

Representations of Competitiveness: International Sport Festivals and Expositions in the Production of National Identity

K.B. Wamsley
University of Calgary, Alberta

David Whitson
University of Alberta, Edmonton

Cultural historian Benedict Anderson has suggested that nations are imagined communities and that the construction of images and myths of “national identity” have been the necessary cultural/ideological corollary of the political and economic projects involved in the production and reproduction of nation states. It is suggested, further, that national identity is something that must be actively produced, in the case of new nations, but must also be continually reproduced and modernized” if it is to transcend folkloric images and sustain its capacity to motivate. This paper examines these propositions in relation to the official discourse that has surrounded Canadian participation in international sporting events and trade fairs.

For many years Canada has sent representatives to international athletic festivals, including Olympic and Commonwealth Games, racing, shooting, and other sport competitions in Britain, the United States, and other countries. Canada has also sent display goods, manufactures, and trade and immigration officials to international exhibitions in London, Paris, Antwerp, and Chicago in the late 19th century, and to many more such events since. In all of these cases, funding for overseas excursions has been legitimized abstractly in terms of ‘national’ objectives. Specifically, it was suggested that Canadian performances, goods and displays served as ‘representations’ of Canada, giving the country positive (and specific) images abroad, while providing Canadians with opportunities to identify with specific kinds of national accomplishments and national purposes. Canada has also hosted a number of international events, most recently Expo ’86 in Vancouver and the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. For such events, massive spending on facilities was legitimized in official discourse which has emphasized showing off the ‘modern’ Canada to international investors and tourists, while encouraging Canadians to think about competitiveness in a global context.

Official documents and press reports suggest that the Canadian political and business elites have always had two audiences in mind for these representations of Canada. Most obvious was the international audience and, clearly, the major emphasis in the discourse of both Expos and Games was about putting Canada on display for the world: showcasing Canadian products, accomplishments, and Canada as a place in which to invest, live, work, and play. There is also, however, a subtext which was directed at Canadians. In this subtext, which has been described in an Australian context as “initiating the locals into the changes which are already transforming their lives,” Canadians have been encouraged to identify with competitiveness, modernity, and global ambitions. Images of Canada as a country of fish and game and brave frontiersmen were supplanted by a discourse about ‘world class’ accomplishments, in which modern technology and indeed transnational corporations were active partners. This paper comments about the reconstructions of Canadian identity which have been articulated in these new cultural signifiers, and raises some critical questions about their political and economic meanings.