

Inside the Olympic Industry by Helen Jefferson Lenskyj (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. xxi + 216, including bibliography and index. Reviewed by Douglas Booth, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand,

For over one hundred years, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has advanced Olympism as a philosophy of international peace, unity, and friendship. But in analyzing the effects that bidding for and hosting Olympic games have on socially and economically disadvantaged urban communities, *Inside the Olympic Industry* exposes the greed, hypocrisy, and cynicism that underscores Olympism. According to Helen Lenskyj, the Olympic industry promotes an extremely narrow set of interests: far from promoting hope, goodwill, and fair play, the Olympic industry compounds the plight of poor and marginalized groups who are invariably disenfranchised and frequently dislocated by bidding/hosting processes.

Lenskyj writes well and *Inside the Olympic Industry* is rich in detail. It draws on a wide variety of primary sources and offers the most comprehensive comparative analysis of Olympic politics yet undertaken. Two chapters on international resistance to the Olympic movement are invaluable contributions to the literature. Here Lenskyj describes the principal anti-Olympic protests since 1968 including those organised in Mexico City, Montréal, Denver, Los Angeles, Seoul, Barcelona, Calgary, Melbourne, Atlanta, Nagano, Sydney, Berlin, Salt Lake City, Turin, Trieste, Helsinki, and Poprad-Tatry. The latter four cities bid for the 2006 Winter Olympics (to be hosted by Turin) and opponents coordinated their protesters through the International Network Against Olympic Games and Commercial Sports.



Boosters refuse to consider any possibility that hosting Olympic events may compound social crises such as homelessness. According to supporters, they are unrelated issues and protesters who voice such claims are merely malcontents and rabble-rousers. Lenskyj debunks this position. The following quote, for example, captures the negative social impact of the 1996 Summer Games on poor inner city communities in Atlanta:

... Olympic construction and preparations took a heavy toll on already disadvantaged populations. About fifteen thousand residents were evicted from two of the oldest public housing projects in the United States when five thousand units were demolished to make way for Olympic accommodation. Only 30% of about two hundred new houses and townhouses were affordable, in an area where the average income was only \$7,800. ... a total of 9,500 units of affordable housing were lost between 1990 and 1995, and \$350 million in public funds was diverted from much-needed low-income housing, social services, and other support services for homeless and poor people to Olympic preparations during the same period (p. 136).

Under some circumstances, even bidding carries an unethical air as Lenskyj shows in her analysis of Toronto's bid to host the 2008 Olympics. A recent report by the Toronto Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force found that 26,000 people, including over 5,000 children, used the city's shelter system in 1996. The Task Force declared homelessness a national disaster. Among the factors it said contributed to the problem was constant "squabbling" between municipal, provincial, and federal governments "over matters of jurisdiction and responsibility." As Lenskyj notes, the enthusiasm and unanimity with which the Toronto council and the Ontario provincial government applied themselves to the 2008 Olympic bid was "a disturbing indication of their priorities" in the wake of the homelessness report (p. 88).

Lenskyj's concerns about the growing relationships between universities and the Olympic industry will interest academics. She recognises "clear parallels" between the unethical practices adopted by the Olympic and tobacco industries. Academics should not lightly dismiss her evidence. Shortly before Sydney won the 2000 Games, Sharon Beder, a well-known environmental academic in New South Wales, criticized the methods proposed to clean up Homebush, the main Olympic site and a former industrial and toxic waste dump. Beder's stance drew the attention of government officials who visited her at work and subsequently blocked the publication of her critique in *New Scientist*. According to the journal's editors, the Chinese would use Beder's claims as ammunition against Sydney's bid!

In the light of this episode in academia, Lenskyj would not be surprised to learn that the executive of the Australian Society for Sports History recently voted (by a slim majority) to apologise to the Olympic industry for a perceived slight. Demands for the apology emanated from the director of the Centre for Olympic Studies at the University of New South Wales. He was concerned by comments, published in an academic newsletter with a minuscule circulation, about 'Olympics in the Next Millennium,' a 1999 conference hosted by his Centre. According to one reviewer, IOC members Jacques Rogge and Anita De Frantz showed a gross lack of tact when they publicly joked about the gifts they received from conference organizers. As the reviewer quite correctly noted, their behaviour made a "mockery of the [Olympic] reform process" and "denigrates those who are genuinely concerned about these allegations of corruption."¹ However, the Centre's director (and his supporters on the ASSH executive) decided that nothing, least of all freedom of academic speech, should jeopardise possible future funding from the Olympic industry.

Inside the Olympic Industry is not free of problems. It is very much an "us" versus "them" polemic in which the Olympic industry is "simply a transnational corpora-

tion that in many instances exploits young athletes' labour and aspirations for its own aggrandisement and profit" (p. 195). This theoretically and analytically one-dimensional stance ignores a host of contradictions, ambiguities, and paradoxes that the author herself identifies. Lenskyj records dissenting voices within the Olympic industry (such as Salt Lake City's Ken Bullock, IOC member Marc Hodler, former Olympians Mark Spitz and Carl Lewis); she notes that some IOC members find the social engagements associated with the lobbying process a strain, and that others resist unethical approaches from bid committees; she observes conflicts between the IOC and host cities over organisational arrangements, and discusses the employment of cultural matchmakers by different bid committees to woo IOC members. Lenskyj even reports that a motion before the IOC executive committee to cancel the Games in Mexico City failed by just one vote; cancellation would surely have changed the history of the Olympic industry. But as far as the author is concerned, these are minor or inconsequential aberrations in an otherwise all powerful homogenous industry.

Inside the Olympic Industry lacks theoretical and analytical rigour in explaining the concepts of Olympic industry and Olympic family. While the Olympic industry is the primary focus of her analysis, Lenskyj persists with the 'family' model when referring to internal wrangles within the Olympic movement. Yet, she does not explain the precise relationship between the family and the industry other than to say that the former is a subset of the latter.

Like many critics, Lenskyj condemns as inherently corrupt the pervasive gift culture in the Olympic movement. Notwithstanding the IOC's pitiful attempts to defend the gift culture, this view ignores the complexity and subtleties of gift giving and receiving. As sociologist John O'Neill reminds us, the negative connotations associated with gift giving derive from a very narrow ideological perspective. Similarly, other contemporary theorists of the gift, including Pierre Bourdieu, Maurice Godelier, and Jacques Godbout, stress that gift cultures do not intrinsically sink into corruption. Indeed, in his recent resurrection of the gift as a critical form of social exchange, Godbout argues that gifts nourish everything at the heart of social relationships - surrender, forgiveness, renunciation, love, respect, dignity, redemption, salvation, redress, and compassion. Of course, these notions would undermine Lenskyj's conceptualization of the Olympic movement as a ruthlessly exploitative industry, as would any discussion of the tens of thousands of volunteers who make the Olympic Games possible. Interestingly, Godbout calls volunteering the "quintessential disinterested gift."

Some readers will undoubtedly find Lenskyj's polemic extreme. Her constant use of the terms "White" and "male" appear sophomoric. In one place, for example, she writes that "[New, South Wales premier John] Fahey, [prime minister Paul] Keating and [former prime minister Gough] Whitlam, apparently by virtue of being Australian, male, and White, readily assumed the role of international ambassador for sport" (p. 74). Neither Keating nor Whitlam had any great affinity with sport and Lenskyj is well aware that the Sydney Bid Company recruited Whitlam to tour sub-Saharan Africa because of his status on the continent. In 1972, the newly elected Whitlam Labor government imposed a boycott on apartheid sport, a move that secured the prime minister lasting adulation among black Africans. Lenskyj's style is unfortunate because when she fully explores and discusses issues, her arguments are cogent. For example, at one point she describes in detail the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic

Games rejecting overtures from local black communities to use the Olympic stadium and environs after the Games to help revitalise their neighbourhood. In light of the evidence, Lenskyj appears on more solid ground when she concludes that a predominantly white and wealthy executive committee displayed “contempt” for a low-income black neighbourhood group (p. 137).

These criticisms aside, *Inside the Olympic Industry* is essential reading for those interested in the Olympic movement. Helen Lenskyj convincingly demonstrates the utter disregard many bidding and host cities show for the ideals that the IOC claims are its guiding tenets. The situation will not improve until the IOC demands that prospective hosts take cognizance of the view from “the bottom of the food chain” (p. 139).

Endnotes

1. Tara Magdalinski, ‘Review: The Olympics in the Next Millennium Conference’, *Bulletin of the Australian Society for Sports History*, 31 (1999), p. 27.