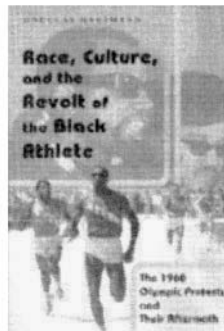


BOOK REVIEW

Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath by Douglas Hartmann (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 344 pp, including notes, references, and index. Reviewed by Douglas Booth, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Standing on a victory podium at the 1968 olympic games¹ in Mexico City with their black-gloved fists raised and heads bowed, African American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos embodied the trilectic of race, politics, and sport in the twentieth century. In *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete*, Douglas Hartmann sets out to answer three questions: why did Smith and Carlos stage the protest, what happened after the protest, and what impact did the protest have on race inequalities in the United States?



Hartmann answers these questions in an engrossing two-part narrative. Chapters 2-5 examine the lead up to, and the immediate events surrounding, the protest, while Chapters 6 and 7 look at the aftermath and consequences of the action. Hartmann's narrative begins with the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference, a meeting attended by several hundred young black activists on Thanksgiving Day 1967. The meeting made national news when participants at one conference workshop—titled the Olympic Project for Human Rights—passed a formal resolution to boycott the olympic games the following year as part of "the struggle against racial injustice" in the United States (p. 34). Hartmann subsequently traces the development of the boycott idea—which had been around since at least 1960—and the views and roles of key actors including Dick Gregory (one time university scholarship athlete, comedian, and political satirist), Tommie Smith (regular member of American track teams, holder of numerous world sprinting records, and scholarship athlete at San Jose State University), and Harry Edwards (former university scholarship athlete, and instructor in sociology at San Jose State). Edwards, the founder and director of the Olympic Committee for Human Rights (OCHR—a small group that organized the November 1967 workshop and proposed the boycott resolution), and author of *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969) (the classic insider account of the Project and the Committee), figures prominently throughout the narrative.

Support for a boycott waned in the months after the resolution. But early in 1968 the OCHR organized a boycott by black athletes of an indoor track meet hosted by the notoriously racist New York Athletic Club and, over the next few months, black athletes staged dozens of protests against racism in sport. However, the OCHR still had to transpose black anger into a fully-fledged olympic boycott, especially among the score of high profile athletes certain to make the United States olympic team. The latter knew well that their participation in a boycott would cost them lucrative endorsement deals, contracts in professional sport, job offers, and teaching positions. Not surprisingly the boycott failed to materialize. Nonetheless, the revolt by black athletes in 1968 remains firmly etched in the collective memory through the ubiquitous image of Smith and Carlos's clenched fists on the victory podium at Mexico City.

In the second part of his narrative, Hartmann examines "the impacts and outcomes of the boycott movement on sport and in American culture" (p. xxi). Here Hartmann extends his perspective beyond the political actions of black athletes, which receded after 1968, and looks at the broader revolution in sport over the next decade. In the 1970s sport became more accessible, equitable, and democratic, and more focused on participation, fitness and health than accomplishment; women, too, became more actively involved. The key focus of this narrative is the institutional reaction of the American amateur athletic establishment to the protests.

The establishment initially responded to the threat of an African American olympic boycott by either downplaying or ignoring the matter altogether. But action quickly supplanted inaction. The establishment insulated itself against radical demands by painting the OCHR as extremist and opportunistic, and by publicly acknowledging moderate elements. A core of university presidents was especially influential here. Accepting that African Americans had legitimate grievances, they put in place new policies to protect and foster the interests of black athletes. Others followed this lead by hiring African Americans as coaches, trainers, officials, and administrators, by providing counseling services and more financial assistance to students on athletic scholarships, and by contributing to race-targeted initiatives such as the National Summer Youth Sport Program. The single most important legacy was the federal Amateur Athletic Act of 1978. The Act, which marked the first intervention by a federal government in amateur sport in the United States, "authorized and empowered" the United States Olympic Committee "to oversee the structure, organization and development of amateur sport in the country" (p. 247). Concomitant with the amateur sporting establishment's new attention to perceptions of racial inequities and injustices, mainstream American culture rehabilitated Smith and Carlos. In 1968 Smith and Carlos were "dangerous, irrational radicals"; by the mid-1980s they were "courageous and dignified American heroes" (p. 267). The turning point in this rehabilitation was the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Having learned the lessons of the previous decade, the Los Angeles organizing committee "incorporat[ed] relatively moderate but symbolically powerful racial actors and progressive ideals into its practice and official policies" (p. 256). As well as hiring John Carlos as a special consultant on minority affairs and engaging Tommie Smith as a site coordinator, the president of the organizing committee, Peter Ueberroth, circumvented potential community protests by meeting in secret with Harry Edwards and winning the latter's blessing for the event.

Hartmann concludes his narrative with a description of race relations in contemporary American sport and sporting culture. On the one hand, "the worst, most blatant forms of racial prejudice and discrimination appear only in extraordinary individual instances from

which all other patties can quickly distance themselves" (p. 246). On the other hand, a host of structural problems and issues remain, including lack of academic preparation for black scholarship athletes, social isolation and discrimination beyond sport, and underrepresentation of racial minorities in coaching, officiating, and administrative positions.

Hartmann's narrative is fascinating, insightful, and powerful; it is also state of the art social history. (As evidence of the latter, readers should note that *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete* received honourable mention at the 2004 book awards of both the North American Society for Sport History and the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport.) Underscoring Hartmann's achievement is his distinctive approach to sources, mode of presentation, level of contextualization, use of theory, and engagement with cultural analysis.

Sources. As well as displaying exemplary skills in the forensic interrogation and cross-examination of his sources, Hartmann takes inordinate care in the conclusions that he draws from them. He is not afraid to concede that a particular remnant of the past or archive is incomplete or of limited value. Hartmann also uses several sources in highly creative ways. For example, he analyzes sporting metaphors in articles and commentaries dealing with race and racism in three mainstream national magazines (*US News and World Report*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*) over two, five-year periods (1973-78 and 1979-84) to show that "once sport had 'resolved' its own, internal racial problems, it was far more likely to be used as a metaphor for or symbol of race relations in the United States" (p. 260).

Presentation. Hartmann's mode of presentation combines a distinct style of narration with complex and sophisticated advocacy. In the first instance, Hartmann is no omniscient narrator. He does not pretend to have discovered all the facts concerning either the revolt by black athletes or the response by the American amateur sports establishment; nor does he imply that his narrative flows forth, like some natural stream, from an underground well of facts. On the contrary, Hartmann is careful to identify the limitations of his history. At one point he even reminds historians that *their decisions* about where to start and conclude their narratives can fundamentally alter the history of a subject.

Although *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete* contains a narrative, it is, more correctly, a form of advocacy that proceeds through a series of clever and challenging arguments. Among the many arguments advanced by Hartmann are that:

the objectives of the revolt shifted after Mexico City "from calling attention to racism *through* sport to protesting against racism *in* sport" (p. 175),

the boycott of the New York Athletic Club meet in 1968 was "an almost unqualified success" because it raised the political consciousness of black athletes (p. 106),

while the OCHR helped "consolidat[e] a progressive black collective consciousness," it failed to "build... the kind of participatory support necessary to nurture and sustain mass-based protests and boycotts" (p. 120),

the boycott provoked intense opposition because 'it revealed cracks, fissures, limitations, and inconsistencies in [an] otherwise seamless web of sports idealism, color-blind social justice, and liberal democracy' (p. 81),

the "forces of power" were "stacked against" further demonstrations in Mexico City after the expulsion of Smith and Carlos from the games (p. 164), and

the organizational structure of American sport meant that "no agency or institution ... had the power or the authority to implement the reforms" demanded by the boycott movement (p. 98).

It must be stressed that Hartmann does not rely solely on the remnants of the past to either develop or prove his arguments. Logic, theory, and context are equally important.

Contextualization. Hartmann places great store on putting events in their proper context. Indeed, he argues that the real motives for the black revolt can only be understood in the context of the post-civil rights period and the split in the civil rights coalition. On the one side were those who advocated a shift "from extra-institutional politics of protest to the more usual institutional politics of the electoral-legislative system and the social processes of civil society." On the other side were those who believed that "social action and activism" were prerequisites "for true racial justice ... in American society" (p. 42). As Hartmann puts it, "the idea of an Olympic boycott spoke directly [to the latter]" (p. 44).

Hartmann also emphasizes that contexts change through time. For example, he notes that the image (text) of Smith and Carlos has carried two very different meanings in mainstream American society. In the early 1970s the mainstream saw in the image two traitors and enemies of the state; a little over a decade later it recognized two heroes of the civil rights movement. In Hartmann's words, "the image itself did not change at all during this period," nor did Smith or Carlos say or do anything "that could have affected how it was interpreted." Hence, "the only recourse for explaining this dramatic transformation" is "to look to the broader socio-historical context within which its meaning was produced and imputed" (p. 11).

Theorization. Whereas most theoretically-inclined historians frame their presentations in a single theory, Hartmann is refreshingly eclectic, drawing from a well-stocked store of theories to both elucidate and reinforce his arguments. For example, he acknowledges the insights offered by Mancur Olson's rational choice theory in explaining why the boycott did not materialize: before individuals commit themselves to collective action they usually weigh up the "personal costs and/or benefits" (pp. 113-114); he incorporates a version of relative deprivation theory—"that revolutions are most likely to happen *not* when things are bad but instead when they are getting better"—as a partial explanation for the "new impulse toward action among African American athletes" in the post-civil rights era (pp. 118-119); and he employs Michael Omi and Howard Winant's model of "unstable equilibrium" to help explain how the state managed the black revolt by "translating the most radical demands into small and mostly symbolic reform initiatives" (pp. 222-223).

Cultural analysis. Lastly, in keeping with the cultural turn in history, Hartmann analyzes the podium protest as a cultural performance. "Smith and Carlos's actions," Hartmann writes, "could not have been choreographed and performed more perfectly. Precisely as the flag rose [and] the anthem began ... these two black athletes bowed their heads and fixed their eyes on the ground, ... rejecting the ritual celebration of a national identity ... [and] ... denying ... the integrity of their native United States'. Furthermore, their symbols—clenched fists, human rights patches, black stockings, black scarves, tribal beads—cleverly deflected attention and honour from both themselves and the nation and 'redirected it towards the

problems of race in the United States." "Rarely is human expression as focused, elegant, and eloquent as Smith and Carlos's was that day," says Hartmann. For him, it was "an act of inspiration, passion, and originality, of sheer expressive genius—truly, by these standards or any others, a work of art" (pp. 19-20).

Whatever the shortcomings of *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete* they are exceptionally minor. Perhaps Hartmann could have strengthened his analysis of the boycott strategy by developing a comparison with the boycott of apartheid sport. Activists in South Africa and the United States both learned a hard lesson about boycotts as political strategies: boycotts cannot transform societies. At best they can produce limited reforms; they cannot transform society because the pressures they exert are insignificant in comparison to the concessions they demand.

The revolt of the black athlete is a great story about race, politics and sport; the greatness of *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete* rests in the way Douglas Hartmann tells the story with such technical and literary aplomb.

Endnotes

- ¹ Using capital 'O' in Olympics and olympism are small, but important, ways in which the olympic movement unjustifiably venerates and decorates itself. This reviewer rejects capitalizing these words.