

OLYMPICS IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

Janaka Biyanwila

In a world system of increasing material and cultural interconnections that also paradoxically intensify cultural differences, the spectacle of the Olympic games deserves some critical analysis. Rather than a comprehensive engagement with this social phenomenon called the Olympics, the essay will focus on some dominant social structures embedded in this popular sports spectacle.

In order to do this, I will begin with a brief account of the social historical origin of this sporting event, particularly its emergence during a period when the expanding middle classes in Europe created a new set of attitudes towards work and leisure. Then I will briefly explore its present global institutional framework leading into a discussion of the dominant ideological constructs primarily focusing on the interplay of nationalism, individualism, and patriarchy. This will be placed in a context of the larger global political economy, which is characterised as a capitalist globalizing process. Finally, I will briefly probe the possibilities of transforming some of these alienating, dominating and repressive structures that are rooted in the modern Olympic movement.

Socio-historical moment

Historically the origin of the Olympic movement is located in Greece around 776 BC., with a popular mythology of an athletic contest in honour of a god or a dead hero; the games are said to have lasted till around 394 AD. The discursive history of Olympics corresponds with a eurocentric model of world history that made classical Greece the source of all civilisation. Reconstructing a sporting event within these mythical origins, the modern Olympic movement was initiated in Athens in 1896 with the gathering of about 300 European male athletes from 13 countries. In Europe, patriarchy at that time barred women from participation.

During the 50 year period following the industrial revolution, colonialism had expanded to cover large parts of the globe and market competition based on industrialisation had intensified. In Europe, along with the release of feudal fetters, the expansion of bourgeois society and capitalist industry saw the rise of modern labour movements as a central anti-systemic movement with Socialism as the dominant ideology. Such was the contested domain of broader political economy in which the modern Olympics movement was inaugurated.

The modern Olympics from its origin was tied in with nationalism, accompanied by the counting of medals as the visible sign of national supremacy, with the opening ceremony being staged as a display of geo-political power. Just as Hitler manipulated the

Olympics as a showcase for Nazi efficiency, cold war super powers practised the dynamics of geo-politics of the epoch. The French government refused to send athletes to the 1896 Athens games a generation after Franco-Prussian war. However, the athletes travelled on their own. After the revolution in 1917, the Soviet Union withdrew from the Olympics until 1952, condemning competitive productive relations and competition in social life. In 1980 when the US boycotted the Moscow Games protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, 61 other countries joined the U.S., with Great Britain and France being important exceptions. In retaliation the Soviet Union boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles games. In 1992, the Soviet Union, fractured into 15 separate republics competed in the Games as the Unified Team. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, East and West Germany competed as one unified Germany. And in the present reconfiguration of global geo-politics, with no official boycotting, the 1996 Atlanta Olympics was a display of US hegemony in a perceived unipolar world system.

From the early days, dominant ideological structures of racism and sexism were infused into the Olympic movement. Black athletes were barred at first; after their inclusion, athletic ability became identified as a racial characteristic. In Mexico City in 1968, the famous Black power symbol, a clenched fist in a black glove raised on the victory stand to protest racial policies in the U.S., caused riots in the stands, and the defiant athletes were deported like criminals. At the Munich Olympics in 1972 a Palestinian terrorist group took 11 Israeli athletes hostage, which ended-up in the killing of all hostages and three terrorists. Although the Atlanta games rushed to welcome post-apartheid South Africa, it was reluctantly barred only at the Tokyo Games in 1964, although apartheid had been enforced since 1948.

In Paris in 1900, 11 women participated compared with 1,319 men, but only in the two 'respectable' games of lawn tennis and golf. An early I.O.C statement declared that the "Olympic games must be reserved for the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, arts for its setting, and female applause as its reward." The U.S. Olympic committee barred women from entering events where long skirts were not required. Amsterdam Olympics in 1928, allowed women for the first time to compete in the centrepiece events in any Olympics, the track and field events. However, the 800 meter run created a controversy for patriarchy at that time. Criticizing the sight of women panting and staggering across the finishing line, the Olympics banned women's events more than 200 meters from 1928 until 1960. Reporting on the women competitors in the 1928 games, the New York Times noted that "the cinder tracks was strewn with wretched damsels in agonizing distress."

Institutional Connections

The global institutional framework involved in staging the Olympic games is intricately allied with the dominant world system. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is its principle organising institution. Linked with the larger network of dominant international institutions of the West and global capitalist structures, the IOC maintains the enduring myth about the games as the spirit of competition devoid of politics and corruption. At the 1996 Olympics, in conjunction with the UN and UNESCO, a special initiative called the Olympic Aid-Atlanta raised funds to help children caught up in war. According to one public information document driven by the Olympic ideals of peace and cooperation, the United Nations called for the observance of an Olympic truce during the 17-day period of the 1996 Olympic Games. Ironically, during those 17 days, in Sri Lanka the LTTE attack on the army camp at Mullaitivu and two bombs in a Colombo train rendered one of the highest number of people killed in the 13 year ethnic war. Similar conflicts continued globally while the spectacle of Olympics constructed a hyperreality of sports as a depoliticized cultural phenomenon.

According to one report the Olympics - dazzling, entertaining, and sometimes inspiring - rest upon an ugly foundation: populated in part by thugs, the Olympic establishment has, according to secret testimony, covered up bribery and drug use, and has overseen an enterprise rife with profiteering and trampling of the public interest. The president of the IOC, Juan Antonio Samaranch, is a former fascist who has never regretted his services as the nations sport czar in the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. With a considerable amount of personal enterprise, he has sustained the IOC power elite with a collection of some sinister personnel; among them are: an ex-member of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency; an Army commander loyal to Idi Amin; an industrialist who has been involved in a variety of dubious business schemes, including the international arms trade. In 1987, when the US refused a visa to member of the Chilean shooting team on the ground that he had been a torturer for General Pinochet, Samaranch publicly announced that he would retaliate by blocking Anchorage getting the 1994 Winter Games. The institutional corruption within the IOC has persisted, endorsing its autocratic control and centralised power over global sports activities.

Most National Olympic Committees in various countries are also saturated with similar corruption. The Russian National Sport Foundation, a funding institute for the Russian Olympic Committee founded in 1993, imported in 1995 more than \$600 million worth of liquor and tobacco otherwise subjected to about 100 percent duty. Although this was a part of import-duty exemption to replace state funding for sports, most of the funds were diverted away from the Russian Olympic Committee. As a part of the International Monetary Fund loan agreement signed in 1995, Russian President Boris Yeltsin rescinded the import privileges granted to the Russian National Sport Foundation.

The staging of the Olympic games are organised by the International Olympic Committee, along with international Sports Associations, National Olympic Committees, host city bidding committees and sponsoring multinationals. The selection of host cities rests on intricate political lobbying among key players particularly big corporations, power elites within the IOC and government officials of candidate cities. The host country of the games generally asserts its version of nationalism during the Olympics, while host cities now see the games as a means of economic gain.

Atlanta Games

American chauvinism was clearly expressed at the 1996 Olympics. In a globalizing process of culture, modernisation was represented as Americanization. In what was termed as the largest gathering of the free world, the Americans managed to monopolise the games in every area from the medal count to the media coverage, endorsing its global power in a polarising world system. The 1996 Atlanta games, the largest so far, were attended by 197 delegations comprising 11,000 athletes; 11 million tickets were sold and 2 million visitors were drawn to the city. With an estimated 3.5 billion viewers throughout the world, this is the largest global spectacle in the present world.

In a display designed to reassert the benevolence of the U.S in global affairs, American nationalism and militarism were depicted through opening ceremonies that included flying fighter jets, Chevrolet trucks, cheerleaders, marching bands and a gospel version of "the Star-Spangled Banner". The closing ceremonies were equally inundated with icons of male white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) culture and an invented version of Southern (American) culture. All this was spatially located in a state with the fifth highest number of executions in the U.S. and in a city famous as the table-dancing-establishment (strip bar) capital of the Southeast U.S.

With the strength of American entertainment infrastructure, the Olympics embodied the U.S culture industry. The telecasts of the Olympics constructed a particularly chauvinist version of Olympics. With an exaggerated focus on American athletes, particularly those with celebrity status in selected spectator sports such as track and field, gymnastics, basketball, etc, the Olympics became a melodramatic production for television. The telecasts of sporting events were often interrupted with biographical episodes of tragic encounters and of perseverance by various high-performance athletes. The blatant message in this propaganda blended with the dominant sports ideology which homogenises social reality, where social life is reduced to a potent individualism.

Commercialism - Big Sport, Big Business

While excessive commercialism has been a main theme of criticism of the Atlanta Olympics, big sport is big business. For seventeen days Atlanta sports venues simulated a trade fair. In fact, the first four modern Olympic games were sporting adjuncts to global trade fairs (Universal Exhibitions). Major sponsorship sold for only \$4 million in the 1984 Olympics. The main sponsors of the

1996 Games, Eastman Kodak, I.B.M., Visa, B.M.W., Xerox and of course Atlantas own Coca-Cola, paid \$40 million just to use the Olympic logo.

In 1960 television rights were sold for \$440,000: this year NBC invested \$456 million. Even before the games began, revenues from this investment had reached \$675 million. According to one commentator, this market perspective was infused into the games after the Montreal Olympics which was plagued by high construction costs and poor attendance. The Montreal Games ran into a deficit of nearly \$1 billion, which the Canadian government had to absorb. The more enlightened Los Angeles organisers funded the Olympics solely through private sources ending up with a \$220 million profit.

Corporate sponsors (multinational corporations) are an influential factor in deciding the composition of Olympic Games, modifying specific sports and timing the events to suit television. The gold medalist Michael Johnson's 200 meter and 400 meter events were spread-out giving the athlete ample recovery time to excel in both events and fulfil endorsement contracts with corporate sponsors such as Nike, Sara Lee (processed food), Coca Cola, AT&T (telecommunications), Mobil (oil), and Bausch & Lomb (eye wear products). It is estimated that he will be earning as much as \$4 million, in endorsements alone, during the next three years. Most final events in the spectator sports were scheduled to fit evening prime-time television viewing. Rules governing some games have been modified to make them more attractive spectacles for mass audiences. Four new sports were introduced creating new markets while certain non-marketable events were deleted. The NBC (U.S. broadcaster) which has paid \$3.7 billion for the rights to the Olympics up to 2008, drew considerable criticism for its version of the games. In packaging Olympics for television, the NBC and the organisers of the event further blurred the gap between news and entertainment. With no clear pre-announcement of the program schedule, the NBC even televised many events as if they were live even if they were taped hours earlier.

With commercialism, talented high-performance athlete have become a globally mobile group of race horses. The fastest man in the 100 meter dash is a Canadian citizen, who had migrated from Jamaica. All the members of the Gold medal winning Canadian 4x100 meter mens relay team are migrants from Caribbean islands. The male Russian 50 and 100 meter freestyle swimmer trains and resides in Australia with his coach. Some of the basketball players from other countries play professionally in the US, and members of the U.S. womens soccer and basketball teams compete professionally in Europe. Ultimately, the guiding capitalist logic behind this driving force motivating high performance athletes to migrate is profit.

Olympics and the Market Ideology

As the dominant ideology of a market system, the primacy of the individual (individualism) and the will (voluntarism)

obscure the differentiated and structured reality. While the nation-state concept is constructed within a particular time-space (geopolitical moment), the athletes who may have carried some nation-state icons transcend the confines of the nation-state's spatial and ideological boundaries. To add to the earlier list, the winner of womens 200 and 400 meters, Marie-Jose Percec, was born on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe and moved to Paris in the early eighties. But now she lives and practices in Beverly Hills, California, and carried the French flag after winning her events. Thus, at one level individualism is coopted and redeployed within the larger social ideology of a homogenised nationalism. Although the construct of nation is a social reality which is intently territorially based, nationalism obscures its own fiction by the translocal cultural mixing of most high-performance athletes.

Connected with the ideology of individualism is amateurism. In its pristine aristocratic ideology of disinterested participation in sports, amateurism was deployed as the legitimate definition of all sports and not only for the Olympics. Amateurism in sports originates from a particular ruling-class sectarian perspective that is constructed as a general interest. Although the rhetoric of amateurism was assembled from the inception of the Olympic movement, even at that time, prize money was awarded to champions in horse racing, archery and yachting. However, at the 1988 Seoul Games, the International Olympic Committee officially abandoned its commitment to amateurism, or more appropriately shamateurism .

In effect, most **transnational** high performance athletes maintain their standards not for some patriotic reason but because there are certain individual economic and cultural privileges to be gained. Beyond nationalism, commercialism complicates the self representation further, since most high performance athletes also advertise (as human billboards) various commodities of multinational corporations. Thus, the winner of nine Olympic medals in a 12 year span, Carl Lewis, not only represented the U.S., but also the Nike corporation, a multinational sporting goods producer. Since the U.S. team had multiple sponsors (VISA credit cards, Budweiser beer, etc.), all were enabled to advertise and promote consumerism through the individual feats of Carl Lewis.

The Atlanta Olympics have been hailed for the highest participation of females with nearly forty percent more women competitors (some 3,779) than at Barcelona in 1992. Yet, there were nearly twice as many men as women competing in the Atlanta Games. And the number of women in coaching and in sports administration worldwide remains miserably small. While all four new sports that were included in 1996 accommodate women, softball and womens soccer were added exclusively for women. Multinational corporate sponsors have also expanded their coverage and utilisation of women athletes. Among the athletes Nike company sponsored were a female Chinese shot putter, while the Gold medal winning US womens basketball team member Sheryl Swoopes, became the first woman to have a shoe named after her, called the Nikes Air Swoopes.

Reconsidering Olympics

With an estimated 3.5 billion viewers, the Olympics illustrate popularity, spectacularity and simplistic comprehensibility. Since it is unlikely that the Olympic movement will be disbanded, transforming some of the alienating, dominating and repressive structures that are embedded in this sporting event must be considered. Olympics is a socially created sporting event with multiple contradictions between its rhetoric and reality. It is a stratified reality where the inequality of capitalist global economy, patriarchy, and racism are real structures that are produced and reproduced. By generalising individualism to social life, the dominant sports ideology represents a depthless, naturalised reality where only the present exists. The labour process of sports, years of self-isolating drudgery, regimented masochistic practice to be the best, has deformed what is constitutive of or essential to one's well being through sports.

While sports competition includes some intrinsic personal value for those who compete in a confined self-embodied reality, it is distorted by the reification and fetishism of sports. This is where the social practice of sports becomes detached from the practices of everyday life, where spectator sports becomes a sacred, unproblematic area of pristine pleasure even to the most rigorous critics of the capitalist global condition.

The mass social phenomenon of Olympics must be adequately analysed to reveal its current limitations linked with nationalism, patriarchy and racism. Sporting events must be unveiled of their mystifications to disclose the underlying political economy. Athletes who are the main factor in this social practice must be organised and adequately represented to negotiate with nationalists

and commercial interests. In order to contest entrenched nationalism in sports, athletes can be encouraged to represent themselves without recourse to any national labels. Patriarchy and sexist ideologies must be exposed along with the promotion of more women in all aspects of modern sports. And as for team sports, initiating more male-female mixed teams and composing national team names similar to club names can shift team sports towards a new set of cultural politics. In order to alleviate the disparity between the rich and poor athletes, various mechanisms and institutions must be considered to redistribute earnings. Finally, specific sports included in the Olympics must truly represent popularity in a global sense. For example, the equestrian events would fail such a test. Except for the bronze medal won by Brazil, the rest of the 17 medals in Equestrian events were won by advanced capitalist countries (Germany, Netherlands, France, Switzerland, New Zealand, Australia and U.S.).

The excitement and drama of the Olympics will next move on to Sydney, Australia in the year 2000. Meanwhile global sports structures and institutions will continue to expand its hegemonic ideology. It is an ideology based on individualism, as the only subjective consciousness, and a facile internationalism with a potent notion of nationalism as the collective consciousness. It restrains the formation of an emancipatory collective consciousness which is latent within sports. It is this possibility of a progressive collective consciousness within sports that needs to be articulated to transform the present decadence of the Olympic movement. Already, Australia is planning on reducing the size of the 2000 Olympics to a manageable size to reduce being manipulated by commercial interests. While the quantitative change may be necessary, it is not sufficient to initiate a qualitative, ideological and cultural transformation of the Olympic movement. ■

Janaka Biyanwala works at the SSA and participated in the Atlanta Olympics as a diver in the Sri Lankan team.