

Games, entertainment and competition between states

It just does not stop, they do it every two years. Athletes come together to compare their stamina, strength and skill. At the time of the writing of this article it happens in Vancouver and in two years time London will be the city the whole world will be watching ...on the telly. By and large this seems like a rather harmless event and most people would shake their heads in disbelief when they hear that this was a very political affair. We do it anyway¹. First of all, these athletes do not compete by themselves, for themselves and in their own name only but always too as representatives of a particular country - namely that country which issued their passports. It may seem self-evident that they - in this position - collect victories and defeats for that issuing nation.

Just as self-evident as the fact that spectators support 'their' athletes², that is the athletes sent by their own state. Thus, this is more than just a simple comparison of physical strength and stamina of individuals and groups of individuals. Even though nothing actually depends on the outcome of these games for the states involved - neither Canada, China nor the UK will have any direct advantage if their athletes collect more gold medals than others - states are heavily involved and support their teams³. Without their involvement these kind of events were hardly possible. The associations in which athletes are organised and which are responsible for organising competitions (for the Olympics these are the international and the national Olympic committees) receive a bulk of their funding and infrastructure from the state. In the host nation stadiums and other infrastructure are built and financed by the state. Why do they do that? The only thing that can possibly come out of this are the cheers by the masses⁴ and the prestige of victories. This is where the political character of this supposedly athletics-only event shows rather clearly: the cheers and the flag-waving are anything but apolitical. In this act everyone involved recognises the subordination under the principle of the nation. Whether flag-wavers and anthem-singers know it or not: they join in singing the national chorus simply by referring to the national bond. And it is this bond which is used to justify nation-states with their permanent submission. These cheers are signs of rejoicing in membership in this grand setup and indicative of an identification with athletes, based on nothing but the shared nationality. 'Our' team is expected to bring home victories; they are expected to ennoble the nation with their triumphs in the field of ideal

competition among states. But it is not only on 'home soil'⁵ where states involved can benefit from staged sport events. The state which hosts the games receives some extra international reputation - it has the opportunity to present itself in a unique manner⁶. For instance, in 2008 when China was hosting the Summer Olympics and rumours were floating around they could not pull it off, it went to extreme lengths and through extreme amounts of money to host the games⁷. It wanted to represent itself as a serious actor on the international stage - in every aspect. Every state does this, be it in sports, music or whatnot. Just like any other state China does not get a discount on the world market as a pat on the back for successfully hosted games. But it gets a chance to represent how powerful it deems itself. To an extent, all other powers recognise this by taking part⁸. The goal is that extra bit of recognition. Whether the host country achieves this or whether other states seize this opportunity to embarrass it is a different question. This depends on whether other states respect the representation of strength of a competitor or whether they

challenge it. For the registration and enforcement of national interests of any kind a state's recognition is a necessary precondition. Since today's world is almost entirely *composed* of capitalist nation states and heavily *dominated* by the few most successful ones, all states heavily depend on the recognition by those Western states. Where this recognition is not granted, the respective nations will not be dealt with - neither economically nor politically. Other nations are questioned even more: their existence is simply denied, meaning they are questioned by military means or get their economy devastated by a complete trade boycott for example. Then the sovereignty, the highest possession of any state, is worth nothing and must again be won with force. If a state's sovereignty is recognised in practice (that is the borders of that country are respected insofar as no foreign soldiers march across them) but not *de jure*, (that is it is ignored insofar as others do not contract with it, have no diplomatic relationships), then being part of worldwide competition is rather difficult. Like all states - generally recognised or not - poor countries and in particular those which are not recognised must respect the rules set by the IMF, the World Bank etc. but they are not involved in deciding them. In the global market, every nation-state competes in order to further its own interests and to harness the agendas of its competitors for its own advantage. If a state is denied to pursue its interests on the international stage, it has little influence. That is why so much emphasis is put on recognition in every round of fisticuffs, contract and war. All this does not mean that engaging in the arena of international sports is a necessary prerequisite for fully functioning nation-states - but it is one mode of acting out the necessary competition between them.

Footnotes

1 This article is based on a leaflet distributed by Junge Linke gegen Kapital und Nation in 2008. 2 Some more eagerly than others. During the 2010 Winter Olympics the Australian freestyle skier Dale Begg-Smith was referred to as "villain" and "traitor" in the Canadian media, his Canadian competitor as "hero". Dale Begg-Smith was born with a Canadian passport but emigrated to Australia because the Canadian sports association would not allow him to have an Internet start-up on the site. 3 Gordon Brown even wrote British athletes a correctly spelled letter: "The whole nation is behind you - as ambassadors not only for your sport and your country, but also for London 2012." 4 Gordon Brown in the aforementioned letter to the British team: "When Britain won the right to host the Summer Games in 2012, we did it with a promise to inspire a generation of young people in this country. And as Great Britain's team for the Vancouver Winter Olympics, you are now the most important torchbearers of that promise. Nothing has more power to inspire young people than seeing our best athletes competing at the very pinnacle of their sport. While you're away, it will be hard to truly appreciate the impact that your performances over the next fortnight will be having at home." Of course, he is not eyeing for hundreds of thousands of young people to join the Olympics any time soon. Rather, he wants to inspire young people 'at home' to achieve their best in whatever they are doing. For most people this means dragging themselves to a shitty job for little pay every day, that is to put up with the conditions they are subjected to by the very same state Gordon Brown represents. David Cameron hammers home the message in case anyone did not get it: "If the Conservatives are in government, David Cameron is likely to find himself at his mid-term nadir, reviled for the pain he has had to inflict, and waiting for signs of the good times he promised would follow. No wonder he is talking privately of the Olympics as the 'turning point' that could restore national morale and get him off the hook in time for a general election." - <http://is.gd/8CdxC> 5 The most prominent and well-publicized Canadian narrative for the recent 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver was, quite literally, the quest to finally win Gold on 'home soil', which had not been achieved at the two previous Games the country hosted. 6 "In summary, Canada will be an international stage for a theatrical

performance that can significantly affect Canada's international reputation, and we are all players." writes a commentator for the Vancouver Observer at <http://is.gd/8BJvq> 7 Same closer to home. The Summer Olympics 2012 already had their budget increased when it became apparent that the estimated budget would not suffice. Downsizing is not an option. 8 When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan one year prior to the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, US president Carter made sure that no US athlete took part in those games - this is what it looks like when a state does not want to show this recognition. Towards China no state dared or cared to take this step in 2008.