

The Olympics ... a call to resistance

The Olympic Games constitute a key mechanism among a whole array of political and economic strategies for shaping our desires and leading us along in the relentless pursuit of comfort, security and power. It is a spectacular demonstration of the triumph of capitalism with its imperatives of competition and consumption, and the reaffirmation of state power in guaranteeing public order and security, all wrapped in the mesmerizing distraction of sport and entertainment. It celebrates the supremacy of corporate and state power under the guise of a benign athletic event of global cooperation. It is a remarkably effective tool for deepening our ideological entrapment in a system of power that is the antithesis of the kingdom of God announced by Jesus and the way of the cross. In this sense, the Olympics are analogous to the what the devil offered Jesus in the wilderness.

While there are no doubt many reasons for critical opposition to the Olympics, here are five that warrant careful consideration.

1) The Olympics are imposed on unceded indigenous territory

I am not an indigenous person and I do not presume to speak for any indigenous person or community. But I do find it deeply disturbing that the three levels of government and the business and social elite who advocated so vigorously to host the 2010 Games are welcoming people from around the world to a region whose prosperity has been built on a history of theft, violence and genocide. Of course, one of the criteria for selecting a location to host the games is the economic ability to support the necessary construction of Olympic venues and infrastructure. The wealth of the region that allows us to host the 2010 Games in Vancouver and Whistler is grounded in the theft of land and resources from indigenous peoples and the destructive policies of cultural assimilation that were implemented. It is fair to speak of theft here because BC, unlike other provinces, remains mostly unceded territory; treaties were not made with the indigenous populations in the province and this remains the case today. Without the resolution of land claims and the recognition of indigenous sovereignty, hosting the Olympics appears to be another act of colonization as more unceded territory is developed for athletic venues and their necessary infrastructure.

In 2004 the province of BC launched a new *BC Resort Strategy and Action Plan* that called on the expansion of resort and tourism business possibilities in the province. This initiative is tied to the 2010 Games in that it fits with the government's plan and objectives for tourism and investment surrounding the Olympics. As the report states: "The Resort Strategy links to the Spirit of 2010 Tourism Strategy & the International Trade & Investment to 2010 Strategy. All these strategies are designed to grow tourism throughout the province, maximize opportunities created by hosting 2010... and attract national & international investment." Increasing the opportunities for resort construction and tourist facilities will inevitably require the development of land that is still unceded native territory. In order to attract such investment, the process will need to be streamlined and guarantees of regional stability will need to be given. This means either the "cooperation" of First Nations bands or implementing coercive strategies for undermining their resistance. Without the completion of a just and honorable land settlement process, this is the actualization of ongoing colonization.

It also seems to me troubling that while the province and VANOC have managed to get the leadership of four Native bands onside with the Olympics (the Four Host First Nations: Squamish, Mt. Currie, Musqueam, Tseil Watuth), indigenous people in our region continue to suffer the fallout of past oppressive and genocidal practises, which have left many individuals and communities suffering with poverty, addiction, violence, suicide, and overrepresentation among the homeless and incarcerated

populations. Native culture and art will be exploited by the Olympics for profit while many native people will experience the punishment of street cleanups and enforcement crackdowns. There is something very hypocritical about all of this. The social and political elites managing the 2010 Games are using their power to either co-opt, silence or remove the indigenous population in order to mask the festering sore of profound historical injustice that their presence signifies. The coming Olympics provides an opportunity for the ruling class to intensify the colonial policies of assimilation or removal of indigenous people. I am strongly opposed to the Olympics because, without true justice being actualized for indigenous people in our province, the 2010 Games will function as a force for further exploitation and injustice.

2) The Olympics entail the displacement of vulnerable populations

In every city that has hosted the Olympic Games or similar mega-events, there has been a record of displacement for vulnerable segments of the population.¹ Displacement takes place in a number of ways. The most obvious is the removal of people from a particular site in order to construct an Olympic venue or Athletes' Villages, or to beautify an area that will be visible to Olympic tourists and TV cameras.

Displacement has also been the result of redevelopment or gentrification processes accelerated by the arrival of the Olympics in inner city areas. Low-income housing is torn down and replaced by upscale projects, and the poor are pushed out. Or low-income housing is converted to accommodation for tourists, students or higher income earners. There is, of course, controversy as to whether this kind of displacement can be directly related to hosting mega-events, but there is no doubt that the economic forces that move these changes in real estate development are given a boost by the arrival of hallmark events like the Olympics.

In the years leading up to hosting such events, real estate prices typically rise and landlords make various moves to cover these costs in order to ensure profitability. In Vancouver, real estate prices have soared recently making it increasingly difficult to afford rent, especially for those living below the poverty line or on very low-incomes (i.e., those living with no fixed income, those on income assistance, those working at minimum wage, etc.).

Displacement also occurs when eviction notices are given to residents as a result of the sale of a building. Over the last few years in Vancouver, many of the SRO hotels in the Downtown Eastside, and in other sectors of the downtown area, have changed hands; and there is a clearly discernible trajectory of upscale conversions of these places for the purpose of increasing their revenue. The massive construction at the former Woodwards site has set off a wave of gentrification in the Downtown Eastside. Poor residents in a number of hotels have been given eviction notices for the purposes of renovations, which will allow these hotels to attract tenants with more resources to spend on housing.

Vancouver has already witnessed a substantial increase in homelessness over the past 5 years, and the displacement of vulnerable people from low-income housing that Olympic Games, directly or indirectly, exacerbates adds to the number of those looking for shelter or living on the streets.

¹ For a full report on displacement of marginalized or vulnerable populations as a result of hosting Olympic Games, see *Fair Play for Housing Right: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights* (COHRE, 2007); see summary on pp. 198-201.

3) The Olympics generate criminalization of the poor, special public order legislation, and aggressive policing of public dissent

It is typical for cities that host Olympic Games to implement a series of enforcement strategies that ostensibly aim at reducing or eliminating public disorder and incidents of nuisance complaints. Mechanisms of punishment for disorderly conduct or uncivil behavior is increased; people whose presence in public space disrupts the image of order and beauty are rounded up and removed from sight; offenders are criminalized and incarcerated; protesters and dissenters are scapegoated and placed under legal sanctions.

Vancouver has not deviated from this well-worn path. In November 2006 Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan implemented *Project Civil City*, an initiative whose stated goals were to reduce public disorder by 50% and the target date constantly reiterated in the strategy document was 2010. In fact, the brochure quotes the Mayor as saying “We have a tremendous opportunity to use the 2010 Olympics and Paralympic Winter Games as a catalyst to solve the public disorder problems that affect our city.” Clearly an Olympic Games clean-up campaign, *Project Civil City* identifies public disorder as sleeping overnight in public spaces, open drug use, panhandling, creating litter from binning, and defecating or urinating in public. The target group of this initiative is unmistakably the poor and homeless of our city. A *Project Civil City* Commissioner was hired, Geoff Plant, former provincial Attorney General, at a cost of \$192 per hour.

Some of the recommendations of the *Project Civil City* strategy include increasing the number of police on the beat, expanding private security in the downtown core, introducing closed circuit TV cameras, enacting no sit, no lie bylaws. Just recently the police were given funds to expand their numbers, and the Downtown Business Improvement Association has asked the City to put \$900,000 toward the expansion of the ambassador program, which is operated by the private security firm Genesis Security. This is interesting: public money to hire private security to move unwanted poor people from storefronts and shopping areas so businesses can improve profits. To avoid the mess left by binners, the downtown business district has proposed mandatory locking of bins, and more recently the complete removal of them from alleys. Along the way other aspects of Project Civil City have been discussed, including mandatory treatment for drug users, community courts for speedier handling of open drug users or people with mental illness who disturb public space; relocate homeless people to housing projects outside the city; etc.

On another front, talk is intensifying around the use of vigilant surveillance and law enforcement directed at those who publicly protest the Olympics or raise a voice of dissent. Anti-poverty groups, native and environmental activists who oppose the Olympics are being targeted by CSIS (Canadian Secret Intelligence Service) and the 2010 Integrated Security Unit – a special 2010 enforcement team under the command of the RCMP which includes various local police departments as well as the Canadian Armed Forces and other provincial and federal enforcement and surveillance agencies. In a recent CSIS report a reference to potential protests at the 2010 Olympic Games was part of a section dealing with investigations of white supremacism and Sikh and Tamil extremism. Clearly investigation of anti-Olympic protesters, which will undoubtedly include civil liberties, social justice, anti-poverty and native rights activists, will form part of their mandate, and CSIS will work with the ISU in supplying intelligence and security information. The estimated cost of providing such security for the Olympics will exceed \$175 million.

So as the Olympics perpetuates injustice and exploitation against indigenous people, displaces vulnerable low-income residents from their homes, and punishes with legal sanctions poor and homeless people who survive on the streets, any voice of opposition or dissent raised in the public domain will be met with disciplinary force by security and police agents. This is the public face of legitimated state violence.

4) The Olympics demand massive economic expenditures in hosting the games

The Olympic Games are, as one writer put it, “the Circus Maximus of planet Earth.” They constitute the grand spectacle of global capitalism and national power. Being selected as a host city / country is construed as placing it among the elite regions of the world. It puts the city on the map, as it were, conferring status as a world class city.

Yet winning the bid to host the Olympics and then putting into place all the required venues and infrastructure is costly business. The price tag for constructing this temporary playground of the affluent is enormous. Billions of dollars are put into construction of venues, improving transportation, building Olympic villages, communication centres, hospitality pavilions, ensuring massive security, etc. The initial cost estimates are always exceeded and the losses inevitably fall on the public purse.

The massive expenditure of the 2010 Games (in the \$2.5 billion range) means that municipal, provincial and federal resources that might otherwise have been directed toward housing, healthcare, education, social services, etc. are channeled into building for the Olympics. In Vancouver, the new Trade and Convention centre went well beyond initial cost estimates and is now calculated at over \$850 million. While this is not technically considered an Olympic expense, it was fast-tracked to be finished for the games, and hopes to function, in part, as the 2010 communication/media centre. We could point out that the money spent on this structure alone would roughly cover the costs of constructing 3200 units of social housing, which is what the City of Vancouver’s Homeless Action Plan and the Inner City Inclusive Housing Table call for, to provide housing for those currently homeless in the city.

Or again, the City has, among other things, a \$20 million fund that it will spend on the Olympics in various ways, including city beautification projects and a welcome pavilion. It is incredible to me that an estimated \$2 million of this will be spent on receptions for visiting dignitaries, while the province leads all others in the country in child poverty. While tens of thousands of people rely on food banks or soup kitchens, the Olympics will offer rich delicacies to wealthy elite from other countries.

The simple fact is that the Olympics does not generate an increase of revenue that raises all boats. It creates a tidal wave of wealth and power that sinks many little boats, and leaves the rest of us with legacies that only the relatively affluent can enjoy. It is hard to imagine the poor in our city engaging in car trips on the new and improved highway to Whistler, or taking the RAV line to the airport a trip to Hawaii, or spending a day skating at the Richmond speed skating oval. The legacy is only for those able to afford participation.

5) The Olympics play an important role in political and ideological entrenchment

National Patriotism: The Olympics play an significant political and ideological role as well. By designating athletes as representing various countries, by showcasing a positive image of the hosting city or country, and by depending on national security forces for protection, the ideology of

nationalism is strongly foregrounded. People's loyalties to their country are cemented by the rituals of flag raising, singing national anthems, and listening to media commentators highlight the efforts and achievements of their own national athletes. All of this breeds a nationalism that eliminates from view current structural oppression or unresolved historical injustices within those countries. The nationalistic fever that is whipped up by the games serves to entrench identity myths about the country and its history, while masking oppression or injustice that continues to flourish far away from the centre stage of the Games. Criticism is considered being in bad taste, undervaluing the work and aspirations of the athletes, and lacking in national pride.

Consumerism: The massive corporate investment and sponsorship of the games serves to ensure our captivity to relentless consumption of goods and the entrenchment of commodification. Official corporate sponsors like Coca Cola, GE, McDonalds, Visa, GM, Bell, Petro Canada and the Hudson's Bay Company contribute large sums of money to the games and in return are given permission to use Games-related marks in advertising and promotion within Canada. They are also given special benefits during the Olympics, including preferred access to the events. This creates a link between large corporations and their products and the feel-good spirit of Olympic athletic performances – a marriage that hides the ethically questionable and environmentally and/or humanly destructive practices of these corporate giants, or their participation in supporting oppressive political regimes or inequitable trading arrangements. As we cheer on our national athletes, drink our large cokes or add to our Visa card debit, we don't see the devastating forces unleashed on human lives, communities or planet earth by the corporate sponsors, supporters and suppliers of the 2010 Games.

Media: Of course the media is an essential part of the Olympic spectacle. The revenue income they generate by covering the games is massive, as they deliver consumers to advertisers for huge profits. Given the size of the international viewing audience, media have immense power in shaping perspectives and inculcating desires and practises that serve the economic and political elite. These media giants present and analyze events during the Games, sift through the plethora of activities to evaluate and inscribe with importance, and dramatize certain moments of triumph or defeat (broken only by an endless iteration of advertisements). They keep us rivetted to our seats, spell-bound by these spectacular distractions that are alien to the mundane routines of our daily lives, that serve primarily as means of "manufacturing consent" to the *status quo* and the interests of corporate exploitation and state power. While millions on the planet die of poverty, hunger or disease and many in our own region suffer deprivation, the media-saturated Olympic spectacle has us primarily concerned with the finals of the bobsled race.

Competition: One of the most important functions of the Olympics is to normalize the ideology of competition as the fundamental mode of human experience. In this grand spectacle of agonistic striving, all competitors have the same starting point, all contend with each other on the same course, but in the end there are winners and losers. It perpetuates the myth of equality and fairness, of individual effort separating those on the podium from those sloughing back to the dressing room, the names of those repeated and honored from those who are quickly forgotten. It is a powerful mechanism of social and economic discipline, of encouraging greater individual training and work in every sphere of life. We are held in the grip of the ideological imperative to succeed or be forgotten; survival of the fittest; only the strong and fit make it.

The political and ideological function of the Olympic Games, then, is to promote nationalism (loyalty to the state, acquiescence to its bureaucratic and coercive power), consumerism (loyalty to the corporations, disciplining our desires to the imperative of relentless accumulation of commodities) and competition (loyalty to individualism, forming social relationships along agonistic or utilitarian patterns). In this way the Games constitute a shot of speed for those already addicted to the status quo of upward mobility and the pursuit of power and affluence.

Helen J. Lenskyj, professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, concludes her book *Inside the Olympic Industry* with the call to grassroots community groups to engage in educational strategies that demystify the Olympics. She writes: “The goal of this enterprise would be to demonstrate that, behind all the rhetoric, the so-called Olympic movement is simply a transnational corporation that in many instances exploits young athletes’ labor and aspirations for its own aggrandizement and profit. Furthermore, the educational agenda must include exposing the real nature of the Olympic legacy, which, in many recent worst case scenarios, has meant huge deficits borne by taxpayers, the suppression of public debate and dissent, and the oppression of disadvantaged urban populations.”²

Closing Thoughts

One can hardly imagine Jesus, who in the wilderness temptation scene rejected the invitation to use his power and privilege to secure his own personal comforts, guarantee protection and security in his mission, and ascend the throne of political and economic domination, advocating support of the Olympic Games. The movement of liberation that he brought, the reign of God that he instantiated, was marked by standing with the weak and the vulnerable, challenging the powerful, and paying for it with his life. Loyalty to Jesus and his way requires saying NO to the temptation to power; the kingdom of God is expressed in solidarity with the poor, resistance to the ways of the empire, and liberation into a community of generosity, justice and mutual care.

The Olympics are the antithesis of the kingdom; they are the grand spectacle of the Empire, and its purpose is to lure us into its grasp. Herod the Great, the political ruler who ordered the slaughter of innocent children in an effort to eliminate the threat of Jesus’ birth, was a strong supporter of the Olympic Games. They are the mechanism of the economic elite and the politically powerful to seduce us into serving their interests. We need to stand with those destroyed or exploited by such power (indigenous people), with those expelled and displaced (poor people), with those punished and removed from sight (homeless people), because that is where our Master stood. It seems to me this puts us in a place of explicit non-cooperation with the Olympics and its supporters.

Like Jesus in the wilderness, our stance should be one of resistance, dissent and non-participation. This might be expressed as public protest, or standing with the victims of exploitation and displacement, or engaging in educational strategies – all of which disclose the destructive power masked by the spectacular convergence of wealth and coercive force that the Olympics represents and promotes. The way of Jesus, the crucified one, is a narrow path that leads us into the company of the poor, the outcast, the afflicted; it is the way of solidarity with the victims of power, resistance to dehumanizing modalities of social existence, and liberation from destructive political and economic arrangements and into communities of shared resources, life-giving justice and care for all creation.

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January 2008

² Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, *Inside the Olympic Industry: power, politics, and activism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000) 195.