

Fires of Illusion: Guarding the Olympic Flame in Rio...

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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"The investment is not for us, it's for the foreigners." — Felipe Paiva, Rio favela resident, CBC, Aug 3, 2016

The hideous mess that is the Olympic spectacle is about to be charged at the opening ceremony in Rio de Janeiro. Its lead-up has been tumultuous, suggesting that any ideal of peaceful reflection by states, participants, and observers about the broader values of Olympism should be best forgotten.

In addition to a shrunken Russian outfit, culled because of doping suspicions, and the sniping and savaging between the World Anti-Doping Agency and the International Olympic Committee (each purporting to want to regulate the other), lies the broadest, most reasonable criticism of all: the games as a monstrous monetary distraction.

Costing an estimated \$12 billion, it has made such demonstrators as Pedro Rosa tell Associated Press that the government had taken "money from health, education and social programs to guarantee the Olympics." [1] The country is in recession, the worst in 25 years; its suspended president, Dilma Rousseff, faces an impeachment trial.

No better illustration of this anger to such waste has been offered than the insistent harassment of carriers of the Olympic flame itself. It has become the detestable symbol, not merely of profligate spending, but needless endeavour. All, it can be argued, for the better, given the orchestrated myth-making ventures around its significance.

Supposedly lit with the good help of the sun in the days of Ancient Olympia, the flame has gone through historical revivals and re-inventions. This, broadly speaking, is the analogue of the Olympic Games – invention and mythology masking defect and drawback.

One enduring notion, that the Olympic Truce somehow suspended conflict while providing safe passage to spectators and athletes to the Games, did not lead to a conclusion of hostilities. Historians have noted that Sparta still attacked Elean territory in 420 B.C., for which it was fined, while the Arcadians ran roughshod over the sanctuary of Olympia in 364.

This is where the good realm of illusion intrudes upon the thick world of fact, not least the actual notion that the five interlocked rings were somehow a matter of antiquity. Much of that error can be laid at the incautious scribbling hands of Lynn and Gray Poole, who mistook a movie prop for ancient lore.

Points of Olympic ceremony have at various stages been contested, not least of all because the Berlin games of 1936 made such a spectacular point of utilising the ceremonial to total effect. Individuals such as sports administrator Carl Diem and film maker Leni Riefenstahl

deserve far more credit than they actually get for staging the occasion. This Nazi stain is hardly a glorious point, but its concealment remains a feature each time the Olympic Games are held.

The lighting of the flame was conclusively documented at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928 and Los Angeles in 1932, though previous references seem to have been matters of re-enactment, a fabrication of Olympism for heart-filled historical retellings. The relay itself became the child of propaganda exultance.

As David C. Young would suggest in an exchange in *Archaeology* (Nov/Dec 1996), "Torch races did take place in ancient Athens and are depicted on Athenian vases, but these were local events held for local youth; they had no connection whatsoever with Olympia or the Olympic Games."

The torch relay to Rio has been particularly ugly, and images of riot police guarding its sacral relevance have revealed the sheer bankruptcy of the project. "There is not going to be a torch," cried protesters in the town of Niteroi this week. Other towns have also witnessed similar indignation. "As the torch passes lit in Itaborai, jobs, health and education are put out." [2]

In late July, demonstrators at Angra dos Reis were reported as blocking the torch bearers, which precipitated a violent response from military police, rubber bullets, tear gas and all. [3] The Olympics has ever been twinned to the project of state power and violence.

A week or so prior, an effort was made to pinch the flame on Salgado Filho Avenue in the centre of Guarulhos, Sao Paulo. The disruptor in question, clad in black, made a dash for the flame before being tackled to the ground, in the process injuring a police officer.

Unsurprisingly, attempts have also been made to extinguish the flame. One assailant in question, equipped with fire extinguisher, ventured to do so. Other reports showed greater success, with *The Sun* sneering at those "thugs" who succeeded, briefly, in the endeavour. [4]

The torch journey has also been witness to other unsavoury events. Showing how Olympic ceremonial events can be lethal to its participants, a jaguar by the name of Juma was shot dead by a member of the Brazilian military after an event in Manaus. The animal had slipped away from its cage. Efforts to tranquilise the animal also failed.

The local organising committee for Rio issued a predictably execrable statement: "We made a mistake in permitting the Olympic torch, a symbol of peace and unity, to be exhibited alongside a chained wild animal. This image goes against our beliefs and our values." [5] On the contrary, the committee was being entirely consistent with the *actual* values of the games.

Perhaps it is only appropriate that the Rio games go ahead in such a dark cloud, utilising propaganda to quell dissent, and again revealing how pomp and circumstance supposedly triumph over butter and bread. Many Brazilians have chosen not to fall for that canard. It is up to other participants and spectators to follow suit.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

- [1] <http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/04/rio-olympics-2016-economists-question-wisdom-of-hosting-olympics.html>
- [2] <http://sports.yahoo.com/news/olympic-torch-met-with-protests-attempts-to-extinguish-on-way-int-o-rio-172959846.html>
- [3] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3713366/Put-torch-Protesters-try-steal-extinguish-Olympic-flame-hundreds-streets-anger-against-Rio-Games.html>
- [4] <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1520166/olympic-flame-extinguished-as-rioters-interrupt-relay-in-brazilian-city-angra-dos-reis/>
- [5] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-rio-jaguar-idUSKCN0Z72P4>

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