

# Heroes of Beijing: The Triumph of the West

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While most of the recent attention that has been focused on the Beijing Olympic Games has been concerned with civil rights and environmental issues, virtually no comment has been made on the fact that by hosting the games, China becomes yet one more country to enter into what is essentially a pact with the devil with capital on the one hand and western sporting “ideals” on the other.

The debate about Beijing’s right to host the Games contains an implicit belief that hosting the Olympics is “a good thing” and that it should therefore be granted only to “good” countries, with “good” being defined by western nations. To question the emphasis of the debate on human rights and the upcoming games is not to imply support for China’s record. However, it is to argue that we should not allow outrage at humanitarian injustice to give succor to a self-delusory belief in the wonders of western democracy and, specifically in this instance, the moral worth of the Olympic Games.

## Sports: War Without the Shooting

Much analysis of the relationship between sport and politics has been concerned with the ways in which nation states seek to promote themselves, or simply carry out their business, using sport as a useful and highly visible medium [1]. During the Cold War, for example, it was apparent that the Soviet Union and most, if not all, of its east European neighbors used sport to advertise their particular brand of communism.

International rivalry was not only acted out on the athletics track or on the high beam but also impacted the wider context of events such as the Olympics, with the United States of America leading a boycott of the Moscow games in 1980 and the Soviet Union and its allies responding in kind when the Olympics moved to Los Angeles in 1984. Related to this is the fact that nation states also put considerable efforts into acquiring the right to host major events, which are then turned into spectacular exercises in self-promotion by the successful bidders. Thus, there can be little doubt that most national leaders in the modern world are highly conscious of the role that sport can play in boosting confidence and gaining markers of esteem.

Another separate, but arguably closely related, use of sport occurs in the diplomatic arena. There exists a school of thought in certain governmental circles and even more obviously at the level of sports administration that sport is a valuable tool in assuaging international tensions and, in some cases, even helping to broker peace. The process has been referred to as “ping pong diplomacy,” a nod in the direction of American attempts in the 1960s to improve relations with China by establishing contact through the use of table tennis players as quasi envoys [2].

More recently, qualified claims have been made with respect to the integrative role that sport has

played or can play in peace processes in such places as Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Although assertions of this sort must be viewed with a certain amount of caution, what is not in doubt is the extent to which many nation states have invested substantial amounts of money in sport and leisure facilities in an effort to lessen anti-social behavior in general and especially the violence that is associated with inter-communal tension. Nevertheless, this kind of social engineering through sports has been also viewed with considerable skepticism not least by those who argue that, by their very nature, sports are more likely to be catalysts for violence than vehicles for spreading harmony.

All of the above considerations were influential in prompting China to host the Games in Beijing in 2008. There was the desire to put the country in the shop window, the need to improve relations with other countries and a professed willingness to try to heal wounds where those exist. Needless to say, this has not been wholly successful so far. Nor should the prognosis for the Beijing Games' legacy be particularly optimistic. But as George Orwell might have asked "how could it be?"

According to Orwell, international sporting competition can best be described as "war minus the shooting." The statement is sufficiently ambiguous as to be open to two radically different interpretations. On the one hand, Orwell may have been arguing that international sporting competition acts as a safety valve which makes warfare increasingly less likely. But, in fact, he actually believed that international sporting competition keeps alive those very tensions out of which violent conflict is often the inevitable consequence. Sport is necessarily competitive and, by implication, potentially conflictual. It is also an important element in the construction and reproduction of social identities. It brings people together. About that there can be no doubt. It does so, however, in contexts which are arguably more likely to exacerbate tensions than to help to resolve them. This "fact" of sporting life can be particularly problematic for newly established nation states, the rulers of which may be inclined to look to sport in their endeavors to foster a sense of national unification.

### **Winners, Losers, and the Also-Rans**

If the Beijing Olympics fail to bring greater harmony to the world, they will not be the first or the last Games to fall short in this regard. However, to the delight of western leaders, once the opening ceremonies are completed, there will be no further need to voice concern about the host country's record on human rights. What really matters now is the fact that China has bought into the extravaganza of commodification that is modern Olympism and, in so doing, the country's buy-in to consumer capitalism is almost complete.

Regardless of the pious statements about peace and harmony expressed at regular intervals by those who lead the international Olympic movement, arguably the greatest achievement of the Games has been to see off the challenge of all those who have proposed and put into practice alternative ways of playing and organizing sport. The Soviet Union and its satellites surrendered their opposition to bourgeois sport. The workers' sport movement tried and failed to usurp the status of the Olympic movement. Now China has joined the club in the most expressive of ways. Most important of all, this is not just a matter of how we view sport. Rather our approach to sport reflects and in turn consolidates a broader social vision. We are interested only in winners. Losers deserve and get nothing. Aesthetic considerations count for little except in those events where dubious judging raises more questions than answers.

Serious as China's human rights abuses are, perhaps even more frightening is the prospect of a world in which it is deemed to be acceptable that everyone can be classified as either a winner or a loser. If winning is so important, then winning at all costs, using whatever means are available, is to

be applauded. This is the message that inevitably leads to cheating – in politics and on the stock market just as much as on the athletic track.

Many theorists of globalization alert their audience to the threat posed to nations and nation states by global forces. In this respect, the Beijing Olympics will highlight the fact that there is little to fear at least for the foreseeable future. The Games themselves, and especially the opening ceremony, will be replete with Chinese national (and nationalistic) imagery. There will be no mistaking in which country this global mega event is taking place. Indeed, although global in their scale, the Games will remain, as they have been since their inception, international in terms of the structure of competition.

Nation states will compete to move up the medal table and the flag of the People's Republic of China will likely be hoisted more than most, accompanied on countless occasions by the playing of the Chinese national anthem. The ultimate winners, however, will never stand on a podium although their logos will be on view throughout the course of the event. Transnational corporations will reign supreme in Beijing just as they have been doing for at least the past thirty years and western capitalist values will have taken another step closer to the winning line.

It is difficult to identify where future resistance will arise from to the dominance of western sporting "values" or the ethics of consumer capitalism that run rampant at the Olympics. Parts of the Islamic world offer some challenge to dominant western values in sport and in society more generally. And developing countries have stood up to western powers at the World Trade Organization, stalling a new round of trade talks.

Arguably, however, the best hope for a better sporting future and a more socially just world for all sadly rests on the current economic downturn combined with not unrelated environmental challenges. In such circumstances, can sport continue to sponsor massive salaries or will major leagues implode as the crisis deepens? Can mega sporting events persist in a world where each individual journey damages the environment and the movement of thousands of athletes from one event to another can easily be interpreted as unnecessary self-indulgence on a massive scale?

By the time London 2012 comes round, the world of sport and the world in general may well be very different. In the meantime, sit back, relax, and enjoy and, while you do so, let's hear it for the true heroes of Beijing – Nike, Adidas, Coca Cola, and the rest!

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## **P.S.**

\* From Foreign Policy In Focus. [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org) Editor: Erik Leaver:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5425>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See FPIF's *What do Governments Want from Sport and What do they Get?:*  
<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5424>

[2] Ssee FPIF's *Beyond Ping-Pong Diplomacy:* <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5426>