

With five days of competition left in the 2012 Olympics, it is worth noting the importance of the games and how they serve as a political event.

The first Olympics were held in 776 BC in Greece as a regional religious event. The games continued until 394 AD, when a Christian campaign against paganism ended them in a move designed to assert the power of Theodosius over his political opponents. From their outset, the Olympics grew steadily more important, eventually becoming a backdrop against which deals between Greek city-states were negotiated.

The states' prestige was tied to the victories their citizens won. The Olympics became synonymous with patriotism, religiosity and parochialism, and the laurels won by victors were mere symbols of the honors that awaited them at home. The Olympics resumed in 1896 as an obvious celebration of the nation-state. In ancient Greece, competitors participated as individuals, even though their home cities were clearly recognized and noted. In modern times, the connection to nationality has been made explicit, with opponents competing in teams organized by country.

From the very beginning, Olympians have had explicit connections to national identity. It is a given that competitors wave their nations' flags, wear their nations' colors and accept their medals to the sound of their countries' national anthems. The games have always been tied to politics. In 1936, Adolf Hitler used the games to demonstrate Germany's achievements. In 1972, the Olympics were the background to the killing of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists. In 1980, the United States led a 61-country boycott of the Moscow Olympics to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Nations such as China -- the most recent, best example of an emerging country vying to host the games and tying great significance to them -- view hosting the Olympics as a demonstration of national virtue.

The Olympic games are an occasion to consider the persistence with which human beings celebrate their cities and nations, and how honor is both given to and derived from those cities and nations. Individual Olympic athletes imbue their nation with honor with each victory. Individual Olympic spectators draw not only personal satisfaction from those victories, but also a sense of communal pride and even vindication. During the Cold War, the Soviet-controlled states devoted substantial resources to producing, training and nurturing athletes, supporting the belief that victorious teams would vindicate their nations and ideology. Other nations followed their lead. It is hard to understand why any individual not competing in the Olympics would delight in the victory of a compatriot.

Yet we do, which is an empirically demonstrable fact that transcends national boundaries, cultures and religions. It is tempting to believe that corporate sponsors or governments are responsible for manufacturing this kind of elation. If so, it is such an efficient manufacture that it is virtually universal.

This phenomenon can't be explained as false consciousness imposed on the gullible. The Olympic games are a celebration of nationalism. Some may argue that the nation-state is becoming less important due to globalism -- the Olympics testify to how wrong that perception is. Indeed, if we want to understand the persistence of nationalism in places like Europe, where the intent has been to do away with the nation-state, we need to consider carefully the principle of nationalism -- that humanity is divided into nations -- and how Olympic victories impact individuals united by country.

At the height of the Cold War, when the United States felt it was on the defensive, its hockey

team defeated the Soviet Union's hockey team in a completely unexpected upset. Those who were alive at the time remember both the electricity of the experience and the psychological effect it had on the country, as well as the rage and disappointment felt by the Soviets. The only people who won that game were on the ice that night, but the entire United States believed that victory somehow reflected on its greatness. This is not an insignificant matter.

As the Olympic athletes don their uniforms, and billions of people watch the games as if they mattered to them personally, it gives us reason to consider the enormous complexity of the human psyche and the dangers of fighting against it.

Patriotism is so pervasive that it is reflected even in a game of hockey played by strangers; it changes the way we think of ourselves. It is strange to say, but nonetheless demonstrably true.