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“This Powerful Signal of World Outrage”: International Relations Theory and Sport Governance
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Having long been absent in sport management scholarship, historical analysis of international political affairs deserves a greater place in the field. For their own part, historians and political scientists have remained reluctant to incorporate ideas originating in sport management departments into their models of the global political system. This underdeveloped relationship is partially responsible for the fact that the literature on sport and international relations remains largely wedded to a few conceptual lenses—most of which emphasize such cultural perspectives as gender, race, and transnational consumerism. Moreover, the few existing works actually informed by political science borrow almost exclusively from the liberal theory of international relations. Sport, under this interpretive lens, is most commonly framed as a transnational mechanisms functioning outside the boundaries of the nation-state (Keys, 2006). In terms of its effect on sport management scholarship, this emphasis on culture and transnationalism has meant that historians and political scientists have produced little on the organizational and managerial realities of international sport events.

To demonstrate the relevance of these models to sport management, this paper traces the evolution of U.S. governmental perceptions of state involvement in the Olympic movement. In doing so, it suggests that realist international relations theory is a uniquely deserving methodological approach available to sport management scholarship. Under the realist model, unitary, rational states seek to maximize relative power in an anarchic international system. In contrast to the importance placed on culture in previous studies concerning sport and international affairs, realist scholars traditionally emphasize political influence, economic power, and military strength (Morgenthau, 1948). With regard to the impact of these elements on foreign policy choices, advocates of the theory assert that governmental leaders make decisions geared toward a definable set of “national interests” (Brands, 1999).

This paper analyses state involvement in three Olympic Games: the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the 1980 Los Angeles Olympics, and the 2008 Beijing Olympics, enabling an examination of the commonalities and differences in the application of realist theory by key U.S. policymakers as it relates to the use of sport for international relations. The historical analysis for this paper derives from previous research on each Olympic Games, the incorporation of prominent realist scholarship in the international relations theory literature, and the utilization of archival documents that reveal policymakers’ viewpoints prior to the Games. Such a methodological approach has been shown to be particularly useful in historical analysis (Trachtenberg, 2006).

The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games have received much scrutiny from sport historians (Eisen 1984; Wenn, 1989, 1991, 1996). While the Games were awarded to Berlin in 1931, it was not until the National Socialist Party’s rise to power in 1933 that the Games became a prominent issue of debate not only in sport, but also in deliberations for international relations. Despite domestic political pressures and the adamant counsel of U.S. diplomats stationed in Europe, the Roosevelt administration chose a course of neutrality regarding the decision for U.S. athletic participation and the consequent diplomatic undertones (cf. Dodd & Dodd, 1941; Messersmith, 1935). From a realist perspective, U.S. policymakers were able to recognize the Nazi use of sport to advance German national interests at the time. However, due to a myriad of domestic and international considerations, a similar utilization of sport was not chosen pursuant to U.S. national interests.

In the context of the 1980 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter faced numerous domestic and foreign policy issues, which ultimately limited his policy options so that non-military tactics for dealing with Moscow gained favor. Eventually, sixty nations followed the administration’s campaign and boycotted the 1980 Games. From a realist perspective, it is noteworthy that most of these nations possessed a weak position in the international balance of power and that they were either economically or militarily dependent on the United States; as such, they felt obliged to follow its wishes. At the same time, the difficulty the United States had in convincing others to join the boycott demonstrated a declining, though still powerful status on the part of the United States.

The United States’ opposition to boycotting the 2008 Beijing Olympics, on the bases of human rights allegations, can be explained in the realist model as resulting from a changing international balance of power. While the United States remained the world’s leading economic and military power, it had become more economically dependent on the People’s Republic of China over the previous 75 years. For example, China’s purchase of $537.7 billion in U.S. treasury bills helped fund the more than $10 trillion American national debt. The realities of economic interconnectedness and China’s growing political and economic power rendered potentially embarrassing initiatives, such as boycotting the Beijing Games, unrealistic and politically infeasible. Put
differently, the realist perspective captures China’s increased power and illustrates how this power limited policy options regarding China.

Sport management scholars contemplating Olympic protests should pay attention to the realist theory of international relations for several reasons. First, realism remains the fundamental worldview among most of those who actually practice foreign policymaking. Consequently, realist theory should be automatically included in any managerial or organizational analysis of foreign policymaking, including international relations and sport. Secondly and from an interpretive standpoint, realist theory helps illuminate the relative attractiveness of a boycott in comparison to other diplomatic possibilities, as it approaches decisions by looking at the forest rather than the trees. Applied to the issue at hand, the data indicate that states perceiving a weakness on their part in terms of the international balance of power seem more likely to initiate a boycott campaign. Third, recent innovations in realist scholarship framing sub-optimal foreign policy decisions as resulting from imperfect domestic situations may offer fresh insights into decisions pertaining to state involvement in the Olympic movement that in hindsight seem miscalculated given the situations then confronted by policymakers (Zakaria, 1998, 2003, 2008). Finally, even in cases where U.S. policymakers took minimal action, realist theory should not be ignored. Rather, both action and non-action taken related to the Olympic movement can still be interpreted as action pursuant to U.S. national interests.

Since one of the leading challenges for sport management researchers is to demonstrate the relevancy of the field to other disciplines (cf. Chalip, 2006), this paper contributes toward the greater utilization of sport in political science and public policy analysis. At a practical level, this paper offers an illustration to sport practitioners that sport is not free from government interests and that sport organizations and event managers would be well served to plan for various government-influenced contingencies.