

Saluting the

Nationalism and the Olympics

David Rowe & Geoffrey Lawrence



When Jon Sieben, the "slight, unheralded" 17-year-old Queenslander, won the Men's 200m Butterfly final at the recent Los Angeles Games, the Australian media went bananas. Sieben had managed to defeat the West German champion Michael Gross, set a new world record and win a gold medal for Australia. He also sparked off an orgy of patriotism which, for a brief moment, recalled the emotional excesses of the America's Cup win. It was a win in real Hollywood style — the young smiling Sieben, physically dwarfed by Gross, had been able to cut four seconds from his best previous race time, and, against all odds, beat the world champion. Cecil B. De Mille couldn't have done a better "David and Goliath" epic.

This was, as one paper acknowledged, "genuine gold". Another reported "A kid without a job takes on a giant killer". For another, he was an "Aussie battler". As the *Sunday Telegraph* told us on its front page, "Out of Work Aussie Beats All the Odds". He had won, as the headlines read, "Gold on the Dole", and had become a symbol of hope for those unemployed kids whose social security cheques had not yet brought them fame and fortune. As a culmination of his success he was photographed, upon returning to Australia, with gold medal on one arm

and girlfriend on the other, receiving a congratulatory kiss. Next stop, presumably, was the Commonwealth Employment Services (CES) office.

Success of the Sieben kind causes the media to break out into a nationalistic sweat because it contains three key elements. First, it is a "mega triumph", unlike the success of coming in a worthy second or a plucky fourteenth, and so permits unbounded rather than qualified exultation. Second, it recalls and exaggerates the myth of upward mobility, that vein of aspiration that has sustained "models" like those of Horatio Alger (from boot-cleaner to multi-millionaire) in the USA and Alan Bond (or even Paul Hogan) in Australia, as rags-to-riches achievers to be emulated by all. Third, the hero or heroine embodies an abstraction — the spirit of Australia — and so helps to heal concrete rifts and overcome material divisions between competing social groups in the name of Australia and its progress. Here s/he becomes an agent in the "national reconciliation and reconstruction" of Australia through stimulating a concentrated bout of national self-congratulation. The cultivation of this fervent nationalism makes a nonsense of any claim that sport is separated from politics, because every time someone extrapolates from a sporting triumph to another area of social life (e.g. the

area of work), they are making a political and ideological connection.

In this article we will explore some of these connections in order to reveal how rampant sporting patriotism, while temporarily edifying the spirit, undermines attempts to challenge and alter exploitative relations under capitalism. The L.A. Games were a vehicle for the promotion of American ideals and values, and also provided an opportunity for Australia to assert its own identity. We will provide examples of the media presentation of nationalistic ideology in the advancement of our central thesis that nationalism tries to reconcile at the cultural level class conflict which emerges inevitably at the material level.

The Rise of Nationalism

Where the ancient Games in Olympia were held in honour of the Greek God Zeus, the modern L.A. Games paid homage to the secular God of Nationalism. The Games — and their representation — were structured in a manner which fostered national identification and glorified national achievement. Countries were in direct competition: "Australia is in lane 4, the Americans in lane 5" and so on. Following an event the world watched as the young, fit champions, wearing national colours, mounted the dais and stood reverently, with eyes affixed to the

State:



unfurling flag of the winning nation.² Many were still panting from their exertion and the magnitude of their effort was further emphasised. The Americans, as if in automatic fashion, held their hands to their hearts and mouthed the words of the anthem. Many eyes were blinded by tears — or perhaps dollar signs.

The award ceremony was introduced into the Olympics during the first Los Angeles Games in 1932 in economically troubled times when there seemed to be a great need for Americans to "rally around the flag". The award ceremony which shows the winner standing tallest on the dais, the flag raising, and the playing of the national anthem, is saturated with symbolic meaning. Hence, in the Los Angeles Games much of what was transmitted, directly and indirectly, was a statement of American achievement, of national superiority. Viewers were exposed to 83 renditions of the Star Spangled Banner (the American Anthem was played four times more often than any other anthem), while on American TV, whenever another nation's heroes had won gold, the ceremony was replaced by an event — any event — in which the Americans were participating.³ The chauvinism was so apparent that the President of the Los Angeles Olympic Organising Committee (LAOOC) was asked to appeal to the ABC network to alter its coverage of

the Games. Apparently, the American commentators had a tendency to use words like "orientals" and "aliens" to describe contestants from other nations.⁴ Such language, which is more appropriate for filling out visa applications than sports commentary, demonstrated that this was essentially a clash of nation states (and, by extension, social systems) not an athletic contest.

Through the identification of the sports champion with "The Nation" we were asked to celebrate a country's power and strength. The opening and closing ceremonies were costly extravaganzas — and a reminder (if one were needed) to the rest of the world of America's wealth. The open displays of patriotism were couched in terms of international fraternity — something already negated by the boycott of the Russian and other Eastern bloc teams. Of course, the ceremonies provided a format for national comparisons. While the previous Moscow opening was "superbly drilled" it was nevertheless a "pretty solemn" affair. The Los Angeles opening, in contrast, had "an air of *joie de vivre* which was missing from Moscow".⁵ The difference was one of control versus freedom, rigidity versus spontaneity, stolidity versus ingenuity. Such discursive dualities were played out endlessly, for they went to the heart of the ideological struggle for the Games.

Yet when authentic (as opposed to manufactured) spontaneity was demonstrated by the athletes who ran onto the track to get a closer view of the opening and closing ceremonies, it was quickly squashed. The athletes were admonished over the loudspeakers like errant school children and some were physically relocated by "helpful" and "courteous" security staff.

Interviews with selected athletes became another forum for outbursts of national pride. Where comments were interspersed with religion the effect was intensified. Carl Lewis was first to forge the link between God, nation and athletic success:

As far as I'm concerned, I can't fail because I, Carl Lewis, will just try my best. I know I have a God-given talent and I know the Lord has given me the talents and ability. All I compete for is the love of sport, for myself and of course for my country — and then all glory goes to God.⁶

Conveniently, he forgot to mention the sponsors.

National heroes are important because they provide a model for younger athletes. Lewis, as a sort of athletic equivalent of Michael Jackson, provides all the right patriotic clues for his fans. His political statements? Lewis is above politics — his beliefs are simple, home-spun, all-American. There is no need for a Black Panther salute with God

and nation on your side, at least not if you're smart in Reagan's America.

One newspaper, anxious to cover "background" events at the Games, interviewed a rather overweight George Foreman, ex-Olympic (and world) heavyweight boxing champion. He told of his feelings at the '68 Games.

The people all applauded so loudly and I had a flag in my pocket and I held it up and waved that flag just as hard as I could. I was so proud. I wasn't black or white. I was American. These days you can add one more. Now I'm a Christian.⁷

He could have added "Reaganite" or "monetarist", perhaps, but in the age of the Moral Majority this was probably redundant.

Whether or not George's brains had been scrambled in one of his many encounters is irrelevant here. What matters is the undiminished patriotism — the national loyalty which underlies achievement at the Olympics. The message is that athletes, by training hard, by showing complete and unrelenting dedication, can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, can serve as role models for others and assert the superiority of their nation all at the same time. As we have come to expect from *The Australian*, one of its editorials acknowledged:

The success of Carl Lewis and Edwin Moses, both athletically and financially, offers hope to those black Americans who are still fighting for equality. They can see, through dedication and hard work, there is a way out.⁸

Sport and Class Relations

Comments like those above have led writers like Jean-Marie Brohm to dismiss sport as an ideological apparatus of the state and as a parasitic institution for regimenting youth.⁹ Brohm insists that the "champions" serve as propagandists, enhancing national prestige and fostering identification of the masses with the state. This argument can be located within the tradition of orthodox western marxism, with its high suspicion of nationalism. Nationalism, it is argued, is biased towards bourgeois social relations because it is based upon the assumption that people comprising a nation state have a common bond with each other — a bond stronger than that which they have with members of

their own class. The "national interest" (preservation of capitalism) is seen to be enhanced if all harmoniously work to advance a particular country. Nationalism, insisting upon the desirability of internal supra-class solidarity, is seen to undermine class consciousness, which stresses that economic and social improvement will only be attained through working class recognition of the source of oppression and exploitation and action to challenge ruling class domination.

While Brohm's account has a certain immediate appeal, it is limited. It fails, for example, to recognise the potential for revolutionary (classbased) activities under a nationalist banner, a significant feature of Third World peasant mobilisation where nationalism may be strategically useful. The Sandinistas of Nicaragua, for example, have shrewdly utilised nationalist sentiment in generating popular resistance to American attempts to re-establish a puppet government. Brohm also tends to ignore or dismiss the contradictory elements of national grandstanding

despite its "dialectical method". For example, what effect might America's dominance of the Games have on, say, a Third World nation? We might agree with Brohm that it enhances American cultural imperialism. But might it not also, in having exposed American chauvinism, strengthen the resolution of some smaller nations to challenge US hegemony? Again, a single win by a representative or team from an underdeveloped country may be read as general lack of physical prowess of that country, but it might also suggest that a challenge to the domination of the larger nations is possible. The win of Cuban Alberto Juantorena in Mexico is a particularly striking example, as that athlete took the opportunity to dedicate his victory to the Cuban revolution.

While the winning ceremony is obviously structured to glorify the nation, a black power salute beamed to half the world's population may give hope to those who are oppressed. Seeing blacks win race after race may promote the view that they are biologically "different" (a cornerstone of racism), but it might also provide a glimpse of the black success which will follow liberation from white



Carl Lewis: "forged a link between God, nation and athletic success".

domination. This should not lead us, like the editor of *The Australian*, to the mythical conclusion that upward mobility is guaranteed to all who work hard. The idea that "drive" and "initiative" can magically overcome class, racial/ethnic or sexual disadvantage is clearly absurd, but enough cases of spectacular success can be drummed up to lend weight to the proposition that an inequitable social structure does not exist and that, ultimately, its victims are at fault for their personal failure. Last year it was the "spinnaker" led recovery and this year perhaps the "javelin" led recovery in a continuing search for variations on the theme that the only thing really wrong with the nation state is the under-achievement of its lowly citizens and the petty squabbling of its interest groups. Such a perspective demands an almost religious belief in the nation state as transcendent deity and is constantly challenged by prosaic phenomena like exploitation, unemployment, poverty and class conflict.

What we should not deny in our analysis is the contradictory nature of the "images" of the Games — the dialectics of the dais if you like. We have condemned the overt ethnocentrism and xenophobia of the Americans and their use of the Games as a forum which bolsters national pride and patches the splits and cracks of capitalism. Yet, we must also question the sentiments of Hu Quili, a leading member of the Secretariat of the Chinese Central Committee, who described the victories of Chinese athletes as:

An historical breakthrough, signifying the growth of the Chinese nation. This shows that we Chinese are people of high aspirations and proven capability and that we can overcome all difficulties and achieve our objectives when we unite as one and march forward firmly.¹⁰

Of course, China is beginning to embrace elements of capitalism, so sport may well become increasingly central to its economic structure and its political ideology.

However, one thing that we can acknowledge is that the media are able to create and/or reinforce cultural stereotypes through their interpretation of Olympic contests. We learned of the "highly disciplined gymnasts from Romania",

of the Americans who set their standards so high that they "felt shame" when they could not win a race. The Australians were the "quiet achievers" who "won the hearts of the crowd". The Italians were, as expected, "emotional".¹¹

These socially constructed views of a country's participants provide a cultural typification which is as shallow as it is misleading. We learn on the basis of these supposed differences to distinguish ourselves (as "Australians") from those of other nations. Such attempts to establish an absolute separation between the citizens of different nation states is at the very heart of nationalist ideology. For once a country's people believe that "aliens" are biologically different or that cultural differences are insuperable and fundamental, then they may be more easily mobilised to oppose (often through violent means) "aliens" and so to preserve the nation's unique qualities. Nationalism is false consciousness because it convinces the exploited people of one nation state that they have a common interest with their own exploiters and an essential antagonism to the oppressed of other nations. Workers of the world do not often unite because they are encouraged to vilify working class "aliens" and to support their local bourgeoisie.

The spectacle of the Olympics was able to blind us and 2.3 billion others to the more significant political events of August. The Olympics coincided with the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. It was also exactly 10 years since Richard Nixon was forced to resign from the White House. Somehow, in the razzle-dazzle of rhapsodies and races, the bleaker periods of American history were overlooked. What emerged was a New Nationalism. Americans were being asked to celebrate alongside the economic "recovery" a resurgence in US influence and supremacy. But, as is the "American Way", confidence spilled over into national arrogance. Within two weeks of the opening of "the Friendly Games" from his bulletproof lookout, President Reagan (in the preliminaries to a radio broadcast) whimsically announced that he had "outlawed Russia" and would be "dropping bombs within five minutes".



Highly disciplined gymnasts from Roumania.

Conclusion

The hysterical national chauvinism unashamedly celebrated in the Olympic Games reveals how central it is to the maintenance of social relations within and between nation states. We have noted how the Los Angeles Olympics were an example, par excellence, of a rightwing government vigorously appropriating the emotion-charged symbols of nationalism, yet we have also seen how nationalism may be used by governments or movements of other political persuasions for quite different ends.

It is an apparent paradox that as the international order has increasingly eroded, both materially and culturally, any conception of "national independence", there has been a considerable resurgence of patriotism. It seems particularly ironical that multinational corporations, who owe allegiance to no single nation state, have carefully cultivated a nationalistic image in each country where they invest capital or sell commodities.¹² Indeed, the spread of international capital may outrage the local elites who are supposed to share ruling class solidarity with other "fractions of capital". As Connell has stated with regard to the developing international economic, military and intelligence apparatuses, such moves run "a real risk of offending the nationalist sentiments that rightwing politics trades on".¹³ Hence,

nationalism may generate a struggle between fractions of capital and frequently between capital and labour, as radical left movements seek to utilise its symbols to unite workers against the class enemy in the establishment of "socialism within one country".

Nationalism is, then, an ideology fraught with contradictions because it rests on the fundamentally false premise that the nation state is an abstracted, mystical source of communal identification

rather than a particular socio-political order whose citizens are often tenuously linked.¹⁴ Sport is a particularly compelling ideological cement because it encourages the suspension of class and other forms of antagonism in favour of a fabled "national interest". The Los Angeles Olympics as we received them through the Australian media attempted to persuade us that we are essentially united in our citizenship, and that class divisions, if they exist at all, are no more than mere trifles compared to the great power of our common land.

While genuinely applauding the athletic success of the Nunns, Siebens, and Lukins, it is necessary to recognise that while national identity is arbitrary and abstract, class position is determined and all too concrete.

Footnotes

1. Quotes are from *The Bulletin*, August 14, 1984, p. 69, *Sunday Telegraph*, August 5, 1984, p. 1, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday, August 6, 1984, p. 1, and Thursday, August 16, p. 27.

2. Just as Roland Barthes saw on the cover of *Paris Match* a picture of a "young Negro in a French uniform saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour" and knew that he was in the presence of a vast meaning system, so we were drawn inexorably towards a compelling cultural spectacle of strength, joy and maudlin sentiment (see Barthes, R., *Mythologies*, StAlbans, Granada, 1972, p. 116).

3. See *National Times*, August 10-16, 1984, p. 35.

4. *ibid.*

5. *The Bulletin*, August 14, 1984, p. 68.

6. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Olympic Extra, August 13, 1984, p. 3.

7. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Olympic Extra, July 31, 1984.

8. *The Australian*, August 11-12, 1984, p. 14.

9. Brohm, J.M., *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time*, Ink Links, London, 1978.

10. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 8, 1984, p. 9.

11. Quotes from *Sydney Morning Herald*, various issues, August 6-14, 1984.

12. See, for example, Paul James, *Australia in the Corporate Image: A New Nationalism*, Arena, 63, 1983.

13. Connell, R.W., in *Which Way is Up?* Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1983, p. 181.

14. See Andrew Lohrey, *Australian Nationalism as Myth*, in *Arena*, 68, 1984.

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