectacle involving participation by thousands of dedicated athletes from around the world. A closer look, though, shows that appearances hide a more sordid reality.

Nationalism

The games have long been the tool of governments, both reflecting and fostering nationalism. Competitors are seen as representatives of states. If a country does not participate in the games, then its athletes cannot participate either. Victories are treated as a cause for national rejoicing, with the playing of national anthems emphasising the point.

Because the Olympics are seen as a repository of high moral value, any association with the Olympics tends to have positive spin-offs. Hence, the privilege of holding the games has long been a source of national and civic pride, with the opportunity to showcase a country and especially the

host city. The most notorious case of this was the 1936 Berlin Olympics, used by Hitler to demonstrate the achievements of Nazi Germany.

By the same token, governments may use the Olympics to score points against other governments, most prominently by boycotts. To withdraw participation from a high-value event such as the Olympics symbolises a correspondingly high level of moral outrage. The US-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics—punishment for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—and the payback Soviet-led boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics are recent examples. In earlier years there were intense struggles in the Olympic movement, and sometimes more widely, over participation of the two Germanies, two Chinas, two Koreas, Rhodesia and South Africa.

The Olympic movement has capitalised on the widespread perception that international sporting competitions foster goodwill between countries. In its effort to foster participation at all costs, it avoids making any moral judgment about governments. Hence, even the most repressive regimes are welcomed as Olympic hosts, and government policies in running sports and selecting athletes are not scrutinised. After World War II, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) bent its rules to encourage participation by communist states. In its efforts to promote universal participation, the Olympic movement has sacrificed its moral standards. The IOC's lack of a moral position is indicated by the eagerness with which both fascists and communists have embraced the games.

Communist governments found international sport a convenient avenue for promoting

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their image since performance is relatively predictable and controllable through physical and mental training, diet, and drugs. Most governments have adopted the communist model of centralised funding and training.

Boycotts and other sorts of overt politicking are symptoms of the fact that the Olympics have long been tools of governments. The political value of the Olympics to governments hinges, ironically, on international sports being seen as above politics.

Commercialism

The Olympics have also become a tool of commercialism, a trend that has accelerated in recent decades. Companies and products benefit from association with the Olympics, which have an aura of both virtue and excellence. The games are one of the greatest media events on earth, with television broadcasting to billions of people, a marketer's dream. As a result, companies line up for Olympic sponsorship.

In earlier days of the Olympics, the ideal of amateurism was enforced, though this primarily served to keep out working-class competitors. As the commercial and national exploitation of sport expanded through the twentieth century, amateurism was increasingly undermined by fake jobs (especially in Soviet bloc countries), scholarships and under-the-table payments, for example from running shoe manufacturers. Eventually the pressures for professionalisation became too great, and today the truly amateur Olympic athlete is the exception.

Successful athletes in the most prominent sports now can become rich through sponsorships. Prize money is of secondary importance to those with a media profile. Athletes benefit from their association with the Olympics, which in turn reflects on their sponsors.

With the advent of global television coverage, the IOC has become a major transnational corporate enterprise itself, with hundreds of millions of dollars in income hinging on television rights. Ironically, the IOC has turned the image of high-minded sporting competitions, seemingly above the sordid realm of politics and commerce,

into a vehicle for making huge amounts of money. Like any corporation and its trademarks, the IOC jealously guards which companies are allowed any association with the five Olympic rings.

Just as the IOC has avoided any moral judgement of governments, so it has abdicated any moral role in relation to corporate sponsorship. Whether running shoes are made by Third World workers in horrible conditions at low pay or whether a drink is of nutritional value is of little concern to the IOC, except for possible bad publicity. Set up originally as a competition for amateurs not needing commercial support, the Olympics have become a spectacularly successful vehicle for commercialism.

Design Flaws

What is it exactly that makes the Olympics such a useful tool for nationalism and commercialism? Surely that was not the intent of Pierre de Coubertin and the other founders of the modern Olympics, who pursued their vision of fostering international harmony and promoting fitness in an era long before the global marketing of sports. Several design features of the Olympics can be singled out as collectively responsible for making the games so adaptable

to the interests of states and corporations.

Firstly, the Olympics Games are, obviously, games. One of the important characteristics of games is that they are worlds unto themselves, with rules to define behaviour and an explicit separation from outside concerns. To be sure, many games in practice are marked by racial prejudice, gender discrimination, economic inequality, and numerous other social dynamics. But the ideal of the game involves a bracketing or exclusion of these factors, with all attention on abiding by the artificial reality of the game itself. It is this that makes games such a valuable escape from the oppressive realities of people's lives. Participants and spectators alike can concentrate on performances and dramas in a miniature social world in which talent, effort and luck combine to produce outcomes.

Ironically, because games are experienced as separate realities, they are ideal for exploitation

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by groups that would like to use them for their own purposes. Any enterprise that is perceived as autonomous and apolitical—sport, science, art—is all the more effective as a political tool when it can be subtly tied to vested interests.

It is not widely known that the Olympics from 1912 to 1948 included events such as sculpture and writing. These events did not last, perhaps because they do not sufficiently match the image of the game as being autonomous of social interests.

Secondly, the games are competitive. There are winners and losers, with the assumption that winners are superior in some way because these are games of skill rather than luck. The competitive element makes the games mesh nicely with the interests of states, which themselves are in a type of competition for power and status. The victories of Olympic athletes are commonly seen as victories for their respective countries. Thus, Olympic competition can easily become a vicarious competition between governments. The tallies of medals are testimony to the importance of victory.

Competition in sports is also congenial for commercialism. By dividing participants into competitors who can be identified, marketeers can attach products to identifiable individuals and teams. So dominant has competition become in sports that the alternative of cooperative sport is submerged. If, for example, a player who scored in soccer immediately joined the other side, the clarity of the team as well as the conception of competition would be destroyed. If swimmers were given handicaps, any participant would have a roughly equal chance of winning, reducing its significance. This is not to mention cooperative games such as a group that tries to keep a ball in the air or a “fun run” in which no times are kept.

Thirdly, the Olympics are a competition of elite performers, thereby giving them great symbolic value. Olympians are presented as the best that their countries have to offer, and gold medalists are feted as world champions. Governments and corporations are alike in their eagerness to be associated with those who are seen to be the world's best.

Because the number of Olympic athletes is

relatively small, it is possible for governments and corporations to reap large symbolic returns through a relatively small investment. Governments set up special institutes, scholarships, and training programs for elite athletes in order to increase their chances of Olympic glory. Corporations provide lucrative endorsements to the most promising and successful athletes as the most cost-effective way of obtaining advertising spin-offs.

The Olympics may be contrasted to the alternative of nonelite sports in which there are large numbers of participants. It is far more expensive for governments to fund facilities for an entire population than for an elite few. Likewise, corporations have little to gain from sponsoring thousands of nonelite athletes. By being an elite competition, the Olympics were ideally designed to be a tool for nationalism and commercialism. Opening the games to all comers—which would require many sites and an extended period of time—would reduce the symbolic value of the Olympics to that of a series of local sporting events.

Fourthly, many Olympic events are well suited for spectators, especially those taking place in stadiums or pavilions. With the development of television coverage and its close-ups and instant replays, some events, previously almost unobserved, are now available to spectators. Nevertheless, some events are far more appealing to spectators, notably those with a discrete location and moderate duration. For example, running events from ten seconds to a quarter of an hour can maintain interest, but after that attention tends to wane. A five-day running event would not have so much audience appeal; orienteering has never become much of a spectator sport.

With the vast increase in spectator numbers, the value of the Olympics to states and corporations has increased correspondingly. Achievements of athletes, national anthems and advertisements now reach a truly global audience.

In summary, four features of the Olympics—encapsulated by the statement that they are exclusively competitive games between elite athletes with large numbers of spectators—make them ideal vehicles through which states and

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corporations can pursue their interests.

Other Problems

In a critique of the Olympics, susceptibility to nationalism and commercialism would come high on the list of problems. But, sad to say, there is much else that can be criticised.

The IOC is a totally undemocratic body, whose members receive large amounts of funding from the IOC itself. Some also profit handsomely from cities bidding to hold the games. Other sorts of corruption include cover-ups of numerous positive drug tests and of pay-offs to boxing judges.

The fact that the games are exclusively competitive has already been mentioned. This means that most aspiring competitors are ultimately losers, with many of them wasting years of effort that might have been spent more productively. This is often forgotten in the focus on winners. In competitions, the aim often becomes winning at all costs, often at the expense of values such as fair play, friendship and mutual help. Forms of physical activity that are more participatory and cooperative are marginalised.

Instead of participation, the Olympics encourage spectatorship. Watching sports such as the Olympics serves to integrate spectators (especially men) into the dominant value system of competitive striving for success, something useful in an era of global corporate competition.

The games have long been male dominated. They have always included far more men than women as participants, coaches and officials. Many national Olympic teams include no women. The sports included in the games are mostly ones that give men an advantage. (Women have an equal opportunity in events based purely on skill rather than strength, and have an advantage, for example, in ultra endurance events.) The IOC and national Olympic committees are dominated by men and male perspectives.

The games also have a built-in racism, in that they were set up by European elites, choosing western sports, which now have become world sports. The IOC continues to be dominated by western perspectives on sport, while indigenous

games have been sidelined.

Many sports are modelled on skills for war and some involve violence themselves, such as boxing. Spectators can become more aggressive as a result of watching competitive sports. There is no evidence that sporting events reduce the incidence of wars, murders or other violence in society.

Olympic-level competitions are increasingly a struggle between applications of advanced science and technology to equipment, training, psychology and drugs (both legal and illegal). Bodies are treated as machines, as means to the goal of winning.

Finally, the high symbolic value of the Olympics means that protest groups attempt to use the games as a stage, most notoriously in the terrorist attacks at the 1972 Munich Olympics. Governments do what they can to present a pleasant image and prevent disruption. Host cities have displaced neighbourhoods to build facilities and moved out homeless people. They have also curtailed civil liberties and repressed dissent. Heightened popular aspirations and government apprehension about

protest before the 1968 Mexico City Olympics contributed to a series of clashes culminating in a massacre in which paramilitary police killed hundreds of protesters.

Conclusion

Many if not all of these problems can be traced to the design flaws in the Olympics, namely their establishment as games based on competition between elites, with spectators. Given these fundamental problems, the Olympic movement has been remarkably successful in presenting the games as the epitome of harmonious internationalism, with the focus on the struggles of dedicated athletes.

In this circumstance, most commentators seek only to reform the Olympics to avoid some obvious problems, such as IOC corruption around the selection of host cities. Various solutions have been proposed, such as having a permanent location such as Athens or having multiple sites to reduce the burden on a single city. To overcome national chauvinism, it has been proposed that athletes represent only themselves and not countries, perhaps

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having common uniforms and eliminating team sports. These sorts of ideas are sensible, but they have little chance of implementation since the IOC and national sports organisations are too oriented to state and corporate imperatives.

The trouble with reforms is that they do not go to the heart of the problem, namely the design flaws. It is useful to ask, what would you get if you went back to design a harmony-producing activity? Instead of competition between elites watched by spectators, an alternative would be cooperative and participatory—and not necessarily a game. Many such alternatives exist today, such as stamp collecting, community gardens, email discussion groups, amateur theatre, and (noncompetitive) aerobics. They have a far greater potential for fostering local and global harmony than international competitive sport, however reformed.

Recommended Readings

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Boundary Riding

Mrs Chong walks her new suburb every morning, wearing her conical straw hat, and carrying a short stick for the dogs that might attack her but never do. She can read the street signs, but cannot pronounce the longer names. Though she is pleased to be here with her son and his family, she regrets that she will never be buried in Henan Province with her husband and his forebears. Still, the family plot her son has already purchased in the Chinese section of the local cemetery is something to be proud of.

Mrs Chong enjoys playing with her grandchildren every day after school, and has already taught them several traditional songs. Yesterday her elder grandson told her he had just learned about the Dingo Fence, much longer than even the Great Wall. Perhaps one holiday they will all go there, have a family portrait taken in front of its grandeur. But in a few minutes she will be back at her son's place, drinking tea.

Ross Clark

composing haiku
down by the harbour
wind curls the paper

Gordon Dickens