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Commentary

The Olympics and the American Press

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With the Winter Olympics finally under way, is it possible that the American journalists, if we can use that term in these circumstances, will be able to write about something other than the failure of Russia to be the United States? Having traveled to Russia multiple times since the collapse of the Soviet Union, I have witnessed the remarkable transformation of this society. Caught in a time warp created by the failure of the Soviet Union, the standard of living of the average Russian trailed behind that of most of Western Europe and the United States. The Soviet Union was not a consumer society and therefore life was vastly different from much of the industrialized west.

The period of transition from a command economy to a freer market has been halting and difficult as old habits of those at the top are slow to change. Simultaneously, change at the middle and lower reaches of the economy are also slow and sometimes very difficult. The boom town atmosphere of the 1990s produced dizzying changes on the ground, and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the chosen oligarchs. Before that decade was out, a collapse of the Russian currency and economy forced a restart of the process.

This second rebirth has been slower, aided by oil, gas, and other natural resources that have fueled economic growth. This process has been directed by in part by Vladimir Putin who has, to some degree, restored order in the economy and in society. Perhaps more important he has restored pride in Russia, a pride that had been shaken by the events in the last decade of the 20th century. The fact that he has done so within an atmosphere of repression can not be denied, while it should be noted that the degree of repression in Russia is not near the scale that existed in the Soviet Union.

At the same time the life of the average Russian, particularly those living in urban areas, and that means millions of people, has improved. Gone are the food lines, the shortages, and the neglect of consumer goods. What Americans might consider normal comforts, may not be present everywhere in Russia today, but the middle class Russian today lives a life full of what would have been considered luxuries in the Soviet Union. It is interesting that while the middle class in America is facing a decline in its income and standard of living that of the middle class in Russia is headed in the opposite direction. That comparison is seldom made.

As to the issues surrounding the Olympics Americans might also have a look in the mirror especially one that reflects American life of a few decades ago.

Security is a good place to start. There is, and rightly so, concern over security in Russia and at the games in Sochi. Major attacks on Russian transportation targets in the last years and months in Moscow and Volgograd were real. Terrorist organizations continue to make threats. One is reminded of the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City in 2002. A major attack of 9/11 came a few months before these games, and that was preceded by attacks on several other U.S. targets. The concerns over security in Salt Lake City were no less than the concerns today, and I can tell you from first hand experience that the security presence on the ground at those games was as formidable as Sochi's Right of Steel.

Corruption in Russia surrounding the Olympics is another notable talking point in the American press. How quickly these journalists and pundits have forgotten the corruption attendant

to the games of Salt Lake. It was Mitt Romney himself who reminded us during the presidential election that cleaning up those games was one of his major accomplishments. In fact most Olympics throughout history have been plagued by bribery and other corrupt practices.

Perhaps the most vocal concerns have been expressed over the issue of the Russian laws on homosexuality. Given the foolishness and bigotry expressed in these statutes it is easy to condemn the laws along with Vladimir Putin. Given the vast changes that have taken place in the United States on gender issues it is too easy to forget how these issues were treated in the United States in the not too distant past.

Public harassment and beating of homosexuals in America was too common a practice less than 50 years ago, and in fact in recent years crimes against homosexuals have continued. It is also clear that a large minority of Americans continue to hold the attitudes typical of the mid-twentieth century. These prejudices have continued to be pushed by religious groups in the U.S. as they are in Russia, and they are a part of the political agenda of those fighting the culture wars in America. Change in this area is recent, was not easily attained, and has not been completed. The self-righteous posture taken by many toward Russia on this issue reeks of self-congratulatory smugness.

No matter how satisfying it is to compare themselves to Russians, Americans should look in the historical and contemporary mirror at those same issues at home. This should offer the hope that change is possible in Russia, just as it was possible in America, and that it will continue in both places.

If sport can in any way promote these changes, then all the better. Criticism of injustice is always welcome wherever it is found, while self-satisfaction by comparison is seldom useful.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to a good sport to be a bad loser.