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Symposium on the Olympic 2012

This symposium arises from a public event held on March 14 2008 by the Academy of Social Sciences, in cooperation with the University of East London, as part of the ESRC 2008 Festival of Social Sciences. The purpose of the symposium is to explore the contribution which social scientists can make to the understanding of the London Olympics, and to clarify issues of public benefit of different kinds which arise from the hosting of the 2012 Games in London.

Introduction: social science perspectives on the 2012 Olympic Games

Michael Rustin

Mega-events like the four-yearly Olympic Games now make up a very significant element in the economic, political, and cultural landscape. They have become a major kind of contemporary institution, though they do not have the solid and tangible organisational form that social scientists and publics alike find it easiest to understand. Maurice Roche shows in his contribution to this symposium, and in his earlier published work (Roche 2000) that the Olympics belong to a broad category of 'Mega-events' – which include other great sporting festivals and international Expos dating back at least to the Great Exhibition of 1851. To these genres of Mega-events can be added others – certain major international political conferences such as the WTO meetings in Genoa and Seattle which have drawn multitudes to them, and a vast number of cultural festivals (Carnivals in Rio de Janeiro, Port of Spain or Notting Hill, music festivals of different kinds at Bayreuth or Glastonbury, more inclusive cultural gatherings like the annual Edinburgh

Festival.) All of these kinds of events attract large numbers of participants and spectators from all over the world.

What differentiates events of this kind from more conventional social institutions is their unusual relationship to time and space. Mega-events like the Olympics are enormous in the numbers of people whom they involve or touch in one way of another, in the flows of economic resources which they consume and produce, in the attention which is given to them by political elites from both cities and nations (sometimes as with the Olympics or the Football World Cup, in the competition to win the right to stage them), and not least in their large presence in the mass media of the world. Yet all this activity and energy is typically concentrated in one relatively small geographical place (often just one zone of a single city), and for an astonishingly short space of time, only three weeks as in the case of the Olympic Games. Great quantities of people, material resources, bytes and images are aggregated for a brief period in a concentrated spatial node (a location in time/space) then apparently dissolve only to re-form and re-cluster for the next mega-event of whatever kind. Each instance and kind of event of course has its own specificity - one Olympic Games is by no means just like another, an international Expo is in many ways dissimilar to a festival of sport. Yet there are significant elements which they share, not least in the flows of resources, the networks, the corporate enterprises, and the links with local and central states and governments, which sustain them and make them possible. Each of these events provides opportunities for the creation of images, for the production and sale of commodities, for the diffusion of information, for the design and construction of buildings, for the generation of prestige, for the cultivation of celebrity, and even for the capture of resources for purposes of regeneration and social improvement. These Mega-events are now an integal element in the social ecology of a globalised society. (Castells 1998).

We are or were used to our major institutions – whether religious, political, financial, or industrial - having a more solid spatial presence and temporal duration than that of Mega-events. In the Vatican City or at Mecca, in Wall Street or the City of London, in the central administrative and political districts of London, Washington, Brussels or Berlin, in the great university campuses of Berkeley, Cambridge Massachusetts or Cambridge England, in new or old centres of production like Silicon Valley or South China, power is concentrated and symbolised in locations which have permanence and material density. Such centres of power and energy are usually designed, in the scale and refinement of their architecture, to awe and impress. Even apparently purely utilitarian installations, such as shipyards, steelworks, oil refineries and train stations, often have their own iconographic presence embodied in giant cranes, chimney-stacks, spectacular arrays of gleaming pipework, or neo-Gothic facades as in the central station of Mumbai.

Flows of material resources, information and people move between these centres, with increasing velocity and volume, in the 'globalised' world. Nevertheless, these remain spatially concentrated and temporally durable nodes of power and activity. These centres are often the core of the 'city states' described by John Urry in his categorisation of the neo-Medieval aspect of this world, or at the scale of the city, the dispersed nodes of activity described in Graham and Marvin's (2001) model of 'Splintering Cities', which Iain Macrury discusses in his contribution.

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The Mega-event represents a more extreme stage in the contemporary overcoming of the constraints of time and space. (Harvey 1990, Giddens 1981) . The Mega-event seems by contrast to materialise and de-materialise, never in one place for more than a short period of time, sometimes settling on a specific place only once in a lifetime (when will there be another Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia, for example?) and of course never visiting most

places in the world at all. (The ritual journey of the Olympic Torch offers a token visit to many places, with the symbolic function of a monarch's procession through his or her realm.) John Urry's description of the extraordinary growth of travel in the modern world, and of the significance of tourism as one of many modern modes of mobility, explains one of the preconditions of this new form of social organisation. His discussions (Urry 1997, 2001) of the constitutive significance of mobilities in the modern world, which in his view render 'society' a nearly obsolete category, provide the broader frame for understanding this phenomenon. Mega-events can be seen as one of the defining forms of life of a society constituted by mobilities. 'Strange attractors', we might say, providing the sense of shared presence and identity, and the opportunities to focus activities – economic, cultural, political – of all kinds, which a mobile society might otherwise seem to lack.

We could say, following Deleuze and Guattari (1987) that the social ecology of the mega-event is rhizomatic, its events being the efflorescences of energies which circulate between whiles through networks which function largely underground and out of sight. In contrast, the structure of more traditional institutional complexes are more analogous to great forests with deep and wide-spreading roots. These capture and store energy in their dense aggregations of material and social capital, drawing in resources from their large hinterlands. They are 'power containers', in Giddens' term (Giddens 1981).

Nevertheless, new and large in their scale and global presence as they are, one might ask whether Mega-events in any case matter all that much? After all, cities continue to grow, centres of material production remain concentrated, even if increasingly in China and India rather than in Michigan or Lancashire, political capitals remain centres of power. Are these Mega-events not mere ephemera, the more-or-less benign components of a

‘Society of the Spectacle’ (Debord 1967/1992) in which modern mass communications put everyone in potential contact of one kind of another with everyone else in the world. Better to have these symbolic spaces in which representative individuals can strive and compete, for themselves and on behalf of the communities and nations to which they belong, than the real conflict and competitions of war, for example? Norbert Elias’s great idea, following Freud, was to see sport as sublimation of the aggressive instincts otherwise deployed in wars. (Elias and Dunning 1997). Do Mega-events like the Olympic Games have any significant social consequences, and does their distinctive and unusual form of organisation have any implications that are worth thinking about? And if so, what might these consequences be?

There are two important aspects to this question. The first of these concerns what we might call the normative significance of Mega-events, and the Games in particular, as representing and promulgating clusters of values. Anxieties about for example the over-commercialisation of the Games, or the uses of the Games to promote the prestige and interests of states (plainly a major goal of the Chinese government in holding the Olympics in Beijing, and of the British government in relation to 2012) or about the corruption of sports by the use of performance-enhancing drugs, are perceived as threats to fields of activity which are inherently valued for their own sake, as the embodiments of intrinsic goods. These ‘goods’ include the values of fair competition, of the enjoyment of physical talents, of the aesthetic beauty of different sports, of the relationships which support achievement, of the shared excitement and enjoyment of audiences. Such activities can only be made into the objects of profit, or political advantage, because they are first valued for themselves. In a sense these ‘extrinsic’ aspects of the Games are parasitic on the intrinsic virtues which, however imperfectly, they exemplify. Iain Macrury’s discussion of the antithesis within the Games between the principles of ‘gift-relationship’ and ‘market-exchange’ explores one key dimension of what one might call the moral question of the Games. He sees

the continuing presence in the Games of the norms of gift-exchange as an aspect of their human potential and value.

A second important aspect is what one might call the consequences of Mega-events, and the Games in particular, for the allocation of resources and opportunities in the world. One clear danger is that Mega-events become a force for gathering inequality, the expression of the 'winner take all' world make possible by globalised competition. The focus on the world's best, performing in the world's most highly designed and perfected environments, may be deemed to suck resources and attention away from everyone and everywhere else. One city wins the Games, every four years, tens of thousands of other cities cannot even think about competing for them. Attention is focused on those who win places in their national teams, and especially on those who win medals, but this may draw attention and resources away from more ordinary and local kinds of sport. How can public participation in sport be extended, when all the pressures seem to be on producing a small number of medal winners, and when it is much more likely that spectators will follow the Games on television at home, than find themselves participating in any sport as a player. The British government has tried to respond to these anxieties in its decision to make swimming in public swimming pools free of charge for all.

Stephen Timms, in his contribution, makes a forceful case for the London Olympics as an agent of transformation and improvement for the historically deprived region of East London. He sees the Games as an important step in a process which has in recent years seen a transformation taking place in this part of the city. He points out that it was this agenda of urban improvement, and the ethnically mixed population which can benefit from it, which actually secured Britain's success in the competition for Games. But while it seems likely to be true that East London will gain signficant presence from the visit of

the 2012 Games, this fact does not altogether allay wider concerns about the distributional consequences of Mega-events of this kind.

In regard to the London Olympics, what are the 'opportunity costs' of concentrating so many resources in one part of a city, in what is generally the richest part of the country? Where are resources not being spent, in order that they can be spent in Stratford? And globally, how does the settling of this caravan, or caravans, every few years on one chosen city after another (Barcelona, Sydney, Athens, Beijing) affect the allocation of investments of resources among all the world's cities? Perhaps the most hopeful thing one can say is that what happens in one place can and does have inspirational and exemplary effects on others. The benefits to East London will be of value in themselves, but what is achieved there may also set an example of what could be achieved in other disadvantaged urban regions, just as the success of the Barcelona Olympics in the regeneration of that city provided many other cities with a model to follow in their own urban development. [1]

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[1] These issues will be discussed further in Olympic Cities, edited by Gavin Poynter and Iain Macrury. Ashgate 2009. ((The development of East London in particular is explored in London's Turning: the making of the Thames Gateway, edited by Phil Cohen and Michael Rustin, Ashgate 2008.

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