

The politics of race and sport: resistance and domination in the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement

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Abstract

Using the case of the African American Olympic protest movement that grew out of the crisis of the civil rights struggle in the late 1960s, this article is an attempt to argue that work involving identity, culture and popular culture is crucial to the study of race and ethnicity in the contemporary world. A reconstruction of this movement demonstrates, first of all, how a cultural arena like sport can make it possible for otherwise powerless racial and ethnic minorities to draw attention to their cause. Of course, as with most insurgent movements, such initiatives ultimately (and often very quickly) come up against structural impediments that work to reject or absorb their challenge and reinforce the hegemony of the established regime. But the precise nature of the structural constraints operating in this particular case provides profound insight into the construction of social order in liberal democratic settings and the threat posed by cultural politics to this order. More specifically, I argue that athletic protest was overwhelmingly condemned and rejected because it threatened to rupture the homologies between sport culture and liberal democratic ideology that otherwise legitimated a fundamentally individualist, assimilationist vision of racial justice and civil rights in the United States. In more general theoretical terms, then, culturally-oriented movements expose the ways in which domination itself is deeply structured in and through culture. The article concludes by suggesting that this, especially in an age when capital and power have discovered techniques to insulate themselves against traditional, materialist forms of resistance, is why cultural forums and identity politics have become primary sites of the struggle for hegemony.

Keywords: Race and ethnic relations; cultural studies; political sociology; social movements; American society.

Introduction: the paradox of cultural politics

Somewhere in *Race Matters* Cornell West (1993) comments: 'One irony of our present moment is that just as young black men are murdered, maimed and imprisoned in record numbers, their styles have become disproportionately influential in shaping popular culture'. Then, there is the parable Pierre Bourdieu (1990, p. 156) told about black athletes in prestigious American universities in the 1970s: despite their seeming prominence and importance, these student-athletes found themselves in 'golden ghettos' of isolation where conservatives were reluctant to talk with them because they were black, while liberals were hesitant to converse with them because they were athletes. These two anecdotes, I think, call our attention to the ambiguities, paradoxes and contradictions of the relationships between culture (especially in its more 'popular' forms), political power and social change in liberal democratic societies. On the one hand, cultural arenas provide racial and ethnic minorities with their most tangible and direct access to, and influence in, mainstream society; and yet, on the other, this cultural capital seems to produce very little in the way of concrete social change, and may ultimately reinforce the very injustices and inequalities that these disempowered groups mean to confront and contest in the first place.

One response to these observations is to argue that the mere fact of minority-group dependence upon such non-traditional and seemingly less-than-important social spaces simply symbolizes the powerlessness, marginalization and inequality of these groups, and the ultimate futility of their efforts to effect meaningful social change. One might conclude, furthermore, that if these cultural and symbolic forms are political at all, they are simply truncated, even sophomoric, versions of the usual politics and results of grass-roots resistance. My own approach, however, is somewhat different. While I acknowledge that the politics and political results of such cultural practices typically reproduce a dialectic of resistance and domination that is by now all too familiar and discouraging for disenfranchised groups, I would also suggest that they are not the same old politics as usual, but the working-out of a more complicated, complex form of the resistance and domination dialectic. More specifically, I would argue that in an age when power and capital have developed sophisticated techniques to insulate themselves against traditional, materialistic forms of protest and challenge, cultural arenas provide one of the few public spaces in which otherwise marginalized and disempowered groups can express social grievances and begin to fashion some sort of mobilization on their behalf. This is not to say that cultural resistance necessarily 'succeeds'; indeed, more often than not, it fails rather miserably. But it is to advance the claim that the terrain of social struggle has shifted to a profoundly cultural or ideological level; it is also to pose the question of what this development implies

about the structure and operation of domination more generally speaking. It is with these issues in mind that I shall explore the history of a clear and self-conscious attempt to use sport as a forum for racial protest: the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement.

To the extent that they know about this 'movement' at all, most people probably associate it with a single and singularly powerful image: that of two African-American athletes poised on the victory stand, Olympic medals hanging around their necks and black-gloved fists raised high above lowered eyes and bowed heads. The image itself was the performative work of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two American sprinters who had finished first and third respectively in a world-record setting 200-metre dash at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games. At the traditional awards ceremony, the two victorious athletes mounted the award podium shoeless, clad in sweatsuits and black stockinged feet. Smith wore a black scarf around his neck, Carlos a string of Mardi Gras beads. Both men, together with the surprising silver medalist Australian Peter Norman, displayed buttons reading 'The Olympic Project for Human Rights'. In the conventional ritual of the Olympic victory ceremony, the Star Spangled Banner was played as the United States flag with its stars and stripes was hoisted to honour the nation of the Olympic champion, Smith. In a stark break with convention, however, Smith and Carlos thrust black-gloved fists – Smith his right, Carlos his left – above lowered eyes and bowed heads. In what would remain his only public comment on the demonstration for over twenty years, Smith described the significance of these actions to ABC's Howard Cosell:

My raised right hand stood for the power in black America. Carlos' raised left hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of black dignity (Matthews 1974, p. 197).

Within two days, Smith and Carlos's gesture was pictured on the *front* page (not the sports page) of newspapers across the United States and around the world, and still today, over a quarter of a century later, references to this image appear – a paragraph here, a sentence or two there, or more often than not, just the photograph itself – with a surprising degree of regularity in a wide variety of contexts.

In a series of works on the socio-logics of Olympic symbology, anthropologist John MacAloon (1982; 1984; forthcoming) has suggested that the power, prominence and intrigue of this image can be traced to Smith and Carlos's ability to interject or force blackness into a ceremonial system that quite literally had no place for representing non-

national collective identities such as race, class, religion or ethnicity. Not coincidentally, I would add, the limitations of Olympic symbology mirror those of liberal democratic theory and practice. Missing from the synthesis of individual and society in both cases are the mediating communities of solidarity and identity that constitute the core of the identity and experience of most individuals (Alexander 1988). It is only in this context – that is, in the context of how liberal democratic ideologies deal with (or, to be more precise, avoid dealing with) collective identity and cultural phenomena – that it is really possible to appreciate the deeper social significance of, and concrete political struggle embodied in, this image and this demonstration, as well as in culturally-oriented movements and politics on the whole. However, as is so often the case in sociological analysis, there is a good deal of historical ground that must first be covered before this argument can be properly defended.

This is, after all, an image with a history behind it. Despite what is often implied or assumed, this gesture was not the free-will or spontaneous act of two isolated and autonomous individuals. Quite the contrary, Smith and Carlos were actually members of a small cadre of world-class athletes and activists led by a young sociologist named Harry Edwards who tried to engineer an African-American boycott of the 1968 Mexico City Games under the official title of the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Though the boycott never did materialize, those associated with the initiative (who, at one time or another, included UCLA basketball star Lew Alcindor, a.k.a. Kareem Abdul Jabaar, Martin Luther King, Jr., writer and columnist Louis Lomax, SNCC's H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael and Muhammad Ali) participated in a series of athletically-based racial protests which attracted a good deal of national attention and provoked a surprising degree of national outrage. Among the most prominent and outspoken critics were: the governor of California, Ronald Reagan, the International Olympic Committee president, an American named Avery Brundage and US Olympic hero Jesse Owens; at one point, Vice President and Presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey even stepped in to try to moderate the dispute.

Since the basic story of this movement has been told numerous times and in numerous places (Olsen 1968; Edwards 1969, 1970, 1979; Grundman 1979; Spivey 1984; Ashe 1988; Wiggins 1988, 1991), many of these details are familiar to scholars in the field of sport studies. It is not my purpose in this article either to elaborate upon the cast of characters and incidents that make up this movement (interesting as many of them are), or to craft a new or revisionist account of these events. Rather, what I want to do here is to synthesize the basic details of this history in a fashion that will formulate and illustrate some more

general points about the dynamics of resistance and domination in culturally-oriented racial movements.¹

The 1968 African American Olympic protest movement

The Olympic Project for Human Rights [OPHR] was formally called into being on 23 November 1967 when a group of approximately 200 athletes and supporters assembled at the Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles and 'unanimously voted to fully endorse and participate in a boycott of the Olympic Games of 1968' (Edwards 1969, p. 55). The boycott idea came most directly from a general resolution passed by the first-ever national Black Power conference held in riot-torn Newark, New Jersey, in the summer of 1967 which urged that black athletes should refuse to take part in the 1968 Olympics, or in professional boxing matches until Muhammad Ali was restored to his former title as world heavyweight boxing champion.² Early that autumn, Edwards along with Tommie Smith (a fifth-year senior and world-class track star) and Kenneth Noel (a former athlete doing graduate work in sociology) seized the idea and took it upon themselves to organize an athletically-based racial protest movement around the idea of an Olympic boycott.

Edwards and his colleagues, many of whom were African-American athletes or former athletes who attended college on athletic scholarship, had come to recognize the possibilities of using sport as a forum for racial protest during the course of a more general black student protest that they had engineered in San Jose State at the beginning of the autumn semester. Two events in particular were fundamental in helping to sensitize them to sport's potential as a protest tool: one was the threat of a boycott of a San Jose State football game they used to focus attention on, and put force behind, their demands for racial changes at the institution; the other was Smith's speculation (at an important international track meet in Tokyo, Japan) about the possibility of some concerted form of protest among black American athletes. The national publicity – or, more accurately, national outrage – that these events generated convinced the San Jose group that their involvement in sport provided a way for them to continue and advance the movement for racial justice in the United States. With this in mind they chose to pursue an all-out black Olympic boycott.

Their proposal for an Olympic boycott needs to be characterized correctly, however. Unlike their predecessors at the Black Power conference (who seem to have been motivated primarily by Ali's unjust treatment), the OPHR initiative did not specifically define any particular object(s) of protest, or make any concrete demands at this initial meeting; rather, they simply threatened an Olympic boycott for vaguely stated or even implicit reasons of 'racial injustice'. Even though it was vague and found few Olympic-calibre athletes as supporters, the mere

proposal of the boycott drew press coverage and comment – and almost unanimous condemnation – from right across the country. Edwards and his colleagues took this as an indication that they had 'touched a nerve' (*New York Times*, 18 December 1967) and that they should proceed by trying to build a movement around the idea of an Olympic boycott.

Edwards and his fellow organizers and newly-found advisers (including nationally syndicated columnist Louie Lomax) spent the two weeks after their November meeting composing a list of 'demands' and 'strategies' to justify, consolidate and organize the OPHR itself. Presented at a press conference on 14 December in New York City in which Edwards was flanked by Lomax, Martin Luther King, Jr., and CORE's Floyd McKissick, this list included: the removal of the American Avery Brundage (who was considered to be anti-Semitic and racist) from his office as the president of the International Olympic Committee; the exclusion of apartheid nations (South Africa and Southern Rhodesia) from all international sporting events; the addition of black coaches and administrators to the United States Olympic Committee [USOC]; the complete desegregation of the New York Athletic Club [NYAC] which annually hosted one of the two most prestigious indoor track and field meets in the country; and the restoration of Muhammad Ali's title and right to box in the United States (*New York Times*, 15 December 1967).

Few of these specific proposals were ever actually carried out, much less even feasible. Nevertheless, in the months that followed, Edwards and the OPHR were associated with a broad, if haphazard, set of protest activities that included an extremely successful boycott of the NYAC's famous February indoor track meet, protests and meetings on some thirty-five college and university campuses across the nation, demands for the expulsion of South Africa (which did come about, though for reasons much broader than the OPHR), and an aborted effort to organize an alternative 'Third World' Olympics. Clearly, the OPHR was helping to mobilize significant numbers of variously discontented athletes and, in the process, attracting a great deal of national publicity and attention to racial problems in sport and society in general (Olsen 1968).

But whatever the tactical successes of these activities, a series of meetings and discussions towards the end of June revealed that they had still not generated enough support among prospective African-American Olympians to make the boycott itself actually happen (Matthews and Amdur 1974). While an overwhelming majority of the thirty or forty prospective Olympians active in the movement were interested in engineering some kind of a statement about the racial situation in the United States, they could not agree on what that statement might entail or what form it would assume. To all intents and purposes, the boycott movement had ended. Edwards and his colleagues

tried to conceal this development from the media, suggesting that the OPHR was in the process of shifting its plans for Mexico City but, at the same time, refusing to comment on what this shift might entail. Later, when many confused accounts of these meetings began to surface, Edwards cleverly insisted that it was a part of a 'strategy of chaos', saying, 'There is only one thing more confusing than a rumor and that's a million rumors' (*Chicago Tribune*, 31 July 1968). It was not until 29 August during the 1968 national Black Power conference in Philadelphia that Edwards finally admitted (via mailed correspondence) that an all-out boycott would not occur, though he promised that some 'lesser forms' of protest would be carried out (*New York Times*, 1 September 1968).

Despite extreme precautions, warnings and threats from the USOC during the whole of the summer trials and training period leading up to the Games, it was clear to many of their team mates that Smith and his black team mates were in fact still searching for some appropriate way to express their feelings (Matthews and Amdur 1974; Moore 1991a, p. 71). Some of the alternative methods of protest that they were considering included losing races intentionally, refusing to participate in Olympic ceremonies, or wearing black socks or arm bands. During the early days of the track and field competition at the Games, a number of athletes wore black socks and berets in their preliminary heats, and when a previously moderate Jimmy Hines won the 100 metres, he refused to shake hands with Avery Brundage when the IOC president came forward to present Hines with his medal. But these were conveniently overlooked by coaches and officials and played down by the media. Track coach Stan Wright, for example, was quoted as saying, 'I was not informed of any demonstration. As far as I know, they wore high stockings because it was cold, but they may have intended it to be a demonstration. If they did, it is their business. We are here to win medals' (*New York Times*, 16 October 1968).

However, when Smith and Carlos's dramatic gesture on the victory stand finally occurred the next day, it could not be so ignored. All the tensions and forces that had surrounded Edwards, Smith and the others in the months leading up to the Games came to a climactic head, and then virtually exploded outwards. According to Avery Brundage, Smith and Carlos's actions had been 'an insult to their Mexican hosts and a disgrace to the United States' requiring immediate and decisive measures' (Avery Brundage Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Illinois). Within two days Smith and Carlos were expelled from the Olympic village by the USOC, acting under immediate and intensive pressure from the IOC, permanently suspended from Olympic competition and sent back home to the United States. Even Australian Peter Norman, the silver medalist who, in good egalitarian, Aussie fashion, as one analyst put it, had simply worn the OPHR button that

Smith and Carlos had offered him as they entered the stadium, was sternly reprimanded by his own Olympic committee.

These actions (or reactions, really) were deemed appropriate and fitting by most Americans. Newspapers were overflowing with emotional letters to the editor, heated editorials and reports. In a commentary on its main editorial page the *Chicago Tribune* called the demonstration 'an embarrassment visited upon the country', 'an act contemptuous of the United States', and 'an insult to their countrymen'. *Time* magazine saw it as an 'unpleasant controversy [which] dulled the luster of a superlative track and field meet', and *Sports Illustrated* relegated what it called the 'Carlos-Smith affair' to four pejorative paragraphs buried on the fifth page of an otherwise verbose twelve-page story. ABC's official thirty-five-minute highlight film of the Games (which emphasized American performances almost exclusively and in fact concluded by playing the national anthem behind images of American flags and Olympic victors in competition and on the victory stand) made no mention whatsoever of the events surrounding Smith and Carlos, despite the fact that the network (using its star reporter Howard Cosell, the 'white reporter who could talk to blacks') had milked the incident for all it was worth during its live coverage. Finally, the 1968 American Olympic team itself was the only one before or since not to be invited by the President to visit the White House.³

One of the harshest indictments against Smith and Carlos was issued by a young staff writer for the *Chicago American* named Brent Musburger. Writing from Mexico City, Musburger began:

One gets a little tired of having the United States run down by athletes who are enjoying themselves at the expense of their country. Protesting and working constructively against racism in the United States is one thing, but airing one's dirty clothing before the entire world during a fun-and-games tournament was no more than a juvenile gesture by a couple of athletes who should have known better.

Calling their demonstration an 'ignoble performance' that 'completely overshadowed' a magnificent athletic one, Musburger likened Smith and Carlos to 'a pair of dark-skinned storm troopers' and concluded that 'they should have avoided the award ceremony altogether' (*Chicago American*, 19 October 1968). All this happened at the same time as Musburger and others were celebrating another black athlete, George Foreman, for waving a small American flag in the ring after his gold medal victory in the heavyweight boxing tournament.

Not everyone, of course, was so critical of Smith and Carlos's gesture (or so supportive of Foreman's). For example, Robert Clarke, the president of San Jose State, Smith and Carlos's alma mater, predicted that they 'would not be received as outcasts in America, but as honorable

men' (*Spartan Daily*, 24 October 1968). Harry Edwards (1969, pp. 107–8) took pains to show that back home Smith and Carlos were treated as 'heroes to black Americans', citing receptions accorded them by (unnamed) black African countries at the United Nations and by black Americans in Washington, DC, tributes paid by black leaders such as H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Adam Clayton Powell and Elijah Muhammad, and letters and telegrams sent by whites and blacks from around the world. Within months, posters of the two athletes poised on the victory stand appeared in every head shop, radical church and student-movement headquarters throughout the country and pictures of those team mates who supported Smith and Carlos by wearing black tams and showing fists after their ceremonies appeared on radical postcards and in Black Panther newspapers. In their recollections of life on the left in the 1960s, Collier and Horowitz (1989, p. 290) recall: 'Tommie Smith and John Carlos were heroes for giving the clenched-fist salute on the victory stand'.

But this was not the company of mainstream America, the America which dominated the society. When they returned to the States, Smith and Carlos found themselves the centre of a controversy that was to last for many years. In a 1973 public opinion survey on issues of politics and race in the United States, Richard Lapchick (1975, p. 215) asked blacks and whites from six different cities nationwide if they felt that the gestures made by black US athletes in the 1968 Olympic games were justifiable in terms of the Olympic ideals of politics playing no part in sports: 57 per cent of the blacks surveyed thought Smith and Carlos were justified in their actions, while only 32 per cent of whites felt the same way (8 per cent were undecided in both cases).⁴ As with all public opinion research, it is hard to say exactly what these figures indicate (obviously the racial cleavages stand out prominently and I shall return to them shortly); but at the very least, especially when combined with all the other sources that comprise the historical record, I think we can say that public opinion was polarized and ran strongly against Smith and Carlos's demonstration.⁵

There is perhaps no better indication of this than the fact that, for better and for worse, Smith and Carlos's identity as Olympic protesters had a determining impact upon their personal lives. When Smith returned for his final semester at college and tried to register for his Reserve Officers' Training Corps classes in 1969, for example, he was advised that if he quietly turned in his uniform all would be forgotten. Then Jim Brown, who before the Games had lent Smith money against the football contract that the sprinter planned to sign with the Los Angeles Rams, informed Smith that the Rams were no longer interested because they saw Smith as 'too eager'. To add insult to injury, Brown demanded his money back as well.⁶ Carlos's ride was to be even rockier, as he must have sensed immediately upon his return to the States:

'Doing "my thing" made me feel the freest I ever felt in my whole life. But I came home to hate' (*Sport*, September 1969, pp. 70–72). For a while, there was talk of his and his OPHR lawyers suing the USOC or even the United States government for infringing Carlos's constitutional rights and misusing public funds. This failed to materialize and he went to the Olympic in 1972 as an employee of a shoe company; afterwards with his athletic stock beginning to wane, Carlos, who never completed his college degree, was forced to take on odd jobs just to survive. Then, in 1977 his wife committed suicide, a tragedy that he still blames on the pressures resulting from his role in the 1968 protest. As he put it in 1984, '[The protest] will always be with me. To most people, I'll always be "John Carlos, the protester, the radical"' (*Los Angeles Times*, 12 February 1984).⁷

How do we make sense of all of this? Perhaps more to the point of the larger issues which this article aspires to address, what does it tell us about the political significance and broader consequence of cultural protest? To put it concretely: was Smith and Carlos's resistance as futile and ineffective as these immediate indicators would suggest? The answers to these questions require a closer examination of the social roots and structural limitations of racial resistance in and through sport.

Making sense of the controversy: social context and cultural structures

In many ways, of course, it is not at all surprising that Smith and Carlos's demonstration drew the antagonistic, critical response from mainstream America that it did. In a country already wracked by the fragmentation of the civil rights coalition, urban violence, militant Black Power protest and white backlash – in the context, that is, of the polarized racial politics of the era (Piven and Cloward 1977; Matusow 1984; Weisbrot 1991) – there was little sympathy or political support for those dramatizing the problems of race once again, much less for those who did so on the international stage of the Olympic Games. What is more surprising and revealing, perhaps, is the intensity and ferocity of mainstream American opposition to the demonstration, especially given its silent, fundamentally non-violent and politically ambiguous nature. European commentators, in particular, registered this impression almost immediately. As the official magazine of the British Olympic Association put it, 'If this was to be the full measure of Black Power protest on the victory rostrum, then it was a well conceived plan involving the most effective of gestures without, it seemed, giving direct offense to anyone' (*World Sports*, December 1968, p. 13).

In the first place I would simply point out that such heated rhetoric and reaction indicate that the Smith/Carlos demonstration (and the entire boycott movement) posed, if not in fact at least in perception, a significant threat to the system of racial relations and conditions of social

order implicated in these events. But what, precisely, was challenged and threatened? Clearly, this was not the usual politics of race in the United States.

A closer look into the actual charges levelled against the OPHR, their initial boycott proposal and the eventual victory-rostrum demonstration reveals that what was at stake in these events was much more complicated than any straightforward reading of the racial context would suggest. At least four distinct lines of argument against race protest in sport emerge (in no particular order): first, that black participation in sport was inherently and unequivocally good for black Americans and race relations more generally; secondly, that this protest was simply 'un-American'; thirdly, that the Olympics were supposed to be a humanitarian gathering of individuals, not a place for members of groups or factions; and fourthly, as a final multifaceted line of reasoning, that 'politics' of any sort had no place in the world of sport. What is important about each of these schools of criticism is not so much what any one of them said or what distinguished one from another, but rather what they did not say and what they all shared.

As far as what they did not say, if and when matters of race were invoked by critics, it was only briefly – either to preface their reprehension about the boycott with some vague declaration of support for 'civil rights', to argue that things were getting better racially, or to assert that however bad the racial situation in the United States was, it was still much better than in South Africa. Otherwise, the argument that the protest had transgressed the boundaries of acceptable, civil-rights protest was almost unthinkable, perhaps even taboo. In short, none of these critiques (except, perhaps, in their most extreme versions) was formulated along explicit racial-political lines. Alternatively, the vast majority put forward some version of the thesis that sport was simply not the proper place for such a protest. Somehow, athletes, coaches, writers and spectators seemed to believe that there was something special or even sacred about sport that precluded it from serving as a site for racial protest; indeed, many went so far as to portray these demonstrations as an attack upon sport itself.

This is *not* to imply that the spectre of race was *not* involved in the judgements pronounced against Olympic protest. Given that those in the sporting establishment who criticized and condemned this activism were often the same officials, reporters and athletes who for so many years previously had congratulated and celebrated sport for its contributions to the advancement of the black race, it only stands to reason that no matter what these critics said or did not say, there was something about the racial politics they associated with Smith, Carlos and Edwards that was deeply and directly connected with their objections to them. Nor, on the other hand, am I making the point that this sport-as-special, anti-protest rhetoric represented some kind of unholy, racist conspiracy

between anti-protest sport idealists and racial conservatives (though it certainly made it possible for Edwards and his colleagues to accuse their detractors of being racists, anti-Semites or 'Uncle Toms'). In other words, if there was some sort of connivance involved in this controversy, I believe it was not a conspiracy of deliberate human agents, but a much deeper, more diffuse collusion of the interests and ideals legitimated in and through the idealization of sport itself.

Even in an era when no aspect of American culture seemed beyond repute, when virtually nothing was sacrosanct, virtually all those who took sport seriously were unified in their commitment to preserving and protecting it from influences that were perceived to be corrupting – and, according to the implicit logic of anti-protest arguments, race-based protest simply happened to fall into this category. No matter how illusory, unrealistic, deceptive, simplistic or mythologized this sport-as-special, anti-protest rhetoric may seem in retrospect, it ultimately worked, which is to say that it drew otherwise disparate ideological and social commitments into common cause against Olympic racial protest. Indeed, a great deal of its power and effectiveness derived directly from the fact that it involved so little subtlety, nuance or refinement.

The reason that critics of Olympic protest were able to focus only on the sanctity of the sports world (and did not feel it necessary to delve into the connections or contradictions between racial politics and sport culture), has, in my view, to do with the remarkable convergence or mutual interdependence in American society between the culture (some might say 'cult') of sport and liberal democratic ideology and practice. Though the relationships between these two sets of discursive practice are much more complicated than I can fully elaborate here, they hold at least two fundamental tenets in common: the idea of fair play within established, abstracted rules of conduct and the notion that the freely acting individual is the fount and source of all creativity, process and order. Moreover, an appropriate synthesis of these two ideals is considered essential for social progress, ethnic harmony and the greatest possible 'good society'. Despite their timeless and universal appearances, the ideals expressed in this synthesis are very, very particular. In terms of the case we are concerned with here, they yield standards of racial justice and civil rights that are thoroughly individualistic and assimilationist as well as being diametrically at odds with the kind of collectivist, structuralist racial critique implied by the Olympic protesters. For athletic protest critics, in other words, sport was inherently about racial justice and civil rights; or, to put it even more starkly, sport *was* just and right for everyone, blacks included. The fact that sport culture and liberal democratic ideology were so closely and unquestionably intertwined made it impossible for outsiders to racial injustice and discontent even to begin to understand, much less sympathize with, the protesters' collectivist grievances and concerns.

Situated in the context of these cultural structures, in fact, what may be most surprising about this entire episode is not that Smith and Carlos were so widely criticized and condemned, but that they and their associates even dared to undertake racial protest in an athletic arena at all. And this is the difficult, paradoxical situation that the larger movement found itself in – the dissolving (or dissolved) civil rights coalition, on the one hand, and the increasing commitment of many black activists of the need for further social and economic change, on the other – becomes most directly relevant to our broader theoretical concerns.⁸ It was *only* in this context of searching for new and more forceful means of activism – even as support for such activism was waning both inside the movement and out – that some African Americans began to consider protest in a cultural realm (sport) which they had long considered to be one of the few in which they were actually afforded a relatively full, fair and free opportunity to participate in American society.

Sport-oriented protest became an attractive option for a variety of reasons. For one, sports had long constituted an important, if under-appreciated, set of activities and institutions in the black community, providing many of its leaders and one of its most established spaces for collective action (second only perhaps to the Church itself). Secondly, and connected with this, sport was one of the few social arenas where blacks as a group had actually achieved some measure of success and representation, and thus enjoyed some amount of cultural capital that could be used as leverage against the persistent problems of race in the United States. It is important to formulate this point carefully because it was probably the factor that directly motivated most activist athletes. Because sport had been relatively open to black Americans for so many years (as those in the media repeatedly emphasized), a number of black Americans – a few 'star' athletes like Tommie Smith and Lew Alcindor in particular – were now engaged in activities that mattered a great deal to many other Americans thus marking them, their actions and their opinions as somehow interesting, important and even essential. Precisely because they were so valued, the thinking went, black athletes might be able to press social change in much the same way that boycotts and other non-violent forms of protest had done throughout the Civil Rights movement. They were simply using, as Lew Alcindor put it, 'what they had' (Edwards 1969, p. 53).

Thirdly, a critical body of athletes was beginning to recognize and resist the forms of racism and exploitation that persisted in the sports world, as well as to connect their personal experiences with the condition of black Americans in the society at large (Olsen 1968). What is more, sport provided a protest forum that did not require participants to take concrete (and potentially conflicting) ideological or political positions; instead they could simply express a sense of discontent and

need for change. Sport protest, and culturally-based activism more generally, was in this sense usefully ambiguous.⁹ Finally, there was the fact that sport itself had long been held up as a realm untainted by discrimination, racism and inequality and, moreover, an arena that had been crucial to pushing integration and mobility for black Americans in society at large. As many activists saw it, if this seemingly sacred realm of sport was corrupted by racism and inequality, this carried important implications for the rest of society too.

Of course, it worked out in quite the opposite fashion. From its very first splash in the national media to the Smith/Carlos demonstration, athletically-based racial protest was unambiguously condemned and rejected by an overwhelming and powerful segment of American society, again not so much for its racial politics as for simply saying something political in the realm of sport. To put it more precisely, the 1968 Olympic protest movement met the fate that it did because mainstream Americans perceived it as interjecting 'dirty' political agendas into the 'sacred', pure-play realm of the sports world. This language of the sacred and formulation of the political, is in my view, the key to the possibilities and ultimate limits of resistance to the American racial order. In a certain sense, it is also one of the issues where blacks and whites agreed completely in Lapchick's 1973 survey: 77 per cent of whites and 78 per cent of blacks thought that politics should have no influence in sport (though only one-third or 33 per cent in both groups felt this was the case in national competition). It turns out, in fact, that the questionnaire items that exhibited significant racial cleavages in responses (such as the Smith/Carlos item mentioned above) are those that touched on explicitly racial issues. Given that both groups equally expressed the view that politics should be kept out of sport, the explanation for this otherwise anomalous result must be that many black respondents simply did not see racial issues as 'political' (and thus inappropriate in a 'sacred' space like sport) but instead viewed them as legitimate moral issues. In short, the very same factors that made sport such an attractive protest arena were also those which dictated its ultimate rejection.

It is also at this point – in the struggle over what counts as 'political', as opposed to what is considered 'legitimate' social protest – where the otherwise seamless connections between sport culture, racial progress and liberal democratic ideology break down, and the deep cultural foundations of domination begin to emerge more clearly formed. The 1968 African American Olympic protest movement was shocking and controversial (and thus required intensive condemnation) because by forcing race into the equation it exposed, or at least threatened to expose, the ways in which sport culture and liberal democratic ideology usually served (and serve) to legitimate a very particular, very interested and very individualistic vision of racial justice and civil rights.

And yet, it seems one can only say 'exposed' or 'dramatized', because ultimately, as we have seen, it seems as if the boycott movement failed: the forces of power and authority lined up to condemn the movement and then expel Smith and Carlos and everything they stood for. There seems to have been no tangible social progress, no material or social gains. Is this reading accurate? Are there resources to structural power contained in cultural arenas? How valuable is cultural or symbolic capital? Can sport, or any cultural form for that matter, be used to force concrete social change? In terms of the questions I posed in the introduction, this analysis would seem to have raised more questions than it answered.

Conclusions

The problem with these questions and impressions is that they buy into overly materialistic, short-term and, in this particular case, unrealistic standards of evaluating resistance and social change.

In the first place, given the rigid and unrelenting structure of racial formations in the United States in the late 1960s, the issue for activists was not to push for additional institutional and structural change in the realm of race relations, but simply to keep the issues and injustice of race on the table for future generations of activists. In many ways, I think that the protesters actually sensed this very early on. As Jackie Robinson, the man who integrated major league baseball and a rare black Republican, explained when he offered his controversial support for the boycott:

I know very well this is not going to work. However, I have to admire these youngsters. I feel we've got to use whatever means, except violence, we can to get our rights in this country. When, for 300 years, Negroes have been denied equal opportunity, some attention must be focused on it (*New York Times*, 27 November 1967).

Though it took an act of striking originality and sheer brilliance to do it, Smith and Carlos were able to force the issue of race into a public sphere that had otherwise refused to have anything else to do with it.

Secondly, it is crucial to remember that, by the late 1960s at least, the struggle over civil rights was as much about ideologies of justice and citizenship as it was about interests, resources and institutions (Omi and Winant 1986; Colburn and Pozzetta 1994). Here, I would follow Hall (1981), Gilroy (1987) and Lipsitz (1990, esp. pp. 133–60) in stressing that the struggle over popular cultural legitimations and identities (as opposed to rights and resources) becomes particularly crucial in a socio-historical era – or, as Harvey (1990) might put it, a post-modern condition – in which capital and power have discovered tech-

niques to insulate themselves against traditional forms of protest, challenge and change. As Lew Alcindor said in the formative days of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, these black athletes were 'simply using what they had' to try to combat a social situation they considered unjust. And there may be no better indication that this struggle over culture constitutes a real political struggle than the drastic attempts of the authorities to intervene in these proceedings, discipline Smith and Carlos after they made their demonstration, and then erase the memory of the image altogether.

It is precisely the fact that the Smith/Carlos demonstration has not only survived these efforts, but become an icon of popular culture and object of collective memory which brings up the third and final point: the struggle for racial hegemony continues in and through popular culture. That is not to say that the memories of popular cultural protests necessarily always serve the interests of those in resistance (indeed, one of the ironies of popular culture is how easily it is co-opted; in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, for example, the Smith/Carlos demonstration was transformed into a celebration of free-market melting-pot society), but rather that they do tend to persist as sites of social consciousness and contestation. With this in mind, I would suggest that it is our task to evaluate how cultural practices and ideologies contribute to the production, reproduction and transformation of social order in liberal democratic societies and the possibilities for alternatives and opposition contained therein. If the study of cultures and identities, which has exploded in recent years, is to be of true political consequence, these issues, I believe, must be taken up.

Notes

1. I should note that in the larger project on which the present analysis is based (Hartmann forthcoming) I use my own theoretical approach and rather substantial research to subject the story of the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement to fairly extensive reconstruction. Because this work obviously frames and informs the analysis presented in this article, I shall list some of my main criticisms of the existing literature. The first is that there is simply too much emphasis on the Olympic Project for Human Rights [OPHR] as a social movement organization [SMO] and not enough attention to the movement as a complex whole. Secondly, even for those aspects of the movement that were significantly engineered by the OPHR, there is an overemphasis on Harry Edwards's personal role (stemming, almost certainly, from his own participation in writing and shaping the history of this movement). The third problem with the existing literature is that it is either unaware of or unconcerned with the fundamental ambiguities, tensions and contradictions that composed the movement, the two most important being whether they were using protest to 'force' change or simply to 'call attention to' injustice and the nature of what was targeted as unjust in the first place. The fourth and final limitation of this literature, and the one that speaks most directly to the concerns of this article, is that it has not explored the broader sociocultural context within which this movement was situated, much less drawn out its deeper theoretical implications.
2. Activist/political satirist Dick Gregory was the principal sponsor and advocate of

the 1967 Black Power Conference resolution that most directly begat the OPHR (*New York Times*, 23 July 1967). I say 'most directly' because the idea of a Black American Olympic boycott had been suggested as early as 1960 to decathlete and eventual gold medal winner Rafer Johnson (*Chicago Tribune*, 25 November 1967). Johnson did not specify who was behind this suggestion. Some sources have suggested that it might have been Gregory himself (who attended Southern Illinois University on a track scholarship in the 1950s). This would fit well with his activities in the ensuing years. In 1963, for example, Gregory proposed that blacks boycott a Russian-American track meet in order to draw attention to racial inequalities in the United States. While this attempt failed, he nevertheless organized a small number of protestors for the Olympic trials held the next year (Baker 1982, p. 290). There were other talks as well. In 1964 former Olympic champion Mal Whitfield advanced what he called a 'shocking proposal' to boycott the Games in *Ebony* magazine's March issue. Arthur Ashe, himself no stranger to these events, claims that these ideas had been floating around for a number of years (personal conversation, Chicago, autumn 1989) and Edwards as well discusses other 'rumblings and rumors' among black athletes that prefigured the OPHR protest (Edwards 1969).

3. According to a UPI bulletin President Johnson did praise the team in a statement released from the White House that said the athletes 'reawakened our national pride and renewed our faith in the future'. 'In victory and in defeat,' Johnson proclaimed, 'you brought new honor to our country. America is in your debt.' The wire duly reported that the President 'did not mention any athletes by name, nor did he make reference to the controversy' concerning Smith and Carlos.

4. Lapchick's poll surveyed 233 people in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Norfolk, Denver, Los Angeles on a series of questions regarding the relationship between sport and politics. Respondents were broken down by race, age and gender (77/34% black; 155/66% white; 87/37% women; 146/63% men; 58% over 30; 42% under) but responses only by race.

5. The only group of people who cared a great deal about the incident and yet were very ambivalent about it seem to have been activist athletes themselves who were torn between an endorsement of the brave politics of their comrades and the knowledge that any repetition of the precedent would almost certainly mean an end to the victory ceremony, if not the Games as they were known. It is interesting to point out that some of these individuals would devote no small portion of their lives trying to come to grips with this experience.

6. After graduating with a degree in education, Smith spent three years on the Cincinnati Bengals' taxi squad during which time he and his wife Denise (herself a former world-class athlete) grew apart and divorced. Smith took his Master's degree in sociology from the Goddard-Cambridge Graduate Program for Social Change in Cambridge, MA, and was eventually offered a job coaching track and teaching sociology at Oberlin College, a small liberal-arts school in Ohio. This opportunity came not in spite of Smith's Olympic experience, but because of it. Oberlin not only had a storied liberal tradition, but its new experimental president had hired Jack Scott, a well-known white radical and sports activist, as the school's athletic director who, in turn, hired Smith. But just as Smith's radical past got him the job, it eventually lost it for him. After Oberlin's president was fired in 1973 and Scott's contract bought out, Smith was left without much political support and denied tenure in 1978.

7. Even more telling, perhaps, is the extent to which all their black team mates' lives were affected. Some individuals, such as 100-metre champion Jimmy Hines lost lucrative endorsement deals or had contract offers slashed dramatically simply because they were associated, rightly or wrongly, with the protest. Others, like Larry James, simply lost their bearings. 'You got tagged in '68 and you had to explain who you were and what you'd done without dishonoring the others... The whole leadership thing wanted for me... I started to question everything' (*Sports Illustrated*, 12 August 1991, p. 66).

8. Having already accomplished the formal goals of individual freedom from discrimi-

nation and segregation, as well as legal and political equality of opportunity and competition, it seemed, according to dominant American ideals about property, individualism and social competition, that black Americans no longer faced 'inequality' or 'injustice'. Yet large sections of the black community found that these reforms mattered very little in terms of their daily lives, either economically or in terms of how they were treated or viewed in the society as a whole. In other words, despite all the 'victories' of the civil rights era, African Americans still found themselves in a world of hegemonic racial stereotypes and socio-economic structures of inequality. Unlike voting rights' abuses, outright segregation or overt physical violence, these forms of racism, discrimination and inequality could not be easily pointed out and challenged, given American liberal democratic understandings of property rights and individualism (Piven and Cloward 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1986). These ambiguities and tensions of this desperate situation created, as Doug McAdam put it in his influential study (1982, p. 183), a 'growing disagreement within insurgent ranks over the proper goals of the movement and the most effective means of attaining them' and brought about a fragmentation of the centralized, unified structure that had dominated the movement and accounted for its successes in the early 1960s.

9. It is difficult at any moment to isolate what the athletic-protesters were after programmatically or ideologically and, in fact, there was a great deal of division and debate among the athletes themselves. Even their leader, Harry Edwards himself, appears in the historical record as a liminal figure, torn – both in terms of his politics and his personal style – between mainstream, civil rights appeals and far more radical calls for separation and black nationalism. Finally, Smith and Carlos's victory-stand gesture itself was almost completely ambiguous in terms of concrete politics or programmes: while they seemed to be saying that blackness was somehow important, it was not at all clear exactly what else, if anything, they were saying about it.

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Ethnicity, the search for rapists and the press

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Abstract

Media reporting of rape continues to provoke concern. This article focuses on the press reporting of the discovery and search for alleged rapists. On examining nine British newspapers for one complete year (1992), a serious distortion in the media reporting of ethnicity emerges at this early stage of the criminal process. While there is an over-representation of minority ethnic men accused of rape coming to the notice of the police, the cases identified as involving minority ethnic (particularly black) men as assailants, are much more likely to be reported widely. The distortion is then intensified by associating minority ethnic (and again particularly, black men) with certain types of rape. However, there are important differences between newspapers in their coverage. Furthermore, while media coverage of the search for rapists is a matter of concern, it also needs to be seen as part of the wider process of the social construction of rapists. Nevertheless, the conclusion is that the media coverage of rape tends to distort in ways which may well exacerbate hostility against minority ethnic groups.

Keywords: Britain; rape; ethnicity; racism; media; policy.

Introduction

Gilroy (1987) stresses that in the 1940s and 1950s the concern with alleged black criminality focused on 'a distinct range of anxieties and images in which issues of sexuality and miscegenation were often uppermost' (p. 79). The image, which includes black male sexuality as being a threat to both white women and white masculinity, has a long tradition in Britain, predating the 1940s by many years (Hoch 1979; Lawrence 1982; Segal 1990). The image of black male sexuality which has been created through literature and the media is predominantly that of bestial. Black male sexuality was defined as being akin to that of animals, reinforced by suggestions, such as those in the eighteenth century of black males partaking in bestiality with apes (Hoch 1979, p. 50). Black then became 'the colour of "dirty" sexual secrets of sex' (Segal 1990,