By John Hoberman

The Olympics

The Olympic Games were founded to bridge cultural divides and promote peace. Instead, they often mask human rights abuses, do little to spur political change, and lend legitimacy to unsavory governments. Worse, the Beijing Games could still be the most controversial of all.

"The Olympics Aren't Political"

Yes, they are. International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Jacques Rogge said in March, "We do not make political choices, because if we do, this is the end of the universality of the Olympic Games." Two weeks later, Rogge observed indignantly, "Politics invited itself in[to] sports. We didn't call for politics to come." But after 75 years of watching the political manipulation and exploitation of the Olympic Games, can anyone actually believe this?

Trapped by its grandiose goal of embracing the entire "human family" at whatever cost, the IOC has repeatedly caved in and awarded the games to police states bent on staging spectacular festivals that serve only to reinforce their own authority. Of course, the most notorious example is the 1936 Berlin Games, which were promoted by a network of Nazi agents working both inside and outside the IOC. Pierre de Coubertin, the French nobleman who founded the modern Olympic movement, called Hitler's games the fulfillment of his life's work. As a reward for this endorsement, the Nazi Foreign Office nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

But the IOC's history of working with unsavory regimes didn't end with the Second World War. The 1968 Olympics in Mexico City were awarded to a one-party, faux democratic government that hoped to use the games to legitimize its rule. Like the 2008 Games, they were confronted with massive antigovernment demonstrations that culminated with the Mexican Army mowing down 300 protestors. (The IOC has never acknowledged this greatest of Olympic-related political crimes.) The 1980 Moscow Olympics were only awarded to the Soviet Union when, in 1974, it threatened to leave the Olympic "family" after losing its bid for the 1976 Games. The IOC awarded the 1988 Olympics to Seoul in 1981, one year after South Korea's military government carried out a massacre in the city of Kwangju, where paratroopers crushed a citizens' revolt against the junta, killing at least 200 and injuring more than 1,000 people.

Whether unwelcome or not, politics is a part of the games. The problem is, the IOC seems not to have a clue as to what to do about it. Having failed to anticipate the scope of the anti-China protests this year, and lacking any real political clout, the IOC has fallen back on old clichés about Olympic "diplomacy" and its "nonpolitical" mission on behalf of peace and human rights.

John Hoberman is professor and chair of Germanic studies at the University of Texas, Austin, and author of The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics and the Moral Order *(New Rochelle: A.D. Caratzas, 1986).*

Thrill of victory: For China's communist leaders, the Beijing Games are a matter of national pride.

GETTY IMAGES

"The Olympics Promote Human Rights"

False. When the IOC awarded the games to China in 2001, it assured the world that it was "not naive." There would eventually be "discussions" about China's human rights policies, the IOC promised. It was apparently the committee's hope that the games would catalyze some sort of political opening. By the spring of 2008, as Chinese troops stormed into Lhasa, the IOC was claiming that the games had "advanced the agenda of human rights" by putting China's human rights record on the front pages of newspapers around the world. That the committee would have much preferred to be spared this attention was wisely left unsaid. Nor has the IOC been willing to demand better behavior from China's rulers. IOC president Rogge prefers to condemn "violence from whatever side."

What the Olympics promote instead is a form of amoral universalism in which all countries are entitled to take part in the games no matter how barbaric their leaders may be. Some argue that the United Nations follows the same principle. But don't be fooled. On a good day, the United Nations can affect the balance of war and peace. On its best day, the IOC cannot. What the IOC offers instead is a highly commercial global sports spectacle. It was instructive, for instance, to hear in April the sentimental invocations of "the Olympic family" as the IOC and the United States Olympic Committee quarreled in Beijing over their shares of global revenues from the games.

"Olympic diplomacy" has always been rooted in a doublespeak that exploits the world's sentimental attachment to the spirit of the games. In the absence of real standards, the spectacle of Olympic pageantry substitutes for a genuine concern for human rights. At the heart of this policy is a timid and euphemizing rhetoric that turns violent demonstrations and state-sponsored killings into "discussions," a combination of grandiosity and cluelessness that has long marked the IOC's accommodating attitude toward unsavory Olympic hosts. Even today, with regard to Beijing, the committee has fallen back on its old habit of claiming to be both apolitical and politically effective at the same time. Although the IOC "is not a political organization," it does claim to "advance the agenda of human rights." Sadly, neither is true.

"The Olympics Are a Catalyst for Change"

Prove it. One way to assess whether the games are a catalyst for change is to take a look at what happens to the citizens of the host cities when the games come to town. Pre-Olympic repression is a tradition whenever the games are entrusted to authoritarian regimes. Just ask the departed Jews and persecuted anti-Nazis of 1936 Berlin. The Nazi regime readily complied with IOC demands that anti-Semitic signs be removed from certain public venues, even as its brutality continued unabated. The 1980 Moscow Olympics were rationalized by the IOC as a unique opportunity for Western visitors to open up a totalitarian society. But one journalist who covered the games later recalled Moscow as "a city gutted of life and ordinary people."

The only sort of change the games seem capable of catalyzing is the aesthetic kind. During the 1988 Seoul Games, for example, South Korean officials drove traditional dog soup restaurants into back alleys so as not to offend foreign sensibilities.

This time around, Chinese authorities are expelling street beggars. More than 1 million migrant workers—without whom the construction of the Beijing Olympic facilities would have been impossible—are reportedly being carted out of Beijing. Shops that sell pirated DVDs have been closed down. And more than 50 prominent political dissidents have been jailed in advance of the games.

Like the IOC officials who thought they were changing Hitler's behavior in 1936, modern Olympic officials imagine that they can influence the autocrats in Beijing. The foreign media presence in China, Rogge said in April, would be "unprecedented," a "revolution." But China's autocrats had already announced that there will be no live television broadcasts from Tiananmen Square during the games. Rogge sounded a plaintive note: "We have no army; we have no police force. The only strength we have is values. We can only fight with values." But fighting for values requires a willingness to sacrifice on behalf of struggle. The problem with the IOC is that it equates ideals with the staging of pomp and circumstance. That leaves no room for the kind of sacrifice that confers moral credibility on real activists.

"The Olympics Are a Moneymaker"

Yes, but for whom? In the beginning, the games were an international athletic competition between countries. Today, they are mostly an enormous marketing scheme for everyone from major multinational corporations to billionaire developers. The IOC plays the role of impresario, enjoying the political capital that derives from being taken seriously as an international organization.

Rogge's IOC reportedly took in combined revenues of more than $4 billion from the 2002 and 2004 Olympic Games. Much of what the IOC makes comes from selling corporate sponsorships and television rights to the games. NBC, for instance, paid the committee $894 million for the right to broadcast the 2008 Games in the United States. Meanwhile, other multinationals are paying millions just to have their name associated with the Olympic brand. Coca-Cola, McDonald's, General Electric, and nine other major sponsors have invested an average of $74 million each to sponsor the Beijing Games. In return, they get access to a massive audience of 4 billion television viewers and hundreds of millions of Chinese consumers. Even so, some financial analysts were warning as early as May that being a 2008 Olympic sponsor was a waste of money.

Governments invest billions of taxpayer dollars to stage the games in hopes of boosting tourism and urban infrastructure. But such spending is fraught with risk. The 1976 Montreal Games incurred a $1.5 billion debt that was not paid off until December 2006. The fiasco became known in Canada as "The Big Owe." The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics are regarded as the first "profitable" games since 1932. The "profit" is routinely estimated to have been between $200 million and $250 million. Such calculations, however, ignore the use

For More Online

For a tour of the most controversial Olympics, see our photo essay at **ForeignPolicy.com/extras/olympics**.

of public funds, infrastructure costs, and security costs. A U.S. Government Accountability Office report on the games estimates that Americans paid $75 million to support the L.A. Games. The 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Games cost Americans at least $342 million.

The huge sums countries are willing to invest in the Olympics continue to escalate to unprecedented levels. The 2012 London Games will cost Britain's taxpayers more than $20 billion. But that's only half what the Chinese are spending on Beijing's "festival of peace." It's unlikely ordinary citizens will ever see tangible returns on these investments. But the authoritarian regime in Beijing will celebrate the games as a national triumph worth any price.

"The Beijing Games Are the Most Controversial Ever"

It depends. Olympic controversies generally fall into two categories. The first involves boycotts of games held in democratic societies, such as the boycott of the 1976 Montreal Games by 22 African countries after New Zealand sent a rugby team to play in apartheid South Africa. This act was, in effect, a secondary boycott that was not aimed at the host country. The Soviets led a similar boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Games in retaliation for U.S. President Jimmy Carter's boycott of the 1980 Games in Moscow.

The second kind of controversy is more contentious. It involves Olympics staged by dictatorships in collaboration with the IOC. The 1936 Berlin Games and the 1980 Moscow Games were both protested on political grounds. Bitter conflicts over U.S. participation in the Nazi Olympics erupted in the United States in 1935 and 1936. Catholic and Jewish organizations, along with trade unions and anti-Nazi factions inside the major sports federations, waged an energetic but futile struggle to keep American athletes out of Berlin. The U.S. boycott of the Moscow Games protested the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the persecution of Soviet dissidents, and the country's restrictions on political freedoms. Likewise, protests against the Beijing Games have targeted Chinese brutality in Tibet and the country's energy deals with Sudan and Burma, as well as other forms of internal repression.

But what separates the Beijing Games from earlier controversies is the sheer clout of China within the geopolitical system. The Nazi regime of 1936 had nothing comparable to China's global reach today, and the Soviet economy in 1980 was a dead man walking. What we can say for sure is the world's emotional investment in the entertainment and inspiration provided by the Olympic Games guarantees an uproar if the political forces that rage outside the stadiums threaten the spectacle—which means the most heated controversies surrounding Beijing probably have yet to unfold.

"The IOC Is Corrupt"

More than you know. The corruption was never worse than when Juan Antonio Samaranch, an unreconstructed Spanish fascist, was president of the IOC from 1980 to 2001. Samaranch brought with him from Franco's Spain an authoritarian style that facilitated the bribery of IOC members, destroyed any chance of curbing doping, and appointed a generation of committee members who never dared to oppose him.

Samaranch, who insisted on being called "Excellency," filled the IOC with such characters as South Korean intelligence operative Kim Un Yong and Indonesian timber magnate Bob Hasan. Both have served prison time for corruption. Then there's Lee Kun Hee, the chairman of Samsung Electronics (convicted of bribery in 1996) and Francis Nyangweso, once the military commander in chief for Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in the 1970s. Nyangweso remains on the IOC board to this day. Why this rogues' gallery was recruited into a "peace" and "human rights" organization remains a mystery.

In fairness, one improvement in the way the IOC operates should be acknowledged. After the 1999 bribery scandal in which IOC members were paid off to support Salt Lake City's bid for the 2002 Winter Games, the IOC established a technical committee comprising a small number of vetted members to oversee the host city selection process, thereby reducing the risk of bribes to less trustworthy colleagues. The one topic this committee will not address, however, is whether staging the games in a repressive society might be a bad idea. Last year, the IOC rewarded Russia's pseudo-democracy with the 2014 Winter Games. When protesters showed up during the IOC's visit there in April, they were beaten by police.

"The Olympics Are a Glorious Tradition"

No. But that's what Jacques Rogge and the IOC want you to think. So spectacular is the Olympic experience in Rogge's mind that in giving the games to China he declared: "We cannot deny one fifth of mankind the advantages of Olympism." To be sure, the Olympic movement has entertained billions by staging world-class athletic competition. But have the Olympic Games really lived up to the lofty expectations of founder Pierre de Coubertin, who envisioned them as a peace movement? Any cause-and-effect relationship between the Olympic Games and the absence of armed conflict is suspect at best. The Olympic century that began in 1896 turned out to be the bloodiest in human history (though this fact did not prevent the IOC from seeking a Nobel Peace Prize).

The real genius of the committee is its ability to create and sustain the myth that it promotes peace. In reality, the Olympic "movement" is a racket that has provided the IOC's ruling elite with small luxuries and a fleeting celebrity very few of them could have achieved on their own. The IOC has served as a home for a long procession of shady and self-serving people. Many recruited themselves into national and international sports federations in order to ride the bureaucratic escalator into the Olympic elite. Samaranch, for example, started out in a Spanish roller-hockey federation.

Admirers of the Olympic "movement" can point to the success of a show business internationalism that has survived a tumultuous history. An institution this hardy, one might argue, must offer something of value. This year, perhaps, it is a starring role in celebrating China's astonishing economic success story. Just don't ask about human rights. FP

Want to Know More?

John Hoberman's ***The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics and the Moral Order*** (New Rochelle: A.D. Caratzas, 1986) offers a critical historical look at the 1936 Nazi Games and the 1980 Moscow Games.

For a look at the International Olympic Committee, read Jean-Loup Chappelet's ***The International Olympic Committee and the Olympic System: The Governance of World Sport*** (New York: Routledge, 2008). Matthew J. Burbank, Gregory D. Andranovich, and Charles H. Heying survey how cities vie for the games in ***Olympic Dreams: The Impact of Mega-Events on Local Politics*** (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

The politics surrounding this year's Beijing Games are the subject of Moisés Naím's **"The Battle of Beijing"** (FOREIGN POLICY, November/December 2007). Brook Larmer's **"The Center of the World"** (FOREIGN POLICY, September/October 2005) helps explain why China's leaders see sports not as entertainment, but as a projection of national power.

»For links to relevant Web sites, access to the *FP* Archive, and a comprehensive index of related FOREIGN POLICY articles, go to ForeignPolicy.com.