Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism


Reviewed by Ian Ritchie <iritchie@arnie.pec.brocku.ca>, Department of Physical Education & Kinesiology, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, L2S 3A1, Canada.

As the world watched the 1984 Los Angeles “Hamburger Olympics,” Canadian sport sociologist Rick Gruneau asked, “Can the Olympic promise ever be fulfilled in societies where personal worth is equated with position in the marketplace?” Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn, and Scott G. Martyn address this important question in Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism. The authors draw upon a rich variety of primary sources to provide historians with the most exhaustive account of modern Olympism’s transformation, from its ‘naive’ and organizationally chaotic amateur days at the fin de siécle to its current state as a fully commercialized mass spectacle.

The authors’ objective is to provide Olympic scholars with a thorough “history of the International Olympic Committee’s transformation . . . to a transnational nongovernmental commercial giant of imposing power and influence in global sporting matters” (p. xi). Methodologically, they achieve this in an “outward” (p. xiv) manner, from the perspective of the IOC’s interrelationship with its Olympic partners, commercial television networks, and marketing firms.

Part I traces the commercial evolution of the Olympic Movement from its formative days in the late nineteenth century to the 1970s. A common myth has it that matters of commercialism were of little concern in the early days. In certain respects, however, these matters were weightier than now. The combination of inexperience dealing with commercial organizations and the challenge such interventions brought to IOC members’ amateur sensibilities amounted to an arduous learning curve. The likes of trademark protection and television rights negotiations were often mismanaged or neglected entirely. The controversial IOC president Avery Brundage (1952–1972) pitted the lure of television contracts squarely against
his sensibilities. Indeed, at the end of his presidency, he begrudgingly witnessed the victory of commerce over amateurism.

The current era of full commercial integration—the subject matter of Part II—takes place in the 1980s and 1990s. Here, the IOC fully embraces and controls lucrative television rights and marketing/sponsorship negotiations. A far cry from the days of genteel aristocratic volunteerism, the IOC evolves to become a finely tuned, bureaucratically efficient corporation. Today, the IOC maintains full authority over international television rights and marketing/sponsorship, the latter of which falls under the direct control of IOC-created Meridian Management.

*Selling the Five Rings* is a rigorous account of the evolution of Olympic commercialism. Historians are offered an impressive array of detail supported by in-depth primary research. Sifting through a century of history reveals complex negotiations interspersed with organizational frays between the IOC and its Olympic partners, especially the United States Olympic Committee. Meticulous accounts of interpersonal give-and-take successfully put a human face on the drama, integrating Olympic history with the personalities that created it.

Detail, however, is emphasized at the expense of sound theory. Criticism of this sort is not warranted when authors made no claim to providing anything more than description. However, the authors do make value judgments regarding the role of commerce in human affairs. The text is prefaced with an explanation of the importance of the Olympics in the global economy. The authors explain that the production of goods has been far more adequate to the service of human needs than the distribution of goods, the latter of which can be rectified with mass advertising and the creation of real or perceived desires. One is left to assume that as long as the international advertising industry can reach more consumers around the globe, humankind’s distribution problems would be over (p. xii). This, of course, is a wildly debatable point. In the final chapter, recommendations are made for the IOC’s future marketing success—again, an explicit judgment of value.

That the Olympics is living up to its full human potential is a matter that demands the most careful attention to complex matters, not the least of which are (a) the interrelationship of the Olympic Movement to international development and (b) its role in (post)national cultures. But *Selling the Five Rings* implicitly justifies Olympic commerce without full attention to its implications. The book will be an invaluable resource for Olympic historians; however, those interested in sociological debates regarding sport’s role in international development and its ability to develop real human potential will find the book less insightful.