



## Why the Olympic Games Generate Dissent and Attract Activists

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In May 1970, the International Olympic Committee selected Denver, Colorado to host the 1976 Winter Olympics. But political activists in Colorado organized a campaign against the Games, emphasizing the ecological degradation the Olympics could cause. Protesters deluged the International Olympic Committee with letters imploring officials to relocate the Games, and they combined forces with fiscal-minded allies to put a state bond referendum up for popular vote in which voters rejected funding for the Olympics. The International Olympic Committee had no choice but to change course, ultimately moving the Games to Innsbruck, Austria. Denver became the first city to spurn its selection to host the Olympics.

Ironically, this prominent instance of anti-Olympics dissent came at the tail end of the long reign of Avery Brundage, who headed the International Olympic Committee from 1952 to 1972 and firmly maintained that politics and Olympics shouldn't mix. As he explained in 1969, "we actively combat the introduction of politics into the Olympic movement and are adamant against the use of the Olympic Games as a tool or as a weapon by any organization." But, in fact, sports and sporting events reflect larger social and political trends. In recent times, activism challenging the Olympic Games – and using them as a political stage – has only intensified.

### Anti-Olympics Activism in the Current Era

Over time, the Games have become bigger and bigger. The fact that the Games have become a social and economic juggernaut means they provoke activists concerned about their impact. In addition, as exemplified by the bribery scandal that wracked the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City, the credibility of the International Olympic Committee has eroded, inviting increased public criticism. Activists focus on typical problems the Olympics can bring – rising debt, displacement of residents, environmental despoliation, and the militarization of public space.

- **Sydney Summer Olympics of 2000:** In the 1990s the International Olympics Committee started stressing environmental sustainability in public statements. The Sydney Olympics were supposed to be the coming out party for the green Games. But environmentalists noted that the clean-up of the Homebush area industrial zone was done at public expense (rather than instituting a "polluter pays" principle) and the beach volleyball competition was staged at Bondi Beach, an ecologically sensitive spot along the Pacific Ocean. Protesters engaged in direct action to thwart bulldozing there, but were met with force from the police.
- **Beijing 2008 Summer Games:** The Chinese government spent billions on advance security measures, and Beijing Olympic officials created three "special zones" where people could gather to demonstrate, but activists had to apply for a permit from the Public Security Bureau, supplying personal information along the way – an opening for surveillance. Ahead of the Games more than 1.5 million people were displaced. All this generated dissent from human-rights groups and housing advocates, but street

protests were hard to mount and rare.

- **Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics:** In Vancouver, activists forged an effective alliance. Direct-action oriented protesters teamed up with nongovernmental organizations, civil libertarians, and poets. Indigenous dissidents organized along with anti-poverty boosters, environmentalists, and anarchists. Anti-Olympics activists argued that the Games were taking place on unceded indigenous land, that taxpayer money was being squandered on sports rather than indispensable social services, and that civil liberties were being violated by security forces. In response, activists achieved remarkable, cross-cutting solidarity, carrying out numerous actions before, during, and after the Games.
- **London 2012 Summer Olympics:** Protesters in London tended to go with the celebratory grain, relying on spoof and wit rather than aggressive protest mobilizations. This was a direct response to heavy-handed police actions before and in the early days of the Games. Many protests focused on dubious corporate sponsors like Dow, McDonalds, and British Petroleum. In one success story, the group 38 Degrees organized an online campaign designed to pressure companies to forgo their tax breaks. In the end, fourteen prominent Olympic sponsors agreed to waive their tax-free status.
- **Sochi 2014 Winter Games:** An anti-gay law passed by the Russian Duma before the Games generated dissent, with groups like Athlete Ally and All Out pressuring the International Olympics Committee to live up to the anti-discrimination principles enshrined in its own *Charter*. Numerous athletes spoke out against the anti-gay law. During the Games the art and activism collective Pussy Riot staged demonstrations, which were met by forceful police responses. Meanwhile, Circassian activists around the world protested the fact that the Games were taking place on the same land where their ancestors experienced genocide.

## What Does the Future Hold?

In 2016, Rio de Janeiro will host the Summer Olympics. This follows the Men's soccer World Cup, which the country staged in 2014. The summer prior to World Cup saw massive countrywide protests during the Confederations Cup. This spirit of dissent may transfer to 2016 where activists in Rio are challenging the Games' high sticker price (around \$14 billion) as well as displacement to make way for the Games and the destruction of the environment to create an Olympic golf course. After the United States Olympic Committee named Boston as its candidate city for the 2024 Summer Games, wide-ranging activism forced a withdrawal of the proposal.

The Olympic Movement is experiencing a slow-motion crisis, and the current President Thomas Bach is well aware of it. He has orchestrated a series of reforms known as Olympic Agenda 2020, which was unanimously approved by the full membership of the International Olympics Committee in December 2014. But this plan is largely aspirational and much must be done to implement its lofty goals. The International Olympics Committee needs to do more to make sure the Olympics fit into the long-term development plans of host cities, rather than appear as an expensive distraction. In addition, there must be improved transparency, starting with ensuring public votes on proposals to host the Olympics, allowing everyone to see the evidence on which votes are based.

Read more in Jules Boykoff, *Activism and the Olympics: Dissent at the Games in Vancouver and London* (Rutgers University Press, 2014).