



Book Review:

The Olympics: The Basics

Miah, A. and García, B. (2012),
The Olympics: The Basics,
London: Routledge

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Contributor note

Richard Haynes is a Reader in the Division of Communications, Media and Culture, School of Arts & Humanities (University of Stirling) and also the Director of Stirling Media Research Institute. His two main areas of research are the relationship between the media and sport and issues relating to digital media, creativity and intellectual property rights. His books include *Power Play: Sport, the Media & Popular Culture* (2009 co-authored with Boyle, R.) and *The Football Imagination: The Rise of Football Fanzine Culture* (1995).

Billed as 'an accessible, contemporary introduction to the Olympic movement and Games', *The Olympics: The Basics* is a welcome addition to 'the basics' student textbook series published by Routledge. Both authors already have a distinguished track record in the analysis of the Olympic movement as both a sporting and cultural mega-event. With this book, they have risen to the challenge of producing what is labelled a basic text, but is in fact an insightful overview of a complex, disperse and widely researched field of enquiry.

The book was published to coincide with London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics, and in many ways anticipates both the public and academic commentary and analysis that will undoubtedly follow both events. Any cynical sneering at the opportunism associated with the timing of the book is more than compensated by what is a lively and engaging pocket-sized book. In a mere 192 pages the authors provide an historical, conceptual and critical overview of the Games, both ancient and modern, but in a way that avoids jargon and the repetition of a well-worn path of academic publication on the Olympics. This is by no means an easy feat, and both authors should be congratulated for the clear and concise

manner in which the book is assembled. Each chapter is broken up with plenty of sub-headings that bring a fresh view of Olympic studies.

Miah and García make clear from the outset that studying the Olympics is more than an analysis of the Games themselves, it is about a movement that has developed from its pre-history in the Pan-Hellenic Games of ancient Greece into a social, political and cultural phenomenon we know today born of the vision of the Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin in the late-nineteenth century. How the core values of the ancient philosophy and the modern form of the Games connect runs throughout the book and provides the fulcrum for critical engagement with the Olympic movement. In this respect the first chapter on the History and Philosophy of the Olympics is the key to opening up critical approaches to the Games, while at the same time celebrating some of its core values.

From setting the scene through an introduction to the idealism of the Olympic movement the book then investigates contemporary thinking about a number of themes associated with the Games. These include society and identity; culture and education; politics

and diplomacy; ethics and values; management and economics; media and communications and finally legacy and impact. Each thematic couplet provides a way in to understanding the Olympic movement and dealt with in discrete chapters.

A common theme that runs through the public discourse on any Olympic Games is how much will it cost? And will the venues be ready on time? As the authors show, these are as much social questions as economic and political issues, and the chapter on society and identity explores the purpose of the Games and its impact on people, communities and societies. The authors remind us that the level of public scrutiny of Olympic organisers is no surprise, and is in fact 'a crucial dimension of any democratic society' (2012: 27). Issues of who 'owns' the Games and of entitlement are therefore a central facet of hosting the Games, and because of its social impact, it 'is a project of identity formation, contestation and consolidation' (2012: 29). The rest of the chapter provides historical evidence of this process from successive Games and, as the authors note, the disjuncture between official and public narratives on the Games is both intriguing and a

serious point of analysis. A discussion of the binary conflicts of inclusion/exclusion, corporate/public interest and global/local are discussed in turn and put some flesh on the wider theoretical point that the meaning of the Games is heavily contested.

Chapter three opens the debate further to illustrate the broader context of the Olympic movement and its lofty ideological mission to be a positive force for culture and education. The chapter provides a number of examples of how the Olympics are 'not just a sports event'. Again, this aspect of Olympism has historical antecedents. The artistic competitions and cultural programmes of the Olympics form the cornerstone of the IOC's principles and values. The authors discuss various incarnations of the artistic and cultural events, and document the changing policies of the IOC, particularly following the Nazi propaganda that surrounded the 1936 Berlin Games. The authors note that more contemporary cultural programmes foster strong local and national identities, and are frequently connected to wider economic objectives (2012: 54). The chapter concludes with a discussion about the concept of festival as opposed to media spectacle, and

suggests the issue for Games organisers is to maintain sensitivity to local needs as well as global audiences.

Chapter's four and five bring the politics and ethics of the Games in to focus. The contradictions of the IOC's stance on international politics are explored in chapter four and the authors help explain how the contemporary Olympic Charter, signed by all participating nations, is a contractual product of previous attempts to politicize the Games and sport more broadly. The challenges of 'putting politics aside' during the Games are explored in some detail through themes such as activism and protest, terrorism and security, and government agendas and boycotts. Ultimately, the authors conclude that the de-politicized view of the IOC is unsustainable when one actually looks at the political interventions and philosophy of the Olympic movement itself. But we are also reminded that there is no uniform political agenda of the IOC. Indeed, it shifts with the times and the circumstances of global politics, which itself is complex and contradictory. Chapter five takes this broader context of politics to discuss how the IOC's approach is driven by moral and ethical values that have a nineteenth century

philosophy of sport at its root. The chapter explores issues of human rights, corruption, environmentalism and doping to reveal the increasing technologization of the Games, which has transformed both the nature of competition and the governance of Olympic sport.

Chapters six and seven deal with the political economy of Olympic sport and the commercial demands of Olympic partners and the media. The first section of chapter six analyses the operational issues facing those who govern and manage the Olympic movement. This involves managing a complex network of international organisations and has bred a transnational class who run global sport. The authors sketch out the evolution of National Olympic Committees and the solidarity that drives The Olympic Partners (TOP) scheme which provides commercial support for the Games in exchange for lucrative four-year contracts of with some of the world's leading global brands. The irony here is the IOC's historic resistance to over-commercialization of the Games, particularly at Olympic venues, which remain 'clean' from sponsorship and advertising. Chapter seven briefly charts the growing importance of television to the Olympic movement as both rights,

fees and influence have escalated. How each Games accommodates the world's media is discussed, highlighting the shifting accreditation process and controls on the thousands of journalists who descend on the Games. The IOC's attempts to manage its media relations have been destabilised by the rise of new media, especially social networked media. The chapter explores some of the salient issues that derive from a changing media environment, concluding with more questions than answers as to the direction of the IOC's media policy and strategy.

The final two chapters focus on the politicized concept of Olympic legacy – a buzzword during London 2012, which branded its own legacy as 'inspiring a generation'—and the future of the Games. The authors conclude that the concept of legacy needs to be subject to a coherent and continuous critical review, which looks beyond mere economic impact, and connects to the broader objectives of the Olympic movement. The future of the Olympic movement is likely to change as its political, media and social relationships also transform themselves. The authors request that future research looks at the Olympic movement in a more rounded context, which means connecting local and global processes of the Olympics and how it affects our lives. This book goes a long way in setting the parameters of this project.

This article was first published in *JOMEC Journal*

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ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

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