

Division of Olympic Proportions

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Apparently, the Olympic Games is about different peoples coming together as one group. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) expounds the nice, liberal values of peace, freedom, justice and honesty, asking that the world comes together to “celebrate humanity”.

Yet, visitors of Salt Lake City (SLC) this February for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games know well that coming together does not imply being treated as equals. Instead, the Olympic Games is perhaps one of the clearest examples of a constructed social order, where one’s social status, literally, hangs around one’s neck. For some, this status hangs like an Olympic medal, shining proudly for all to see. For others, it is like a sign warning of the plague, letting others know you are not important enough to spend time with.

If you have not been to an Olympic Games, then you have probably not been exposed to this new-age discrimination. The way it works is that accreditation tags

denote what level of privilege you are afforded while at the Games. Everybody who is anybody must wear one – or at least anybody expecting privileges by virtue of their involvement with the Games. So, Kings, Queens, celebrities, members of Parliament or volunteers will have their respective accreditation tags.

The result is a strange social world where greeting people entails looking towards their navels at their tag, before looking into their eyes and smiling a cheery hello (or not!). You need to know how important they are to know how much time it is worth spending with them. Of course, it is also a well-ordered world and the justification of these tags is that the IOC requires a functional Games. It simply would not do for athletes to be kept waiting for hours in queues while they miss their events! Given the internationalism of this event, perhaps such rigour is justified.

What might be surprising is that, at the top of the accreditation tree, are not really the Kings and Queens. Rather, the media reign supreme in Olympic country and

they receive access to all the best seats in all sports venues. If you want to see the winning athlete cross the 100m sprint line, then you really need to be either a Queen or an NBC employee. Otherwise, it might be better to stay at home. The media are also afforded the most flexible and extensive transportation and comfortable locations.

This is not to say that such luxury is undeserved. An accredited broadcaster or journalist works very hard indeed during the Games. The least they should expect is somewhere to relax; after all, a content journalist makes for a pleasant report. Journalists in queues of traffic missing events would not benefit the Games public profile.

So, is this really a place where established social structures are turned on their head? Not quite. Those who are at the bottom, remain there. For the unaccredited 'nobody' – also those who are the life and soul of the games – you still have to queue for 2 hours to get a hot dog or go to the bathroom. There are no privileged short cuts or free tickets. Although, to the credit of the SLC organising committee, local inhabitants were able to apply for tickets to medal ceremonies, which they would receive for free. Such initiatives should be compulsory at the Games, since it is often the local residents who pay the highest price.

If you don't think this sounds much like celebrating humanity or sharing the spirit – the Olympic catch-phrases – you would be right. The Olympic values are written by those who have a privileged perspective of the Olympic Games. They do not need to queue or pay for anything or wait 45 minutes to sit in a crushed bus, while travelling for an hour to a sporting venue.



SLC Main stadium, 2002

This is not to say that the everyday person has no form of privilege. The affordability of some competitions is certainly fantastic. To observe elite athletes for just a few dollars is wonderful. As well, the streets are full of free entertainment and activity. Just don't get above your station! Equally, there is much to be gained by sitting on such buses, especially when you are among people who are in the same situation but with vastly different backgrounds. It is only the Olympics that brings such immediate diversity to a city, for such a brief time, and with nearly no incident of national resistance.