

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 8

Issue 5 *May Roundtable: An Annotation of "China's Olympic Delusion" by Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom*

Article 4

5-2008

Sport and Politics

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Recommended Citation

Bell, Christine (2008) "Sport and Politics," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 5, Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol8/iss5/4>



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Abstract

I found the reflection interesting, but unsurprising. Protestors use the Olympic spotlight (or should we say torch?) to shine on China's flaws, and China tries to re-direct or extinguish its beams.

Keywords

Human rights, China, Olympics, Politics, Ethics

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Sport and Politics

by Christine Bell

I found the reflection interesting, but unsurprising. Protestors use the Olympic spotlight (or should we say torch?) to shine on China's flaws, and China tries to re-direct or extinguish its beams.

Was China delusional to think that it could boost its reputation through hosting the Olympics? Or did it make a calculation that what it had to gain from the Olympics was more than it had to lose? Do most states try to place themselves in the global spotlight yet hope that no one will focus on their flaws? Do most states not try to rig the spotlight in some way, so that flaws remain in the shadows?

To me, and to the British public, the more interesting question has been whether and how sports events should be used with relation to political change. The developing "[torch saga](#)" which post-dated and played out many of the article's points, has seen the merits of the South African sports boycott and the Moscow Olympic boycott, all re-hashed. In Britain at least, even protestors have been torn between how far to try to interfere and even damage the running of the Olympics, and how far effective protest requires cherishing the Olympics as bigger than the country that hosts it. The show must go on precisely because it does harness aspirations of peaceful unity through diversity. The paradox of course is that it is precisely this bigger side of the Olympic dream that makes it a vehicle for effective protest.

Typically the debate moves as two ships passing each other by at night. Sports should be kept completely separate from politics, *versus* sports cannot be separate and sporting bodies must be wise to, and even use, the cachet of large scale sporting events to promote other social ends, such as respect for human rights. Personally, I often find myself somewhat torn. I reject the view that we should enforce a separation between politics and sport that does not exist. Sport, and particularly the Olympics, is intrinsically linked with notions of nationality and belonging, and laced with an ethic of fair play and even justice. A country seeks to host a large scale international sporting event precisely because it can enhance its economic and political standing.

However, the types of protests and the effectiveness of them never occur evenly across all human rights violators. Once we open the door to tying sport to human rights issues, we enable wrapping sporting events up in broader geopolitical wrangles, a la [Moscow](#). Furthermore, is it just to penalize those countries with poor civil and political rights records, while ignoring the global socio-economic rights deficits for which Western liberal democracies also bear responsibility? Can not the revenue and job-creating Olympics go some way towards addressing this deficit? In a world in which widening inequalities are one of the major human rights issues, this would also be a human rights problem.

As the torch wend its troubled journey, I found myself in sympathy with those protestors attempting to link their protests with the Olympic spirit, and to counsel the right to disrupt whole-scale celebration without seeking to derail the entire Olympic event. I do not get too upset about television presenters and celebrity personalities who voluntarily undertook the torch-carrying task under full police protection, having to endure protests and even a few runs at the

torch. The torch trail is the market place of free speech, and I welcome conflicted spaces where the torch procession can be simultaneously celebrated and cherished and vilified. This is local and global democracy in action.

Also, although I am relatively uninformed about the work of the [International Olympic Committee](#) (IOC), I found myself wishing that it had been clearer about the human rights conditionality attached to hosting the event, with a clearer mechanism for ensuring that this was implemented. Most of the problems that arose could have been easily anticipated and responded to in some way—a mediation role that should have taken place appeared to have been missing. But it also seems clear to me that the Olympics alone could not reform China and should not bear that responsibility. The role of the Chinese people and other world powers is much more crucial and they hold more responsibility.

But the sport and politics debate plays out a larger debate about cause and effect and what are effective forms of human rights advocacy. This is the debate as to whether economic liberalization will naturally herald and “bear forth” political liberalization, or whether pressure for political liberalization must be demanded as a condition of greater economic participation. Does giving China the Olympics bring it into a set of relationships, including with the global media, in which human rights abuses will inevitably become more difficult? Or is it dangerous to assume that a reduction in human rights abuses will just happen because this risks shoring up China’s sense of impunity, if and when it finds out that it can get away with “business as usual”?

In essence, this is an argument also about carrots and sticks, and its implications go well beyond China. Do people comply with human rights standards by being made fully participating members of communities whose other members value norms and where “norm-promotion” happens in diffuse ways through subtle forms of international “peer pressure”? Or do the carrots need to be backed up by sticks, with international economic and political goodies conditioned on compliance with human rights and social justice? In an important and influential book, [Buying Social Justice](#), Oxford University Press 2008, Christopher McCrudden has reframed this debate. In brief, he argues for human rights and social justice conditionality in the public procurement context. He does not put it exactly this way, but in essence he suggests that a space that is created enables a conversation between local and global actors in which the application of human rights values are negotiated. This is human rights, not as an inflexible advocated position, but as a way of talking to each other and a way of doing business. McCrudden does not address this year’s Olympics, but his ideas suggest a way of integrating globalized economic transactions and progress with ensuring the human rights of individuals and communities that we would do well to study more.

But if I had to nominate an Olympic Song for this year’s opening ceremony, I might wonder about Kaiser Chief’s “I Predict a Riot” with world leaders in the background crooning The Clash’s “Should I Stay or Should I Go?”

Christine Bell was born and brought up in Belfast. She is currently Director of the Transitional Justice Institute, and Professor of Public International Law at University of Ulster (based at Magee Campus). She read law at Selwyn College, Cambridge, (1988) and gained an LL.M in Law from Harvard Law School (1990), supported by a

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