

THE MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES AND THE CAUSE OF BLACK NATIONALISM

Peter A. Horton

Nanyang Technological University - Singapore

The sociological analysis of the modern Olympic Games is invariably concerned with the consideration of one or more of what Guttman [1988] refers to as the “the major roadblocks on the way to Olympia.” These are: gender, religion, race, ideology, nationalism, politics, commercialisation and the aspects concerning the individual athlete, particularly the scientization of athletes or, to be specific their bodies. The path to these discussions has become well-worn and how these social forces have influenced the development of the Olympic Games, and how they have in turn organically accommodated to the exigencies of such forces is a continual theme of the sociological analysis of the Olympic movement (Gruneau 1984, Triesman 1984, Hargreaves 1992, Mandell 1971, & Murray 1992). Yet, little direct comment has been made on the impact of the Olympic Games, as a transnational social entity, on society and it is thus appropriate to ask, to what extent are the Olympic Games or the Olympic movement, in the general sense, agents of social change?

Social Change

As a consequence of its close allegiance with the philosophical foundations of history, the science of sociology has, since its earliest days sought to explain social and political change, and in particular revolutions in behaviour and thought. (Bottomore, 1987)

Sociologists such as Spencer, Comte and Hobhouse, as an outcome of their attempts to make analogies between the biological and the social world, viewed society as evolving along the lines similar to Darwinian theory. Social change, progress and development were merged into a single concept to create the theory of social evolution and, thus, the notion of change has always assumed the mantle of

progress. Marx’s theory of history views social change to be primarily the consequence of two major forces: the advance of technology and the conflict between the social classes (*ibid.*). This sinuous thread pervades historical materialism and even with the re-examination of Marxist thought over the past thirty years (see Habermas 1976, Bottomore 1985, Berlin 1963). and with the emergence of modern Marxist and post-modernist schools the validity of the linear theories of social change and the strength of their arguments is still most relevant to a discussion of the modern Olympic Games and social change. The underlying premise of theories of linear change as opposed to the notion of cyclic change is that change is the cumulative outcome of a set of elemental effects. These are: the growth of knowledge, the advance of human productivity, the increasing size, range and complexity of modern societies, and the general world-wide trend towards social and political equality (Bottomore, 1987).

Change and the Olympic Games

The monumental ideological shifts of the past four years throughout Eastern Europe, South East Asia and China bear testimony to the evolutionary view of humankind’s development. Few investigations of sport have considered the influence of *sport* on society or how sport might itself have changed society in the macroscopic sense. In this paper it will be hypothesized that the Olympic Games have been instrumental in effecting significant behavioral, attitudinal and political changes over the last thirty years. This analysis of the Olympic Games, as an agent of social change will be advanced through the consideration of race, or more specifically the cause of Black nationalism. It will be argued that the cause of Black nationalism, which is here viewed as the social and political advancement of Afro-negroes, has been directly promoted as a function of the involvement of black athletes in the Olympics and of the efforts of the Olympic movement to pursue the ideals of Olympism. It will be argued that this effect has eventuated as a consequence of the unique nature of the Olympic Games.

Olympism

The revival of the Olympic Games was steeped in classical symbols and philosophical ambitions and motives. Today we still cling to the ideals of Olym-

pism as philosophical justifications for the continuation of the Games. Thus, the Olympic movement has assumed the role of social change agent as part of its credo: the spirit of Olympism is dedicated to: world peace and understanding, equality of opportunity, racial and religious harmony and the glorification and unification of the youth of the world through sport.

Segrave (1988) reflected upon the altruistic nature of the IOC's perception of the philosophy of Olympism. The following passage, which formed part of a discussion document for the 1985 Olympic Academy of Canada, clearly demonstrates that social improvement and welfare are central features of the espoused philosophy of Olympism:

It has, as a goal, to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with the object of creating a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.

It is this explicit declaration of the, "pursuit of social values", that Segrave (*ibid*) contends, "distinguishes the Olympic movement and the Olympic Games from all other international sport institutions."

It has often been said that the Olympic Games are the biggest single collective social event that takes place on Earth with well over a third of the world's population watching them on television over the course of the two weeks of the Games' duration (MacAloon, 1988). Yet, the attention of the World is focused for many weeks before the staging of the actual Games and, as has been witnessed recently with the bidding process for the 2000 Olympics, for many years ahead in terms of the suitability and the desirability of future venues. It could be argued that, indeed, some of the more tangible manifestations of social change are often witnessed as a consequence of a particular city's (nation's) candidature for an up-coming Olympic Games.

The aspirations of Olympism relate to effective outcomes in the areas of education, international understanding, equal opportunity, fair and equal competition, cultural expression, the independence of sport and of course, excellence (Segrave, *op cit*). When considering the development of the modern Olympics the topic of race has frequently arisen (see, Edwards, 1971, Brohm, 1978, & Mandell, 1971).

The Olympic Games, even though their working principles are grounded in the ideals of Olympism, have not been immune to the prevailing climates of intolerance and the dominant attitudes they reflect.

Black Nationalism and The Olympic Games

Since well before the revival of the modern Olympic Games sport had been the site of many examples of racial injustice. Once sport became an institutionalized form with attached reward systems of both an intrinsic and an extrinsic nature the taint of racial intolerance and hatred soon became manifest. The history of modern sport from the late 19th century to the current era is littered with many sorry episodes that reflect the bigotry that surrounds race relations. The biographies of athletes such as boxers, Peter Jackson, Jack Johnson, and Joe Louis, and track athlete, Jesse Owens, illustrate the worst features of racism and the barriers that were placed in the way of black athletes, as does an analysis of the histories of professional baseball, basketball and football in the United States of America. The much despised "color line" that pervaded American sport for the best part of 60 years, having been initiated in 1892 by boxer John L. Sullivan in his famous challenge "to all comers (except blacks)," could still be seen in evidence in the attitude of the athletic management of certain university campuses nearly 80 years later (Wiggins, 1988). Even when aspects of absolute racial exclusion disappeared in America negro athletes were and still are in some instances confronted with stereotypical attitudes regarding their moral character, intelligence, tolerance to stress and leadership ability. Thus, they are often excluded from particular playing positions, leadership and managerial roles and even certain sports. However, the stacking syndrome (Eitzen and Yetman, 1977) of the 1970s does not prevail to the same extent today, as is witnessed by the appearance of several leading Afro-American quarterbacks in the NFL, such as Warren Moon.

No illustration or justification of the impact, the scope and magnificence of the contribution of black athletes (the term is used in a most general manner to include all Afro-negroes, whether African, Afro-Americans, West Indians or British nationals from either West Indian or African origins) to the world of sport is required in this paper, nor could such a meagre offering in any way sum up how this contri-

bution has advanced the development of modern sport. Perhaps a more pertinent question to ask would be, if whether the growing visibility, impact and value of this contribution has been matched by a similar enhancement of the social status of blacks particularly in North America and the United Kingdom?

The Olympic Games are, without doubt, the single most impactful sporting festival held and the exposure black athletes receive, as an outcome of their performances in the high profile sports of track and field athletics, football (soccer), boxing and basketball is immense. The single most significant factor is not simply that so many black athletes are now so visible, in what is called the "greatest show on Earth" but rather because their achievements are so outstanding. Even though the Olympic Games are only in the direct focus of the world's media for just two weeks every four years, the world's top athletes are rarely out of the media's eye and, obviously, their Olympic achievements contribute enormously to their profile.

Black Olympic athletes are the stars of the track, the boxing ring, the soccer field and the basketball court. The Olympics' athletics track has, since the days of Jesse Owen, been the scene of many outstanding feats by Afro-American and West Indian sprinters and jumpers of the quality of Jim Hines, Bob Beamon, Tommy Smith, Wilma Rudolph, Don Quarrie and more recently Florence Griffith-Joyner and Carl Lewis. Just as the black sprinters and long jumpers have virtually dominated their events, the East African middle and long distance runners have had tremendous success since Abebe Bikila won the marathon in 1960 at Rome and again four years later at Tokyo, and without doubt East Africans are the single-most dominant racial group in distance running today. The success of the Ethiopian and Kenyan runners has at times focused the attention of the whole of the world's sporting public upon these economically and socially desperate nations. It can only be conjectured, however, as to the extent of the enhancement of the understanding and support for the plights of these people that has been gained as a consequence of the Olympic achievements of their distance runners.

The themes of nationalism, ethno-nationalism and sub-nationalism in the analysis of the Olympic Games are most apparent as are the attendant multitude of theoretical considerations of the topic (see:

Mandell, 1971, Espy, 1979, Murray, 1992 & Hill, 1993). All concede that the modern Olympic Games are and always have been venues for the expression of intense nationalism. However, the corollary that the Olympic Games have had a significant role in the promotion of the cause of black nationalism has only been hinted at (Hargreaves 1992, Rowe and Lawrence 1986, MacIntosh *et al* 1993, Hill 1993, Wiggins 1989) even though the contribution and impact of Afro-American, East and West African, West Indian and British black athletes has made a significant, implicit, contribution to the cause of black nationalism.

Olympism and the Fight against Apartheid

The Olympic movement has fought and won a significant battle against racism in sport. The fight against apartheid and the role of the sporting boycott against South Africa from Olympic competition and all other subsequent sporting prohibitions against them, had as much, if not more, of an effect on the abolition of the policy of apartheid than all other sanctions. The boycott was seen to be so significant that Sam Ramsamy(1984), who was at the time Chairperson of the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC), believed:

...The boycott against apartheid and racism in sport is the only Olympic boycott that has been effective. This does not indicate that the Olympic Games are free of racism and discrimination. However, given the exclusion of South Africa, it can be safely said that the Olympics are free of institutionalised racism.

The significance of the contribution of the Olympic movement in the victory over apartheid thus cannot be trivialised. Hargreaves also asserts that the efforts of the Olympic fraternity has had a direct impact upon the situation:

The cause of black nationalism has also been served by the Olympics. The case in point is, of course, South Africa, excluded for practising racial discrimination in sport. The campaign to isolate that country through sport has been one of the most important factors, not only in bringing about the demise of apartheid, but in helping to unify black Africa.

Hargreaves (1992:130)

The sporting assaults upon the social system of apartheid have been many and varied yet the initiation of the Olympic ban in February 1964 was the first effective official censure of the political system. The Olympic movement is fundamentally committed to Olympism as espoused in the Olympic Charter. Rule one of the Olympic charter denotes that one of the principle aims of the Olympic movement is: "to educate young people through sport in a spirit of better understanding between each other and of friendship, thereby helping to build a better and more peaceful world."

The Olympic Charter overtly enshrines an anti-racist philosophy as Rule 3 states that:

"...No discrimination in the Olympic Games is allowed against any country or person on grounds of race, religion or politics."

The readmission of South Africa to the Olympic fraternity has only been achieved as a consequence of the South African Olympic and National Games Association (SAONGA) guaranteeing that it will be able to fulfil, what Macintosh *et al* (1993) call "the transnational goal of Olympism," to which Rule 3 of the Olympic Charter is germane. The effectiveness of the Olympic ban placed on South Africa and any outcome it might have had upon the democratization of South Africa cannot be considered in isolation of other racial trends that occurred on the wider sports front. Over the past twenty or thirty years there has been a ground swell in Europe and the USA towards the acceptance of both the position and the worth of black athletes in major sports outside of the Olympic domain. As has been suggested previously, the verification and assertion of black people through the constant and overwhelming efforts of East African distance runners has been one of the most remarkable sport-based social revolutions this century.

All the above structural and attitudinal shifts must have mobilised considerable sympathy and support for the fight against apartheid and its implicit discriminatory sporting policy.

The significance of South Africa's sporting emasculation from a white South African's perspective can only be fully understood with an appreciation of the obsessive pre-occupation most white South Africans had, and indeed, still have for sport. The victories on the rugby field or on the cricket oval served to vindicate their way of life, their social

system and to reassure them of their worth. The dominant ideology and the hegemonic forces sought, and in sporting success found, justification for a way of life that brought condemnation from the majority of the world's nations. The isolation that came with the world-wide criticism of these policies meant that South Africans were culturally excluded from the rest of the world and thus sport became the one link they had and the one means of national verification.

With the demise of apartheid the face of Africa has changed for ever but no doubt the entrenched racist attitudes will persist and sport in South Africa will organically segregate itself. However, rugby will be become open to all races and football (soccer), which has for so long been the symbol of black and Asian groups, will similarly open its arms to embrace all racial groups. Yet these only represent the high profile sports, if we consider the social impact the dissolution of apartheid will have on the range of sporting, leisure and recreational activities the full extent of the potential social change becomes apparent.

The importance of the role of the Olympic movement as a facilitator for these changes would be very hard to deny. Macintosh *et al* (1993) concur:

The importance of the Olympic Games should not be underestimated. The South African government looked for IOC recognition as a symbolic statement that the repressive apartheid laws were being dismantled and that South Africa should be welcomed back into the international community. In reintegrating South Africa into the Olympic movement, the IOC also put subtle but considerable pressure on nation states and other transnational organizations to reassess existing policies concerning sanctions against South Africa.

Macintosh *et al* emphatically suggest that the Olympic movement had a primary role in the establishment of the new world order that will eventuate as a consequence of the democratization of South Africa and its re-admission into the international community. An order that will eventuate as a consequence of the democratization of South Africa and its re-admission into the international community. If this then helps to unify black Africa, as Hargreaves (1992) believes it will, it would not be unreasonable

to contend that the impetus from the efforts of all black athletes since the days of Peter Jackson has been a major causal variable in this change.

Conclusion

The origins of social and/or cultural change in a particular society are neither the sole outcome of endogenous or exogenous effects and rarely do they emerge as a consequence of a single event or agency. Consistent with the underlying premises of theories of social change, the social changes that have occurred as an outcome of the relationship between the Olympic Games and the aspects of Black nationalism clearly demonstrate that any changes that have occurred have evolved as the cumulative outcome of a set of elemental effects rather than in isolation.

The significance and impact of the Olympic Games as an agent of social and cultural change must be viewed as part of the total process of the development of humankind and, undoubtedly, the exigencies of the dominant ideologies and of the hegemonic forces, that controlled and still do control sport, have directed the course of Olympic history as they have so many other aspects of our lives. Yet, the nature and extent of this relationship has not been a one-way process. Throughout the history of the Olympic movement it has never been free from the control and influence of institutional social forces. Since the inception of the modern Olympic Games they have been the site for controversy, political turmoil, philosophical debate and moral condemnation. They have been enlisted to promote national pride, to justify political ideologies and to demonstrate Aryan supremacy, yet ironically, the Olympic arena has provided one of the most significant avenues for the expression of Black nationalism. The Olympic movement explicitly promotes racial equality and their policies have directly contributed to the demise of a political regime totally centred on racism, whilst the performances of black athletes implicitly vindicate their race.

The unique character and appeal of the Olympic Games and its commensurate influence as a transnational social institution has endowed them with an immense power to effect social change. Whether all the changes the modern Olympic Games have precipitated can be viewed as beneficial is questionable yet its positive contribution to the cause of Black nationalism cannot be denied. Surely, any advance

in eradication of racial injustice and bigotry should be applauded.

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