Politics of the Sporting Body

A study of sport as a political tool under Communism

Lin Yang

Writing 20 (Spring 2007): Embodying Social Meaning
Professor Marcia Rego

Exactly ninety years ago, Russia heralded the dawn of the communist era with the 1917 October Revolution. In many ways, the revolution not only changed the course of Russian history, but also set the stage for the global turmoil in the turbulent times which followed. Marxist-Leninist communism introduced radical changes to the way power was distributed and managed. However, behind the violence and confusion of the twentieth century, communist ideology was also adding new dimensions to traditional power relations between the state and society through the effective utilization of a centralized sports program. Indeed, as Howell observed, the USSR “was the first major country in modern times to realize the full extent of the political significance of sport” (1975, p. 137). The efficiency with which centralized sports institutions were created, as well as the fact that the USSR’s own version of the Olympics—the Spartakiads—was inaugurated as early as 1928 (Girginov, 2004, p. 44), attests to the dedication of the communist regime to its sports initiative.

The ardent devotion of the communist government to its sports program in the period between the rise and collapse of the Soviet Union appears bewildering at first glance. Russia was beleaguered by problems of starvation, civil war and an utterly dismal economy in the immediate years after the November Revolution. Given the dire circumstances, it was difficult to fathom why the central authority still chose to invest considerable amounts of financial capital and human resources in the development of sporting infrastructure and the design of sports programs. The fact that the communist sports initiative was given such high priority suggests the existence of an agenda which went beyond a simple aim to improve public health, an agenda which possibly involved political dimensions. If this were indeed true, what characteristics of human sport made its politicization possible? More importantly, how did the manipulation of sport under communist rule bridge the space between sport as an “inherently playful activities rooted in basic human impulses” (Girginov, 2004, p. 26) on the one hand, and as a political tool on the other?

Early on in the communist rule, the Soviet Union had already begun efforts to create a centralized sports authority and a nationwide sporting initiative. The new sports program brought sparse and scattered sporting infrastructure under the control of the state, and identified the masses as a primary target of the program. In this spirit, the kollektiv, or small exercise units in the workplace, were born (Howell, 1975, p.140).
The key idea behind this was the concept of mass participation, or massovost (Howell, 1975, p.140). Breaking down the masses into work units allowed the government to efficiently control and dictate not only the kinds of physical activities which the masses participated in, but also when, where and how these were carried out.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault pointed out that the eighteenth century saw the maturation of the idea that the human body could be broken down into its most basic elements—the body parts—and then analyzed. Disciplinary institutions such as schools, prisons and the army quickly learned to decompose the body to the level of its operating mechanisms (e.g., how both feet are planted apart when standing at attention, or how the head is tilted during a march), hoping to gain control of bodily behavior through firm control of the actions of individual body parts (Foucault, 1984, p. 179-182). Just as the army and criminal justice system in the eighteenth century sought to “explore,” “break down” and “rearrange” the human body by attempting to restrict and regulate the movements of individual body parts one at a time, the Soviets also actively tried to wield control over the very mechanism of bodily movement through the application of the massovost concept. The means by which this is carried out may be best explained through an analysis of mass gymnastic displays, which were extremely popular in the years spanning the 1930s to the 1970s.

Of the numerous types of sporting activities and championships, mass gymnastic displays represented one of the most successful instances of massovost. These displays were highly favored by communist governments and were usually large scale events involving over ten thousand performers from different kollektivs (Roubal, 2003, p.1). Through a series of dance and gymnastic routines, human bodies were used to create spectacular formations of breathtaking proportions (Figures 1 and 2). A well-coordinated mass gymnastic display was in itself an utmost display of the power of bodily control, because the astounding effects of the display may only be fully demonstrated through the regulation of the movements of uncountable bodies moving together in tandem. In fact, the operating mechanism of mass gymnastic displays may be seen as the ultimate “display of power” for the human body in the twentieth century. Thousands of individuals, each with his or her unique physical characteristics, are fed into the system, but the training process smoothens out any differences and instead churns out participants that are the equivalent of clones on the display field. Success of the mass gymnastic display hinges on the ability of participants to perform every action of the routine at exactly the same moment, with the same grace. Images to be presented during the display are created not through a combination of individual bodies as a whole, but rather a product of individual body parts put together. As such, every component of the body becomes locked in time and space, and has to be subjected to the rigidity of the routine. Seen from this perspective, a mass participation event such as the gymnastic display may be an unconventional form of a disciplinary platform, but is firmly rooted in the concepts of bodily control through an objectification and mechanization of body parts. It becomes, as a result, highly efficient in exploring, breaking down and rearranging the body, creating individuals that move and operate in the same way so...
much so that they may start to resemble each other, both in physical build and in demeanor.

To extend this idea further, we may say that mass participation naturally and perhaps inevitably produces such forms of control. If an activity were to be performed as a joint effort of individual bodies, each body has to adopt a behavior which is fitting for his or her part in the whole. Failure to do this inevitably results in a loss of meaning when the event is viewed as a whole, just as a mass display event where individual movements are not synchronized is no different from a chaotic waving of limbs. The overall effect of a massovost event is more than a mere addition of each individual’s moves. Pluck a mass display participant out from his fellow performers, and the spectacular effects that his routine created are utterly lost. These natural requirements placed on bodies involved in mass sporting events work to suppress the sense of the self and augment the notion of the body as merely a part of the whole community or state. From this angle, the human body does somewhat relinquish the right to govern its own behavior and movement. This loss of self governance “breaks down” the body, objectifies it, and presents it as nothing more than the mechanical parts of a larger machine. The idea of state above self works well in helping the state justify its right to assert influences on the people and clears the path towards more complete central control.

While mass displays in the spirit of massovost are indeed good avenues for politics to invade the personal spaces of the general public, the fact that the extent of this control is strictly limited to the well defined time periods when the individual is physically involved in the activity means that control may only be temporary. This drawback certainly weakens the effects of massovost, but by no means negates them, especially since mass displays have the propensity to influence and mould the bodies of so many.

The natural ability of sport to grab attention, excite the audience and draw them into the game may also help explain why generations of Russian communist leaders kept turning back to sport in their bids to accomplish political objectives. Vassil Girginov pointed out a distinctive characteristic of totalitarianism, including communist regimes. According to Girginov, the communist revolution in Russia, amongst other revolutions which brought on totalitarian rule, “represented a solution, however irrational, to unresolved problems of mass, industrial society” (2004, p.30). Indeed, behind the Bolshevik’s simple slogan of “Peace, Land and Bread” lay a much
more powerful message: the realization of the communist utopia—“from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” These promises of a prosperous and fair society brimming with hope for the future were crucial to the communist power base because they satisfied the deepest and most desperate yearnings of the people accumulated over decades of poverty and misery. The promises, however, also presented problems for the government once it came into power, because, as Roubal mentioned, “communist regimes with their utopian aspirations faced the acute problem of how to bridge the gap between ideological claims and reality” (2003, p.11). Promises that brought them into the positions of power in the first place have to be fulfilled sooner or later, or the regimes risk losing their strongest support base as the masses become disillusioned.

Roubal argues specifically that the mass gymnastic display, which represented one of the most successful instances of mass participation, was crucial in making the link between reality and ideology in many communist states. Through the coordination of body movements of thousands of performers, breathtaking images were presented to the audience. The visual impacts of mass gymnastic displays enforce the notion of a beautiful and prosperous society. This phenomenon arises because the bodies involved in the mass display become symbols which reflect the community at large (Roubal, 2003, p.13). The ideas of strength, beauty and youth arising out of the performance are powerful influences because of man’s natural tendencies to relate these concepts to happiness and hope. The fact that the performers were all average proletariats gave the display field a much more realistic quality, easily reinforcing the message. Hence, mass participation sports events such as mass gymnastic displays could be employed by the communist government to demonstrate to the people that the promises of a heroic revival of the state were not merely empty words. This further contributes to the political stability of the communist state.

From another perspective, the ability of the communist regime to achieve such feats may also introduce the idea that the will of man can overcome natural powers. After all, the success of mass displays is indicative of man’s ability to enforce his will over the body (which may be viewed as a natural endowment unique to each individual) and forcibly change it for his needs. Such an idea is significant because most communist societies used to have agricultural-based economies before communist takeovers. Mother Nature held the power over the survival of the masses, and every one of her whims could spell starvation and death. Although famines and droughts were by no means eliminated in the communist era, the introduction of the idea that knowledge of the sciences ardently pursued by the central authorities could release some of the shackles nature placed on mankind may have contributed to a higher degree of faith in communism. This, coupled with the rapid industrialization of the state through ambitious economic development plans like Stalin’s controversial five year plans, further reduced the dependence of human society on nature for survival and thus helped to inject an enthusiastic endorsement of the central authority into society, such that communist rule is again reinforced.

Turning our focus from mass gymnastic displays back to more conventional sports activities under the communist sports program like volleyball or skiing, we realize that the above argument cannot be convincingly applied to these games. Mass displays are unique in the large number of participants they can accommodate, but the same could not be said for the majority of sports activities invented by man. Team or individual sports take strong emphasis on the control of bodily movement, but the small numbers involved in any one game and the lack of components as visually impressive as that offered by mass displays meant that it would be much more difficult for the central authority to elicit the support and approval that it sought. Team or individual sports would have to be brought to a level that can capture the attention of the masses so that displays of physical prowess and superb bodily discipline may have a sizeable audience. Only then can these sporting activities achieve the same level of impact on the population.

This, in turn, may only be satisfactorily attained through the introduction of competitive sport at the national or international level—a time-consuming process in which success is by no means guaranteed. Promising young talents have to be picked out from the numerous youth championships organized by kollektivs all over the country, trained, further selected, and groomed before they could go on to the national level and command the attention of the masses through their participation in competitive sport. The stringent requirements and years of arduous training meant that only a handful had both the ability and the determination to eventually become involved in the communist sports program at this level. This is in stark contrast with the massovost sporting events, which gives the average proletariat a chance to participate without having to commit and train for too long a period of time, and yet still have the ability to use their bodies to create stunning effects such as in the case of mass displays.

In this sense, one could probably say that massovost sports events were more efficient political tools and were favored by communist regimes because they allowed the ultimate goal of political stability to be achieved, with the minimal investment of time but maximal mobilization of the masses. However, this is not to say that the other components of the communist sports
program, which focused on producing professional athletes and preparing them for competitive sport, were any less effective in achieving the goals of the communist state. In fact, the emergence of the first generation of successful athletes into the spotlight of the world sporting arena could also have served as a form of political propaganda and heightened the prestige of communism. This is once again clearly illustrated in the Soviet Union from the 1950s until its collapse in 1991.

The USSR amazed the world when Russian athletes pulled into second place with a total of 71 medals in their first Olympic Games in 1952. As Howell put it, “the Russian people have not traditionally been athletically inclined, nor physical-fitness conscious, as survival (had been) of paramount importance in Tsarist times” (1975, p. 137). The transition from a monarchical system to a socialist state had been painful and Russia, for most of the twentieth century, was ravaged by the destructions of the two world wars, her own civil war, and numerous bloody revolutions. The fact that the Soviet Union managed to emerge at the top of the pack at her first Olympics in such troubled times was a clear indication of the emphasis the communist leaders placed on competitive sport.

The reason behind this obsession with medal counts in competitive sport lay in the fact that well-known athletes were usually looked upon as role models in society, and could potentially be used as political tools. It is common knowledge that an individual had to possess considerable physical prowess to excel in sporting activities, and this may only be attained through physical training. As such, desirable qualities such as discipline, self control and determination were generally associated with athletes who had gained recognition in their sport, and they naturally came to be seen as role models for the community at large. The Soviet sports policy made use of this natural role for athletes by associating the qualities of a “true communist” with them. As Girginov observed, athletes in communist states were in general “not portrayed as individual character(s) with specific needs, (but) rather as symbols of ‘communist stubbornness’ and ‘socialist morale’” (2004, p. 46). The communist government capitalized on the respected standing of outstanding athletes in the society, and these bodies became the interface at which desirable personal qualities were integrated into communist ideologies. As such, the body of the athlete is turned into a source of communist propaganda. Using the athlete’s body as a vehicle to propagate communist ideology can be particularly effective because their achievements make them subjects of emulation in the first place. By consciously assigning communist interpretations to the actions and behavior of athletes, the communist sports program enabled communist ideology to become more deeply embedded within society.

From this analysis of the communist sporting initiative, we can see that sports policies in communist states are rarely as simple as they are made out to be. While I have focused on the political aspect of sports in this article, this is not to deny that communist sports programs have benefited the society at large. In many cases, it was these sports programs which made facilities and resources such as stadiums, sports schools and basic sporting amenities accessible to the people—achievements which were often not possible prior to the establishment of the communist state. However, it is important to recognize that these programs were also political tools, have served political purposes, and are still used to advance political agendas in today’s world, albeit in different forms. More importantly, such a realization compels us to question whether or to what extent twenty-first century competitive sporting events (e.g., the World Cup or the Superbowl) and mass displays like the Olympics opening ceremony have been embedded with political undertones, and how we may have unwittingly allowed ourselves to become enthusiastic participants in these waves of sport politicization.

Works Cited


