

Olympic symbolism worth more than gold

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We are used to anticipating and enjoying the Olympic Games as a quadrennial festival of human sporting excellence. But when the closing ceremony has played its last note and the athletes have all departed, the Olympics are as likely to be remembered for the political incidents, tensions and controversies that occurred as for the feats of athletic excellence.

The reason, of course, is that the Olympic Games are major events in international affairs, providing the biggest stage in the world for politics both high and low. More countries compete in the Olympics than are members of the United Nations, and unlike the turgid debates of the General Assembly, more than 90 per cent of all televisions in the world will tune in. From their modern inception in 1896, the Games have stood as a symbol of an idealised world, of human fraternity, of competition without bloodshed, of excellence without subjugation. The International Olympic Committee regularly calls for ceasefires for the duration of the Games. It is a place where "nationalism lite" can flourish without the dangerous downsides.

This is a symbolic backdrop too powerful for politics to ignore. The idealism and fraternity of the Olympics have provoked a very long history of exclusions and boycotts, to protest against certain regimes trying to use the Games to wrap themselves in the cloak of acceptability. From the bans of losing belligerents of the two World Wars at Antwerp (1920), Paris (1924) and London (1948) to the bans of race-based regimes (from Tokyo 1964 to Atlanta 1996), exclusion from the Olympics has been among the most powerful symbols of international disapprobation. In Melbourne in 1956, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Spain boycotted over the Soviet Union's participation, and Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon boycotted to protest against the participation of Israel, Britain and France.

Hosting the Games has become a powerful symbol of the "arrival" of a country at developed status (Tokyo 1964, Seoul 1988, Beijing 2008, Rio 2016) or the return of a country to the community of nations (Rome 1960, Tokyo 1964, Munich 1972).

Each Olympics faces the complex political symbolism amassed by all previous Games - so when Beijing was awarded the Olympics in 2001, it faced extended debate as to whether the 2008 Games would be used by an authoritarian regime to market its legitimacy (like the 1936 Berlin Games) or provide the impetus for democratic reform (like the 1988 Seoul Games).

Of course, the Olympic playing field isn't at all level. Huge amounts of money are invested by competitive countries in their athletes' success: it has been estimated that Australia's gold medals since 1980 have cost \$36 million each; China's since 1984 \$102 million each; and European countries' \$47 million each.

Inevitably, given this stage and this history, the Olympics have become part of the arsenal in the struggles of great powers against each other to shape the world. The Nazis tried to use the 1936 Berlin Olympics to showcase their belief in racial hierarchies (but forgot to tell Jesse Owens). During the Cold War, the superpowers saw Olympic competition as an extension of their contest: superior athletes must come from a superior system. After the Cold War, ideological competition died down outside and inside the Olympics - until the Beijing Games in 2008.

Beijing's theme, "One World, One Dream" sounded benign and idealistically Olympian, but had a hard-power edge to it. The opening ceremony focused strongly around the Chinese character "he" (harmony), the story of the peaceful voyages of the Ming dynasty naval expeditions of Zheng He, and the Silk Road. The subtext was China's claim that it is rising peacefully in pursuit of a "harmonious world" - at a time when much of the world was looking aghast at the foreign policy of George Bush's America.

London's theme this year is "Inspire a Generation". It's hard not to read into this theme a defiant tone - Britain may be down, but we'll come back.

In four years the host will be Rio, Brazil. As one of the so-called BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China), this is likely to be a portent for the future, as the world's big emerging economies follow on from Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing to proclaim their rise . The Olympics will remain a stage for world politics for as long as they're staged.

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