

# Sport without referees? The power of the International Olympic Committee and the social politics of accountability

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## Abstract

As governor of the world's pre-eminent sporting event, the International Olympic Committee exercises considerable power on the world stage. It has also been widely accused of corruption, corporate greed, and hypocrisy. However, for all of the media attention that the International Olympic Committee receives, it has seldom been examined theoretically and in the context of global governance. Why have so few stakeholders, including the states that host the events and field the teams, engaged in serious efforts to hold it accountable for its actions? In addition, what can the experience of the International Olympic Committee tell us about accountability in global governance more generally? Drawing from conceptual treatments of accountability, we argue that the challenges of the International Olympic Committee are rooted in the organization's social position and social power. The IOCs position in international society dilutes the base of potential accountability holders and exacerbates collective action problems, while its social power allows it to maintain a reputational shield to guard against meaningful accountability efforts. The article concludes by considering whether these dynamics ripple beyond the experience of the International Olympic Committee into other areas of global governance.

## Keywords

Accountability, global governance, international sports, non-governmental organization, power, society

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## Introduction

Few organizations with a transnational footprint come under more routine scrutiny than the International Olympic Committee (IOC). As the governor of the Olympic Games, the IOC has long been a lightning rod for political controversy. Although it presents itself as the conduit for the values of Olympism, the IOC is often critiqued as an opaque and insulated organization that is prone to corruption and the abuse of power. IOC decisions regarding the selection of host cities, the requirements that these cities must fulfill, the addition or subtraction of events, and the participation of particular athletes or territories are frequently contested (see Senn, 1999). The commercialization of the Games and the strong corporate ties of the IOC raise serious questions about who is benefiting from the Games and the Olympic brand (see Boykoff, 2013). Furthermore, while the IOC — whose charter states directly that the practice of sport is “a human right ... without discrimination of any kind” — cloaks itself in humanitarian ideals, it commonly receives criticism for failing to live up to these ideals, most recently, for not challenging Russian laws relating to homosexuality (*Daily Mail*, 2013).

The persistent power of the IOC through these and other controversies presents a puzzle. Why, even in the face of widespread criticism, have so few stakeholders engaged in serious and sustained efforts to hold the IOC accountable for its actions? Is there something about the nature of the IOC and the space it occupies in international society that makes accountability particularly difficult? What might the experience of the IOC tell us about accountability and global governance more generally? Existing International Relations (IR) literature offers only partial insight into these questions. This is both because this literature largely ignores powerful sporting organizations like the IOC and because conventional treatments of accountability often overlook important social factors at play.

We therefore argue that a more complete understanding of the important governance challenges posed by the IOC requires greater attention to the social politics of accountability. We find that the social position and social power of the IOC complicate traditional mechanisms of accountability and can foster a dynamic in which the agent is allowed to maintain control over its own oversight and thus be subject to far less pressure to change. Our analysis further suggests that while the IOC certainly has some unique attributes, similar accountability issues may ripple beyond the confines of international sport to include other actors, such as private military firms, non-profit organizations, and religious organizations.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we draw from the existing literature to weigh potential explanations for the IOC's accountability gap and underscore the importance of considering factors such as social position and social power. Second, we examine in more depth the nature of the IOC's social position and social power, showing how these features have influenced accountability politics and so far helped the organization deflect calls for major reform. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of the IOC's accountability problems for global governance more broadly.

## The social sources of accountability gaps

Accountability is conventionally defined as a condition and process in which an actor answers for its conduct to those it affects (Scholte, 2011: 16). An “accountability gap”

refers to the regulatory space between the many international norms that apply to the activities of organizations and the lack of ability of other actors to require adherence to those norms.<sup>1</sup> As the world becomes ever-more interdependent and therefore reliant on global governance arrangements, the accountability of its governors has become increasingly important.<sup>2</sup>

A growing body of literature has shown how the delegation of authority by states (principals) to international organizations (agents) can lead to accountability gaps and suboptimal outcomes for the would-be beneficiaries of the governance arrangement (Abbott and Snidal, 1998; Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Hawkins et al., 2006; Weaver, 2008). In many cases, the bureaucrats and leadership of international organizations may have divergent preferences from the state principals – due to the desire for organizational autonomy, resistance to potentially costly reforms, or fundamentally different substantive priorities (Buntaine, 2014; Nielson et al., 2006; Weaver, 2008). In many instances, principals have sought to put in place strengthened accountability mechanisms (Buntaine, 2014; Grigorescu, 2010). The IOC experience manifests these themes in many fundamental respects. However, as this section argues, the IOC's accountability gap is further complicated by its social position and reserves of social power, which warrant closer consideration by the broader literature.

### *Explaining the IOC's accountability gap*

What might explain the IOC's persistent accountability gap? One obvious answer from a realist perspective might be that sport ultimately rests on the sidelines of international politics and that actors simply do not care enough about the IOC to bear the costs necessary to increase accountability. However, such an explanation is belied both by state history of using sporting events as a platform for political gamesmanship and by the ways that decisions of the IOC do have a meaningful impact on states (Cottrell and Nelson, 2011).<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed in the next section, the IOC is strongly connected to the state system and exerts a considerable amount of power over political issues that states and other actors seem to care about a great deal. Lord Killanin, the head of the IOC in the 1970s, wrote that "Ninety-five percent of my problems as president of the IOC involved national and international politics" (quoted in Senn, 1999: x).

A more liberal line of thinking might diagnose the accountability gap in terms of a democratic deficit. The idea is that democratic leaders are expected to exercise power in a manner that is transparent and subject to oversight through institutions, the media, and the legal system. If officials are perceived not to live up to their obligations, voters can hold them to account simply by electing somebody else (Dahl, 1956). The problems of the IOC could therefore be addressed by increasing the participatory access of relevant stakeholders to the governance process, strengthening the negotiating capacity of weaker actors, and creating advisory panels to monitor and report on institutional performance (Chappelet, 2011; McGrew and Held, 2002).<sup>4</sup>

As Grant and Keohane (2005) have discussed, however, the democratic model is very difficult to translate to the realm of global governance given that there is no single, unified global public analogous to the kinds of publics characteristic of constitutionally liberal democracies (see also Dahl, 1999). Furthermore, organizations such as Transparency

International have already pushed the IOC toward more transparency and a stronger set of representative institutions (Schenk, 2011). A recent set of reforms has implemented renewable eight-year term limits and a 70-year age limit for IOC members, and, for the first time, allowed a segment of its body (athlete representatives) to be elected. These efforts have not successfully transformed it into a responsive and accountable international organization.

A third explanation might involve a closer examination of the conditions necessary for accountability mechanisms to work properly. Accountability relationships are commonly characterized as containing three operative conditions:

1) *standards* that those who are held accountable (agents) are expected to meet; 2) *information* available to accountability holders (principals), who can then apply the standards in question to the performance of those who are held to account; and 3) the ability of accountability holders to impose *sanctions* – to attach costs to the failure to meet the standards. (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006: 426)<sup>5</sup>

If these conditions are out of balance — if standards are vague, information is unavailable, or sanctions are weak — then accountability efforts are likely to be ineffective.

However, the “standards, information, sanctions” formula espoused by conventional treatments typically relies on an instrumentalist ontology and therefore glosses over normative questions that inform the construction of those standards, the interpretation of information, and the political will necessary to activate accountability mechanisms. The mere presence of accountability conditions is not necessarily enough. We contend that the normative construction and understanding of these conditions is also important.

Consider an example. When the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened in Kosovo in 1999, it was widely considered to be an “illegal, yet legitimate” action (Henkin, 1999). Many observers perceived the NATO intervention to be in clear violation of the United Nations (UN) Charter, yet no significant accountability mechanism, internal or external, took hold, in part, because a critical mass of actors perceived the action as “right.” While there are other complexities surrounding the situation, to be sure, the example underscores the need to be mindful of how meaning is attached to actions and then interpreted to gain a fuller account of political outcomes.

The existing literature often does not examine the influence of ideational structures on accountability politics. Nor does it pay sufficient attention to the particular *type* of power being exercised by agents, who often seek to gain and use authority to create and maintain those structures that perpetuate their positions of influence. A more complete understanding of the accountability gap in the case of the IOC, we contend, must therefore pay more careful attention to the social dynamics that inform accountability politics.

### *Social position*

The first social factor involves the complicated position of the IOC as an organization within international society. Most models, such as those of Grant and Keohane (2005), posit a relatively straightforward accountability relationship between principals and agents. Grant and Keohane’s delegation model suggests that the accountability of international

organizations such as the World Trade Organization is primarily the responsibility of those who entrust the organization with authority, whereas non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace are accountable via the participation model to those affected by the organization. This means that international organizations can be held accountable by states through supervisory or fiscal accountability,<sup>6</sup> and NGOs can be held to account by donors and the global public in general through market, peer, or reputational mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

What is missing from this analysis is that these seemingly straightforward accountability relationships can be obscured and even vitiated by social position. When constructivist scholars think about the nature of agency, they consider social position to be a potentially important source of influence (Barnett and Duvall, 2005; Wight, 2006). The space an actor occupies in international society might make it relatively more or less capable of exercising agency.

The IOC occupies a place in international society that straddles public and private, governmental and non-governmental. In some ways, the IOC acts like an international organization and is treated as such by the international community. States delegate great responsibility to the IOC to govern the Olympic system and have effectively given it a monopoly over its area of interest. At the same time, the IOC is legally and financially set up as a Swiss-based NGO with a decision-making process that operates outside the state system.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, as the next section addresses in more detail, the social position of the IOC yields benefits that complicate accountability politics. Although the IOC is recognized by states as the sole authority responsible for governing the Olympics, its formal NGO status insulates it from the supervisory, fiscal, and peer accountability mechanisms that would typically accompany this position. Furthermore, because the Games themselves carry such social and economic value, it is also insulated from market-based means of accountability. This leaves reputation as the strongest potential mechanism.

A related problem involves the would-be accountability holders. Given the social position of the IOC, who should be responsible for overseeing and implementing any accountability mechanisms? States could hold the organization to account by boycotting the events or refusing to host. Corporations could hold the organization to account through the marketplace by withholding the sponsorship funds that the IOC relies on. Athletes could hold the organization to account by refusing to participate or engaging in individual protests. Other organizations could hold the IOC to account by attacking its reputation in the media or through other avenues. There are many such possibilities. However, the existence of more accountability holders does not necessarily mean more accountability.

The complexity of the IOC's social position creates a surfeit of potential accountability holders and a lack of clarity as to who the most appropriate accountability holder might be. These difficulties become even more pronounced under conditions of inequality, when would-be accountability holders have less incentive to act collectively given the daunting prospects for change and potential fallout of attempting to hold powerful agents accountable for their actions. As Rubenstein (2007) points out, accountability can be especially difficult to achieve under conditions of inequality, thus requiring surrogates to step in to fill the void, which is usually a suboptimal option. Therefore, the collective

action problems posed by the IOC's complex social position are further compounded by the social power (and reputational shield) wielded by the organization.

### *Social power*

Most conceptual treatments correctly assume that power underpins any accountability relationship since accountability holders establish the standards of behavior for a given agent, apply the standards, and, if necessary, uphold the standards. These treatments tend to emphasize materially based, coercive power (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 9).<sup>9</sup> In accountability politics, the threat or application of sanctions receives particular attention in this regard but provides only a partial picture of the operative power dynamics at hand. By adopting Barnett and Duvall's (2005: 8) alternative definition of power as "the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their own circumstances and fate," we can gain a deeper understanding of the broader social forces at play that constrain and construct accountability relationships.

There are at least two broad ways that social power thus understood is relevant to accountability. First, as suggested earlier, social power can give organizations control over the development and application of the conditions of accountability (standards, information, sanctions). Commonly held "operative standards of accountability" are derived from normative and ideational consensus forged through social discourse and are the basis by which inappropriate organizational behavior is evaluated. Once established, these standards constrain outcomes by providing the rules of the game by which interactions are governed. These rules can, in turn, lock in power relationships and limit the ability of weaker accountability holders to have any recourse in holding agents to account for their actions. We must therefore pay careful attention to how accountability standards come to be defined, which actors exercise the most influence in defining them, and who serves as the gatekeepers of those standards over time.

In a similar fashion, social power can also affect the information condition necessary for accountability relationships to take hold. This information must be collected from and interpreted by an authoritative source if it is to be acted upon in an effective fashion. Both the quality of the information and the meaning attributed to it, though, can be politically contested.

On the one hand, if the activities of the agent lack transparency or the agent has a great degree of concentrated power in their domain (e.g. the IOC), it can be difficult to collect sufficient information, a "smoking gun" if you will, to activate any existing accountability mechanisms. On the other hand, even if information is readily available (e.g. public agents with externally validated reporting requirements), it is subject to interpretation and contestation from an increasingly diverse range of actors that are recognized as having rational-legal, moral, or expert authority. Difficulties in cultivating some degree of intersubjective consensus about what counts as authoritative information and how to respond to that information can therefore dilute accountability mechanisms.

The second way that social power is relevant to the accountability of the IOC is through the symbolic meaning attached to sport. Sport is a big part of our social fabric — locally, nationally, and internationally. Children in most countries around the world grow up playing or at least being exposed to a culture of football. Large swaths of

humanity have been socialized into valuing sport and corollary rituals such as the Olympics or the World Cup. Such events are important to global society both because “they offer an illusion of permanence and continuity in a world characterized by mobility, change, and uncertainty” (Menand, 2012: 72) and because they appear to be apolitical (or at least allow people to suspend disbelief in that regard). Sport is both valued by and set apart from the world of politics and partiality, creating a “state of exception in which the normal rules of politics do not apply” (Boykoff, 2014: 5).

Agents are aware of this structural influence and the types of symbolic power that can be exercised to capitalize on them. For example, as the following section discusses, the IOC frequently draws on the symbolism of sport to cement its authority and maintain its unique social position. Its members may sneer at politics, but the IOC decides who hosts the prestigious Games, fiercely guards its billion-dollar brand, and hand-picks an elite group of corporations deemed worthy of the designation as “top Olympic partner.” In each of these instances, the IOC draws from its moral authority as the guardian of Olympism to maximize profit and lock in its effective monopoly over the Games. Indeed, in many respects, the IOC constitutes what Mosca (1939) called a “ruling class” of international sport — the so-called guardian of the Olympic spirit. It is therefore important to examine the language and strategies used by the agent to perpetuate its influence.

Symbolic power can also complicate the accountability relationship from the perspective of the potential accountability holders. If agents are providing a good or service that carries great cultural or social value, it may increase the tolerance of accountability gaps by would-be principals or reduce their ability to generate the political will necessary to close them. We may be socialized to resist holding an agent to account for alleged misdeeds because of the need to preserve the ritualistic practices of world sporting events or the moral integrity (at least in our own minds) of humanitarian relief agencies. Ignorance is bliss in some areas more than others. The symbolic power afforded by society to a given agent may therefore further insulate it from major pressure because it exacerbates collective action problems, especially when the principals are diffuse or not clearly defined. Rationalizing inaction is also easier when there are others who should be bearing this responsibility. In diagnosing accountability gaps, we must be mindful of not only who the principals are, but also how interest in taking actions necessary to narrow any perceived gap is affected by the social value they place on the area governed by the agent.

## **The IOC and the social politics of accountability**

The previous section argued that the social position and social power of the IOC are key underappreciated factors in explaining the organization’s persistent accountability gap. This section first probes in more depth the sources of the IOC’s social position and social power. It then shows how these features have influenced accountability politics and helped the organization deflect or absorb pressure for major change.

### *Guardian of the flame: The social standing of the IOC*

The IOC bills itself as “the supreme authority of the Olympic Movement.” Its work is described as follows:

Acting as a catalyst for collaboration between all parties of the Olympic family, from the National Olympic Committees (NOCs), the International Sports Federations (IFs), the athletes, the Organising Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs), to the The Olympic Partners (TOP) partners, broadcast partners and United Nations agencies, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) shepherds success through a wide range of programmes and projects. On this basis it ensures the regular celebration of the Olympic Games, supports all affiliated member organisations of the Olympic Movement and strongly encourages, by appropriate means, the promotion of the Olympic values. (International Olympic Committee, no date(d))

As the description indicates, the IOC's social position is not that of a typical non-governmental organization. Its very mission is a byproduct of the state system. Its affiliates are both public and private, state and non-state. It claims authority over a broad movement that transcends traditional boundaries in global society. Black and Peacock (2013: 709) note that:

given the de facto privileges and immunities (e.g. extraterritoriality, legal exemptions, treaty-making and monitoring, etc.) it has consistently enjoyed, the IOC has functional equivalence to an IGO [international governmental organization]; in fact states respect its decisions and jurisdiction more reliably than many IGOs.

The “de facto privileges and immunities” granted by this status means that when it comes to Olympic sport, the IOC has no obvious peers and no market competition — it is the only game in town. The peer and market accountability structures typical of NGOs are therefore exceedingly difficult to apply.

At the same time, the IOC also benefits from its formal status as a Swiss-registered NGO. As discussed by Grant and Keohane, IGOs are often held accountable via a form of “supervisory accountability” in which an organization, state, or other principal exerts responsibility over the actions of its agent. Since it formally operates independently of the state system, though, the IOC is not limited in the manner of a principal–agent model and is therefore free from supervisory accountability. Its particular standing in Switzerland also limits the applicability of non-Swiss legal standards and allows it to benefit from the significant tax exemptions granted to many Swiss sporting organizations: “They get the same advantages as a yodeling association, but they are so much bigger” (Carvajal, 2011). Furthermore, although it is bound by the Swiss legal system, Switzerland has had a reputation of going easy on its multibillion-dollar sporting organizations (*The Guardian*, 2014).

Moreover, unlike many other internationally integrated NGOs such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the IOC is funded independently of the international state system. In 2009, over 80% of the total contributions made to the ICRC were made directly by governments, while less than 3% came from private sources (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2009). The IOC, on the other hand, is entirely privately funded, with the vast majority of its revenue coming from corporate sponsorships and broadcast rights for Olympic events (International Olympic Committee, no date(e)).

The benefits of the IOC's position in international society are further amplified by the organization's social base of power. The IOC is widely recognized as the sole legitimate governing authority of the Olympic Games.<sup>10</sup> To understand further the accountability politics surrounding the IOC, we must therefore consider where this authority comes

from and how the IOC's claims to being an apolitical protector of universal Olympic values are used to perpetuate this authority.

The IOC has not always wielded as much power as it does today. When it was founded by Pierre de Coubertin in 1894, the IOC played only a minor coordinating role in reviving the modern Olympic Games. Most Olympic decisions, including the events that would be held, the rules that would govern these events, the referees who would adjudicate, and even the countries that would be allowed to participate, were made by the particular host cities and host states. The 1904 Games in St. Louis, for instance, featured 650 athletes, 580 of whom were American, and prior to the 1912 Stockholm Games, other delegations were warned by their Swedish host that "if disputes arise as to the meaning of any certain point in the programme, rules and regulations, the Swedish version alone is official" (Miller, 2008: 25).

It was only when complaints arose that the Games were unfair, chaotic, and inconsistent from year to year that the power of the organization began to grow.<sup>11</sup> The Olympic Congress, including representatives of each state's NOC, voted in 1914 to give the IOC greater authority over issues such as the number of entries allowed per event, and later authorized the organization to settle complicated questions related to the naturalization and proper citizenship of athletes and the Olympic participation of territories such as Finland and Bohemia (Miller, 2008). Already, the IOC's coordinating role was growing beyond what had been initially intended.

The IOC's formal separation from state control only grew as the Games themselves became more politicized and were used as a location for political protest (Cottrell and Nelson, 2011). Beginning most notably with the so-called "Nazi Games" of 1936 and continuing with widely discussed events such as the "black power" salute in the 1968 Games, the anti-apartheid boycotts of 1976, the US-led boycotts of 1980, and the Soviet-led boycotts of 1984, political activity of all sorts has become a regular part of both the Summer and Winter Games. The IOC's response to this external politicization has been to carve out a social position that resides above the political fray. The organization maintains that "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas." (International Olympic Committee, no date (c)). The famous black power salute, for instance, was called by a spokesperson for the IOC "a deliberate and violent breach of the fundamental principles of the Olympic spirit" and led IOC president Avery Brundage to threaten the entire US track team with suspension (*BBC*, 1968). Being perceived as apolitical is now central to the IOC's identity and has served to add ideological distance to its formal separation from state control. Although it once acted as an agent in a state-centered principal-agent model, the IOC now maintains singular control over the Olympic movement.

Another social source of the IOC's power is its perceived universality. After all, the organization's control applies not to some niche area, but to a broad Olympic movement with a vast global audience and membership. The 2012 London Games were the single most-watched televised event in US history (Collins, 2012), and former IOC President Juan Samaranch openly declared in 1996 that the Olympic movement is "more universal than any religion" (quoted in Senn, 1999: x).

Furthermore, there are currently 204 NOCs represented within the Olympic movement, which is more than the 193 members of the UN. Guam, Hong Kong, Puerto Rico,

Palestine, Taiwan, and Kosovo all have recognized NOCs and have all participated independently in Olympic competition even though they do not yet have full UN membership. Taiwan even competed (as “Chinese Taipei”) in the 2008 Beijing Games. This inclusion has become an important indicator of status for state and non-state territories alike: “Since the 1960s and the independence of former European colonies, taking part in the Games has been seen as a sign of sovereignty as strong or perhaps even stronger than being admitted to the United Nations” (Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott, 2008: 10).

The IOC has also developed a particularly close relationship with the UN. Former IOC President Juan Samaranch was the first representative of an NGO without status within the UN to address the General Assembly in 1995, after which UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali stated that “in the International Olympic Committee, the United Nations has a precious ally in its action in the service of peace and bringing peoples together” (quoted in Miller, 2008: 298–299). Since that time, it has become a common practice for the UN to call for an “Olympic Truce” halting all global hostilities over the course of the Summer and Winter Games. This close relationship calls attention to the fact that although the organization is formally and ideationally separate from the state system, it still maintains an enduring connection to this system.

The IOC’s claims to universalism mean that, as former President Samaranch suggested, it is “accountable to the world” (quoted in Sandomir, 1999). What that means in practice, however, is unclear and problematic. The sheer range of would-be accountability holders — states, private actors, athletes, global citizens — invites collective action problems. Furthermore, even if some degree of political mobilization occurs, it is unlikely to be representative of all of humanity, making the IOC’s claim to universal membership and values a potentially powerful neutralizer. Thus, while, in theory, the IOC is accountable to everyone, in practice, concerns abound that it is effectively accountable to no one.

A final and related source of social power for the IOC is the symbolic nature of the Olympic movement itself. Since Ancient Greece, the purpose of the Olympics has been to create a space and time for peace, establish individuals as equals under the rules of sport, and promote tolerance and diversity (see Guttman, 2002; Senn, 1999). The interlocking Olympic rings, which rank among the most recognizable symbols in the world<sup>12</sup> and are widely regarded to represent the five continents, further underscore the universality of Olympism. According to the Olympic Charter: “The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity” (International Olympic Committee, no date(c)).

The humanitarian values that comprise intersubjective understandings of what Olympism means are vital sources of the IOC’s power and authority. The IOC uses this authority to produce social and ideational categories ranging from what counts as a sport, to what appropriate rules are, to the very meaning of sportsmanship. Furthermore, whether or not one sides with critics who maintain that the values of the IOC are at odds with its actual behavior, it is difficult to deny that the organization is adept at wielding its authority. The IOC not only proactively uses its symbolic power to help shield against accountability efforts, as the next section discusses, but also fiercely protects its livelihood and is effectively able to translate its social position and social power into material power.

As guardian of the Olympic flame and governor of the Games, the IOC is supported by vast economic resources and the lure of “celebration capitalism” (Boykoff, 2014).<sup>13</sup> With the neoliberal turn in the 1980s and the rise of commercialism, the IOC has become a decidedly capitalist organization.<sup>14</sup> The IOC is estimated to have brought in a staggering USD8 billion in revenue in the 2009–2012 quadrennial (*Sportcal*, 2012), approximately 10% of which was used to fund the organization itself (with larger portions going to OCOGs, NOCs, and International Olympic Sport Federations) (International Olympic Committee, no date(e)). This figure is more than the annual gross domestic product (GDP) of many states that participate in the Olympic Games and represents a tripling of broadcasting revenue since the mid-1990s (*Sportcal*, 2012). Indeed, many critics claim that when one looks behind the proverbial Olympic curtain, one sees not a celebration of humanitarian values and sport, but rather a “money-generating machine building the ‘golden triangle’ of broadcasting, advertising, and sponsorship” (Berlin, 2012: 12).

The IOC is very strategic about how it utilizes its social position and symbolism. It creates relationships with a number of corporate sponsors, an elite group of which are called “top Olympic partners” — one in each major commercial category (e.g. Coca-Cola for soft drinks) — that pay massive amounts of money for the right to use and market the Olympic brand, which, in turn, pays dividends for the states that participate in the Olympics and the cities that host them (International Olympic Committee, no date(e)).<sup>15</sup> These sponsors get not only the exclusive tag of Olympic partner, but other special benefits, such as access to the torch relay and VIP traffic lanes.<sup>16</sup>

The IOC also requires host cities to promote its brand. For instance, Rule 51 of the Olympic Charter asserts that “no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas” (International Olympic Committee, no date (c)). When Vancouver, British Columbia, hosted the 2010 Winter Games, the *New York Times* reported that the city “passed a bylaw that outlawed signs and banners that did not ‘celebrate’ the Olympics. Placards that criticized the Olympics were forbidden, and the law even empowered Canadian authorities to remove such signs from private property” (Boykoff and Tomlinson, 2012). The IOC also makes host cities police Olympics-related intellectual property rights. In preparation for the 2012 Games, the British Parliament passed the London Olympic Games and Paralympic Games Act 2006, which defined as a trademark infringement the commercial use of words like “games,” “2012,” and “London” in proximity. Others cite how the IOC compels host cities to spend on security:

Visitors to London, where the games are scheduled to run from July 27 to Aug. 12, would be forgiven for thinking they had dropped in on a military hardware convention. Helicopters, fighter jets and bomb-disposal units will be at the ready. About 13,500 British military personnel will be on patrol — 4,000 more than are currently serving in Afghanistan. Security officials have acquired Starstreak and Rapier surface-to-air missiles. (Boykoff and Tomlinson, 2012)

As a counter-narrative to those critical of the capitalistic flavor of the governance of the Games, the IOC invokes its independence, broader humanitarian mission, and redistributive practices. Press releases are frequently accompanied with the byline:

The International Olympic Committee is a not-for-profit independent international organisation made up of volunteers, which is committed to building a better world through sport. It redistributes more than 90 per cent of its income to the wider sporting movement, which means that every day the equivalent of 3.25 million US dollars goes to help athletes and sports organisations at all levels around the world.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, over the past century, the IOC has capitalized on its professed apolitical nature, universal audience and membership, and appeal to the humanitarian principles enshrined in sport to cement its role as the world's guardian of the Olympic movement. Yet, many observers continue to find it hard to reconcile the actual behavior of the IOC with the values that it purports to promote, at times, exerting pressure for reform. The next section examines efforts to hold the IOC accountable for questionable actions and considers the extent to which its social standing provides a buffer to significant change.

### *Sport without referees?*

Throughout its recent history, the IOC has encountered criticism on a range of topics. Some have criticized elements of the Games' administration, such as the regulation of performance-enhancing drugs, the participation of controversial athletes (such as HIV-positive Magic Johnson and South African runner Zola Budd), and the inclusion or exclusion of specific events (Longman, 2013). Others have contested IOC responses to issues of social exclusion and human rights, such as the absence of female athletes from the Saudi Arabian Olympic team in 2012 or Russian laws related to homosexuality at the Sochi Games (Pilon, 2012). Even the design of the Olympic logo has attracted controversy (*New York Times*, 2011). The most serious accountability questions, however, have involved allegations of IOC corruption, cronyism, and the exploitation of the Games for material gain.

Perhaps the most notable such controversy surrounded the selection of Salt Lake City for the 2002 Winter Games, although there were similar concerns following the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta, the 1998 Winter Games in Nagano, and the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney (Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott, 2008: 12). Investigations by the United States Olympic Committee and the IOC itself found that several members responsible for the selection in 2002 accepted direct bribes and a range of other gifts, such as college admission guarantees for family members, in exchange for their votes (Longman, 1999). The uproar over the Salt Lake City scandal became significant enough that the United States Congress (1999) introduced a bill decreeing that "No person doing business in interstate commerce in the United States may knowingly provide financial support to the IOC" until it implements reforms. IOC's corporate sponsors also expressed concern: "If the corruption suspicions are confirmed, McDonald's will ask itself if sponsorship of the games still has a place in the group's image" (Toohey and Veal, 2000: x).

The IOC responded to this scandal and its aftermath by voluntarily dismissing several individual members from the organization and developing a new Ethics Code stating, among other things, that "only gifts of nominal value, in accordance with prevailing local customs, may be given or accepted by the Olympic parties" and "the hospitality shown to the members and staff of the Olympic parties, and the persons accompanying

them, shall not exceed the standards prevailing in the host country” (International Olympic Committee, no date(a)). For the first time, the IOC explicitly forbade the behaviors directly associated with the Salt Lake City scandal. The IOC also established an Ethics Commission charged with regularly updating the body’s Code of Ethics and investigating allegations of ethical misconduct. This nine-member body is to include “at least five prominent personalities known for their independence of spirit, their competency and their international reputation” (International Olympic Committee, no date(a)). The US bill never entered into force.<sup>18</sup>

While these reforms certainly represent a step in the right direction, they also reveal ways in which the IOC uses its social standing to promote self-preservation. For instance, although the IOC’s Ethics Commission is nominally independent, it is only allowed to investigate ethical breaches that have been submitted to it by the IOC president, and reports not to an independent agency, but to the IOC itself. The findings of the Ethics Commission are fully confidential and unavailable to the public unless and until the IOC executive board makes a decision on the matter (International Olympic Committee, no date(a)). What this all means is that, even in the wake of a scandal as significant as Salt Lake City, the IOC has been able to define its own ethical standards and almost entirely control how information related to any new charges is disseminated. Although it is certainly understandable that an organization like the IOC would want to maintain control and act in its own self-interest, this is not real transparency and is possible only because of the social position and social power described throughout this article.

Indeed, a 2008 global accountability report released by One World Trust ranked the IOC dead last among the 30 international organizations they examined (One World Trust, 2008). Other critics maintain that the IOC remains a body that is largely run by “a privileged sliver of the global 1 percent” (Boykoff and Tomlinson, 2012). Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) President Sepp Blatter, himself a member of the IOC, has referred to the organization as “a club,” stating that of the:

115 members of the IOC, only 45 are directly linked to sport. ... All the others, the 70 members are individually appointed members. If you need to know where in the world you still have princes, princesses and kings, then you go to the list of members of the IOC. You will find a lot of them. (*Associated Press*, 2011)

Since enacting the reforms, the IOC has been even more proactive in deploying its symbolic power to safeguard its apolitical image and insulate it from accountability measures and political protests or statements of any kind. In practice, this has meant that any protesters at the Games must be stationed at a location far removed from the actual events and, in the case of the 2008 Beijing Games, must apply for a permit from the host state before they are allowed to protest at all.<sup>19</sup> This includes activists who, for environmental, indigenous, or other reasons, are protesting against the Olympics and the IOC. Similarly, IOC member Mario Pescante framed the US’s decision to include several openly gay athletes in its delegation for the Sochi Games as a political stunt. He said that it was “absurd that a country like that sends four lesbians to Russia just to demonstrate that in their country gay rights have [been established]” and later stated that he “just wanted to make the point not to let politics interfere with the Olympics” (*CBS News*, 2014). In each

of these instances, the IOC has drawn upon its social power to limit the space for political activity. Criticism and protest is often portrayed as violating the symbolic values of Olympism and the apolitical stance of the IOC.

In a similar fashion, the IOC regularly protects its brand from even minor competition, ensuring that only it and its corporate sponsors are able to profit from the symbol of the Olympic Games.<sup>20</sup> If others attempt to deploy any aspect of the brand, they are subject to legal action. In one famous case, Olympic representatives threatened to fine a London butcher USD30,000 for displaying sausage links in the shape of Olympic rings (Longman, 2012). According to the *New York Times*:

Until an outcry ensued, workers preparing for the opening and closing ceremonies could eat fish and chips but not sausage and chips or burgers and chips or just plain chips, unless they were served by McDonald's, which holds exclusive French fry rights at the Olympic stadiums. Even the parents of Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge, and their party supply company came under scrutiny [for featuring on their website an Olympic torch and a woman throwing a javelin under the headline "Let the Games Begin"]. (Longman, 2012)

Furthermore, in the lead-up to the 2012 London Games, the British Sugarcraft Guild was prevented from using the Olympic rings as a cake decoration during their annual exhibition. The IOC threatened litigation even though the cakes were not for sale and the guild did not stand to make a profit from the event (Robinson, 2011). It is clear that the inclusive values of the Olympic movement do not extend to the symbols of the Olympic movement.

IOC leadership has even used its humanitarian mission as a reason why it should be free from political oversight. Current IOC President Thomas Bach (2013) made this case to the UN in 2013:

But to apply this "universal law" worldwide and spread our values globally, sport has to enjoy responsible autonomy. Politics must respect this sporting autonomy. For only then can sport organisations implement these universal values amidst all the differing laws, customs and traditions.

Later in the speech, Bach (2013) reiterates the point:

In the mutual interest of both sport and politics, please help to protect and strengthen the autonomy of sport. Only in this way we can create the win-win situation of a fruitful partnership for the benefit of youth and society in general.

The story of the IOC's accountability gap cannot be fully understood without consideration of its social standing. Its status as a privately funded NGO places it in a position in international society that makes public accountability difficult. There are no clear principals outside of the organization that exist to hold it accountable, and because the private sponsors of the IOC benefit so greatly from the social and economic value of the Games, there is little incentive for them to contest the legitimacy of the IOC. Furthermore, while the reaction to the Salt Lake City scandal by the international media, US Congress, and corporations helped provoke a response from the IOC to reform, the self-imposed

changes seemed satisfactory for most stakeholders even though they did not fundamentally alter the accountability equation. Recent events, however, have given some long-standing critics of the IOC new hope that further reform could be in the offing.

### *A new hope?*

In the wake of the 2014 Sochi Olympics — which occurred under the shadow of Russia’s anti-gay laws, accusations of corruption, and an inflated budget exceeding all previous Winter Games combined — the IOC has once again been confronted with pressure to change (Boykoff, 2015). Voters in several European states that could have been potential Olympic hosts opposed application for the 2022 Winter Games, leaving Beijing, China, and Almaty, Kazakhstan, as the sole applicants. Optimists interpret this action not only as a threat to the reputation of the IOC, but also as a sign that the “market” to host the Winter Olympics may be drying up.

Moreover, the Swiss government adopted a new law that will, at least in principle, enhance oversight over the financial dealings of the IOC (*Associated Press*, 2014b). According to one Swiss lawmaker, the law offers increased scrutiny of “any strange movement” in bank accounts and financial assets held in Switzerland (and only Switzerland) (*Associated Press*, 2014a). While it remains to be seen how the law will translate into practice, its passage places the IOC in a category once reserved for “politicians and dictators” and is a symbolic recognition of the fundamentally political character of Olympic governance.

Not surprisingly, the IOC has been quick to embrace the new Swiss law (noting that “it is in line with what the IOC already does” (quoted in *Associated Press*, 2014a) and to nip other criticisms in the bud by releasing a blueprint for another round of self-imposed reforms. At their December 2014 meeting, the attending IOC members unanimously approved an “Olympic Agenda 2020: 20 plus 20 recommendations” plan that introduces cost-cutting measures for prospective hosts, outlines enhanced sustainability measures, “protects” clean athletes, and pledges to comply with principles of good governance. It also notably addresses hot-button human rights issues by including recommendations to strengthen the sixth principle of the Olympic Charter to bar discrimination based on sexual orientation and to foster gender equality (International Olympic Committee, no date(b)).

Reviews of the 2020 agenda have been understandably mixed. Optimists welcome these proposed changes, interpreting them as signs that accountability over the IOC is increasing and the Olympic movement is adapting accordingly (Clarey, 2014). Others are more skeptical. They ask why the IOC is so late in its support for gay athletes when they could have acted earlier in 2014 in the run-up to the Sochi Olympics (Boykoff, 2015) and suggest that the plan is a thinly veneered ploy to perpetuate the IOC’s “business machine” (Ahl, 2015). Observers from all angles agree that actions will speak louder than words.

However, when examined from the perspective of the social politics of accountability, a few items stand out. First, the IOC appears more concerned than ever about maintaining its reputation and pre-empting further accountability efforts that could erode its authority. In his speech to IOC members, IOC President Bach (2013) paraphrased

Shakespeare, asking: “To change or to be changed, that is the question?” This choice of language is telling. It recognizes that the IOC must change to preserve its legitimacy, but it also implies that the IOC should not relinquish its long-standing ability to self-police (or “be changed” by others). Indeed, there is little in the agenda that significantly alters how the IOC operates. For example, first, the reforms’ proposed means of “strengthen[ing] ethics” (International Olympic Committee, no date (a)) is to increase the independence of the IOC’s Ethics Commission by replacing Executive Committee appointment of commission composition with a vote by all IOC members. While a possible step forward, this change is likely to matter only at the margins.

Second, many of the recommendations included in the 2020 agenda are geared precisely to leverage the IOC’s social standing and insulate it further from accountability. While the media tend to emphasize the steps that the IOC is taking to address its own perceived shortcomings outlined earlier, less attention is given to the 2020 priorities that draw on social power to promote the Olympic brand. For instance, the IOC also intends to “launch an Olympic [television] channel,” further strengthen its own advocacy capacity and partnerships with IGOs and NGOs, “spread Olympics values education,” and extend access to the Olympic brand for non-commercial use. All of these could further strengthen the IOC’s social power and its ability to guard against reputational accountability. (International Olympic Committee, no date (b))

Finally, amid all the criticism of the IOC over the last 15 years, very few have actually contested the status of the IOC as the “supreme governing authority” of the Olympic movement. Some ideas for reform have included the establishment of an external oversight body to monitor the IOC, but calls for a replacement of the organization have not received serious consideration. That might be the most telling indicator of the IOC’s persistent social power.

## **Conclusion**

From the outset, this article has sought to address several questions. Why is it that so few stakeholders have engaged in serious efforts to hold the IOC accountable for its actions? Is there something about the nature of the IOC and the space that it occupies in international society that makes accountability particularly difficult? Our exploration of these questions suggests that social position and social power are key to understanding the ongoing accountability gaps of the IOC.

In essence, the IOC thrives on its own paradoxical social nature. On one hand, the IOC portrays itself as an embodiment of universal international norms of humanitarianism that transcend the borders of the international state system. It seeks refuge above the political fray. On the other hand, as guardian of the Olympic brand and the billion-dollar revenues that accompany it, the IOC engages in behavior that is far from apolitical and seemingly more about self-preservation. Members of the international community – the individual athletes, the states that constitute the organizational basis for the Games, and the corporations that profit from them – have thus far not been willing or able to alter fundamentally the social politics of accountability.

Can we generalize from the IOC experience? While the IOC has unique attributes, it is certainly not the only actor that is able to exploit its social position and social power to avoid accountability measures. The most direct comparison might be the world’s other premier international sporting organization, FIFA. Like the IOC, FIFA casts its missions

in altruistic terms and uses the symbolism of sport as a substantial source of power. Also, like the IOC, FIFA has been the subject of considerable political controversy. For example, FIFA's selection of Qatar as the host of the 2022 World Cup has been contentious from the beginning. There have been concerns about the country's sweltering summer heat and laws regarding alcohol consumption and homosexuality, and more serious allegations about bribery and the abuse of migrant labor (Nordland, 2014). The drumbeat of criticism has grown strong enough that three of its major sponsors (Castrol, Continental Tires, and Johnson & Johnson) have publicly declined to renew their contracts with the organization (Gibson, 2015) and the United States Department of Justice has indicted a number of high-ranking FIFA officials on charges of corruption and racketeering. Furthermore, FIFA's own ethics investigator quit in late 2014 after an "erroneous" version of his investigation into bidding procedures was published and he lost confidence in the independence of FIFA's Ethics Commission (Watt and Rumsby, 2014). Although the full effects of these latest developments remain to be seen, the analysis of this article suggests that the final reforms may be nominal.

Social position and social power might also affect the politics of accountability in other areas. Private military firms such as Academi (formerly Blackwater and Xe), non-profit organizations such as the Internet Association for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), and religious organizations such as the Vatican similarly straddle the boundaries between public and private, state and non-state, and rely on greater or lesser degrees of social power to maintain their legitimate authority.<sup>21</sup> They are also similarly difficult to hold accountable for controversies new and old.

Given the myriad difficulties with holding the IOC, FIFA, and other similar organizations to account, what are the prospects for reform that moves beyond nominal efforts to self-regulate? Although a detailed discussion is outside the scope of this article, recent research on experimental governance (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008), which seeks innovative ways to broaden stakeholder participation and stresses mechanisms such as the iterative benchmarking of standards and peer review, may hold promise in this regard. For instance, if the IOC participates in annual review meetings with groups of relevant stakeholders (e.g. states, athletes, corporations, labor, and perhaps even fan representatives) that scrutinize and provide feedback on self-reporting requirements with an eye toward improving accountability, it could create a denser social environment more conducive to dialogical processes that create intersubjective understandings that fill the gaps in the standards and information accountability conditions necessary to evaluate the quality of reform and impose real costs in the absence thereof.

Ultimately, meaningful reform at the IOC and similar organizations can only occur if it is propelled by ever-elusive political will. Therefore, the IOC and others will continue to profit from their social position and social power, while taking the nominal steps necessary to prevent significant political will from forming in a way that would undermine its authority and jeopardize its social standing. Apparently, so long as the Games are played, we are just fine with that.

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## Notes

1. For a related discussion of the accountability gap, see Bridgeman and Hunter (2008).
2. For a broader discussion of accountability and other global governance challenges, see Avant et al. (2011).
3. For general treatments on sport and politics, see Houlihan (1994) and Levermore and Budd (2004).
4. A democratic system thus contains both *vertical* and *horizontal* accountability mechanisms (Sperling, 2009). The former refers to processes whereby the voting public is informed about decisions and is able to decide whether or not a given rationale is sufficient to keep officials in office; the latter refers to instances in which government institutions check each other's power through electoral commissions, ombudsmen, or other oversight mechanisms. Grant and Keohane (2005) are careful to differentiate between "checks and balances" and formal accountability mechanisms. Checks and balances, they argue, are designed "to prevent action that oversteps legitimate boundaries by requiring the cooperation of actors with different institutional interests to produce an authoritative decision. Accountability mechanisms, on the other hand, always operate after the fact: exposing actions to view, judging and sanctioning them" (Grant and Keohane, 2005: 30; see also Woods and Narlikar, 2001).
5. See also Stiglitz (2003) and Rubenstein (2007).
6. *Supervisory accountability* "refers to relations between organizations where one organization acts as principal with respect to specified agents." *Fiscal accountability* "describes mechanisms through which funding agencies can demand reports from, and ultimately sanction, agencies that are recipients of funding" (Grant and Keohane, 2005: 36).
7. *Market accountability* involves reactions by investors and consumers, whose influence is exercised in whole or in part through markets, being able to boycott products from companies with inferior or costly practices. *Peer accountability* is derived from the evaluation of organizations by their counterparts or other related actors. *Reputational accountability* applies "to situations in which reputation, widely and publicly known, provides a mechanism for accountability even in the absence of other mechanisms as well as in conjunction with them" (Grant and Keohane, 2005: 37).
8. This situation is similar to that of many US banks that compete squarely in the private marketplace but also have an explicit or implicit governmental guarantee, a status that has made it difficult to hold them accountable after disasters such as the 2008 financial crisis.
9. See Barnett and Duvall's (2005) discussion of compulsory power.
10. On legitimacy and authority in international politics, see Hurd (2007). For insights on conditions that might result in the IOC being replaced by an alternative, see Cottrell (2009).
11. For more on the development of the IOC and the Olympic Games, see Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott (2008), Houlihan (1994), Guttmann (2002), and Senn (1999).
12. See Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott (2008: 37).
13. See also Barney et al. (2002).
14. It is interesting to note that former IOC President Brundage opposed the commercialization of the Olympics, viewing it as a "struggle in the face of political and commercial encroachment, to maintain the high standards which belong to the Olympic movement" (quoted in Boykoff, 2014: 3).
15. Top-tier deals are long-term (at least eight years) and global. The size of each deal is secret, but the total for all 11 for 2009–2012 is USD957 million.
16. In London, more than 250 miles of VIP traffic lanes were reserved not just for athletes and IOC luminaries, but also for corporate sponsors. Even the signature torch relay has been commercialized: the IOC and its corporate partners snapped up 10% of the torchbearer slots for IOC stakeholders and members of the commercial sponsors' information technology and

marketing staffs.

17. Among other similar releases, see, for example: <http://www.olympic.org/news/ioc-session-unanimously-approves-olympic-agenda-2020/242144>
18. For more on the IOC reforms, see MacAloon (2011) and Mason et al. (2006).
19. On dissent in Vancouver 2010 and London 2012, see Boykoff (2013).
20. On the Olympics as “celebration capitalism,” see Boykoff (2014).
21. On private military firms, see, for example, Avant (2005) and Singer (2011). On ICANN, see Chango (2011). On the Vatican, see Robertson (2010).

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