

# A Summer of Discontent - Olympics and popular protest

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**The Rio Olympics start in one month — they won't be the first games to spark popular protest.**

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*"We are not elected. We are self-recruiting, and our terms of office are unlimited. Is there anything else that could irritate the public more?"*

So spoke Baron Pierre de Coubertin [1], French patrician and president of the International Olympic Committee (1896-1925) in a 1908 address to his IOC colleagues. Over a century later, the disconnect between the Olympic Movement and civil society is even greater and the lack of accountability all the more glaring [2].

Public resistance to the games is nothing new: the Depression-hit residents of Sacramento held up placards in 1932 demanding "Groceries Not Games!" And in 1968, Mexican security forces massacred scores of protesters in the Tlatelolco Plaza [3].

But over the past four decades, this dissent has become increasingly sophisticated, as activists have shifted their focus to trying to scupper the Olympics at the bid stage. In Denver, Colorado in 1976, residents mobilized against their own city's bid for the Winter Olympics, forcing the IOC to move the event to Innsbruck, Austria [4].

More recently, public disaffection has manifested in a number of decisive interventions: voters in Stockholm, Munich, and Krakow all vetoed their cities' bids for the 2022 Winter Games. Organizers had to choose between Beijing and the Kazhak capital, Astana. Voters in Hamburg, Germany, rejected their city's 2024 bid.

When referenda aren't provided, the public still weighs in. The campaign group 38 Degrees [5] successfully compelled a number of major London 2012 sponsors to forego their IOC-approved tax breaks. Bostonians expressed their gratitude for the US Olympic Committee's selection of Boston for the 2024 Summer Games by staging a mass protest.

The IOC's self-serving rhetoric about Olympian values and legacies is no longer convincing: a great many residents of potential host cities seem to agree with Jules Boykoff's assessment that the games are little more than "a freeloading parasite."

Boykoff's *Power Games: A Political History of the Olympics* explores public discontent with the Olympics and the IOC [6]. But it's really two books in one: a historical overview of the Games'

checkered history and a searing indictment of the IOC's hypocrisy and hubris.

## **Prizes and Politics**

Boykoff — a politics and government professor at Pacific University and former soccer player — starts his retrospective with the first modern Olympics, held in Athens in 1896. Coubertin's project had lofty aspirations: to emulate the Ancient Greeks by projecting the Olympic values as a transformative “philosophic-religious doctrine.”

Many of Coubertin's successors have shared his missionary zeal, like Hitler apologist and all-round eccentric Avery Brundage [7] (nicknamed “Slavery Bondage” by colleagues on account of his bullying temperament). Boykoff quotes Brundage waxing lyrical about how the Olympic movement would act as “a protective antitoxin neutralizing the infections of future wars” in, of all years, 1938.

But the idea that the hallowed crucible of sports could be insulated from politics has always been a pipe dream. Boykoff's survey of the various political controversies that have erupted at the modern Olympics doubles as a shadow history of twentieth-century political turmoil.

Irish athletes at the 1906 Games in Athens refused to don the Union Jack [8], sporting bright green blazers embossed with shamrocks. Track athletes Peter O'Connor and Con Leahy unfurled a large green flag with an Irish nationalist slogan from the flagpole during their medal ceremonies.

In 1908, women's liberation took center stage as feminist activists disrupted the games to advocate for universal suffrage.

And after the Russian Revolution, the USSR became a hot button at a number of games: following the Soviet Union's violent repression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, a water polo match between the two nations descended into violence [9].

In 1968, Czech gymnast Vera Caslavská protested the Soviet assault on Czechoslovakia by looking down and away on the medal stand while the Russian national anthem played [10].

The US boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Russians returned the favor four years later by absenting themselves from Los Angeles.

The issue of apartheid South Africa disrupted the games for a decade [11]: after numerous nations threatened to boycott, the IOC withdrew South Africa's invitation to the 1964 and 1968 Games, before expelling South Africa from the Olympic Movement in 1970.

For American athletes, US segregation came to the fore. Jesse Owens's own country snubbed him in 1936 [12]: Southern newspapers whitewashed their coverage, and President Roosevelt declined to send him a note of congratulations.

At the 1968 Games, Tommie Smith and John Carlos performed their now-iconic raised-fist salute in support of the US Civil Rights Movement [13].

In the post-Cold War era, human rights concerns have eroded the Olympics' universalist brand: the 2008 Beijing Games were a spectacular showcase of state-of-the-art, high-tech surveillance in one of the world's most secretive regimes, and the Sochi Games spotlighted Russia's mistreatment of its LGBT community.

## The Gentleman's Games

The Olympics' much-vaunted "values" have always been somewhat ill-defined. Amateurism has been particularly troublesome. This ideal is rooted in the ideology of the nineteenth-century English private school system, which saw disinterested, hobbyist sportsmanship as inherently more gentlemanly than professionalism.

If the idea of insulating the Olympics from the pernicious intrusion of commercialism was laudably noble, the conflation of amateurism with independent wealth was deeply problematic, blatantly contradicting the Games' universalist pretensions; Coubertin's Games excluded not only anyone who had sought to make an income from sport, but also anyone who made their living out of manual labor.

In response, working-class athletes convened their own, hugely successful Workers' Olympiads [14], in Frankfurt in 1925 and Vienna in 1931.

The Frankfurt games featured 150,000 participants from nineteen countries, and the Vienna event attracted 80,000 athletes from twenty-three nations. (A Spanish-hosted Olympiad scheduled for the summer of 1936 was curtailed by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War [15].) Doubtless perturbed by the specter of a credible rival to the Olympic brand, the IOC ultimately relaxed its admission criteria.

But change was grudgingly slow. Avery Brundage — every inch the cartoon villain of *Power Games* — insisted that abandoning the principles of amateurism would "sound the death knell of the Games," and tight restrictions against professionalization kept the spirit of Coubertin's amateurist creed alive.

Boykoff recounts several instances of high-profile athletes being stripped of medals or barred from participation for having earned a little income on the side. Jesse Owens, who declared bankruptcy in 1939, famously recalled, "I had four gold medals, but you can't eat four gold medals."

If Brundage's stance seemed anachronistic in his time — he joined the IOC board in 1937 and assumed the top job in 1952 — his insulation from the athletes' material realities was in a sense characteristically Olympian.

The IOC today evinces this same sense of obliviousness. It imposes monstrous fiscal burdens on host-city taxpayers [16] and fends off dissent with overblown and invariably undelivered promises of urban regeneration and environmental sustainability.

Between 1960 and 2012, the average cost overrun for a host city was 179 percent. Montreal set the precedent in 1972 when it went \$1.5 billion over budget, and it has gone downhill since then. Most egregiously of all, Greek taxpayers paid 85 percent of the \$16 billion price tag for the 2004 Athens Games.

Whatever this is, it isn't neoliberalism. Rather, it's a massive state subsidy of private enterprise, sustained, Boykoff notes, by "a stringent regime of rules and regulations." Politicians no longer pretend that the Olympics will make money for the host city.

Instead, hosting serves as an invitation for foreign capital investment — an enormous, vastly expensive television commercial, funded by the taxpayer. Boykoff describes the 2016 Rio Games as "the symbolic transformation of Rio into a business-friendly metropolis smack in the center of the circuit board of capital." [17]

## Cracks in the Facade

Leftist sports books tend to be a mixed bag, but Boykoff's is a credible work, not least because he doesn't seem to have an axe to grind with sports per se.

There is some "bread and circuses" stuff about governments using sport as a tonic to revive a beleaguered populace, but the broader narrative points away from such reductionism.

Boykoff also proposes a number of eminently practical reforms to the Olympics conundrum: create independent review boards to scrutinize the economic and urban planning strategies, hold the bid to account, and to enforce sustainability promises; align host city selections with human rights principles, like those set out in the Olympic Charter; broaden the IOC's membership to include a more representative cross-section of humanity.

So while *Power Games* is unrelentingly critical it is also constructive. Boykoff's bottom-line hope — that a coalition comprising progressives and fiscal conservatives might ultimately hold municipal governments and the IOC to their purported goals and values — is both desirable and realistic.

Certainly, the Olympic Movement has grown into a corporate behemoth. But its influence cannot be straightforwardly conflated with the will of capitalist elites; it sustains itself through a complex network of vested interests, both corporate and governmental.

Nevertheless, it is a potent symbol of our times, insofar as its de facto economic strategy of socializing costs and privatizing profits evokes the culture of bankers' bailouts and the gargantuan swindle that is austerity economics.

In a sense, the Olympics were always this way: Boykoff's accounts of the earliest modern Olympics paint a picture of rarefied exclusivity, mirroring the hierarchical world order that spawned them. But those early Games were financed by private philanthropy, not taxpayers' money.

As the twentieth century wore on, the public has been increasingly exhorted to get on board with the project, not only financially but also ideologically. With that participation comes a certain expectation of democratic accountability, and this is conspicuously absent.

Today, the public's consent, once a matter of passive acquiescence, is a hotly contested issue. Here as in many other areas of political life, the advent of digital social media has energized dissent. The edifice, though still very much intact, appears to be tottering just a little.

At the time of writing, there is much concern about the safety of participants and spectators at the 2016 Rio Games in light of the outbreak of the Zika virus in Brazil.

The World Health Organization says the risk to public health is low, but there is a widespread suspicion that it is bending to the will of the IOC, and a number of high-profile athletes have dropped out of the Games.

The controversy sums up the Olympics in a nutshell: the niggling sense that the tail is wagging the dog, that the show must go on no matter what.

**Houman Barekat**

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## P.S.

\* "A Summer of Discontent". Jacobin. 7.5.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/olympic-games-coubertin-rio-jesse-owens-boycott/>

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://global.britannica.com/biography/Pierre-baron-de-Coubertin>

[2] <https://www.olympic.org/about-ioc-institution>

[3] ESSF (article 38632), [The student movement and Mexico's 1968 Massacre: What Really Happened?](#).

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2015/apr/07/when-denver-rejected-the-olympics-in-favour-of-the-environment-and-economics>

[5] <https://secure.38degrees.org.uk/index.php/pages/296/>

[6] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2105-power-games>

[7] <https://www.usmmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007087>

[8] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jll6laPUCEg>

[9] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-14575260>

[10] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dykBBhaoczg>

[11] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/18/newsid\\_3547000/3547872.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/18/newsid_3547000/3547872.stm)

[12] <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/introduction/owens/>

[13] <http://time.com/3880999/black-power-salute-tommie-smith-and-john-carlos-at-the-1968-olympics/>

[14] <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/film/new-great-power-first-workers-olympics-1925>

[15] [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/archive\\_material\\_reveals/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/archive_material_reveals/)

[16] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/8897244/Olympic-Park-debts-of-229m-to-burden-L>

[ondons-taxpayers.html](#)

[17] <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-the-rio-olympics-could-cement-a-brazilian-coup/>