

Toward a Theory of Sportswashing: Mega-Events, Soft Power, and Political Conflict

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Sportswashing has emerged full force in the 21st century, highlighting the gap between word and deed in the sports world. Yet, the term suffers from definitional imprecision and is often applied solely to autocratic hosts. This article offers a robust definition of sportswashing and—building from the soft-power approach to analyzing mega-events like the Olympics and World Cup—creates a sportswashing typology. This paper offers four advances in conceptualizing sportswashing: (a) the practice is not just the domain of autocrats, but can emerge in democracies as well; (b) domestic audiences are crucial to understanding the political complexities of sportswashing; (c) sportswashing often sets the stage for military intervention; and (d) new forms of sportswashing are emerging, with authoritarian regimes funding teams and events in democratic states.

Sport plays an increasingly central role in political and social issues as well as processes of capital accumulation and the absorption of surplus capital. Sport both stabilizes and justifies the capitalist order, in part by priming athlete-workers for their role in the labor system and by reinforcing the wider commodity spectacle (Brohm, 1978; Perelman, 2012). As such, “The sports system is . . . an integral part of the capitalist mode of production, constituting a specific sector within the capitalist division of labor” (Perelman, 2012, p. 123). Sport refracts the problematics of capitalism, but, as perhaps the most influential cultural form in the 21st century, it also helps illuminate the contours and limits of predominant political discourses as it instantiates “the production of new meanings and the transformation of people’s social practices according to different definitions and rhythms” (Hall, 2016, p. 43).

In a historical conjuncture marked by crisis-prone, uber-mobile capital (Harvey, 2010), the rise of China as a geo-political force (Chun, 2021), and whipsaw heterogeneities in the oil sector (Restrepo et al., 2020)—and all this guided by the interwoven logics of intricate financialized accumulation modes (Sahr, 2022), resource wars (Van der Ploeg, 2018), and intractable debt traps (Dienst, 2011)—sports mega-events have emerged as an apt site for soaking up surplus capital, stoking popularity with restive domestic publics, and rejuvenating international reputations. In the 21st century, the “connotative domains of dominant or preferred meanings” are in flux, as Stuart Hall (2019, p. 269) would have it. In this context, sportswashing, as an emergent sociocultural formation with unequivocal political-economic markings, entered the fray full force, not only as a way to resolve capitalism’s crisis tendencies (like overaccumulation) through the production of space and the absorption of surplus capital and labor (Harvey, 2001), but also as a potential path for reputational refurbishment on the topography of political culture.

The word sportswashing has become pervasive in critical sports writing. In 2021, the Norwegian Language Board even chose “sportswashing” as its word of the year (Elsborg, 2022). And yet, the term often goes undefined. Many only apply sportswashing to authoritarian settings, as when U.S. Senator Ron

Wyden described it as “right out of every autocrat’s playbook, covering up their injustices by misusing athletics in hopes of normalizing their abuses” (Canzano, 2022).

I define sportswashing as a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front. Sportswashers use mega-events to try to foment national prestige and to convey economic or political advancement. Sportswashing can emerge in both authoritarian and democratic political spaces. It is a social relationship that entangles multiple audiences, both international and domestic; sportswashing can target a country’s internal population as much as an external, global public. While facilitating a “spatial fix” (Harvey, 2001, p. 24), sportswashing can subtly massage reputational repair into public consciousness through the sporty, cultural side door. As such, sportswashing both reflects the past and shapes the future.

In this article I theoretically sketch how sportswashing is grounded in both the machinations of capital *and* the largely discursive processes of rights and righteousness. Sportswashing fortifies and sharpens globalized capitalist development while simultaneously destabilizing and regenerating conceptions of fandom, allegiance, and human rights. It toggles between external and internal audiences. It has material implications and can even help generate war. The sociopolitical and socioeconomic trajectories of both authoritarian and democratic regimes—as well as regimes in between that exhibit features of both—can be partially reconciled via sportswashing. To anchor sportswashing as a component of the wider capitalist *and* cultural terrain, is to wedge open the political site map through which powerbrokers mobilize discourses in service of their agendas.

Theorizing sportswashing can help adumbrate the heterogeneous complexities animating capitalism, (settler) colonialism, and political alterity. It can also demystify “how sport serves as an economy of affect through which power, privilege, politics, and position are (re)produced,” as Silk and Andrews (2012a, p. 5) put it. Sportswashing both comprises and complicates what they (2012b, p. 129) call “the multidiscursive (political, economic, social, juridical, and architectural) constitution of new urban glamour zones and associated populations, the brutalizing injustices resulting from the advancement of profoundly divisive social

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geographies” in the sphere of sport. Various narratives explored here—aimed at international and domestic audiences, sometimes simultaneously—underpin sportswashing’s discursive allure and animate its structural effects.

The context of settler colonialism elucidates discursive and cultural elements of sportswashing, highlighting key elements of the process. Just as “there is much more at play in the contemporary reproduction of settler-colonial social relations than capitalist economics” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 14), there is more at play with sportswashing than the mere accumulation of capital. Sportswashing illuminates what Glen Coulthard (2014, p. 14) of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation calls a “host of interrelated yet semi-autonomous facets of discursive and nondiscursive power.”

To be sure, autocrats do use sports mega-events to try to launder their stained human-rights reputations on the world stage. With global leaders traveling to sports mega-events like the Olympics and soccer World Cup, where they engage in grin-and-grip photo opportunities with other global powerbrokers and sport barons, the result can be a sporty halo effect for the host nation and its political leadership. But sportswashing can also emerge in putative democratic, where sports mega events distract the public from unjust processes like gentrification, homelessness, and hyper-policing, and are used as a rationalization for addressing these hot-button social issues. And, of course, human rights violations happen daily in Western democracies, too. For instance, in Los Angeles, in the lead up to the 2028 Olympics, an epic humanitarian crisis around homelessness is unfolding in plain sight. After visiting Skid Row in Los Angeles, UN Rapporteur on extreme poverty Philip Alston observed, “The sheer size of Skid Row makes it look like a refugee camp.” However, he also noted, “the availability of toilets here is worse than in a UN-run Syrian refugee camp” (Ostrovsky, 2018). Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti used the scourge of homelessness to sportswash, stating that “I’m confident that by the time the Olympics come, we can end homelessness on the streets of LA.”¹

Sports mega-events provide the host with a rare chance to rewrite its history, reshaping narratives that bolster extant power relations. But there is also an underdiscussed knock-on effect of sportswashing: how it can smooth the path for war. Sportswashing, which has resonances with the concept of soft power, can clear space for hard-power interventions like an invasion. Sportswashing cannot merely be reduced to an elaborate and exorbitant branding exercise. It can actually be a conveyor belt of life and death.

Sportswashing, Human Rights, and Soft Power

The genealogy of the term sportswashing is brief. The word first came to prominence in 2015, just ahead of the European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan. Human rights advocate Rebecca Vincent used “sportswashing” in a press release for the Sport for Rights (2015, p. 1) campaign designed to illuminate Azerbaijani dictator Ilham Aliyev’s suppressive efforts, defining it as “attempting to distract from its human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events.” Around that time, Vincent (2015) also deployed the term in an essay she penned for the *International Business Times*.

Sportswashing swiftly became firmly embedded in the human rights lexicon, due in part to the fact that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the two most influential human-rights organizations globally, folded sport into their portfolios (Keys,

2019). It is important to note, though, that the field of human rights itself has a relatively short political history. Although the idea of human rights was formally born in 1948 with the passage of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it did not gain full traction until the 1970s. The Universal Declaration of 1948 not only lifted up political speech rights but also the more ambitious project of distributive equality. Human rights and economic rights were intertwined (Moyn, 2018).

The 1970s brought a significant split: the ascendance of human rights revolving around free expression, torture, and wrongful imprisonment, and the simultaneous shoe-horning of economic rights—replete with visions of large-scale redistribution—into a basic-needs discourse. Both the human-rights and basic-needs discourses were bundled as a humanitarian affair that was largely directed outward toward the Global South. These discourses also rhymed with the rising relevance of “personal freedoms” that was so crucial rhetorically to the subsequent neoliberal revolution. For human-rights scholar Samuel Moyn (2018, p. 121), all this “was too perfectly timed to avoid the conclusion that rights and needs were really attempts to ethically outflank the more ambitious global equality that postcolonial states themselves proposed.” He adds that “An emphasis on sufficiency looked to many like a consolation prize for the abandonment of equality . . . the distributive ideal of sufficiency alone survived and the ideal of equality died.” Even as subaltern groups leaned on human-rights talk as a “moral lingua franca” to effectively challenge their subordination, “material hierarchy was frequently ratified and strengthened,” notes Moyn (2018, pp. 216, 215). In part this was because the “Washington Consensus”—a clutch of neoliberal policies supported by Washington, DC-based institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury—were slow to take human rights seriously (Moyn, 2018, pp. 190–192). Still, even the revamped vision of human rights can play an important role in reframing public discussions around the positive and negative externalities of sports mega-events (Keys, 2019).

The concept of soft power overlaps with sportswashing. According to political scientist Joseph Nye (2004, p. 5), soft power “rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others” through co-optation rather than coercion. It is about attracting people to one’s values and ideas rather than compelling them with hard power in the form of military threats or economic penalties. It is about constructive engagement rather than military force. It is about nonmaterial modes of influence rather than brass-knuckle compulsion. Although soft power and hard power imply a binary, Nye suggests that they should be viewed on a spectrum ranging from hard-power command to soft-power co-optation. He also asserts (2004, p. 99), “Soft power is more difficult to wield” since “many of its crucial resources are outside the control of government, and their effects depend heavily on acceptance by the receiving audiences.” In addition, “soft-power resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, and sometimes take years to produce the desired outcomes.”

Critics of the concept have noted that Nye’s explanation “still presents the powers fundamentally as opposites” (Wolfe, 2020, p. 547).² Also, Mattern (2005, pp. 586, 587, emphasis in original) asserts that soft power is less about persuasion via attraction than foisting ideas upon a target audience; actors wielding soft power “sociolinguistically construct ‘reality’ not through evidence-based argument but through *representational force*.” Since it relies on sociolinguistic coercion, “soft power is not so soft.” This opens up a wider question: how often does soft power’s ostensible attraction come tacitly wrapped in the military carapace of hard power? The

iron fist of hard power can reside inside the velvet glove of soft power. Additionally, Hall (2010, p. 195) points out that “soft power as a term has a political utility quite separate from its analytic utility,” given its reliance on the problematic concept of attraction. Soft power tends to reaffirm and ratify the preferred policies and values of those who deploy the term, thereby refracting Western-dominated power relations and political predilections. Finally, because the concept of soft power emerged in the context of international relations, it has a built-in blind spot for domestic considerations, which are vital for understanding sportswashing. Nevertheless, scholars often deploy a soft power framework to analyze the political machinations of sports mega-events (Alekseyeva, 2014; Grix & Kramareva, 2017; Kramareva & Grix, 2018; Wolfe, 2016). Soft power can offer leverage on understanding sportswashing, but sportswashing simultaneously spotlights the limitations of the soft-power approach.

Elements of Sportswashing in History

Although the term sportswashing was coined in the 21st century, some of the core ideas animating the concept stretch back centuries. Scholars trace the component elements of sportswashing back to the ancient Olympics in Greece where in 416 BCE, amid a war between Athens and Sparta, Athens entered numerous teams into the chariot race where they thrived. Their success distracted attention from the fact that Athens was being beaten in the war, affording the impression that everything was going well (Golden, 2008, 1998). Historian Paul Christesen stated, “It was a straight-up geopolitical maneuver” (Rosenberg, 2022). Alcibiades, a young Athenian politician on the rise, and the person who brought all those chariot teams to compete at the Olympics, pivoted off his success, using it to scythe a path for bellicosity. In a speech in 415 BCE, citing the recent Olympic victories as evidence of power and honor, he implored Athenians to invade their rivals in Sicily (Nielsen, 2014).

Elements of sportswashing were also present at 1936 Berlin Olympics. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis used the Berlin Games as a trampoline for their own political power. The Nazis even invented a special tradition to facilitate sportswashing: the Olympic Torch Relay. Under their plan, a flame lit at Mount Olympus in Greece eventually wended its way to Berlin’s Olympic stadium, where it ignited the Olympic cauldron. The relay—avidly supported by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels and officially approved by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in May 1934—made its way from the ruins in ancient Olympia to Berlin in the hands of more than 3,000 runners. The event chimed with Nazi propaganda identifying German Aryans as the true and worthy heirs of the ancient Greeks (Mandell, 1987). Traversing seven countries in 12 days, the route from Olympia to Berlin not only spread the word about the upcoming Olympics, but it also enabled Hitler to funnel Nazi propaganda through central and southeastern Europe, key zones of Nazi geopolitical ambition and future war-making. During the final days of the relay, those chosen by the regime to carry the torch through Germany were exclusively blond and blue-eyed, perfect exemplars of the Nazis’ Aryan “master race” (Large, 2012).

Media coverage of the sport spectacle was often fawning. The *New York Times* described Hitler as “the new Caesar of this era” who “was receiving the plaudits of a league far removed from politics, a league of peaceful sport to which he had become the proud host” (Birchall, 1936a, p. 1). In another *New York Times* article—titled “Olympics Leave Glow of Pride in the Reich”—correspondent Frederick Birchall (1936b, p. E5) enthused that the

Games contributed to nothing less than “the undoubted improvement of world relations and general amiability.” Olympic visitors from abroad would depart Germany with the impression that “this is a nation happy and prosperous almost beyond belief; that Hitler is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, political leaders in the world today, and that Germans themselves are a much maligned, hospitable, wholly peaceful people who deserve the best the world can give them.” Birchall (1936b, p. E5) added, “Even if the Olympics have cost Germany 100,000,000 marks, most of which will go into the financial deficit, this has been a propaganda achievement well worth it.”

The Games burnished Hitler’s reputation globally, but also at home in Germany. The Führer’s popularity reached “its zenith in summer of 1936,” notes Hilmes (2018, p. 98), “penetrating deep even into the working classes.” Domestic support formed a firm foundation for military action. In the aftermath the 1936 Olympics, Hitler swiftly turned his attention to waging invasions, and even the Olympic stadium was used as a space to develop the technologies of war. The year after the Olympics, Hitler informed his military brass that the use of force would be required to realize the country’s proclaimed destiny. In 1938, Germany annexed Austria and occupied the Sudetenland. The *Kristallnacht*, or The Night of Broken Glass, transpired in November 1938 when Nazis went on a violent rampage against Jews. In 1939, Germany overtook Czechoslovakia. By the end of that year—only three years after the Berlin Olympics—Europe was embroiled in World War II (Shirer, 1960; Welch, 1993).

Sportswashing in the 21st Century

Sportswashing emerged full force in the “concrete historical conjuncture” (Hall, 2016, p. 94) of the 21st century. The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics are a prominent, instructive instance of the process in action. When the city was bidding on the 2008 Summer Games back in 2001, the head of the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee stated that hosting the Games in China would “not only promote our economy but also enhance all social conditions, including education, health and human rights” (Hadad, 2008). However, this human rights heyday never arrived. In fact, the 2008 Olympics marked a pivot point for intensified state repression. Sophie Richardson, the China Director at Human Rights Watch (2008, emphasis added), asserted, “The reality is that the Chinese government’s hosting of the Games has been a *catalyst* for abuses.” However, this did not stop the IOC from selecting Beijing to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, even though it knew full well that previous promises went unmet and that human-rights violations had continued, and even intensified, whether against ethnic Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang Province, people in Tibet, or democracy activists in Hong Kong (Byler, 2021). The IOC chose Beijing despite the fact that human-rights abuses in China clashed mightily with “fundamental principles of Olympism” such as the aspiration “to create a way of life based on . . . social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles,” as stated in the *Olympic Charter* (IOC, 2020, p. 11).

More recent examples of sportswashing include the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia where the Games allowed Vladimir Putin to distract from laws that openly persecuted lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, a topic that generated negative media coverage internationally (Boykoff & Yasuoka, 2014). If one focuses only on external-audience image-improvement strategies, the Sochi Olympics may appear to be a flop. However, Sochi Olympics organizers were not only concerned

about Russia's international image; they invested immense energy gearing their Olympic messaging toward a domestic audience, infusing it with affective loyalty for the country and yearning for national strength and solidarity in the face of international adversaries and their calculated cultivation of anti-Russian sentiments (see Figure 1). The Sochi Olympics were slammed by international critics for arriving with a price tag exceeding \$50 billion, more than all previous Winter Games to that point (Müller, 2014). Polling in Russia showed that only 43% believed the Games would yield economic benefits, with 46% asserting the opposite. And yet, more than three in five (62%) in Russia were proud to host the 2014 Olympics and the 2018 men's World Cup (Alekseyeva, 2014, p. 168). Domestic messaging, wrapped inside the wider sportswashing project, had important effects.

Domestically, the Games were about more than money matters. "Sochi 2014 illustrates how high profile mega-projects pursued by the Russian Government are largely aimed at image-building," notes Anna Alekseyeva (2014, p. 159), as well as the production of diffused symbolic support for the government and wider political system. Wolfe (2016, p. 483) asserts that hosting the 2014 Olympics provided an opportunity to solidify a singular sense of "Russian-ness" amid competing notions that had been circulating since the fall of the Soviet Union. Domestically, the Games helped those who were "propagating a unified, stable sense of Russian-ness constructed from selected portions of pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian cultural history." In the lead-in to the Games, state media featured a steady flow of positive, heartening stories that generated patriotic pride. During the actual Olympics, Wolfe (2016, p. 488) observed a sharp pivot whereby "many Russians—even those with avowed pro-Western, anti-Putin views—took umbrage at what they considered biased, overly negative coverage from the West. They called this 'Western *zloradstvo*' or, literally, evil-reveling." Using Western criticism

—and in particular, U.S. reproach—as a foil, "the Olympics transformed into a rallying point for the country, and the games became a point of pride." In short, hosting the Games stoked national unity.

Although Nye (2014) himself argued that Russia squandered its opportunity to wield soft power through hosting the Sochi Olympics,³ scholars Grix and Kramareva (2017, p. 463) assert that this view misses the fact that "the Sochi Olympics were designed above all as a source of domestic soft power rather than simply as an external 'signaling' exercise." For them, the 2014 Olympics held "a double purpose," on one hand to "ignite a patriotic sentiment and to be perceived as a unifying cultural symbol," and on the other to facilitate "the emergence of the potent new Russian myth" (Grix & Kramareva, 2017, p. 464).

The Sochi Olympics were part of a larger modernization program in Russia, a fact often missed by Western observers. According to both the independent polling agency Levada and Russian news outlet *Novosti*, Putin achieved unprecedented popularity in the wake of the Sochi Games, leaping to an all-time high approval rating of almost 86% in May 2014 (Grix & Kramareva, 2017, pp. 463–464). Part of this popularity can be attributed to the fact that after the Olympics concluded and before the Paralympics commenced, Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula and subsequently annexed it, snatching the region from Ukraine. But the successful invasion points to a key idea: hosting the Olympics revs up domestic publics in ways that can soften up the political terrain for war. For an international audience, the Crimea invasion was evidence of a dangerous renegade state. For the domestic audience inside Russia, it symbolized Russian strength and the inability of Western rivals to stop a nation on the rise, even as those adversaries condemned the military incursion; these were exactly the same messages delivered via the Sochi 2014 sportswash. Grix and Kramareva (2017, p. 468) assert the invasion, following on the



Figure 1 — Sportswashing can be geared toward both international and domestic audiences. IOC = International Olympic Committee. This figure was inspired by "‘For the Benefit of Our Nation’: Unstable Soft Power in the 2018 Men’s World Cup in Russia," by S.D. Wolfe, 2020, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 12(4), pp. 545–561.

heels of the Olympics, “elevated national consciousness to unprecedented levels in post-Soviet history.” Considering the domestic dimensions of sportswashing helps illuminate the blind spots of soft-power analysis that emphasizes international prestige and attraction.

In some ways, 2022 was the year of the sportswash. Not only did Beijing host the 2022 Winter Olympics and Paralympics, but in November Qatar will stage the men’s World Cup. Qatar was voted to host in 2010 under a shroud of corruption allegations; the U.S. Department of Justice alleges that vote-buying was rampant for both the 2022 Qatar mega-event and the 2018 World Cup in Russia (Bensinger, 2018; Panja & Draper, 2020). The government in Qatar—a constitutional monarchy where Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani exerts total executive power—severely restricts free expression and assembly, wields significant prohibitions against labor organizing, and criminalizes same-sex relationships (U.S. Department of State, 2021). A senior Qatari security official for the World Cup stated publicly that LGBTQ fans would be welcome to attend the event, but that they might have their rainbow flags confiscated in order to protect them from being physically attacked (Harris, 2022a). A February 2021 *Guardian* investigation determined that more than 6,500 migrant workers—from places like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—have died in Qatar since 2010, with around three dozen perishing while working directly on World Cup stadium construction (Pattison et al., 2021). Moreover, according to Human Rights Watch (2022b), hundreds of thousands of migrant workers experienced grave labor abuses while helping Qatar prepare for the World Cup, and they have not yet received financial compensation.

Making matters worse, when FIFA President Gianni Infantino was asked whether he was doing anything to help the families who were affected by these labor travesties, he minimized the misery stating, “When you give work to somebody, even in hard conditions, you give him dignity and pride. It’s not charity. You don’t make charity. You don’t give something to somebody and say, ‘Stay where you are. I give you something and I feel good’” (Harris, 2022b). As if to stack up the gaffes, Patrice Motsepe, President of the African Football Confederation, said while attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, “Every time I am in Qatar I see thousands of people from all over the world having the privilege and the excitement of employment and taking money home with the building of the stadiums, the building of hotels. It has huge benefits for our people in the Middle East as well as worldwide” (Kunti, 2022). Coming from the mouth of a billionaire mining tycoon, and in the midst of what is arguably the world’s most prominent gathering of global elites, his words swerved well wide of the mark for those concerned with human rights.

The Qatar World Cup spotlights the fact that for host countries, sportswashing does not come with a guarantee of success. The phenomenon is wrapped in an implicit gamble. Attempts at sportswashing can invite increased scrutiny. Not only has the Qatar 2022 World Cup raised the profile of the unjust kafala labor system—a migrant sponsorship system that can lead to forced labor—but it has also raised the ever-present specter of FIFA corruption. Thanks to relentless pressure from human-rights advocates, Qatar amended its kafala system in September 2020, becoming the first Gulf state to allow migrant workers to switch jobs without their employer’s permission before their contracts end. (Human-rights groups view an employer’s total control over workers’ ability to swap jobs as a key step on the road to forced labor.) Following Kuwait, Qatar also

set a minimum wage. Employers in Qatar still maintain enormous control over the lives of migrant workers who are often mired in debt and living in fear of retribution. Draconian punishments for “absconding” remain in place, affording employers the chance to penalize migrant workers who leave their job without securing permission or who stay in Qatar past the strictures delimited on their work permit. Nevertheless, these reforms, if enforced effectively, could improve working conditions for thousands of migrant workers, although Human Rights Watch (2020) cautiously noted, “passport confiscations, high recruitment fees, and deceptive recruitment practices are ongoing and largely go unpunished, and workers are banned from joining trade unions or striking.” Still, it is hard to envision these labor reforms without pressure generated by the World Cup; the mega-event thus generated positive externalities that did not chime with the host’s original sportswashing blueprints.

A Sportswashing Typology and Spatial Complications

When it comes to sportswashing, there is no one-size-fits-all model. The form that sportswashing takes depends on two central factors: the political context of the mega-event host and the intended audience. In terms of political context, does the host country veer authoritarian or democratic?⁴ The audience for sportswashed messaging can be international, domestic, or both. In combination, these factors point to the political purpose of sportswashing. What objective is the sports mega-event supposed to facilitate? Is the endeavor meant to rev up patriotism in domestic audiences, paper over social problems, assist in directly addressing social problems and human-rights concerns, or some combination thereof?

Figure 2 presents sportswashing’s primary paths, albeit with heuristic binaries that erase the gray areas between categories. As mentioned earlier, Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics organizers vowed, in a message largely geared toward international audiences, that hosting the Games would kick-start a human-rights renaissance in the country. We also saw how domestic messaging was vital with the Sochi 2014 Winter Games. In the democratic context, the Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Olympics, the first Games held after

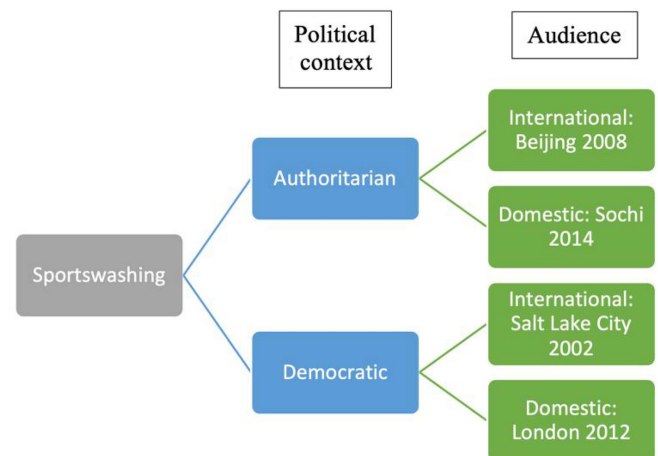


Figure 2 — Sportswashing typology. The formation that sportswashing assumes depends on two primary factors, the political context of the mega-event host and the intended audience.

the 9/11 terrorist attacks, created a prime opportunity for politicians and other plenipotentiaries to project a message to an international audience that the United States was “the safest place in the world.” More broadly, media coverage served as an integrated effort to reshuffle and fortify Manichaeian ideas about the “War on Terrorism” and its global insiders and outsiders. The U.S. government used the Olympics to sportswash the terrorist attacks and to reassert technological and security dominance, and this was refracted through the media, creating a ghost legacy of a more aggressive counter-terrorism policy and amplified public fears about terrorism (Atkinson & Young, 2002). The hegemonic narrative also created a glide path for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. But democratic hosts can also sportswash with domestic audiences in mind, as when London 2012 Olympic organizers vowed that staging the Games would “make the U.K. a world-leading sporting nation” while inspiring a surge of young people embracing exercise activities (Jowell, 2008, p. 4). However, *The Lancet* found that no such uptick in sports participation occurred (Bauman et al., 2021).

Sportswashing has also emerged in the context of colonialism and settler colonialism. Colonialism, notes Coulthard (2014, p. 7), is a form of “structured dispossession” that often includes the indoctrination of possessive individualism. “Colonialism is more than the intent, identities, heritages, and values of settlers and their ancestors,” adds Red River Métis scholar Max Liboiron (2021, p. 9). “It’s about genocide and access.” Liboiron (2021, p. 6) makes the key point that colonialism is not a monolithic creature of the past but “a set of contemporary and evolving land relations that can be maintained by good intentions and even good deeds.” Sportswashers claim to be the purveyors of such “good deeds.” Settler colonialism is a “land-centered project” that bends toward genocide (Wolfe, 2006, p. 393). Coulthard (2014, pp. 6–7) elaborates, “A settler-colonial relationship is one characterized by a particular form of *domination*; that is, it is a relationship where power—in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power—has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority.” The “interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of . . . power” are evident in the case of sportswashing and the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics where the audience was both domestic and international. Here we see Mattern’s (2005, p. 586) “representational force” in action.

In a world where the enclosure of Indigenous territory portends the foreclosure of an equal partnership, sportswashing can provide a tantalizing path for mega-event powerbrokers. At the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, Indigenous peoples played a more prominent role than in any previous Olympics. The Vancouver Games were staged on unceded Coast Salish land. Thus, the specter of dispossession haunted the Olympics and “No Olympics on Stolen Native Land” became a principal anti-Olympics slogan amid a battle for Indigenous rights and against settler colonialism. In November 2004, four First Nations from British Columbia—the Lil’wat, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples—came together to create the Four Host First Nations, agreeing to work together to assist with the Games. As part of the sportswash, the IOC recognized Indigenous people as official host partners for the first time. While the Four Host First Nations took center stage at the Olympics—and benefited economically from their willingness to partake—80 of the 203 Indigenous bands in British Columbia refused to participate, a remarkable statistic in light of ubiquitous pro-Olympic, mediated discourse and the possibility of economic gain (Pemberton, 2010).

The Vancouver Games, despite the high-profile publicity emerging from Olympic circles, did not bring significant job creation for Indigenous people. In 2006–2007, Indigenous people comprised 1.2% of workers in the Vancouver Organizing Committee. Between 2007 and 2009 this increased slightly—to 3%—before unaccountably decreasing to only 1% in 2009–2010 (Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, 2010, p. 18). Clayton Thomas-Müller (2017) of the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation calls this “redwashing,” or an attempt to transmit benevolence “through sponsorship schemes for Indigenous education, art and culture. It is the process of covering up the detrimental effects of corporate initiatives with friendly slogans and lump sum donations to Indigenous communities.” Indigenous scholar O’Bonsawin (2006, p. 391, 392), of the Abenaki Nation at Odanak, asserted that sportswashing manifested as the “transparent appropriation of First Nations culture” that “reinforced hegemonic dominance over a colonized people.” This did not stop the Canadian Olympic Committee from enrolling the Four Host First Nations as partners in Vancouver’s bid to host the 2030 Winter Olympics (Mackin, 2022). Once again, Olympic plenipotentiaries are attempting to deploy the Olympic project in the service of sending the message to both international and domestic audiences that Canada is a multicultural idyll while deflecting attention from unresolved battles over the legal status of Indigenous land (Kaste, 2010). The Commonwealth Games are another example of sportswashing in the service of colonial erasure for the former British Empire (Pavlidis et al., 2019).

But what about when authoritarian countries take their sportswashing show on the road? Stepping away from sports mega-events for a moment allows us to see a qualitatively divergent version of sportswashing whereby controversial regimes purchase professional sports clubs or host major events in putative democracies. This entails essentially renting the world’s best athletes as de facto ambassadors. Unlike hosting mega-events, where athletes have little say in where they occur, athletes are fully implicated in authoritarian-backed sports transpiring in democratic countries.

For instance, in 2021, Saudi Arabia used its Public Investment Fund, which oversees some \$500 billion in assets, to purchase Newcastle United in the English Premier League of football. Premier League officials were appeased by Saudi Arabia’s assurance that even though the Governor of the Public Investment Fund, Yasir al-Rumayyan, was chosen to serve as Newcastle United’s nonexecutive chairman, and that the Public Investment Fund is chaired by the Crown Prince of the country, Mohammed bin Salman, that it is nevertheless totally distinct from the Saudi government. Bin Salman is generally viewed as the ruler of Saudi Arabia where he formally serves as the Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister (Panja & Smith, 2021). Nevertheless, in a press statement, the Premier League (2021) asserted that it “has now received legally binding assurances that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will not control Newcastle United Football Club.” Amnesty International’s Sacha Deshmukh said in response that “Ever since this deal was first talked about we said it represented a clear attempt by the Saudi authorities to sportswash their appalling human rights record with the glamour of top-flight football” (Panja & Smith, 2021). The Newcastle United purchase is qualitatively distinct from sporting events that Saudi Arabia has increasingly hosted on home soil in motorsports, boxing, soccer, and tennis. The move may not sway the politically sophisticated sports fan’s views on Saudi Arabia, but it may well soften the views of everyday ‘apolitical’ aficionados keen to see their team compete among the best while fortifying the reputational prestige of Saudi powerbrokers on the home front.

The human-rights situation in Saudi Arabia is deeply controversial. Purchasing a football club in England expanded Riyadh's multi-front propaganda effort—spanning sport, art, business, and entertainment spheres—designed to amend perceptions of Saudi Arabia, both externally—in the democracies where they are planting roots—and domestically, where Saudis can feel pride in their country as a global power player and cultural influencer. The sportswashing emerging from Saudi Arabia is also meant to erase the fact that in October 2018, journalist Jamal Khashoggi was killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, his body hacked into chunks with a bone saw before being discarded. Many allege that the assassination was done at the behest of Mohammed bin Salman. Beyond this, women's rights advocates in Saudi Arabia are routinely repressed and the country oversees mass executions and metes out exorbitant prison sentences for peaceful activists (Human Rights Watch, 2022a).

This brand of sportswashing helps Saudi Arabia sop up surplus capital, achieving what David Harvey (2001, p. 24) dubbed a “spatial fix” to describe “capitalism's insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring.” But sportswashing serves deeper ideological functions as well. While wedging open the new zones of capital accumulation, the production of sportswashed space relies on previous established regimes of fandom that exist outside the sovereign territory of the purveyor of sportswashing. This taps into what Kalman-Lamb (2019, p. 522) emphasizes as the affective elements of sport as a key site for social reproduction. He argues that capitalism creates “affective need” that is satiated through sport spectatorship. So, “fandom is a response to the affective deprivation of capitalism. It is an attempt to find meaning and community in a society that denies them. Fans watch sporting events and feel a part of something that is larger than themselves. They feel like they are part of a team and part of a community of others who are also part of that team.” Sportswashers operating on foreign turf exploit these complex relations for their own purposes, enrolling spectators, as well as athletic laborers, as political chess pieces in the process. At the same time, sportswashers risk igniting political opposition, given that fandom is saturated with affective capital, and thus gamble fomenting militant activism anchored in local concerns but linked to wider movements for justice. In this way, sportswashing both hardens and expands what Hall (1989, p. 13) called the “boundaries and limits of tolerable politics” while invoking but also unsettling human-rights discourses.

These dynamics played out during the Saudi-funded LIV International Golf League, which debuted in London in June 2022. The winner of the inaugural event was guaranteed to haul in \$4 million while even the last place finisher received \$120,000. The London tournament was part of a spate of events in summer and fall 2022, with five in the United States and others in Bangkok and Jeddah. The Saudis have plunged \$255 million into the endeavor, which has lured big-name golfers like Dustin Johnson and Phil Mickelson into the fold (Beall, 2022). In numerous press conferences, golfers stumbled, bumbled, and mumbled in response to questions about their role in the sportswash (Sternik, 2022). Sport looked like the world's highest-profile laundromat. If colonialism carves out temporary systems of inequitable relations that may have an expiration date while settler colonialism is voracious in its land-grabbing and ruthless with its quest to replace Indigenous people with permanent settlers (Phillips et al., 2019, p. 144), then the LIV golf project is more in alignment with colonialism while the purchasing of professional football clubs more resembles settler colonialism. Both emergent formations of sportswashing

point to an evolutionary pivot toward the machinations of colonialism and settler colonialism.

The sportswashing-induced vectors of capital create victors and victims, both directly and indirectly. A key point all too often lost in discussions of sportswashing is that in seeking the redistribution of reputational power, sportswashers can simultaneously unlatch the gate toward brass-knuckle military intervention. In the case of Saudi Arabia, sportswashing distracts attention from the country's ongoing war on Yemen (Al Dosari & George, 2020). Beginning in 2015, when military operations commenced against Houthi forces, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly violated international humanitarian law, killing thousands of civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2022a). Since the Saudi Public Investment Fund purchased Newcastle United and organized the LIV Golf League, the aerial bombing of Yemen has only intensified, even as the UN declared the conflict there as the biggest humanitarian crisis on the planet, with 80% of the population requiring assistance (BBC, 2022). To be clear, this does not necessarily imply a straightforward, positivistic version of causality. The relationship between sportswashing and military intervention is not tantamount to the crisp click of billiard balls whereby the cue ball snaps the eight ball into the corner pocket so much as a plea for a relational ontology with a wider time horizon.

Conclusion

From the perspective of high-level sports officials, working with autocrats to stage mega-events like the Olympics and World Cup can bring significant benefits. In a rare moment of candor, IOC member Gian-Franco Kasper admitted, “Dictators can perhaps carry out such events; they do not have to ask the people” (Hauri & Rindlisbacher, 2019). An administrator from FIFA, the world's governing body for soccer, echoed this sentiment, stating, “less democracy is sometimes better for organizing a [sports mega-event] When you have a very strong head of state who can decide . . . that is easier for us organizers” (Reuters, 2013). Sportswashing can bequeath autocrats with a functional relationship to legitimacy, but for host countries, it does not come with guarantees of success. Sportswashing is wrapped in a silent gamble. Attempts at sportswashing invite increased scrutiny, as when the Qatar 2022 World Cup raised profile of the country's kefala system, forcing reform, while throwing a spotlight on FIFA corruption.

This paper has typologized sportswashing, asserting four fresh contentions along the way. First, sportswashing is not just the domain of autocrats; it can transpire in putative democracies where elected officials vow to leverage social change through hosting mega-events. Sportswashing, in other words, does not oblige Western exceptionalism. Second, domestic audiences are crucial to understanding the political complexities of sportswashing, but are often overlooked. With a focus on international relations, Nye (2004, p. 4) writes that soft power is “getting others to want the outcomes that you want.” And yet, an examination of sportswashing shows that it is not quite that simple. Domestic audiences, often overlooked by theorists using the soft-power approach, are central to understanding sportswashing and its knock-on effects. When people inquire as to whether sportswashing works, they often turn a blind eye to the dynamics in the homeland. Third, sportswashing can set the stage for military intervention, albeit not in oversimple causal fashion. Nye (2004, p. 9) contends, “Soft power does not depend on hard power.” However, sportswashing can certainly pave a path for military intervention or its intensification. The relationship between soft power and hard

power remains underexplored. Fourth, new forms of sportswashing are in emergence, with controversial authoritarian regimes funding teams, leagues, and events in democratic states, flinging new factors into play when it comes to both the roles of fandom and athletic laborers who get caught in the sportswashed crossfire.

Sportswashing thrives in a 21st-century historical conjuncture that Silk and Andrews (2012a, p. 9) describe as “a power shift from democratic local governing regimes” in Western countries “to a constellation of public/private institutions that operate largely independently from democratic politics, with little public accountability and less of a commitment to extend social justice to the whole of society.” In this context, sportswashing is structured awkwardly atop a system of predominant values and ideas like soft power, human rights, and social justice. It manifests in multiple, complex fashions. Sahr (2022, p. 102) asserts that a key task of critical sociology is “to identify which power constellations allow particular justification models to become established as more or less hegemonic social legitimization discourses, and with what social consequences.” Sportswashing has emerged as an increasingly “hegemonic social legitimization discourse” for autocrats and democrats alike to try to help resolve the tensions that arise amid 21st-century precarity, whether material or discursive, whether culturally appropriate or reinforcing. Simultaneously, sportswashing reveals political fault lines and heightens economic contradictions.

Depending on the audience, sportswashing can be either intoxicating or toxic. Moyn (2018, p. 6) notes that “human rights have become prisoners of the contemporary age of inequality” and this can be seen with clarity when considering sportswashing, where human-rights concerns are often shuffled under the rug of capital accumulation and ecstatic fandom. Sportswashing heralds the structural derangement of the human-rights impulse. Analysis of sportswashing demands a relational rather than positivist epistemology, functionally dependent as the latter is on regularized, measurable variables. Hyper-specific and contingent political context is enormously important when it comes to the machinations of sportswashing, making a universal, one-size-fits-all theory moot.

Dikeç (2001, p. 1792, emphasis in original) propounds a sociospatial heuristic for thinking about sportswashing: the dialectical relationship between the “the *spatiality of injustice*—from physical or locational aspects to more abstract spaces of social and economic relationships that sustain the production of injustice—and the *injustice of spatiality*—the elimination of the possibilities for the formation of political responses.” Sportswashing scythes space for what we might call *disrememberment*: the intentional installation of an alternative historical collective memory regime that has the structural effect of dismembering a group or culture, nixing particularistic histories and positions while foregrounding hegemonic formations. With this in mind, it behooves us to understand sportswashing’s complexities.

Notes

1. See “Mayor Eric Garcetti is optimistic about local politics,” *Late Night With Seth Meyers* (2018), https://archive.org/details/KNTV_20180307_083700_Late_Night_With_Seth_Meyers
2. Wolfe (2020, p. 547) writes, “Mega-events like the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the 2018 World Cup reveal that soft and hard powers are not necessarily so opposed as imagined: they can intermingle, sometimes complementing one another, sometimes contradicting. Hard and soft powers are contingent and mutable, engaged by heterogenous methods at various times and dependent on a variety of actors, targets, and contextual conditions.”

3. A similar argument can be found in the academic writing of Kobiercecki (2016).
4. To be sure, this is a heuristic binary that occludes the gray space that exists in empirical reality.

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