

Human Rights and the Olympic Movement: estrangements and approximations

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Abstract

This article focuses on the connexion between the Olympic Movement and Human Rights issues, specifically addressing the Summer Games that took place in 2000 (Sydney), 2004 (Athens), 2008 (Beijing), 2012 (London), and 2016 (Rio de Janeiro). Initially, the text locates the Olympic Games in the context of global capitalism. Later, the article highlights aspects of the Games that have become affected by human rights issues in the XXI Century. Next, we give examples of how these issues have been interpreted in the context of the Olympic Movement. Finally, we indicate ways in which the academic community can contribute to help issues related to Human Rights become an integral part of the Olympic Movement.

Keywords

Sociology of sports, sport mega events, Olympic Games, Human Rights

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Introduction

Sport mega events in general have been increasingly moulded by transnational businesses, which come to affect these events through increasing streams of revenue, such as television rights, ticket sales, and commercial ‘partnerships’ or sponsorships (Allmers & Maennig, 2009; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2004; Matheson, 2006; Müller, 2014). These events have also been progressively involved in specific forms of securitisation, which invariably have negative consequences for deprived communities in the vicinity of the event in addition to increasing costs (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009; Eisenhauer, Adair & Taylor, 2014; Houlihan & Giulianotti, 2012; Matheson, 2006).

Additionally, these events have also become strongly related to policies of gentrification, which often affect local communities and political economies (Allmers & Maennig, 2009; Gaffney, 2013; Schausteck de Almeida & Graeff, 2016). These processes are only possible due to the gigantic size such mega events have grown to (Giulianotti, 2011; Müller, 2015), which is important for this text, because the Olympic Games that ‘land’ in the cities of the XXI century are not the same as those first imagined by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, but giant structures that may suffer from ‘gigantism’. Gigantism is the term used in the literature on sport mega events to refer to problematic issues arising from the fact that such events are becoming increasingly larger (Bloyce & Smith, 2012; Müller, 2014).

Sport mega events have increasingly been considered as out of the ordinary, representing a break in the routine of everyday life at national, local and individual levels (Horne, 2015; Roche, 2000). However, the characteristics mentioned earlier do not manifest themselves in an isolated fashion around sport mega events. These events have been increasingly associated with the logic of capitalist modernity (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Roche, 1998) and have tended to be ‘the creations of political leaderships and economic elites’ (Roche 2008, p. 287). Thus, they are produced by the collective efforts of enormous corporations in the most diverse areas, whole national states, vast media complexes, political and economic elites, and transnational sports institutions.

One facet of such phenomena that arouses interest in academia is the connexion between the Olympic Games and globalisation. Attempts to understand and explain ‘the global’ have become

more frequent since the late 20th century. For the development of our text, it is important that we highlight some features of the globalisation phenomenon.

One important development in the growth of contemporary global capitalism occurred at the beginning of the 20th century in the economic field: the rise of transnational capital. By transnational capital we mean the set of resources used by investors and speculators to develop economic activities in different countries (Robinson, 2012). However, several authors also use the term when referring to the transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 2002b; Struna, 2013). For Sklair, 'if the capitalist system is the dominant global system, then the TCC [transnational capitalist class] is the global ruling class' (1997, p. 520, emphasis added). Although underlined by technological and scientific advances, especially in areas such as transport and communication, the rise of transnational capital then opened the possibility for important changes that formed the basis for the economic globalisation (Robinson, 2004).

It is also important to note that after the rise of transnational capital, the flow of production and distribution of goods and services followed a trend of expansion, fractioning and outsourcing, now under the auspices of the advancement of neoliberal policies and the strengthening of transnational capital (Maher, 2016; Meszaros, 1995). More specifically, the flow of production and distribution of goods and services operated territorial expansion, fractionation of the productive process and outsourcing of productive stages to places where cheap labour could be used.

This point is crucial for the discussion of sport mega events presented in this article, and specifically the Olympic Games given that sport mega events and the Olympics have followed these trends of global capitalism. Sport mega events and the Olympics have recently expanded their territorial base, and they also use forms of fractionation of the production process and outsourcing. Thus, the first step we will take to adjust the focus of our text is to locate the 'Global South tour' that the Olympic Games and other sport mega events have been taking throughout the beginning of XXI Century as part of the process of globalisation and integration of the Games into global capitalism. For example, in the period from 2000 to 2022, FIFA World Cups and Summer Olympics will have been held in places such as Sydney (Australia), Athens (Greece), Beijing (China), South Africa, Brazil, Russia and Qatar (Curi, Knijnik & Mascarenhas, 2011; Horne, 2015).

The long-term consequences of this sport mega events allocation policy will only be known after many years. Meanwhile, the impact of the sport mega events 'Global South tour' on human rights could be recognised even before the Games first landed in the Global South, as some of the examples we will use demonstrate. In the next passage of the text, we analyse literature (not only academic) and present examples to illustrate peculiarities and approximations between the issue of Human Rights and the Olympic Movement.

Editions of the Summer Olympic Games in the XXI Century and Human Rights

Human rights are rights that are considered essential to all human beings, irrespective of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and freedom, freedom from slavery, from torture, freedom of expression, and the right to work and instruction. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris on December 10, 1948, by the General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.

Since then, several advances have been made in the area, while the achievement of such policies has been a constant challenge, and particularly problematic in specific areas. In relation to sport mega events, the main concerns raised are related to forced evictions, abuse of workers, exploitation of children, failure to provide adequate housing within development projects, the right to work, and the right to expression and participation in decision-making processes (Centre of Sports Human Rights, 2019; Humans Right Watch, 2018).

In this section of the article, we analyse literature - not solely academic - to problematize human rights issues arising from the editions of the Olympic Games that took place in the XXI Century. While the main focus of this passage is to make evident the change provoked by the sport mega events Global South Tour, we maintained Sydney and London within the scope for two reasons. First, although geographically in the Global South, Australia can be understood in terms of different socio-economic contours to those typically identified in relation to the Global South. But together with London, the case of Sydney may help the text to highlight

that when referring to the Global South, we are referring to the 'economic, political, and epistemic dependency' that this part of the world has developed in relation to the Global North (Mignolo, 2011, p. 166). However, it is worth noting that the Global South is not only a geographical location, it is 'a metaphor that indicates the regions of the world in the receiving end of globalization', suffering the consequences of the unequal relationships that are given in this context (Mignolo, 2011, p. 184). Thus, we also kept London within our frame of analysis. However, although the United Kingdom can be considered one of the world's most advanced nations, it is not free of unequal relationships and their consequences – as we are going to demonstrate here.

The Sydney 2000 Games gave the Aboriginal Peoples of Australia a chance to highlight historical injustices dating back to the period of the country's colonisation. According to movements linked to the traditional peoples of Australia, their actions around the Olympic Games took place to give visibility to the human rights abuses suffered by such peoples throughout history. According to authorities of the Traditional Peoples, which are about 400,000 indigenous people in the country and now more than 600 traditional groups, throughout more than 200 years of colonisation, such peoples have suffered a process of decimation and disrespect. Also, according to these leaders, the Olympics did not do anything to support their cause or to help them within the economic and political situation of Australia. Other issues that became visible around the Sydney 2000 Games include questionable business, environmental policy deficits, the global sale of fake indigenous Aboriginal culture and last-minute legislation. According to Belam (2008), these last-minute laws significantly disregard 'basic democratic rights of public protest, and freedom of movement and assembly; it dramatically increases the power of police and security guards in many of the most important public places in Sydney; it introduces wide ranging public order offenses without safeguards or accountability against the abuse of power' (n.p.). There were also court cases against the organisation of Games in reference to their failure to provide support to people with disabilities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2000; Belam, 2008; Müller, M., 2014).

For the Amnesty International (2004), one fact that should be considered regarding the 2004 Athens Olympics is that this was the first Summer Games to be held after the attacks on the twin towers' and other sites in the United States on September 11, 2001

(Samatas, 2011). This is one of the first issues that emerged during the preparation period for the 2004 Games in relation to Human Rights: the security of the event. Several sources went public to record the promulgation of anti-democratic laws as well as police abuse (BBC NEWS, 2002; International Amnesty, 2004). Another issue that grew to great proportions in relation to human rights in Greece prior to the 2004 Games has two fronts. The Roma People were persecuted, according to their reports and human rights activists. The form that such persecution took was related to the right to adequate housing. Several cases of animosity have been documented and Roma Peoples complain to the present day of having lost territory because of the Athens Games (COHRE, 2007). According to them, there was a cleaning operation and they were excluded and expelled from their homes (Brame, 2003; ESCT/OMCT, 2004). Finally, the case of Athens 2004 also highlighted an economic issue. As the first country in serious financial trouble to host the Games in the 21st Century, the Greek case has shown that the Games can be detrimental to economies in developing countries (Berlin, 2015; Makris, 2011). After the Games, Greece approached an unprecedented economic crisis and ended up appealing to the international community. For various actors, the Olympics contributed to the growth of the Greek debt, so the Games would have contributed to the worsening of Greece's economic conditions. For example, according to the Council for Foreign Relations, the summer Olympic Games 2004 cost Greece 9 billion euros. This led to public borrowing which contributed to a rising deficit (6.1 percent) and debt-to-GDP ratio (110.6 percent) for 2004¹.

According to the daily newspaper *New York Times* (2008, n. p.) 'the International Olympic Committee lowered its standards on human rights around the Beijing Olympic Games'. On the other hand, the then President of the IOC, Jacques Rogge, had made a previous statement contradicting this accusation and reaffirming that the IOC was in 'full support of human rights, and that the Chinese people had acknowledged that the games would help change their society' (The Guardian, 2004, n. p.). Wang Wei, Executive Vice President and Secretary General of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games, claimed that the Beijing Olympics had led to greater respect for human rights (Olympic Watch, 2008). However, during the Beijing Games, the media widely reported violations of the rights to decision making processes and free

¹ <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/greeces-debt-crisis-timeline>

expression, as there was a sharp increase in abuse of migrant construction workers as well evictions of Beijing residents whose homes were demolished to make way for that infrastructure, and Chinese citizens who expressed concerns about all the human rights abuse were even silenced through intimidation, imprisonment and repression. Control over potential criticism has increased so much that new legislation designed to adapt the state to the Games have included penalties for ‘unauthorized’ coverage of everything from natural disasters to corruption scandals that might embarrass the Chinese Communist Party². In terms of violence against human rights’ advocates, for example, 53-year-old housing rights activist Ye Guozhu served a four-year prison sentence for attempting to organize protests against forced evictions related to the Beijing Olympics. Similarly, Ni Yulan, a 47-year-old lawyer was disbarred and imprisoned for her work defending the rights of those forcibly evicted in Beijing and crippled by the beatings she suffered in prison. She was arrested while trying to prevent the destruction of her own home³. The media assert that underneath the pretext of maintaining ‘security’ during this megaevent the Chinese government prepared themselves to removal, repress, intimidate, detain, torture and even execute hundreds of ‘undesirables’ during the games in 2008 (Human Right Watch, 2008; New York Times, 2008; Olympic Watch, 2008; Telegraph, 2008).

There was widespread speculation regarding whether the Olympic Games in London would create a sustainable legacy for the most deprived communities in the UK. In human rights terms, the bid book set out several positive commitments such as limiting construction to avoid evictions; devoting new dwellings to social housing; and constructing community facilities (Equality Human Right Commission, 2010; Right Now, 2012). This expectation was reinforced by the UK’s government position that the Games have long been recognized to foster development and strengthen education, promote health and prevent disease and drug abuse; empower girls and women; promote inclusion and well-being of disabled and facilitate social inclusion (GovUK, 2012). Thus, it was expected that the 2012 Olympic Games would have a positive impact on the lives of the people of the host country.

While London 2012 did focus on these socio-economic aspects, no attention was paid to the event’s impact on human rights (Right Now, 2012). Long before the Olympics began, the regions around

2 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2008/country-chapters/china-and-tibet>

3 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/08/06/china-olympics-harm-key-human-rights>

event venues suffered from an accelerated process of urban change including pressure on the housing market, increased rents and house prices; displacement of previous residents; increased harassment and criminal charges against homeless persons (Right Now; 2012). Human rights abuses were suffered by migrant workers who, working as forced labour amid poor health and safety regulations, manufactured badges and mascots to London 2012. Meanwhile, underneath the illusion of job opportunities in one of the most charming cities in the world, the reality was one of human trafficking and modern-day slavery within the supply chains linked to official Olympic partners, major London hoteliers, travel and tourism companies (Institute for Human Rights and Business, 2012).

Rio de Janeiro 2016 may end up being remembered as ‘The Exclusion Games’ (World Cup and Olympics Popular Committee of Rio de Janeiro, 2015). That is mainly due to the apparently total disregard for human rights this edition of the Games displayed. The Rio 2016 Olympics were reportedly linked to widespread violations of children’s rights, such as the right to education and other civil liberties. In total, more than 4,120 families lost their homes due to Olympic initiatives (The Guardian, 2015), and 22,000 were evicted in total (Telegraph, 2016). The right to free movement as well as the right to life were threatened throughout the entire process of production of the Games. Just as people were often banned from entering their own neighbourhoods because these areas were being destroyed, so there were prohibitions against people leaving their neighbourhoods (slums) through the Favelas’ Pacification Policy. In some of these cases, people were targeted by police as they drove across the borders of the favelas where they lived⁴. The Favelas’ Pacification Policy was reinforced by the federal and state governments, creating problematic conditions for slum dwellers, whose already stigmatised place in society was worsened, and came to live under constant surveillance of the forces of state repression (Children Win, 2015). Talbot and Carter (2018) emphasised that although the international media did not treat human rights as an important issue related to the 2016 Games, grass roots activists systematically reported abuses. For example, violence against local populations, police brutality, economic abuse, discrimination against homeless people, deprivation of liberties (free movement

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/08/rio-olympics-2016-human-rights-violations-report>; <http://g1.globo.com/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2016/06/relatorio-alerta-sobre-risco-de-violacao-de-direitos-humanos-na-rio-2016.html>; <https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2016-08-human-rights-violations-olympic-city.pdf>

and expression), creation of exception laws, race discrimination, and denial of the right to information were frequently noted by different actors in relation to Rio 2016 (Boell, 2016).

To keep in mind

The following table exemplifies, according to our samples, the most common incidence of Human Rights frustrations linked to the first five editions of the summer Olympic Games of the XXI Century:

Table 1. The most common incidence of Human Rights frustrations linked to the first five editions of the summer Olympic Games of the XXI Century

	Sydney 2000	Athens 2004	Beijing 2008	London 2012	Rio 2016
1. Creation of exception laws and impediment to participation in decision-making processes (last minute legislation and exclusionary policies)	X	X			X
2. Denial of the right to information		X		X	X
3. Discrimination of race, homeless and migrant people	X	X	X	X	X
4. Disregard for environmental issues	X				X
5. Disrespect of traditional peoples and their cultures	X	X			
6. Economic abuse		X	X	X	X
7. Economic exploitation of developing countries		X			X
8. Forced evictions			X	X	X
9. Illegal expulsion of specific populations without appropriate reward		X	X		X
10. Interruption or attack on the continuum of adequate housing			X		X
11. Police brutality		X	X		X
12. Violations of the right to free expression			X	X	X
13. Modern Slavery and human traffic				X	

Note. For Sydney 2000, see Australian Human Rights Commission, 2000; Belam, 2008; Müller, M., 2014. For Athens 2004, see BBC NEWS, 2002; Berlin, 2015; Brame, 2003; COHRE, 2007; ESCT/OMCT, 2004; International Amnesty, 2004; Makris, 2011; Samatas, 2011. For Beijing 2008, see Humans Right Watch, 2008; the New York Times, 2008; Olympic Watch, 2008; The Guardian, 2004; Telegraph, 2008. For London 2012, see Equality Humans Right Commission, 2010; Gov UK, 2012; Institute for Human Rights and Business, 2012; Right Now, 2012. For Rio 2016, see Boell, 2016; Children Win, 2015; Telegraph, 2016; The Guardian, 2015; World Cup and Olympics Popular Committee of Rio de Janeiro, 2015.

The Olympic Movement and Human Rights issues

The Olympic Movement became related to or overlapped with almost every political or social movement that took place in the last century. There was an Olympic Games (1936) that became strongly associated with Nazism. One of the International Olympic Committee presidents was associated with the Spanish Fascism (Juan Antonio Samaranch). On the other hand, several images and documents connect the Games with feelings of liberty and social justice. The Olympic Charter itself states that the rights and freedoms set forth in the Olympic Charter 'shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' (IOC, 2019). Regarding powerful images, at the 1968 Games, Tommie Smith, the 200 m gold medallist, and John Carlos, bronze medallist in the same event, raised their fists in protest against racial discrimination in the USA. This protest was specifically connected with the most advanced social movements of the era. These athletes were severely punished by the Olympic Movement, but over time came to be recognised as heroes.

This initial paragraph aims to make clear that the Olympic Movement is not a homogeneous structure and that its direction is in constant flux. One of the fronts that the Olympic Movement has begun to develop more systematically, and in more depth, concerns human rights. This course of action has grown to prominent proportions in the present period and it is to this initiative that we will refer in this passage of the text. This is the inclusion of a specific chapter on human rights in the host city contract.

In February 2017, the IOC announced that it was going to be making specific changes to the host city contract for the 2024 Games with regard to human rights, anti-corruption and sustainable development standards (International Olympic Committee, 2017). This initiative is, according to several interpretations, strictly related to problems associated with the editions of the Olympics that took place in the Global South (Humans Right Watch, 2017). However, as our discussion has showed, Olympic Games that take place in the Global North are not free from human rights abuses either.

Propositions to tackle human rights issues, in general, are faced with diverse challenges, and specifically those related to the

economic power exerted by corporate actors. In the case of the Olympic Movement, some of the most powerful companies in the world are official sponsors of the IOC. The main actors in this context are referred to within the Olympic Movement as the TOP sponsors (members of the Olympic Partners Program)⁵. These companies would not be receptive to seeing their brands involved with human rights issues and thus the IOC has been rather cautious in choosing the language, they use to address human rights- related discussions and actions both within its forums and beyond them.

In the next passage of the article, we focus on discussing some suggestions that may contribute to the advancement of human rights standards within the Olympics, from a primarily academic viewpoint.

The Olympic Movement, the Olympic Games and Human Rights: friends forever?

In this passage of the text, as concluding considerations, we discuss ways in which the academic community can contribute so that issues related to human rights become an integral part of the Olympic Movement. But first, we stress that the inclusion of the theme of human rights in the host city contract of the Olympics represents important progress both for the human rights area but specifically for sport as a social phenomenon and particularly for the Olympics. This move has the potential to prevent many of the issues we raised earlier.

The inclusion of issues related to human rights in the host city contract was an initiative that ostensibly suggested a positive step forward for the Olympics. However, in a document of 45 pages, the term ‘human rights’ only appears cited 4 times, all in the same paragraph. Thus, this suggests that the necessary interrelation between the many different sub-areas that interact to produce an Olympic Games may lack consideration for the human rights dimension. Therefore, this is the first challenge that the Olympic Movement, the IOC and Paris, the first host city to have to comply with explicit guidelines related to human rights, will have to face: to make human rights an integral part of the Olympics.

More specifically linked to the aim of this passage, it is important to state that although the message sent by the IOC is clear, host

⁵ <https://www.olympic.org/sponsors>

cities will have to 'protect and respect human rights and ensure any violation of human rights is remedied in a manner consistent with international agreements' (International Olympic Committee, 2017, p. 16), the way host cities will accomplish such a test is still to be known. Thus, this is the first indication of how academia can be supportive of this change within the Olympic context: researchers can examine the ways host cities organise their duty to comply with the core requirements associated with human rights. Several initiatives and actions aimed at discussing issues related to human rights have been happening in the Olympic context and can be used as a basis for researchers to evaluate the approaches of the Olympic movement and the IOC. But it should be remembered that this more official sphere may have limitations in expressing itself because of its commercial ties with the corporate universe, as mentioned in the introductory passage at the beginning of this article. Thus, all care must be taken so that rhetoric and narratives are not 'bought' by the researchers without critical analyses (International Olympic Committee, 2017a; 2017b).

Another way for researchers to contribute to the issue of human rights within the Olympics is to keep themselves aware of the institutions that traditionally work in the area of human rights. It is possible to expect that such institutions, be they transnational or local, non-governmental organisations, etc. come to participate in the Games' production processes. Whether this is true or not, people traditionally concerned with human rights will certainly have relevant positions to share with researchers. As is well known, investigative journalism has also made important contributions in the area of sport mega events and human rights. Thus, being aware of what journalists produce can likewise be an important source of information. However, we must also be aware of the fact that local mass media's economic interest in sport mega events may turn journalists from 'reporters into impresarios, from potential whistle blowers into cheerleaders' (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006, p.8).

Now, perhaps the most important task that researchers can performance in the context of implementing a human rights agenda on the Olympic platform concerns those affected by projects linked to the Olympics. Here it seems relevant that we return to the evidence presented earlier in this discussion. Researchers interested in how the inclusion of the chapter on human rights in the host city contract has impacted the Olympic Games should listen to people who have historically been harmed

by sport mega events.

Traditional Peoples, homeless people, ethnic and race minorities, people directly affected by development projects associated with the Games, and people living in the regions where construction sites 'land' in the name of the Games should be the first to be considered where researchers are seeking to assess the development of human rights issues within the Olympics.

The task for researchers in the field of sports at the present time is considerable. We have, as an area, initiated an approximation with the issue of human rights. Several studies can be listed and they have had importance in their time. These works have been founders of a sub-area of studies: sport and human rights. But they had a difficulty that the current generation does not have, the researchers who developed such studies were pioneers, they had little or no support from the sports or academic communities (Donnelly, 2008; Giulianotti, 2004; Giulianotti & McArdle, 2006; Kennelly & Watt, 2012; Kidd, 2010; Kidd & Donnelly, 2000; among others). Now, the impression we have is that the sport community has created a sensitivity to issues related to human rights. It is possible that forms of research funding in this field become more readily accessible and more frequent. It is up to the researchers interested in this niche to develop a healthy and prolific field such that human rights issues become an integral part of the Olympic Movement in particular and of sport in general.

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