

Hoberman, John. *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics, and the Moral Order*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Aristide O. Caratzas, Publisher, 1986. Pp. 169. \$30.00.

Having read Hoberman's *Sport and Political Ideology*, it was with enthusiasm that I began his monograph on the Olympics. The first fifth of this short book kept me attentive by his fierce arguments woven with quotations from sources in the French, German, English, and Scandinavian languages. However, following the presentation of his main thesis, Hoberman's direction becomes labyrinthine, the quotations repetitious, even inappropriate; the thrust confusing. The result is a vexing book.

There is one major argument that Hoberman makes in this work, and he makes it well in the first thirty pages. "Moral claims can occasionally outweigh the claims of sport. This is the basis of the campaign against apartheid in South Africa; it was the basis of the African boycott of the Montreal Olympiad of 1976" (p. 5). "The paradox is that sport has become an emblem of the moral order precisely because it does not call for moral actions. It is universally accepted because it does not make judgements. Indeed, far from being an ally of ethics, modern sport is better interpreted as one of its antagonists" (p. 6). "As I [Hoberman] will argue . . . , sport is NOT comparable to the fundamental human rights . . . the willingness of the Western democracies to define sport as an unqualified good is a major concession to Soviet and East German ideologists, who have a vested interest in equating the limited world of sport with culture itself" (p. 8). "Mass sport. . . is a mass hygienism. It is the only way for a state to dramatize the otherwise mundane concerns of public health" (p. 9). "By joining the [Olympic] movement, the Russians achieved, in a formal sense, a certain kind of moral parity with the rest of the world, since it assumed that a deep interest in sport presupposes wholesome instincts" (p. 10). "Today sport is the one international culture which is developing in accordance with a Communist model . . . , the ethos of the sport mobilization initiated by Stalin in the mid-1930s has become a global standard" (p. 11). "For the 'sport party' . . . is actually a global one which has affected the moral order, almost always at the expense of ethical standards" (p. 14). "But the Olympic movement has never possessed an ETHIC. It does have a code of sportsmanship and international understanding which has found eager subscribers of every political stripe precisely on account of its obvious and banal character" (p. 29). "What is . . . forgotten is that another side of universality is the failure to discriminate" (p. 30). "Amoral universalism substitutes sportsmanship for ethics. But sportsmanship is actually a mere etiquette for the strong, the select community of potential victors, and 'Olympism' is a ministry to the healthy . . . it represents not ethics, but the flight from conscience, its suffering, and its doubt" (p. 32). Hoberman makes a powerful indictment.

So according to Hoberman, sport is either antagonistic to ethics or it is amoral; at best, it is the chivalry of the elite. The universalism of the Olympics, trying to get as many countries as possible to participate, comes about by compromising with tyrannical regimes. The Berlin Games tainted the move-

ment; and the Moscow Games were a mockery of ethics for dissidents like Shcharansky were rounded up and deported from the Russian capital prior to the Moscow Olympics. And, Hoberman notes that one week before the Mexico City Games, police fired on and killed hundreds of student demonstrators; yet the Games went on.

Rather than universalism, Hoberman suggests that the IOC emulate the World Psychiatric Association, which, as it prepared to expel the Soviets, precipitated their withdrawal in 1983. Hoberman believes Avery Brundage and the IOC made a mistake when the Soviet Union first applied for membership in the Olympic movement after World War II. Hoberman asserts that the IOC, as a price for that membership, should have required that an independent Soviet Olympic committee be created rather than simply accept Stalin's appointees. In effect, Hoberman believes that the IOC should have rejected Soviet membership. In contrast to the Olympics' universalism, Hoberman seeks Games for the good guys, and only the good guys (and gals). Hoberman provides examples of some who agree with his approach of a more limited sport-(1) those who succeeded in boycotting South African sport, (2) Castro's refusal to permit Cubans to play baseball against Somoza's Nicaragua (pp. 16-17), (3) even the Soviets' refusal to play soccer in Chile's National Stadium shortly after it had been used as the site where Allende supporters had been collected, tortured, and in some instances, murdered by soldiers of the junta (pp. 19-20).

Hoberman condemns a universal approach that is not just the good guys-for if it included Nazis in 1936 and Communist bureaucrats today, it is a sham. We rightly boycotted the Moscow Games and left it "a joyless" event (p. 73)! If we are to be ethical, we must abandon universalism. Furthermore, Hoberman endorses some criticisms of the Olympics made by both the 1920s Worker Sport movement, the New Left and neo-fascists: thus, we should abandon some of the competitive, commercial, and professional aspects of sport.

I disagree with Prof. Hoberman. When the Olympics were revived in 1896 by Baron De Coubertin, they were not the same as the ancient Games in a number of ways. There were two differences that I must emphasize here: (1) They would not be as bloody. (2) They would not be exclusively for the Greeks or any one people, but would be open to all including the "barbarians." However, at a time when German swordsmen were refusing to fence Jews, at a time when most Americans refused to play baseball or football with or against blacks (and Jack Johnson had to win his boxing title in Australia), the Olympics were extremely egalitarian. Sport need not have been so. One can refuse to play with certain "barbarians" of whatever variety. Or worse, one can play with "inferiors" in a manner that illustrates and reinforces their "inferiority," like the Romans in the Arena or American Indians using a man's head for a ball, or a Nazi taking target practice on a concentration camp inmate, or just larger children tormenting their younger brothers and sisters.

The modern Olympic Games were open to all, with all competing on a rather equal footing. *This need not have been the case.* But it was, and it is generally

democratic, and I would say ethical, especially when compared to some of the alternatives.

Baron De Coubertin maintained it is not necessary that we love one another, but it is necessary that we respect one another, and to do so, we must know one another (p. 118). I disagree. We need not know one another to respect one another. Indeed, how much "knowing" of one another occurs at the Olympic Games? But we can know enough to respect one another. We can learn to respect, even admire another. And this is the significance of the Olympic movement. Take, for example, the least liked Olympics, the one that "stained" (p. 51) the movement, the Berlin Games of 1936. In 1932 the chief Nazi newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, reported, "Negroes have no place at an Olympiad . . . This is an unparalleled disgrace and degradation, and the ancient Greeks would turn in their graves . . . The next Olympic Games will take place in 1936 in Berlin. Hopefully, the men who are responsible . . . will know what their duty is. The blacks must be excluded. We expect nothing less" (p. 104). One year following the publication of that article, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Despite his Nazi ideology, blacks were not excluded from the 1936 Olympics. Jesse Owens won medals, and even cheers from the massive crowd, mainly German, as he defeated Aryan athletes. The blacks won enough medals in 1936 to puncture ideas of Aryan supremacy. And had Owens and the others boycotted Berlin and instead attended the Left's counter Olympics in Barcelona in 1936, they would not have been able to compete, for Franco and the fascists rebelled on the day the counter games were to have occurred. Had the Americans boycotted, who now would have heard of Owens? And the Berlin Games would have been an uninterrupted Aryan triumph. The 1936 Games in Berlin did include participants of all types and races according to the individual nations that partook. Hoberman views it as a Nazi Olympics. It was and it wasn't. It was also an Owens Olympics. So much so that following the Games, Hitler told Albert Speer that blacks would have to be excluded from any future Olympics (p. 104). And had the Axis won, blacks undoubtedly would have been barred from any more Games. Indeed, Hoberman quotes French rightists who, long after World War II, still demand the exclusion of blacks, and others, for otherwise the Olympics degenerate into a contest between civilized whites against colored barbarians, with the latter having a natural advantage in sport. The neo-fascists view the modern Olympics as an affront and a challenge to their racist notions. *And so it is! The internationalism and interracialism of the Olympics is by its nature an ethical statement* in a world that still harbors ideas of racial and extreme national superiority. Hoberman is wrong when he deems the Olympics as "amoral" or even anti-moral. Olympic sport, by the fact of being open to all people who compete on an equal footing, is taking a stand for equality, democracy, and morality, especially in a century that has experienced fascist challenges to these notions. Hoberman is simply wrong when he declares sport antagonistic to ethics.

There is another manner in which sport can be ethical. I once played soccer with a most diverse group. In the game an adult Israeli tripped over an eleven-

year-old Arab and was about to fall on the youth, who would be smashed onto the rocky field. The Israeli quickly twisted his own body so that the youth fell atop rather than beneath him. Neither was injured. To Hoberman, this is mere chivalry, mere sportsmanship. I deem it ethics in action, For if some athletes learn to be selfish and even dirty players, still many learn through sport to sacrifice for others. If a ball is coming which might hurt a bystander, a teammate, or even an opponent, it is the athlete who will more likely be able to move swiftly and strongly enough to avert tragedy. The more contemplative might see the danger, but they may be less capable of acting to prevent injury. And it is often through sport that a Pavlovian stimulus-response reaction can be established so that the athlete is willing, *and able*, to sacrifice possible injury to himself in order to prevent harm to others. Every athlete has seen such ethical behavior on the field. In sport one learns to act ethically without taking time to ponder about it. In sport, ethics is fused with action. The neo-Freudian Hoberman dismisses the essential morality that one acquires through Pavlovian principles in sport; however, most people in the world, athletes and non-athletes, dismiss Freudian theory and instead embrace the morality they know is revealed in sport.

Hoberman laments that “Mass sport . . . is a mass hygienism. It is the only way for a state to dramatize the otherwise mundane concerns of public health” (p. 9). Is Hoberman correct in judging public health mundane? Health is “ordinary” only to those who possess it. If the East Germans and other socialist nations dramatize through sport mundane concerns with public health, it is because such concerns are not merely base but basic. Perhaps the West should seriously reconsider policies regarding the health and hygiene and sports participation of its citizens—changes that might result in more Olympic gold. Again, I disagree with Hoberman’s judgment.

Hoberman concedes a universal appeal of sport, but contends “it is a formal characteristic which does not address the issue of content” (p. 25). Sport, according to Hoberman, glorifies “the moral insensate body-beautiful ideal . . . [which] forces the human image down to the level of kitsch, . . .” (p. 26). Although sport “offers an intense experience on its own terms; . . . it is an impoverished context in which to ask the fundamental question of art and philosophy, ‘What is man?’ ” (p. 26). I propose that one simply imagine an alternative sport, like kicking a severed head across a football field. Immediately Olympic sport is seen, in contrast, by its restraint and by its universalism, as embodying values far higher than kitsch. There is a content to Olympic sport, and that content is generally composed of democratic and egalitarian values. The Communists see that; the Pope sees that; even the neo-fascist critics of the Olympics see that. Professor Hoberman seems in the minority in viewing the Olympics as a value without content.

Hoberman also writes, “Despite its hysteria, its racism, its pseudo-classicism, and its Hitler nostalgia, the neo-fascist critique of Olympia is not entirely without value” (p. 100). I judge the core of the fascist critique to be

precisely its racism and elitism. Thus, I see its critique of little value to democrats.

In addition to Hoberman's main thesis on ethics in sport, he makes many questionable assertions. Space precludes an adequate reply. But I must note here that Hoberman errs when he declares the World Youth Festivals to have been Stalin's counter Olympics (p. 18); he is as wrong in blaming the Olympics for terrorism as one who would blame the theater for Lincoln's assassination; and Hoberman indulges in the nastiest form of McCarthyism in his effort to discredit Olympic leaders Avery Brundage and Carl Diem (pp. 31, 42, 50, 52-54).

After criticizing the Olympics for 117 pages, Hoberman suddenly reverses himself and writes: "Conclusion: The Defense of Olympia" (p. 118). Unlike his stirring rhetoric in the early pages denouncing the amorality of the Olympics and its treacherous leaders, Hoberman defends the Games in the blandest jargon:

"What redeems the Games is their profoundly ambiguous nature . . . The value of the Games . . . resides in their power to offer an enormous public a massive lesson in the epistemology of everyday life" (p. 125).

Sure! Here I cannot disagree, for I do not understand Prof. Hoberman. In summary, Hoberman has written a difficult book. His main argument on the morality of sport is an important one, even if I remain unconvinced. Unfortunately, there is an unusual meanness in this work, which is more reminiscent of a political vendetta than an academic monograph. Hoberman's book on sport and political ideology is a superb work; his book on the Olympics is not.

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