Signaling and the Olympics

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Athletic competitions are meant to be peaceful, impartial occurrences and history has proven this ideal: the ancient Olympic games were held between the usually warring city-states of Greece in a temporary time of peace, having put aside their differences for the sake of the games; and during the Christmas holiday in the First World War, soldiers from both sides of the trenches came together to play a friendly game of soccer. However, though impartiality is the goal of Olympism, experience has shown us that international conflicts and politics are *not* put on hold for the Modern Olympic Games, and are in fact an integral part of any nation's participation in international athletic competition today. In many ways, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Olympic Games (the Games) have been used as the catalyst for international and intergovernmental signaling. Nations can use the Olympics to signal changes in world prominence, nationalist ideals, and economic and diplomatic freedom. Furthermore, the IOC can signal to member states a need for institutional change or the successful completion of such.

A study on the international effects related to the Olympics would not be complete without first understanding the terms of the argument. An international organization is defined as an intergovernmental body where members are individual nation-states and representative of their governments. While my research will seek to prove that the IOC and the Olympic Movement has many intergovernmental properties by way of persuasion through signaling, the IOC itself cannot technically be classified as an intergovernmental organization. Written explicitly in the charter of the Olympic Committee is that they are expressly a non-governmental organization (NGO). An NGO is a *trans*national organization, meaning that while members may belong to various nations, they do not actually represent their governments. For example, "members of the IOC are representatives of the IOC to their home country, not*vice versa*" (Scholz 2012). Finally, the intention of this investigation is that a signal is any action that has underlying meaning or any alternative motives. Signals do not include an action that *could* be seen as controversial under certain circumstances but is not an intentional goal. For instance, if Jamaica decided not to send a team to the Winter Olympics, it would not be considered a signal of disapproval of winter sports, but rather that Jamaica is a warm-climate nation and may have trouble qualifying athletes for winter-weather competitions. What *is* considered a signal is the United States adding freedom of sexual orientation to its National Olympic Committee (NOC) charter as a direct result of Russia's denunciation of so-called gay propaganda (Rayman 2013). The signal is an act of defiance in the face of the Sochi Olympics and a message to Russia that they are wrong and the United States is right.

The founder of the IOC and the Modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, created the IOC and the idea of Olympism in 1894 as a means for peaceful, international athletic competition. The main goal of the IOC was to advance Coubertin's idea of Olympism. The Olympic Charter lays the foundation for Olympism as a "philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind" with the aim of promoting a "peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity" (Olympic Charter 2013). The ideals of Olympism are meant to extend to all corners of the globe "without discrimination of any kind" (Olympic Charter 2013). These ambitious goals are to be achieved through cooperation in sport and compliance with the rules and regulations laid forth by the Olympic Charter. The main proponent of Olympism is the IOC, in which no political influence is meant to be permitted. Members of the IOC are not permitted to hold governmental positions in their respective home nations nor are they allowed to be influenced by politics. These qualifications ensure that the IOC is in fact an NGO and free from any outside biases. Below the IOC are individual NOCs whose purpose it is to "promote the fundamental principles and values of Olympism in their countries" (Olympic Charter 2013). National Olympic Committees "have the exclusive authority for the representation of their respective countries" (Olympic Charter 2013). This qualification

punctures the first hole in the assertion that the IOC is purely a non-governmental organization. In that "NOCs may cooperate with governmental bodies" and representative members to an NOC *may* be people with political positions of power, when non-political members then become representatives to the IOC general Session they then represent the politically influenced national committee in which they reside. By this extension, there is a way for national politics to encroach its way into the IOC, pulling at the seams on transnational activities and starting to blend them into international goings-on. With even a miniscule amount of government involvement in the IOC, the beginnings of signaling opportunities may be borne. The remainder of this study will look into the various ways that such signals may be made and the effectiveness of them.

There are numerous ways in which the world's governments insert their politics, however successful or unsuccessful they are, into the business of the supposedly non-political Olympics. As previously mentioned, individual nation-states can signal economic, political, organizational, or power changes through their relations – or lack thereof – with the IOC and the Olympic Games. Hosting the Olympics, or simply applying to host them, is an enormous economic commitment, and thus, developing nations will use the bid to host to signal their growing economic strength. The astronomical costs of hosting the Olympic Games has served as an effective deterrent to would-be false signifiers of economic growth and development. In addition to growing economic strength, there is also a parallel signal of upcoming "trade liberalization" by way of "countries that host a mega-event seem to realize an economic benefit in the form of greater openness" (Rose and Spiegel 2011). Thus, if you are hosting the Olympics, then you are willing to change to a more open-market system to allow for the expansion of trade. The best example of such a change occurred in China as they prepared to host the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Prior to the Games, China (barely) functioned on a communist, closed-market system. However, with the influx of tourism and trade opportunities, China recognized the need and the benefits of loosening market restrictions and thus began the process of privatization just two months after winning the bid in July 2001 (Rose and Spiegel 2011). There have been several other notable correlations between Olympic hosting and economic liberty, for instance in Italy, Japan, Spain, and Korea respectively after winning hosting bids (Rose and Spiegel 2011). These findings hold not only for the countries who win the bids to hold the Olympics, but those who try to win the bids as well. For example, in the mid-1990s, South Africa "began a dramatic trade liberalization" in an effort to be awarded the 2004 Olympics (Rose and Spiegel 2011). All of these examples serve to prove that the desire to host the Olympics is a vital signal to the rest of the world that economic reform is underway. It is also important to note that the liberalization begins just prior to or immediately after winning the bid for the Olympics, roughly 7 years before the actual Olympic Games, and thus the Games themselves serve as the culmination of the newly implemented economy which has had several years to settle in and mature. Andrew K. Rose and Mark M. Spiegel argue in their study "The Olympic Effect" that the order of events that occur when deciding to host Olympics and trade liberalization is as follows: the government decides to apply to host the Olympics, then "private agents make their investment decisions, based on their expectations of the government's liberalization decision," only after this does the government actually make its decision and is then named Olympics host and reaps the payoffs of its actions (Rose and Spiegel 2011).

Hosting the Olympic Games sends one kind of signal, but boycotting the games altogether sends a completely different, yet still incredibly strong signal as well. Boycotting the Olympics for any reason expresses a "powerful international statement." Boycotting is seen as "violating one of the most important tenets of the Olympic Movement: the separation of politics and sports" (Moretti 2013). The specific example of the first and only boycott by the United States of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow centered on the recent Russian invasion of Afghanistan. The United States refused to attend the Moscow Olympics as a response to the aggressive invasion. President Carter declared that sending a US team to Moscow "would be against our national interest and would damage our national security. It would indicate to the Soviets – and to the entire world – that the US lacks the resolve to oppose Soviet aggression" (Moretti 2013). This sentiment is tantamount to all that Olympic signaling can ever possibly be about: a message to not just the host but to the entire world, a message of power and resolve while still promoting world peace, and a message of national interests being imposed into a supposedly impartial event. Vice President Walter Mondale agreed with the President, asserting that "the Olympic boycott is a genuine element of America's response to the invasion of Afghanistan. It is an unambiguous statement of our national resolve" (Moretti 2013). And while the implications of an economic signal are all mostly positive, those following the boycott of a peaceful competition are much harsher and heavily criticized. Because of the extreme influence that boycotting could have, "neither the Soviet Union nor the IOC believed Carter had the power to bring about a multi-nation boycott" (Moretti 2013). In fact, Carter

was able to succeed in having more than fifty of the United States' allies join the boycott and refuse to send athletes to Moscow under national flags (Moretti 2013). All in all, the boycott of the Olympics was a clear attempt of the US government to use the Olympic Movement for "political purposes" (Moretti 2013). To prevent the demise of the Olympic Games from coming about after the 1980 Moscow boycott and subsequent 1984 Los Angeles retaliation boycott, the IOC condemned any future Olympic boycotts alerting the NOCs that any who "refused to participate in Olympic Games for political reasons risk being thrown out of the Olympic movement" (Arnold and Foxall 2014). Due to the other crucial signaling uses of the Olympics that nations wanted to take advantage of in the future, this warning was very influential in shaping the outcome of future international conflict. For example, the United States or other Western powers may have decided to boycott the 2014 Sochi Olympics over Russia's recent endeavors in Georgia or on anti-gay rights legislation. However, the strict ban on boycotts and the desire to continue to take part in future Olympic Games held these members back from abstaining from the games. However, in the scope of the Cold War, a boycott of the 1980 Olympics was a *peaceful* signal to the Soviets and "did not require the deployment of American troops, an action that could have led to escalating tension with the Soviet Union" (Moretti 2013). Although there is inconclusive evidence as to whether the 1980 Boycott had any effect on Soviet policy, it sent a strong signal from the US and the Western bloc while still keeping the peace in an era of high tension.

Boycotting can be one way of sending a signal about disconcerting national policy, however it turns out that actually participating in controversial Games can have the same, if not stronger, signaling effect. As it happens, "attending the Olympics is not, ipso facto, a formal declaration that one endorses the policies of the state that hosts the Games" (Austin and Reid 2012). In fact, it can be argued that an "oppressed minority that participates and performs well in the Olympics can actually further the cause of their group" by proving their worth and disproving their inadequacies. This is a signal of strength and determination; that nothing can keep you down. The prime example of minorities doing well for themselves comes from the 1936 Berlin Olympics, at the very start of Hitler's reign. Jewish and black athletes resolved to compete in Germany despite fear of retribution or international disapproval. Many African Americans supported "black athletes in the Olympics on the grounds that it would be an opportunity to discredit Hitler's Aryan ideology" (Austin and Reid 2012). Black athletes succeeded in their goal, especially when Jesse Owens won four gold medals for the United States, winning over the German spectators and fellow athletes. Contrary to Hitler's desires, fellow German competitor Luz Long "openly embraced Owens after a victory" – right in front of Hitler! (Austin and Reid 2012). Although World War II still happened and the Olympics could not stop it, "Jesse Owens and the US team had a far greater impact by participating in the Berlin Games than a boycott would have had" (Austin and Reid 2012). For although "overcoming prejudice may not extend far beyond the sports arena," it does "show some potential to move towards recognition of equality and contributing to forms of inclusion" (Scholz 2012). Signaling by participating was very relevant in the most recent Sochi Winter Olympiad in which the United States sent several openly gay athletes to Russia, despite Putin's anti-gay propaganda laws.

While hosting the Olympics can signal economic reforms, it can also be a power show. Many studies have argued, for example, that the 2014 Sochi Games were meant as a sort of coming-out party "to herald Russia's return to superpower status" (Arnold and Foxall 2014). Indeed, since being awarded the Games, "Russia has framed its victory as recognition of its reemergence as a power in both geopolitical and geoeconomic terms" (Arnold and Foxall 2014). As a result of the boycott the last time the Games took place in Russia, "the size of the international stage on which it hoped to show off the value of its political and social system" was dramatically reduced, and thus the return to Sochi proved the perfect time to reattempt its power display (Moretti 2013). In cases of power development, the governments of the respective host countries play a particularly strong role in planning and structuring the upcoming Olympic Games in every effort to have them be as spectacular as possible. In Russia, "the federal government is functionally in charge of" all Olympic construction and planning whereas normally these jobs are delegated to the national Olympic Organizing Committee (Arnold and Foxall 2014). Putin was himself personally vested in the outcome of his Olympics and had "largely staked his own reputation on these Games. Any political protest, shoddy infrastructure, or other disastrous event at the Games risk[ed] humiliating the Russian president" (Arnold and Foxall 2014). Indeed, the world knew this well enough from Putin's signaling, so much so that when one of the Olympic rings would not open during the opening ceremonies, parody reports started spreading through the internet about the supposed assassination of the engineers who created the faulty ring for causing huge embarrassment to Russia, but more specifically to Putin. We know exactly how important Russia's coming-out spectacle was, for only days after closing ceremonies, Putin had sent troops to intervene in Crimea and Russia had taken center stage in power politics

over the Ukrainian region.

Whether or not you are the host of the games, ideas of nationalism or national strength are portrayed through participation in any Olympic Games. “The Olympics [are] an occasion for displaying national…prestige” and in many ways, “there is a sense in which athletes today may be thought of as representatives, ambassadors, or standard-bearers of their nations” (Austin and Reid 2012). Thus. any success or failure on behalf of an athlete directly translates to a success or failure on the part of the nation which they represent (Austin and Reid 2012). For example, Coubertin “saw physical strength as crucial to the national security of his home country of France,” and thus competition and success meant to signal the strength of French security and serve as a warning against any potential invaders (Scholz 2012). During his reign, Hitler too sought to advocate his national regime and Aryan purity propaganda through the Berlin Games. Furthermore, although the games are meant to be between individual athletes and not nations, when most Americans turn on the television to watch an Olympic event, they are rooting for Team USA or the underdog athletes in the stars and stripes, and not the mediocre sprinter from France (Billings, et al 2013), for athletes are seen to most as “fighting for national glory, subsuming the individual into the national unit” (Scholz 2012).

All of the preceding examples of Olympic signaling involved nations using the Olympics as a catalyst for national motives. However, there is another side to these signals: there have been instances where the IOC is doing the signaling, and the rarity of such actions makes the effect all the more powerful. The most notable example of the Olympic influence comes from the ban of South Africa during the more than two decades of Apartheid. On August 18, 1964, South Africa was “barred from taking part in the 18th Olympic Games in Tokyo over its refusal to condemn apartheid” (“On This Day” nd). The South African leadership did “accuse the IOC of introducing politics into sport” and it most certainly was (“On This Day” nd)! Introducing politics became necessary since these are the politics behind promoting Olympism in the first place. To be sure, the sports ban that the IOC placed on South Africa was “by far the longest boycott of that country by the international community” and was the domino that fell to bring about all of the other political and commercial boycotts that “piled up over the years in an attempt to force South Africa to abandon racism as official policy” (Ibrahim 1991). Just as the IOC got the ball rolling on putting pressure on South Africa, it was also the first entity to start releasing those pressures at the end of the apartheid period in 1991. On July 9 of that year, the IOC officially “lifted a 21-year-long ban on the nation, allowing its athletes to compete in the 1992 Summer Games in Barcelona, Spain” (Ibrahim 1991). By doing so, the IOC was able to signal to the world that they should be trustful of President F. W. de Klerk’s “effort to dismantle the legal underpinnings of apartheid” which began just one month prior with the abolition of the Population Registration Act (Ibrahim 1991). More accepting measures in regard to South Africa were not taken for several more years. It was not until 1994 that the United Nations invited South Africa to rejoin the General Assembly, officially marking its recognition in the international theater. In such a case as this, the IOC was able to signify to the rest of the world that South Africa *was* headed in the right direction. Based on the resulting ban reversals, we can be pretty confident that the IOC was correct in its assumptions.

Overall, the Olympics is the ultimate catalyst for signaling, both from nation to world through Games participation *and* from the Olympics to world through the IOC. While the IOC “maintains that politics – domestic or international – has no place in the planning or the executing of the Olympic Games…over time the IOC has been unsuccessful in preventing politics from interfering in the Olympics, as it has also engaged in it” (Moretti 2013). These signals are important to recognize as we plan for future Olympic Games. Looking ahead to the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, we can probably expect more economic liberalization and reform from the largest of the South American countries, much like occurred in Beijing. Looking further ahead to the 2018 South Korea Winter Games, we can anticipate a likely celebration of South Korea’s increasing role in world politics such, just as Sochi was for Russia. Knowing what signals to look out for will help us to better predict and understand the functions of the various governments, all with the help of a seemingly non-political athletic competition.

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