

# H-Net Reviews

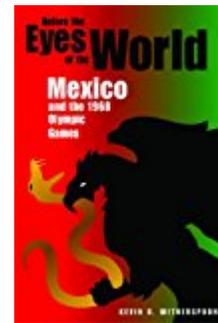
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin B. Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World: Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008. xi + 212 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-388-3.

Reviewed by Stephen Allen (Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey)

Published on H-LatAm (May, 2011)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



## Sport, Diplomacy, and Contentious Politics: The 1968 Mexico City Olympics

As Brazil prepares to host the FIFA World Cup (2014) and the Summer Olympics (2016), it makes sense to reflect on the last time a Latin American nation hosted both events in a two-year span. Much like Brazil now, Mexico used the Summer Olympics (1968) and the World Cup (1970) to broadcast to the world the economic progress and political stability it had achieved. In the case of the Olympics, the results were mixed. The massacre at Tlatelolco one month before the games tarnished Mexico's peaceful image, although the actual sporting events carried on smoothly. In *Before the Eyes of the World*, U.S. diplomatic historian Kevin B. Witherspoon draws on the 1968 Summer Olympics to examine Mexican society and politics, Cold War international politics, and the U.S.-based Black Power movement. His analysis illustrates that hosting an international sporting event can have consequences far beyond the organizers' intentions.

Witherspoon contends that the 1968 Summer Olympics "united politics, culture, diplomacy, and athletics as no Olympics before or since" (p. 5). Conscious of their nation's status as the first third world host of the Olympics, Mexican elites sought to project an international image of Mexico that balanced its modern and industrial characteristics with more traditional, and distinctly Mexican, traits. In contrast, the Mexican student movement viewed the Olympics as an example of the misguided policies of an authoritarian Mexican gov-

ernment that refused to democratize. The Mexico City Olympics also became the site of debate over the contentious racial politics of the United States (specifically the Black Power movement and its effect on athletics) and South Africa (which continued to be banned from international sporting competition for its apartheid policies). Finally, from the bidding process to the actual sporting events, these Olympic Games served as a platform for the United States and the Soviet Union to outwit and outperform each other in order to gain an advantage in the game of Cold War cultural supremacy.

*Before the Eyes of the World* consists of six chapters, with each examining a specific aspect of the 1968 Summer Olympics. Chapter 1 describes how Mexico City won the bid for the Olympics, and includes a history of Mexican participation in and hosting of international amateur sporting events. In bidding for the Olympics, Mexico City defeated its chief rival, Detroit, by securing the support of the Soviet Union and by contrasting U.S. arrogance and racial exclusion with Mexican humility and racial inclusion. Chapter 2 discusses the central controversies of this Olympiad, including South Africa's eligibility, the nature of amateurism, and Mexico City's altitude. It also analyzes the Cultural Olympics, which took place a year before the sporting events and focused on the cultural contributions of participating nations. Although a success, Witherspoon contends that

the Cultural Olympic activities “celebrated European and American culture, relegating Mexican culture to a lesser stature” (p. 77).

The following two chapters analyze the contentious politics that surrounded the games. Chapter 3 examines the impact of the Black Power movement on African American amateur athletes, many of whom considered boycotting the Olympics because of inequalities in how they were treated. Although fascinating, this chapter makes very little reference to Mexico. Chapter 4 narrates the events of the Mexican student movement and the massacre at Tlatelolco, which shattered the image of Mexico as a peaceful and stable nation—an image the Olympics were intended to project.

The final two chapters focus on the results of the Olympics, on the field and off. Chapter 5 looks at the sporting events of the Olympics, with a particular focus on African Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s controversial fist raise during their medal ceremony, a salute to Black Power. The chapter, however, makes very few references to Mexico and Mexican perceptions of the results of the Olympics. Chapter 6 serves as a conclusion and an epilogue. Regarding the impact of the Olympics on Mexico, Witherspoon argues, “it seems clear that spending on projects such as the Olympics contributed to the economic woes of the 1970s and 1980s” (p. 146). In terms of Mexico’s impact on the Olympics, he notes that the 1968 Summer Olympics set a precedent for the amount of time and money spent on security, both of which would continue to increase for future Olympics.

In narrating the story of the Mexico City Olympics, *Before the Eyes of the World* makes a significant contribution to the existing academic literature on Mexico and on sport. It is the first critical history to analyze both the actual sporting events of the Mexico City Olympics and the political and social contexts surrounding them. Witherspoon attempts to address issues in Mexican, African American, U.S. diplomatic, and sport historiography, which works best when he analyzes the bidding process for hosting the Olympics in chapter 1. Furthermore, Witherspoon demonstrates that the Mexico City Olympics were a turning point in Olympic history, as the Mexico City Olympics were a harbinger for the increased politicization of the games that led to the Olympic boycotts of the 1980s.

Witherspoon’s narrative relies on a variety of sources: private collections, personal interviews, public archives, and periodicals. Of these sources, the latter two provide the bulk of the evidence. The archival

evidence includes documents from the Mexican Olympic Committee, the United States Olympic Committee, the National Security Archive, and the Avery Brundage Collection, although the vast majority of the archival evidence is from the National Archive and Records Administration (NARA). Of the forty periodicals cited, three were published in Mexico, while the rest were published in the United States or Europe.

To his credit, Witherspoon examines the Mexico City Olympics from multiple perspectives. Yet, at times, Mexico and Mexicans are depicted flatly as passive spectators, especially in chapters 3 and 5, where they receive little mention. One wonders if these depictions would have differed had Witherspoon consulted the Archivo General de la Nación’s archive on the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games, as Ariel Rodríguez Kuri and Claire and Keith Brewster have done.[1] Cultural magazines, such as *Siempre!* And *Mañana*, and sports dailies, such as *ESTO* and *La Afición*, likewise would have helped flesh out Mexican perspectives on African American athletes and the athletic results of the games. Furthermore, *Before the Eyes of the World* does not examine the links between the 1968 Olympics and Mexico’s hosting of the 1970 World Cup, which both Joseph L. Arbena and Eric Zolov contend were also intended to project a modern, Mexican image of the nation abroad and legitimize the regime back home.[2]

In the end, *Before the Eyes of the World* provides a well-written account of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics that functions better as Olympic and sport history than it does as Mexican history. The second half of the title, *Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games*, is a bit misleading, though Mexicanists should find much of the book engaging.

#### Notes

[1]. Ariel Rodríguez Kuri, “El otro ‘68: Política y estilo en la organización de los Juegos Olímpicos de la Ciudad de México,” *Relaciones* 19, no. 76 (1998): 108-129; and Claire and Keith Brewster, *Representing the Nation: Sport, Control, Contestation, and the Mexican Olympics*, in special issue, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26, no. 6 (2009): 711-880.

[2]. Joseph L. Arbena, “Hosting the Summer Olympic Games: Mexico City, 1968,” in *Sport in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. Joseph L. Arbena and David G. LaFrance (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 133-143; and Eric Zolov, “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomorrow’: Mexico and the 1968 Olympics,” *The Americas* 61 no. 2 (2004): 159-188.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Stephen Allen. Review of Witherspoon, Kevin B., *Before the Eyes of the World: Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31733>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.