Book Review/Compte rendu

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, *Olympic Industry Resistance: Challenging Olympic Power and Propaganda*. SUNY Series on Sport, Culture and Social Relations. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. 182 pp. $US 18.95 paper (978-0-7914-7480-8), $US 56.50 hardcover (978-0-7914-7479-2).

Both as global mega events and as the world's largest celebrations of international sporting competition, the Olympic Games have attracted the attention of historians and social scientists for many years. Helen Jefferson Lenskyj is arguably the world's foremost critical scholar working on the Olympic movement. She has been rightly lauded for her previous works, *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics and Activism* (SUNY, 2000) and *The Best Olympics Ever? Social Impacts of Sydney 2000* (SUNY, 2002). In this latest withering critique of Olympism as presently constituted, some familiar ground is covered, not least in the extensive coverage of the damaging social, economic, and political impact on Olympic host (and, indeed, bidding) cities. The overall thrust of the arguments presented here are neatly summarized towards the end of the book. The Olympic industry is indicted for its "failure to conduct business in a socially responsible and ethical manner" (p. 149). In opposition to this state of affairs, the author calls for social responsibility to become a pillar of the Olympic movement and argues that if future Olympic Games and the Olympic movement in general wish to claim an authentic legacy, this must be demonstrated by accessible housing, tenants' rights, freedom of assembly, a free media, unrestricted public use of public spaces, and the protection of children and young people from Olympic propaganda. These are huge demands. According to Lenskyj, however, "without such safeguards, talk of a lasting legacy for *all* residents in Olympic host cities is empty rhetoric" (p. 152).

The book is divided into two parts: "Olympic Impacts and Community Resistance" followed by "Olympic Education." Lenskyj is on much firmer ground in the former than the latter. The damaging effects of hosting the Olympic Games or even seeking to do so are well documented as are the efforts by various groups to resist the Olympic juggernaut. Not only can the Olympics threaten the day-to-day existence of countless ordinary citizens but, as Lenskyj expertly demonstrates, they can also

contribute to an overall threat to freedom of expression even in supposedly liberal democratic countries. Given the potential for terrorist attacks when the Olympics arrive in Vancouver in 2010 and in London in 2012, and the spiralling costs (both constitutional and financial) of trying to secure the event, there will undoubtedly be many who begin to wonder if only authoritarian regimes (or regimes that are willing to trespass on human rights as a price worth paying for the benefits of civic boosterism) can safely be awarded the Games in future years.

Ironically, given the power of the Olympic juggernaut to rampage from one city to the next, the challenge Lenskyj addresses in the second part of her book is perhaps even more daunting. Here she examines the messages that are sent out by the Olympic movement and Olympism particularly to young people — "the missing piece of the puzzle" as she describes it (p. 2). The resultant wide-ranging discussion of role models, fallen heroes, celebrity, and nude calendars is undeniably relevant to the place of the Olympics in contemporary society and no doubt the IOC deserves special attention because of the way in which it has consistently prided itself on the educational value of sport. Nevertheless, the issues that Lenskyj discusses in this section of the book are by no means peculiar to the Olympics.

Whilst it is appropriate, and not unrealistic, to demand changes from the Olympic movement in those areas which are clearly under its control, what Lenskyj describes as Olympic propaganda overlaps with so many other contemporary social phenomena as to make the IOC virtually, although not perhaps entirely, powerless. To what extent for example, is the Olympic movement a major player in the construction of a celebrity culture through which children and young people are influenced by unsuitable role models? If anything, the IOC with its somewhat dated messages about fair play, palls into insignificance when one considers the range of information sources and messages that are available to the youth of today. I would also worry a little that Lenskyj's critique can be read as patronizing towards those very people whom she sets out to protect. Either young people are simple dupes or they are making the wrong choices in life. One way or another though, they are in error and the IOC is a prime cause of their delusion. Many young people, although certainly not all, have undeniably fallen for the false promises of consumerism and celebrity stardom. I doubt that very many of those, however, have been regularly exposed to Olympism.

Given Lenskyj's concerns, I was surprised to see her dismissal of Olympians as alternative role models. She argues that "athletes who are coopted by the 'educational outreach' branch of the Olympic industry as role models risk entrenching the sexism, racism, and other discrimina-

tory systems that they may be hoping to challenge" (p. 77). This is certainly a danger. But why should we have greater faith in those "ordinary" men and women such as family members, teachers, and coaches who are proposed by Lenskyj as "worthy" role models? In fact, I would suggest that although critical scholars cannot expect to exert much influence on the hierarchies of sport's governing bodies, a close relationship with athletes and fans in addition to those most adversely affected by events such as the Olympics could well pay dividends.

It is in this latter discussion and also in the opening chapter that the book offers most to the wider sociology community rather than simply to those who are interested in the social significance of sport. An undercurrent that runs throughout the book is the debate about public sociology and sociology as activism. Here I agree wholeheartedly with Lenskyj when she criticizes those who are guilty of "blurring the lines between Olympic cheerleading and scholarly debate" (p. 10). If one wishes to critique organizations such as the IOC and FIFA, there is no point sitting at their banqueting tables, attending their sponsored conferences, and accepting their free tickets and press passes. On the other hand, as Lenskyj recognizes, there is also a danger in being identified almost exclusively with the resistance movement as the radical left's "tame academics" (p. 8) — hence the need to engage with some of those people who actually like the Olympics as well as with those who do not.

What is undeniable is that something needs to be done about events such as the Olympic Games and it is to Lenskyj's immense credit that she has devoted so much time and effort to trying to do something. This is a book that should be read not only by those with a primary interest in sport but by anyone who is concerned about the ways in which our world is evolving. As for the Games themselves, Lenskyj is surely correct when she writes that "like other hallmark events, the Olympics threaten the basic rights and freedoms of residents in host cities, with particularly serious impacts on the lives of low-income and homeless people." One might wish to add that the potential impact on the environment is as yet immeasurable as are the costs involved in keeping the Games going. For the foreseeable future, the Olympics will go on. The challenge is to make sure that the only losers will be those who fail to win medals.

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