

When the world gathers for the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup, or any other global sporting spectacle, the focus is meant to be on athleticism, unity, and “the spirit of competition”. Yet beneath the fireworks, flags, and fanfare lies a complex web of political strategy, soft power, and social tension. Major sporting events have always been about more than sport — they are stages on which nations perform their identities, pursue legitimacy, and negotiate global influence.

Winning the right to host a major sporting event is often treated as a badge of honour. But the bidding process is as political as it is logistical. Countries invest billions in infrastructure, security, and promotion, not only to impress the world but to assert their place within it. Hosting gives nations a chance to project stability, prosperity, and cultural sophistication. China’s 2008 Olympics symbolised its emergence as a global power; Qatar’s 2022 World Cup showcased its ambition to be a central player in international affairs. These events are designed to rewrite narratives, turning global skepticism into admiration. Leaders often use sporting events to rally national pride or distract from internal issues. From the 1978 World Cup in Argentina (held under a military dictatorship) to Russia’s 2018 edition, sporting triumphs and polished international showcases can help shore up political legitimacy at home.

The promise of global recognition comes with a hefty price tag: financial, social, and environmental. Mega-events have a history of leaving behind underused stadiums and displaced communities. While organisers tout economic boosts, studies often show that costs outweigh benefits. The 2016 Rio Olympics left Brazil with staggering debt and empty venues, while Greece’s 2004 Games deepened an already fragile economy (IMF, 2004; Sports Illustrated, 2017) (*See Appendix A for the full explanation*). Preparations frequently involve exploitative labour and suppression of dissent. In Qatar, thousands of workers faced dangerous conditions building World Cup infrastructure.

Sporting events also serve as platforms for resistance and visibility. Athletes and fans alike use them to challenge injustice and amplify marginalised voices. The 1968 Black Power Salute by Tommie Smith and John Carlos remains one of the most iconic acts of protest in sports history (*Appendix B*). More recently, fans in the stands were seen holding up Palestine flags at the Norway versus Israel World Cup Qualifier match. With calls to boycott and ban tournaments and ban countries with poor human rights records from competing, the politics of sport increasingly reflect the politics of society itself. Athletes today wield social media influence that rivals traditional power structures, often turning games into global conversations about justice and equality.

During the 20th century, the Olympics were proxy battlegrounds for ideological competition, as nations sought to demonstrate the superiority of their political systems through athletic success. The boycotts of the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles Games, for instance, reflected how Cold

War tensions transformed a global event into a stage for political confrontation. In recent decades, however, the growing presence of emerging nations as both hosts and competitors has begun to challenge long-standing geographic, economic, and racial hierarchies within international sport. The Olympics are no longer dominated solely by Western or wealthier nations; instead, they have become a means for countries from the Global South to assert geographical visibility and influence alongside athletic achievement.

While many call for a “separation of sport and politics”, history suggests that’s an illusion. Sport is inherently political because it deals with identity, representation, and power. The teams and athletes we celebrate often symbolise nations, communities, and causes, turning every victory or defeat into a statement of collective pride or struggle. Decisions about who gets to compete, which sports receive funding, and how athletes are portrayed in the media all reflect broader social hierarchies and political priorities. Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) this political dimension, sport continues to captivate the world. It provides moments of shared humanity that transcend borders, even as it exposes the inequalities and ambitions that shape them.

Major sporting events are mirrors, reflecting both the best and worst of the societies that create them. They can inspire unity and showcase human excellence, but they can also conceal deep inequalities and become tools of political manipulation. Governments have long used major tournaments like the Olympics or the World Cup to project national pride, distract from domestic unrest, or legitimise controversial regimes. For instance, the 1936 Berlin Olympics were used by Nazi Germany to promote an image of strength and racial superiority through highly choreographed displays of Aryan athletic success and elaborate propaganda efforts. The regime invested heavily in monumental architecture — most notably the redesigned Olympic Stadium — to project unity, discipline, and national power (Large, 2007) (*Appendix C*). Nazi filmmakers reinforced this image through Leni Reifenstahl’s *Olympia*, which presented German athletes as embodiments of physical perfection and modern efficiency. Even the torch relay, introduced for the first time in 1936, was deliberately designed to symbolically connect Nazi Germany with the supposed purity and legacy of Ancient Greece (Mandell, 1971; Hoberman, 1984) (*Appendix D*). Examples like this reveal that to understand sport fully, we must look beyond the medals and mascots to the forces that make these moments possible. So when the world gathers again for its next great spectacle, we should remember that behind every display of athleticism and unity lies a mirror — one that reflects the politics and priorities of those who host it.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Rio's Olympics Debt and Greece's Fragile Economy

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission's concluding statement for Greece following the 2004 Olympics, although Greece had enjoyed several years of robust economic growth at the time, the end of Olympics-related investment constituted "a substantial adverse shock in the short-run, especially to already weak construction activity." Greece's general government deficit expanded sharply in recent years, in part due to higher spending on the Olympics and other one-off costs, as well as weaker revenue.

According to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) the organising committee still owed US\$35 - 40 million in debt after the Games, and the IOC declined to provide further assistance claiming it had "closed all its obligations with the organising committee." The article also states that after the Olympics "the sporting venues are mostly vacant."

Appendix B: The 1968 Black Power Salute

The 1968 Black Power Salute by American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the Mexico City Olympic Games stands as one of the most powerful and enduring acts of protest in sports history. The gesture took place during the medal ceremony for the men's 200-meter race,

where Smith had won the gold medal and Carlos the bronze. As the U.S. national anthem played, both men bowed their heads and raised a gloved fist in the air — Smith with his right hand and Carlos his left.

This act was a symbolic protest against racial injustice, inequality, and human rights abuses faced by African Americans in the United States. The raised fists represented the Black Power movement, which sought to promote racial pride, economic empowerment, and the end of systemic racism. The black gloves, black socks without shoes, and Smith's black scarf were deliberate symbols:

- Black gloves - unity and strength of Black people
- Black socks without shoes (bare feet) - poverty faced by African Americans
- Black scarf - Black pride
- Beaded necklace (worn by Carlos) - remembrance of victims of racial violence

Appendix C: Large, 2007: Nazi Games

Large provides a comprehensive account of how Nazi regime planned, staged, and exploited the 1936 Olympics. He details the massive investment in the Olympic Stadium and surrounding architecture meant to project grandeur, unity, and national strength. The book shows how every aspect of the event was designed to enhance Germany's national image. Large also highlights the tensions between Nazi racial ideology and the global expectation of fair competition.

Appendix D: Hoberman and Mandell

Hoberman examines the ways governments consciously use sport to communicate political values and ideological messages. He argues that sporting rituals and symbols often reinforce national myths and power structures.

Mandell offers one of the earliest scholarly analyses of the 1936 Olympic Games as a political event. He documents how the Nazi regime carefully crafted the Games to serve as a showcase of German revival and racial ideology. His work explains the invention of the modern torch relay and its symbolic linkage between Ancient Greece and Nazi Germany. Mandell also explores how international officials underestimated the propaganda potential of the event.