

# GREEK OLYMPICS?

An intelligent comment today in the NYT on the mismatch between modern and ancient Olympics [Link – “The Way We Live Now: What Olympic Ideal?” – Daniel Mendelsohn (Princeton)]

(Thanks to Jody Maxmin for putting me on to this.)

Main point – the Greeks were very different to how most people imagine them to be. There is no direct line of cultural continuity from antiquity to the present – that was all a blatant fallacy propagated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

And so, whereas today’s Olympic committee prefers to “celebrate humanity” (an official slogan of contemporary Olympiads), the Greek athlete wanted only to be celebrated himself; it was his one ticket to immortality. It is difficult for us today to conceive of the extent to which a ferocious competitiveness fueled so much of Greek culture, virtually no aspect of which was not somehow organized into a competition; for the inhabitants of a city-state like Athens, civic life was an endless stream of athletic contests, poetry contests, drama contests, beauty contests. For the Greeks, whatever was worth doing was worth competing for – and winning at. It’s no accident that three out of the four Games on the ancient circuit were established early in the sixth century B.C. – precisely the historical moment that a new kind of warfare, which

required an extraordinary degree of cooperation among infantrymen, was beginning to predominate in Greece, replacing old-style battle with its displays of individual heroism. It's as if, lacking a military outlet for their competitive energies, the Greeks inevitably poured them into these new athletic events. But the desperate rawness of the battlefield – and its stark, all-or-nothing logic – was never very far beneath the surface.

Leni Riefenstahl's 1936 Berlin Olympics.

I commented on the cultural and academic hype around the Olympics back in March [Link]. Cornelius (Holtorf) objected then that the propaganda is harmless

Why take all this kind of propaganda so seriously? Why not enjoy that the past is taken up for something we like rather than something we dislike? Why not revel in the wonders of actualistic journalism and desperate commentary? I sense a certain desperateness in standing up for a past that is long gone, and an uneasiness with popular discourses.

I see it instead as a duty to stand up, not for some image of a past eternal, but one that is part of an edifying relationship between past and present. The relationship is all too often an abusive one that works in favor of interests no one should find tolerable.