

WHEN CONTEXT MEANS EVERYTHING: PRACTICES AND MEANINGS OF PIN EXCHANGES AT THE SOCHI OLYMPICS.

Summary

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The practice of swapping pins among participants in the Olympic Games has a long history (at least 90 years). This practice includes all participants in the Games: athletes, journalists, TV reporters, technicians, spectators, and others. Although most of the participants in this practice change with each Olympic Games, the tradition persists. The main question posed in this article is as follows: What is the meaning of Olympic pin exchange for participants? The answer to this question will explain why this tradition has proven to be so sustainable and inclusive. This task is also connected with the problem of understanding of the role of Olympic pins as objects of material culture and as intermediaries between participants of the Olympic Games.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted between January 30 and February 24, 2014, in Sochi, Russia, during the XXII Olympic Winter Games. The main method of data collection was participant observation, which included the systematic implementation of Olympic pin exchanges with the above-mentioned coparticipants of the Olympics. The subject of the study is the process of sharing Olympic pins among athletes, staff, and spectators of the Olympic Games.

Working as a video logger for the Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS) during the period of the Olympic Games, I was myself able to participate in the process of Olympic pin exchange. Exchanges took place in a few key areas: the International Broadcast Center, Olympic Park (coastal cluster of Olympic venues), Krasnaia Poliana (mountain cluster of Olympic venues), as well as the hotel Chistye Prudy (where the majority of OBS employees resided). Access to the main Olympic facilities provided me with the opportunity to exchange pins with many different participants in the Games (except for the Olympic athletes themselves, who were a very closed group and, therefore, difficult to access).

All exchange operations were recorded in a diary. Over the course of two weeks, I engaged in 43 exchanges with 37 people. In addition, I recorded conversations with exchange partners. Circumstances permitting, I also engaged my exchange partners

in informal interviews, asking how long ago they began to participate in the exchange, what meanings they ascribed to their actions, and which pins were represented in their collections.

I note that representatives from all countries had more or less equal opportunities to be involved in pin exchanges with me. I conclude that my observations cover a representative sample of the general pool of exchange partners, and thus my research had no significant bias, except for the lack of the access to Olympic athletes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A detailed literature review shows how practices of exchange have been studied and interpreted by sociologists and anthropologists.

First, I draw an analogy with the *kula*—a system of exchange of necklaces and bracelets between residents of the Massim region of Papua New Guinea, as described by Bronislaw Malinowski. Although there is a huge geographical, cultural, and contextual distance between the custom of *kula* and the exchange of Olympic pins, I argue that there are several commonalities. In both cases, there is an exchange of objects, which normally have no commercial interest or household purpose. Olympic pins, like *kula* necklaces and bracelets, each have their own “story,” and the status of the previous owner can play a significant role in determining the value of an object. Like *kula* exchange, pin exchange also establishes partnership relations. The main difference between the two practices is the fact that the exchange of the Olympic pins is a very truncated process, and the place and time of such exchange are not ordered. *Kula* valuables comprise a complex system of mutual gifts, and a certain amount of time must pass before a recipient can make a reciprocal gift. The exchange of Olympic pins, on the other hand, takes place at the same time. In addition, some Olympic pins may be excluded from exchange, while *kula* necklaces and bracelets regularly change owners.

Secondly, I connect this work to a broader tradition of research on material culture. The study of material culture covers a variety of objects—souvenirs, gifts, books, coins, antiques, military objects, cigarette lighters—all of which, when involved in interactions between people, acquire new meanings. Objects can have certain values conferred onto them and as such can achieve a kind of immortality. Despite being exchanged, lost, or destroyed, they may still retain a subjective value.

In this article, I also emphasize an interesting paradox, the phenomenon of so-called keeping-while-giving: when an object, despite being transferred from one person to another, still retains some connection with the first person, because in addition to its material (objective) values the object also has significant subjective value. That is why the act of giving an “inalienable” object modifies the relationship between the people involved in this act, in particular, by creating a social hierarchy.

The subjective value of a material object may change over time. Objects have their own “social lives,” just as their owners do. Furthermore, the life expectancy of objects with high subjective value often is not limited to an individual’s life. In changing owners and accumulating value, an object can acquire a kind of “immortality.”

The main feature of “inalienable possessions” is their tendency to be excluded from the exchange, or put into museums. Much current research in material culture studies draws on studies of museums. Within this framework, great attention is given to the process of creating an “exhibition” out of significant objects. The material object itself may have a certain memory. However, of import is not only the “story” of a particular object but also the context in which it is placed or the range of other objects that surround it.

Drawing on relevant literature, I make the following assumptions:

- 1) During the process of exchange, an Olympic pin can acquire subjective meaning and become an “inalienable possession” (in the words of Annette Weiner [1985]) for its owner.
- 2) Pins endowed with subjective value can be excluded from exchange because their value has no sufficient equivalent for the owner.
- 3) If the exchange of “inalienable possession” takes place, an Olympic pin will retain a connection with its previous owner creating an “image” that will always be tethered to it.
- 4) Olympic pins can be exhibited. They tell a particular “story” of exchanges that can increase the status of their owners. The importance and value of each pin are determined solely in the context of the entire collection of an individual participant in the Olympic Games.

Olympic pins can be viewed from many different perspectives. On the one hand, they have symbolic meaning because they often contain elements of the official symbols of the Olympic Games—Olympic rings, mascots, and so on. On the other hand, some of the pins have a marketing function because they may advertise a particular organization. Sponsors of the Olympics especially produce pins featuring their corporate logos alongside the Games’ symbols. Furthermore, for some people Olympic pins are just souvenirs. This variety of meanings makes the pin an appropriate medium of exchange between people with different goals and agendas.

STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF OLYMPIC PIN EXCHANGES

The phenomenon of sharing Olympic pins has strict geographic, temporal, and semantic borders. These boundaries are very important for objects of material culture as subjects of exchange because their meaning depends on the time and space of the transaction. Three conditions must be fulfilled in order for an exchange of Olympic pins to take place. First, the potential participant must make it clear to other participants that he is ready for the exchange by putting pins on his Olympics accreditation ribbon. Second, one of the participants must offer to make a deal if he sees the pin he would like to get. Finally, the participants must complete this deal (coming to an agreement on which pins are the objects of exchange).

The exchange of the pins actually consists of several forms of exchange with different meanings for participants—though these forms may appear similar at first glance, they are distinct. I distinguish between five spheres of pin exchange: corpo-

rative, expanded, collection-oriented, speculative, and imitative. The placement of the participant in one of these spheres depends on his or her status and position.

The first sphere of exchange is one in which only experienced professionals of the Olympic Games (like athletes or journalists) take part. They have access to restricted venues as well as unlimited access to the official pins of their corporation. They take part only in the exchange of official corporate pins; therefore, this first sphere of exchange is quite small and exclusive.

The emergence of an extended sphere of exchange is a consequence of the fact that a large number of employees of the Olympic Games, who perform a variety of tasks, have access to closed venues as well. Staff at the Olympics contact members of the corporative circle and become included in the process of exchanging pins, although at this level the “rules of the game” are modified. In the expanded sphere of exchange, the value of the pins is differentiated. I distinguish two types of values ascribed to pins: objective (price, issue size, material, rarity) and subjective (interest of the owner, the “story” of the previous exchange, etc.).

The participants in the extended sphere of exchange are trying to maximize both objective and subjective value; especially important for them are the history of the object’s exchange and the identity of the previous owner. At the same time, participants in the third sphere of exchange—professional collectors—are mostly trying to maximize the objective value of the pins in their collections. For them, the means by which they obtain desired pins is not very important: they can exchange them or purchase them. There is also a group of pin traders (participants in what I call the “speculative sphere of exchange”) who seek to maximize the commercial value of pins. They exchange pins with members of the corporative and expanded spheres in order to get exclusive pins that could be sold to anybody with enough money (mostly Games spectators). Finally, the spectators are copying the practices that they can observe (in the extended sphere of exchange) but do not follow the same strict rules. For participants of this “imitative” sphere of exchange the most important motive is to be a part of the Olympic Games rather than to maximize the subjective or objective value of Olympic pins.

I conclude that different participants of the practice of pin exchange are trying to achieve different objectives, which depend on their status in relation to the Olympic Games.

THE DYNAMIC OF EXCHANGE

The practices of Olympic pin swapping changed significantly over the course of the three weeks that the Sochi Olympics lasted. I divide this transformation into five stages: renewal, infection, epidemic, parade, and museum. The initiators of this process were participants of exchanges from the previous Games: senior employees of the Olympics and the collectors. Following their lead, many of the employees of the Games (up to 25 percent) became involved in the practice of pins exchange. Thanks to speculators, more and more pins entered into circulation and the intensity of the exchanges increased.

Closer to the end of the Games, the exchange of pins slowed down. The participants in exchange had more experience and began to pay more attention to the objective value of the pins. The most exclusive pins or those with an interesting “story” were excluded from exchange; therefore, it became more and more difficult to find “interesting” pins. By the end of the Games, finally, participants began to show off their collections. During the final two–three days of the Olympics, participants showed each other all their collected pins and proudly shared stories of their acquisition. This stage—the “parade”—was perhaps the only stage when the Olympic pins explicitly acquired status value. A collection of pins displays the successes of its owner in contacting the representatives of different organizations and cultures.

Finally, after the closing ceremony of the Sochi Games the exchange of pins stopped for the majority of participants. Even though collectors and speculators may continue to trade or sell pins in other venues, for all other employees of the Olympics pins become part of their “personal museum,” keeping alive their memories of the Olympics and their exchange partners.

CONCLUSION

One idea that is shared by all participants in Olympic pin exchanges is that they are involved in a unique and ephemeral process. The subjective value that the pin has acquired in the process of the exchange can never be recreated again, and it cannot be fully transferred to another person after the end of the Games. Almost every pin can be bought on eBay (it is only a question of money), but the buyer will be nothing more than a participant in the imitative circle of exchange, because his pin will not have any “story.”

I conclude that the context of the Olympics means everything for the process of pin exchange: it stimulates participants to increase the subjective value of the collection in order to protect memories of an “unrepeatable” event. The collection of Olympic pins preserves memories of a unique gathering of individuals who are unlikely to come together again as a group.

This “short-termism” and the consequent limitations of the process preserve Olympic pins from “inflation.” If the exchange of Olympic pins were to flow constantly, these objects would lose their subjective importance for the majority of participants. The collection of “stories” would not be possible: there is nothing special in the exchange “here and now” if partners can transact anywhere at any time. Without the Olympics, this exchange would become just another hobby. These practices, which have different meanings for different groups of participants in the Olympic Games, have one thing in common: an attempt to create subjective value, meaningful acts that will be preserved after the Olympics. Objects of material culture are the intermediaries in this process, and the exchange of Olympic pins is one tool for creating such meaning.

REFERENCES

Weiner, Annette B. 1985. “Inalienable Wealth.” *American Ethnologist* 12(2):210–227.