



**celebration
capitalism**
and the
olympic games

Jules Boykoff

ROUTLEDGE


Celebration Capitalism and the Olympic Games

The Olympic Games have become the world's greatest media and marketing event—a global celebration of exceptional athletics gilded with corporate cash. Huge corporations vie for association with the “Olympic Image” in the hope of gaining a worldwide marketing audience of billions.

In this provocative critical study of the contemporary Olympics, Jules Boykoff argues that the Games have become a massive planned economy designed to shield the rich from risk while providing them with a spectacle to treasure. Placing political economy at the center of the analysis, and drawing on interdisciplinary research in sociology, politics, geography, history, and economics, Boykoff develops an innovative theory of “celebration capitalism,” the manipulation of state actors as partners that drives us towards public–private partnerships in which the public pays and the private profits. He argues that the Athens Games in 2004 marked the full emergence of celebration capitalism, with London 2012 representing its quintessential expression, characterized by a state of exception, unfettered commercialism, repression of dissent, questionable sustainability claims, and the complicity of the mainstream media.

Controversial, challenging, and forthright, this book opens up a fascinating new avenue for understanding the contemporary Olympics in the context of global capitalist society. It is essential reading for anybody with an interest in the Olympic Games, the relationship between sport and society, or global politics and culture.

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1 Celebration capitalism

On July 6, 2005 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded the 2012 Summer Olympics to London. The city had scored a stunning upset, edging out frontrunner Paris in a nail-biter vote. Across the British political spectrum euphoria was in the air. Charles Kennedy, Member of Parliament and leader of the Liberal Democrats, exclaimed, “This is fantastic ... It will unite the country just as it united the three main political parties in its support.”¹ The media joined the celebration, too. London’s *Daily Mail* hailed the IOC’s decision as “a moment of sheer electricity” whereby “the sense of exhilaration across the country not just the capital was palpable.”² *The Independent* breathlessly described the scene at Trafalgar Square where “[s]trangers clasped each other and danced around while British, St George and Olympic flags were waved in triumph. Tickertape rained down on the crowd and balloons flew up in the air as the atmosphere took on a carnival flavour.”³

Enthusiasts hailed Lord Sebastian Coe—the former gold-medal-winning, middle-distance trackster who steered the bid to London—as a national hero. Coe himself declared, “This is just the most fantastic opportunity to do everything we ever dreamed of in British sport.”⁴ Others pointed to the key role played by Prime Minister Tony Blair. The IOC’s Richard Pound gave the Prime Minister high praise: “If it hadn’t been for him, we’d be holding a press conference in French.”⁵ Blair, along with his wife Cherie, had energetically lobbied IOC voters in hopes of securing their support, with the Prime Minister going so far as to initiate a chat with a urinal mate he believed—mistakenly it turned out—was an IOC member.⁶ After London’s selection, an ecstatic Blair spontaneously bear-hugged his chief of staff. “It’s not often in this job that you punch the air and do a little jig and embrace the person next to you,” he exclaimed. “It’s a fantastic thing and I am absolutely thrilled.”⁷

Economic titans in Britain were equally “thrilled.” Those poised to cash in on hosting the Olympics were licking their lips. Confederation of British Industry chief Sir Digby Jones, who also served as a London 2012 bid ambassador, radiated confidence and sprayed an array of what had become—and what would continue to be—the Games supporters’ stock claims:

This is fabulous news for everyone in the UK. The best bid won and now it is up to us all to make a reality of the dream. Sport is big business and the

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Olympic Games will be a win-win for the economy and sporting competition. The Games will lift our international profile, attract inward investment and boost profits and jobs for everyone. They will help raise our competitive game all round, and highlight to young people the fantastic rewards and exhilaration of competition.⁸

Such sweeping, buoyant pronouncements ricocheted through the media. The *Daily Star* boldly declared, “the Games will make London an overall profit of £100 million” and provide “a huge boost for the rest of Britain.”⁹ Overseas, the machinations of capital were clicking at a quick clip, too. A headline in *The Business Times Singapore* read, “UK Business Hails Olympics Coup—Ecstatic Companies Set Sight On Spin-offs from Hosting 2012 Games.”¹⁰

These optimistic prognostications are at variance with the work of sports economists and critical sociologists who have long pointed out the perils of hosting such mega events. The relentless exuberance of starry-eyed Olympics supporters brings to mind Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief for the moment,” a certain sports-oriented “poetic faith.”¹¹ Avid champions of the Games showed a willingness to ignore a 2002 report published by the government Department of Media, Culture and Sport that, after a careful analysis of Olympics economics, declared, “The quantifiable evidence to support each of the perceived benefits for mega events is weak.” The report went on to conclude:

The explicit costs of hosting a mega event should be weighed very carefully against the perceived benefits when a bid is being considered, especially given the high risks attached. The message is not: “don’t invest in mega events”; it is rather: “be clear that *they appear to be more about celebration than economic returns.*”¹²

In this book I investigate the idea that hosting the Olympics is a celebratory spectacle that is more about economic benefit for the few than economic prosperity for the many.

Celebration capitalism

The Olympic Games have become the world’s greatest media and marketing event—a global celebration of exceptional athletics swaddled in corporate cash. Huge corporations vie for association with the “Olympic Image” in the hope of gaining a worldwide marketing audience of billions. Somewhere between multinational corporation and global institution, the International Olympic Committee sits at the heart of a vast interlocking structure of national and international bodies, sporting associations, and sponsoring firms. The IOC weighs the bids for hosting the Games put forward by the National Olympic Committees, milking the process for cash and credibility. Based in Lausanne, Switzerland, the IOC is registered as a not-for-profit non-governmental organization (NGO), and enjoys tax exemptions wherever it touches down.

Hyper-commercialism did not always reign at the Games. Former IOC President Avery Brundage (1952–72) crusaded against the commercialization of the Olympics, often conflating commercial concerns with an array of things he didn't like, such as politics and professional sports. At the 1966 IOC session in Rome he remarked that despite the Olympic Movement's growth and success, "there will always be a struggle in the face of political and commercial encroachment, to maintain the high standards which belong to the Olympic Movement."¹³ But by the time Juan Antonio Samaranch took the IOC helm in 1980, neoliberalism was ascendant and Samaranch was ready to attach the Games to capital's rising star. Thanks in large part to Samaranch and his successor Jacques Rogge, the modern Olympics cohere with neoliberal capitalism in several ways. The Olympic Games have become much more commercialized, branded, and commoditized as private capital has taken on a more high-profile role—former IOC marketing head Michael Payne once approvingly branded the Games "the world's longest commercial."¹⁴ Meanwhile, private security firms have taken on a larger role in policing the Games.

Some have argued that recent Olympic history points to a "neoliberalisation of the Games."¹⁵ But in *Celebration Capitalism and the Olympic Games* I argue that the Olympics are less about neoliberalism and more about the dynamics of capitalism in general. The tenets of neoliberalism, as relevant as they are in some respects, do not take us the entire way in illuminating the five-ring juggernaut. Instead, a specific formation of capitalism I call "celebration capitalism" helps us better understand the economics behind the Olympics, and, more broadly, the economic system's nimbleness in the modern era. The Olympics, I argue in this book, are the quintessential expression of celebration capitalism, although other examples abound, from royal weddings in the United Kingdom to stadium building in the United States.

In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* Naomi Klein explains the ways neoliberal capitalists unabashedly capitalize on catastrophe. Disasters create collective states of shock that can soften us up to the point where we hand over what we would otherwise ardently defend. In the wake of disaster, while the general population is reeling in the chaotic moment of political peril, corporations along with their collaborators in government ransack the public sphere and slosh thick dollops of neoliberal policy onto the public's plate.¹⁶

Celebration capitalism is disaster capitalism's affable cousin. Both occur in states of exception and both allow plucky politicians and their corporate cohorts to push policies they wouldn't dream of during normal political times. However, while disaster capitalism exploits social trauma to eviscerate the state and force-march us toward free-market fundamentalism, celebration capitalism manipulates state actors as partners, pushing us toward economics rooted in so-called public-private partnerships. All too often, though, these public-private partnerships are lopsided: the public pays and the private profits. In a smiley-faced bait and switch, the public takes the risks and private groups scoop up the rewards. Vancouver-based activist Am Johal summed up this dimension of celebration capitalism when he told me, "The Olympics are a corporate franchise that you buy with public money."¹⁷

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Capitalism is a shrewd shapeshifter. Its longevity owes to its flexibility in the face of impediment, its ability to assume diverse forms in dissimilar historical moments. And capitalism can materialize in different formations in a single moment in time. This is consistent with David Harvey's insight that neoliberalism, and capitalism more generally, "is an unstable and evolving regime of accumulation rather than a fixed and harmoniously functional configuration of political economic power."¹⁸ All this points us toward considering "actually existing capitalism," which unfolds unevenly, depending on place, time, and circumstance. Indeed, sometimes it takes the form of Klein's "disaster capitalism" replete with aggressive neoliberal policies. At other times, though, under conditions of social celebration, capitalists uncork another of their favored forms: celebration capitalism. While under disaster capitalism, private corporations view the state and nonprofits as competitors to be outmaneuvered, under celebration capitalism they are seen as teammates to be exploited. Yet, disaster capitalism and celebration capitalism share a propensity for what Klein calls "democracy avoidance"—using the state of exception as an alibi to justify sidestepping normal democratic processes in the name of expediency, exigency, and urgency.¹⁹ Together they can form a powerful combination, with celebration capitalism clearing a path for disaster capitalism, and vice versa.

Klein contends that opportunistic neoliberal capitalists cash in when tragedy knocks. With what she dubs "the disaster capitalism complex," the goal is to capitalize on social traumas like wars, hurricanes, military coups d'état, terrorist violence, sharp economic downturns, and tsunamis.²⁰ For disaster capitalists, ruptures in everyday reality render a more malleable populace in search of answers. Klein points to influential individuals like conservative economist Milton Friedman—a prime architect of neoliberal capitalism—as loitering vulture-like, waiting for "the disorientation of rapid political change combined with the collective fear generated by an economic meltdown," which sets the stage for "the promise of a quick and magical cure—however illusory."²¹ Free-marketeers thus ruthlessly exploit widespread social instability to enfeeble the state and install free-market capitalism where it wasn't before. Klein writes that "the ultimate goal" of the corporate Goliaths at the hub of the disaster capitalism complex is to normalize the privatization of the public sphere, to fully corporatize government in the "perpetual quest for clean sheets and blank slates upon which to build model states."²² Some Olympic scholars have argued that the Games are fundamentally a neoliberal project and an example of Klein's "disaster capitalism" under the "shock doctrine."²³ But in this book, I take a different approach, arguing that disaster capitalism and celebration capitalism are distinct phenomena, though they can harmonize into a powerful combination.

Celebration capitalism thrives on social euphoria, not collective shock. While in recent years the global economy has most assuredly had its fair share of dire downturns and unforgiving undulations, there have also been moments of celebration, at least from the perspective of profit-seeking capitalists. The Olympics are one such global celebration—metronomic in its regularity—and one that people engage with regardless of political persuasion or social class. The

Olympic Games foment festive feelings of goodwill, peace, and internationalism. Even though Olympic-style celebration capitalism is crafted in the rarefied air of cosmopolitan global elites—the “Olympic family” as Samaranch so frequently intoned—and routinely elides the poor and marginalized, it attracts huge audiences around the planet.²⁴ Although the Winter Games take a backseat to the Summer Olympics, the Vancouver 2010 Games was a magnet for more US news consumer attention than any other story, including the economy and President Barack Obama’s health care reform.²⁵ Women looked forward to the Games with as much—if not more—fervor than men.²⁶ In a 2008 public-opinion poll, three out of every four people in the US took the position that the Olympics have been successful at “building a peaceful and better world through sports.”²⁷ Deploying market-oriented language, a Canadian newspaper editorial captured the appeal of the Olympics: “The Games are the free trade of sport; they invite athletes everywhere to leap the walls of parochialism and reach the highest expression of grace and beauty.” Such coverage is indicative of the media’s tendency to portray the Games as both a cash cow and a “great leveler” that appeals to the best in humanity.²⁸

Capitalism has proved not only to be a merciless juggernaut, but a crafty conjuror. In an effort to add nuance and complexity to our understanding of how capital functions under conditions of exception, it is important to examine how celebration capitalism expresses itself before, during, and after the Olympic Games. Should we wish to understand what Anna Tsing describes as “the heterogeneity of capitalism at every moment in time,” we ought to inspect the machinations of capital in jovial moments of exception, too.²⁹ While not as entrenched as the disaster capitalism complex, celebration capitalism complements disaster capitalism in discernible ways. Shiny promises of Olympic legacies—what sports historian J. A. Mangan calls “a promiscuous assemblage of hope”³⁰—are both the rationalization and the lure for celebration capitalism.

When it comes to the Olympics, celebration capitalism has a number of key dimensions. First, it takes place in a state of exception where the normal rules of politics do not apply. Second, celebration capitalism entails the installation of public-private partnerships that are often lopsided. A third tenet is festive commercialism that inspires public support for the Games. The Olympics feature a torrent of slick advertisements that are focus-group-tested by an army of marketers to maximize their affective effect. And the festive spirit is ramified by the Cultural Olympiad, a series of art and culture events in the years leading up to and during the Olympics. Fourth, celebration capitalism means a boon for the security industry. This translates into a repressive atmosphere for those who may wish to express anti-Olympic dissent. Fifth, celebration capitalism is stoked by the feel-good claims of environmental and social sustainability. Sustainability may swerve us toward intergenerational equity, but it can also serve as a costume for capitalist chicanery. Last but certainly not least, the mass media play a vital role in fashioning and disseminating the political-economic spectacle. In a paroxysm of synergy, media and sport team up in the context of spectacle-drenched capital. These component parts combine to create a celebratory space

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where interlopers who are not there to revel in the merrymaking—political activists, social critics, and those allegedly engaging in ‘anti-social behavior’—must be ejected. As such, the process of celebration capitalism includes the displacement of those who might like to put a damper on the party, whether through repression, forced removal, gentrification, or temporary bans. The security clampdown is designed to preserve the festive spectacle. In *Celebration Capitalism and the Olympic Games* I excavate the historical emergence of these essential dimensions of celebration capitalism.

Disaster capitalism has its supranational behemoths to lay down the law and prescribe the neoliberal medicine: the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization. Celebration capitalism has its own colossus: the International Olympic Committee, which encourages host cities to arrange public–private partnerships while simultaneously pressing for the other key tenets of celebration capitalism. Sometimes there is symbiosis between the disaster capitalism and celebration capitalism variants. As Klein notes, capitalism conveniently “generates a steady stream of disasters all on its own, whether military, ecological, or financial.”³¹ In a way, celebration capitalism responds to these disasters, purporting to assuage our ecological and financial fears. And when Klein writes “the disaster capitalism complex does not deliberately scheme to create the cataclysms on which it feeds ... there is plenty of evidence that its component industries work very hard indeed to make sure that current disastrous trends continue unchallenged,” it applies equally to celebration capitalism if you replace “cataclysms” with “celebrations” and “disastrous” with “celebratory.”³² The promoters of celebration capitalism—the IOC, National Olympic Committees, International Sport Federations, host cities, government officials, corporate partners—work unstintingly to keep the celebratory dream alive.

Yet celebration capitalism and disaster capitalism are complementary. Importantly, celebration capitalism can surreptitiously carve out a space into which disaster capitalism can slide. In the wake of celebration capitalism’s escalation of public spending, politicians can demand austerity measures that cohere with the dictates of neoliberalism, privatizing, deregulating, and cutting state welfare expenditures in the name of fiscal exigency, once again harkening to the state of exception. The reverse is also true, with the perils of disaster capitalism rendering a public more malleable and open to the enticements of celebration capitalism. In other words, celebration capitalism and disaster capitalism can combine as a devastating one-two political-economic punch. This book aims to extend Aihwa Ong’s exploration of “the difference between *neoliberalism as exception* and *exceptions to neoliberalism*” or “the selective deployment of the neoliberal exception, on the one hand, and exceptions to neoliberalism, on the other, that are instrumentalized in the spatializing practices of sovereignty.”³³ I will examine the compatibility of celebration capitalism and disaster capitalism in more detail later in the book.

The 2004 Athens Olympics mark a pivotal moment in the history of celebration capitalism and the Games. Since Athens, we have seen celebration capitalism in full form in Beijing 2008, Vancouver 2010, and London 2012. On-the-ground

celebration capitalism exhibits the basic characteristics outlined above, but it takes distinctive form depending on the context. As such, the configuration of celebration capitalism at the 2004 Olympiad in Athens looks different than at the 2008 Beijing Games. And those two Olympiads differ from the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics and the 2012 Summer Games in London. In this book, I trace the historical development of celebration capitalism, paying special attention to these four Olympiads, as they help illuminate celebration capitalism's flexibility.

Neoliberalism and the Olympics

Neoliberalism emerged out of the global economic recessions of the 1970s, the New York fiscal crisis, and the perceived failures of Keynesian welfarism. Neoliberal architect Milton Friedman famously wrote, "Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around."³⁴ As the world economy gyrated in the mid-1970s, proponents of neoliberalism—such as Friedman and Austrian economic philosopher Friedrich August von Hayek—posited that the best "ideas that are lying around" included bolstering private property rights, prioritizing entrepreneurialism, promoting open markets, and removing barriers to trade. All this would be accomplished, they argued, through deregulation, privatization, and the state's evacuation from most economic planning and ownership. Friedman and Hayek worked to bring about the day when constraints on the mobility of capital were removed, financial flows and trade relations were liberalized, and state interventionism in economic matters ceased except in extreme instances. In their view, the ostensibly oafish, coercive, and inefficient state should be replaced by private market relations rooted in competition and choice. Using freedom and individual choice as ideological pillars, human relations could be casually and consistently commoditized.

In the 1960s this version of capitalism remained a utopian intellectual current. That changed in the 1970s, when a crisis of capitalism afflicted the West. The crisis expressed itself in clear terms during the oil embargo of 1973, when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cut back the sale of petroleum to any country that had supported Israel. This was accompanied by OPEC's tactical spike in the price of oil.³⁵ The price hike provided oil-producing states like Saudi Arabia with a flood of petrodollars, which they reprocessed through investment banks in the US. In search of profitable outlets for this money, these banks were forced to look abroad, speeding up the process by which US financial firms forged rules and made deals to operate securely in foreign lands. As Harvey notes, this dynamic created a "shift" that "impelled the movement towards neo-liberal solutions."³⁶ It also set the stage for the next crisis.

Then, in 1975, investment bankers performed a *coup de finance*, essentially bankrupting New York City. This fiscal crisis led to austerity policies and economic reforms previously untested in such broad fashion in the Global North, with the mayor of New York cowering into a powerless puppet while the city's Emergency Financial Control Board pulled the economic strings.³⁷ On either side of the Atlantic

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan grabbed the baton from Friedman and Hayek and aggressively pushed their policies and ideas, with Thatcher famously invoking the self-fulfilling dictum of TINA: there is no alternative. By the end of the 1980s these economic principles had coalesced into a coherent economic vision that had jumped to the transnational sphere and that was peddled by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and US Treasury Department—the threesome known as the Washington Consensus. These powerful entities helped render politicized policy into received wisdom. Indeed, neoliberalism has become a naturalized ideology. It is capitalism’s new normal.

Neoliberalism has taken the form of numerous on-the-ground economic and social policies. Its main tenets are privatization, deregulation, individualization, marketization, trade liberalization, and financialization. Its guiding principle is letting the market decide. With this ideology firing full-throttle, governance becomes an ostensibly apolitical exercise in matching social problems with technical solutions. This ingrains a preference for below-the-radar technocrats engineering the economy by adjusting interest rates, instituting newfangled financial mechanisms like derivatives, and ramming ahead with free-trade pact after free-trade pact. At the same time, neoliberal policies press precariousness upon workforces at home and abroad. To be sure, neoliberal architects prefer euphemisms like “flexibilizing the workforce” rather than “firing workers and insisting they get retrained.”

Critics of this vision abound. Media scholar Robert McChesney contends that the neoliberal motto of “letting the market decide” has placed the populace on the path toward disengagement from politics. At the same time, he argues, “Neoliberalism simply reduces or eliminates the *idea* that government should represent the public interest vis-à-vis the corporate interest.”³⁸ As such, the shift toward neoliberal capitalism converts citizens into consumers at the strip-mall of governance without government.

As mentioned above, in some ways, the modern Olympics cohere with the central tenets of neoliberal capitalism. This makes sense since the Olympics reflect, and in some cases exaggerate, the wider trends we see in political-economics and society more broadly. We are afforded a lucid look at the commercial aspects of neoliberalism in a special advertising section of *Fortune* magazine from 2002 called “An Ideal Partnership: Supporting and Leveraging the Olympic Values.” The author, Christopher Redgate, presents it all transparently, helping us understand “the total immersion of Olympic sponsors into the staging of the Games today.”³⁹ At the core of the endeavor is the “Olympic Image,” which “insiders” associate with a commercial brand, but one with special, almost magical qualities:

The Olympic Image is an amalgam of what the Olympic Games offer to the world and the essence of what the Games mean to us at the emotional level. It’s also the cornerstone of Olympic sponsorship, the guiding force behind the contributions that companies make to the Olympic Movement and the programs that they use to communicate their Olympic messages to you and me.⁴⁰