

It's NOT the economy, stupid (nor a question of popular participation): London 2012 and Sport for Its Own Sake

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## Introduction

In the years leading up to the thirtieth modern Olympiad, the official discourse of London 2012 was dominated not by athletics but by the prospect of urban regeneration in East London; and by the possibility of mass participation in a community-building process. Under the terms of this discourse, the Olympiad would serve to re-engineer a regional economy characterised by lack of development and long-term, deep-seated deprivation. Meanwhile the people of Britain, especially those living in the deprived areas of East London, would gain health and wellbeing from taking part in the preparations for the Olympiad, from entering into the community spirit of the whole enterprise, and from volunteering for a supporting role during the Olympiad itself. Thus London 2012 was invoked as the continuation of society by other means, re-awakening economic development and re-kindling conviviality – this in the absence of class-based solidarity, now defunct.

In this chapter, it is suggested that people in East London were never fully convinced of this rationale for London 2012. If there had been a local citizens' jury on the Games and their supposed benefits for East London, it would still have been out, even as the Olympic torch was brought in to the stadium to signal the commencement of the thirtieth modern Olympiad. Only a few days into Games Time, however, the popular mood had changed from widespread scepticism to vocal enthusiasm. What, then, had occurred during those few days to bring about this change of heart?

It is surely significant that once the Games were under way, the official discourse of economic regeneration and public participation was necessarily displaced by sport itself – by the stellar performance of athletes competing in events designed to test them to the very limit of their sporting prowess. Accordingly, although this chapter does not attempt to establish a causal link, it seems sensible to suggest a correlation between these two developments, i.e. the rise in popular enthusiasm for the Games and the temporary demise of official discourse about the Games, now supplanted by the Games themselves.

In short, the Games seen in their own terms – as athletics – were readily embraced by the people of London; unlike the Games couched in terms of economic benefit and lifestyle improvement, which remained at some remove both from the lived experience of East Londoners and from the hearts and minds of the wider population.

Yet if there really was an inverse relationship between official discourse and popular enthusiasm, why did the proponents of London 2012 initiate and maintain their particular discourse, as described above? The chapter further suggests that London 2012's officialdom – a combination of politicians, policy people, managers and sports officials – did not credit the wider population with the level of discrimination required to appreciate the Games as the pinnacle of sporting achievement. Instead they made the assumption that most Londoners would remain consumed with self-interest, only supporting the Games if they thought that the Games were going to do something for them; moreover, something of economic or other tangible benefit. Conversely, London 2012's organisers

underestimated the popular appetite for intangibles – for ‘benefits’ which may be sublime rather than measurable or ‘evidence-based’. Thus the front runners of the thirtieth Olympiad seem to have projected their own restricted view onto a population which thankfully does not adhere to such a diminished outlook.

### **Preparing the ground**

On 6<sup>th</sup> July 2005, the International Olympics Committee (IOC) awarded the 2012 Games to London. In his speech to the House of Commons the following day, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw MP sought to explain how London’s bid had won the Games – beating off strong competition from Paris and Madrid, and how London would gain from being the host city:

London’s bid was built on a special Olympic vision. That vision of an Olympic games that would not only be a celebration of sport but a force for regeneration. The games will transform one of the poorest and most deprived areas of London. They will create thousands of jobs and homes....One of the things that made the bid successful is the way in which it reaches out to all young people in two important respects: it will encourage many more to get fit and to be involved in sport and, whatever their physical prowess, to offer their services as volunteers for the Olympic cause. (Hansard 2005)

Along similar lines, the Olympism chapter in London’s candidate file, i.e. the section in the bid document which outlines how the putative host city aims to actualise the Olympic ethos, took as its text the poet John Donne’s observation that ‘no man is an island’, and promised ‘an Olympic and cultural programme that will connect with the wider world’. (London 2012 2004: 5)

Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London at the time of the bid, welcomed the Games as a ‘sword of Damocles’ which would force the pace of urban regeneration by hanging over the heads of those in charge. (Livingstone 2006) Livingstone made this remark at the Thames Gateway Forum – the annual conference of those involved in regenerating the East London region, and an event which had come to symbolise not only regional regeneration but also the frustratingly slow pace of its implementation.

In 2007 the Department of Culture, Media and Sport issued *Our Promise for 2012* (DCMS 2007), in which it was said that hosting the Games would have the following beneficial effects:

- Make the UK a world-leading sporting nation
- Transform the heart of East London
- Inspire a generation of young people to take part in local volunteering, cultural and physical activity
- Make the Olympic Park a blueprint for sustainable living
- Demonstrate the UK is a creative, inclusive and welcoming place to live in, visit, and for business.

Mayor Ken Livingstone echoed this prospectus in a further set of ‘legacy commitments’ (Livingstone 2008): increasing opportunities for Londoners to be involved in sport; ensuring Londoners benefit from new jobs, business and volunteering opportunities; transforming the heart of London;

delivering a sustainable Games and sustainable communities; and showcasing London as a diverse, creative and welcoming city.

These are only a few, early examples of what came to be the official discourse of London 2012. Other contributions to this book will afford far greater insight into the nuances of this discourse. My purpose in rehearsing it here, if only in the barest outline, is to highlight what is NOT present within it, namely, recognition of the significance of sporting excellence of the highest order. Rather, in the promotion of London 2012 what is surely the defining element of each and every Olympiad – athletic prowess representing the furthest extent of human achievement – has somehow been demoted to the lowest rank; it is de-prioritised to the point of being discarded.

Accordingly, in Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's speech, sport does receive a mention but it is not the centre of attention. Thus London 2012 will 'not only be a celebration of sport', it will also be 'a force for regeneration'. This is to say, in effect, that sport is a given, requiring no further consideration; as Straw sees it, what makes the Olympiad worth talking about is its non-sporting potential, its capacity to act as midwife for the delivery of economic benefits and community development. Similarly, in the DCMS prospectus, London 2012 is commissioned to inspire a generation of young people to take part in physical activity, thereby catalysing their health and well being. But in such documents there is no understanding – nor even recognition, of what it is about elite sport which is capable of inspiring young people. Whatever such documentation was itself inspired by, it was not the prospect of sporting excellence.

Again, when Livingstone finalised his list of commitments less than three years after the Games were awarded to London, the term 'legacy' had already come to dominate the official discourse of London 2012. This in itself is a measure of how removed the focus was from sport itself. Whereas sport is actualised in the moment – as the sporting event itself is taking place, 'legacy' cannot but refer to the long lasting outcomes of a process which is likely to have been equally long and drawn out; anything but momentary, in other words. Thus by definition the key word in official discourse – 'legacy' – is antithetical to the essence of sport itself, which can only be momentary; occurring in and of the moment.

In short, the discourse surrounding London 2012 encircled all kinds of social and economic benefits; conversely, the idea of athletics for the sake of athletics – sport for its own sake, was all but expelled from the conversation which politicians, policy makers and organisers sought to initiate with the wider public.

Their approach is summed up in a deliberately bold statement made by Sir Robin Wales, Mayor of the London Borough of Newham (one of London 2012's host boroughs). On 30<sup>th</sup> March 2006, at the start of his presentation to Host Cities, a conference on cities hosting the Olympics organised at the ExCel conference centre by the University of East London, Sir Robin declared that 'the Olympics has nothing whatsoever to do with sport'. He explained that 'it's about what it does for our community,' adding, 'that's the only way I can justify it.' (Wales 2006) According to Sir Robin, in the run-up to London 2012 the borough council's role was to 'build an Olympic community'. After only nine months on the road to the Olympics, he ventured to suggest that such a community was already in evidence. Newham, he reported, experienced a drop in youth offending when London got the Games; the announcement had the effect of diverting kids from crime. (Wales 2006)

Less than a year after the IOC announcement, already in evidence is a London 2012 discourse of 'regeneration', 'legacy' and 'community' which, with these as its priorities, also marginalised and even excluded mention of the activity at the core of every Olympiad – elite sport; indeed in Sir Robin's prognosis, 'the Olympics' was meant to have 'nothing whatsoever to do with it'.

### **The local view**

The following section is in no way intended as a comprehensive survey of the popular response to London 2012 and its official discourse; but it will suffice to show (a) that in East London local people were equivocal in their response to London 2012, first in prospect and then in its development; and (b) that, whether for or against London 2012, their responses were often qualified by awareness of counter arguments and contrary opinion. In this respect, men and women in the streets neighbouring what became the Olympic Park, were often more nuanced than policy makers might have expected – or wanted them to be; moreover, in the long run-up to Games Time, their reactions were anything but unbridled.

Towards the end of 2004, UEL students Lennie Pothecary and Carly Crittenden canvassed local opinion on the 'Back the Bid' campaign launched by London Mayor Ken Livingstone. At Stratford station, which was to become the transport hub of London 2012, they spoke to a woman selling the *Evening Standard* newspaper who revealed that she was against London's bid on the grounds that clearing the putative Olympics site had already led to the loss of local jobs, e.g. in warehouses which she said had been demolished to make room for the planned Velodrome. (Pothecary and Crittenden 2005)

Pothecary and Crittenden found that the paper seller's scepticism was far from unique; most of the people they spoke to were reportedly unimpressed:

None of them felt especially well-informed about the Olympic plans, about how things are being built and how building work might affect them in the coming months.

Many said they hadn't read all of the leaflets they had received; one individual even denounced such material as 'a load of lies', pointing to a certain distrust of the media and the authorities.

There was no 'type' who were expressing these kinds of opinions; it wasn't only a certain age group or a certain kind of person. Rather, negative opinion seemed rather prevalent among different kinds of people living near the Olympic site. (Pothecary and Crittenden 2005)

The student reporters observed that the largely negative character of the initial, local response, was markedly different both from the official view and from the recorded views of Londoners living further afield from the Olympic site.

In July 2005, around the time of the IOC meeting in Singapore at which London's host city status was announced, for the London East Research Institute Professor Phil Cohen and Dr Iain MacRury carried out a series of focus groups on the bid and subsequently on the successful outcome of the bidding

process. In their write up of these focus groups, there is less evidence of outright opposition; rather, in a summary entitled 'Hopeful or worried but not yet jumping for joy', Cohen and MacRury reported a range of mixed feelings on the part of local people. For example, various members of the focus group gave equally guarded responses to the pro-bid promotional video *Imagine*: 'the film puts together all the best things but it doesn't really think about what's really going to happen'; 'the Olympic vision is marvellous, but all the squabbling to get it, and all the big business interests behind it, is against the ideal'; 'it dodges all the difficulties. Children take it all verbatim and of course they are excited by the potential of the Olympics. And rightly so. You must never stop young people dreaming, but it is irresponsible to encourage and trade off these dreams without being 100 per cent certain that they can be realized.' (Cohen and MacRury 2005)

Almost before the bid was sealed, this focus group seems to have been attuned to many of the possibilities associated with London 2012, but also wary of officialdom making promises which it was in no position to keep.

In 2006, Stratford-born Mitchell Panayis, another UEL student, warned that 'billions of pounds will be spent on new stadia, transport and facilities, but outside this glitzy display, East London will be left to survive on scraps.' (Panayis 2006) In the following year, student reporter Greg Pryke observed that 'when London got the Games' his initial reaction had been to 'jump for joy'; but having interviewed a range of East Londoners on the advent of the Games, he could now see why many of them were doubtful of the benefits. (Pryke 2007)

One of Pryke's interviewees described the run-up to London 2012 as 'Catch 22'. Reporting on formerly unemployed, local trainees losing out on Olympics construction jobs for lack of previous experience, student journalist Kelly Handscomb went one better, describing their thwarted employment prospects as 'Catch 2012'. (Handscomb 2006)

Mixed opinions about London 2012 – hostile to hollow promises yet hopeful of new possibilities – remained very much in evidence all the way through to the opening of the Games in July 2012. Shortly before the Games were due to start, it emerged that G4S, the private company contracted to provide security, had failed to recruit enough security guards. Nick Buckles, the head of the company, failed to inspire confidence, and military personnel were brought in at the last minute. Some feared that this was only the start of an unsuccessful Olympiad in which British ineptitude would look especially inadequate next to the showcase of Chinese efficiency that was Beijing 2008.

Even Danny Boyle's opening ceremony met with a mixed reception initially. On the evening of Friday 27<sup>th</sup> July 2012, to some contemporaneous observers the tableaux representing Britain's long lost industrial past seemed unintentionally poignant, especially since this sequence was rehearsed in part of the Ford's Dagenham estate which is no longer used for car manufacture (the reduced scale of Ford's Dagenham is a by-product of the painful de-industrialisation of London and the South East). Meanwhile, as the opening ceremony continued to unfold, a Conservative MP tweeted his displeasure at 'leftie multi-cultural crap'. (*Daily Mirror* 2012) In the Olympic stadium itself, there were plenty of empty seats by the time Sir Paul McCartney stood up to conduct the final chord of 'Hey, Jude!' at 12.50am.

The first line of response to the Olympiad's opening night seems largely in keeping with the mixed feelings – some positive, some negative, the one frequently qualified by the other – which local

people had expressed towards London 2012 throughout the entire course of its long development. But the morning papers were unequivocally enthusiastic. Their upbeat tone seems to have been in tune with a mood swing away from ongoing doubts and continuing concerns; and Aidan Burley MP was soon forced to explain that his tweets had been 'misunderstood'. (*Daily Mirror* 2012)

Burley's tweets and his subsequent explanation were reported in the *Daily Mirror*, a tabloid newspaper with a mainly working class readership. Also in the *Mirror* that day, columnist Tony Parsons suggested that although the organisers' track record of misjudgements might hitherto have alienated 'the Brit in the street', the time had come to 'celebrate' the Games – 'our Games', now that the athletes themselves were about to take the field.

'There have been mistakes galore,' Parsons observed, citing 'traffic mayhem', because 'Olympic big shots' are 'staying in Mayfair, nine miles away from the Games'; 'security chaos'; and tickets being 'too expensive and too hard to obtain'. But Parsons went on to say that 'you would need a very small and very hard heart to not want to celebrate', since 'the next two weeks will be ablaze with the biggest names in sport, straining every sinew, pushing every muscle to the limit, striving for glory, making their bid for immortality'.

Parsons was saying, in other words, not only that the athletes were taking the field, but also that athletics could now take precedence, displacing the self-serving character of the official discourse and the associated, state-sponsored process.

On the day that Parsons' piece was published – 28<sup>th</sup> July, i.e. the Saturday immediately following the opening ceremony on the night of Friday 27<sup>th</sup> July, the public mood does seem to have changed in line with his recommendations. This is not to suggest that millions of *Mirror* readers acted in direct response to Parsons, taking his column to heart and implementing its core message; rather, that his column had drawn together and fleshed out what was already there, almost waiting to be drawn attention to.

In a general sense, Parsons was operating exactly as a columnist or commentator is meant to – formulating what readers, listeners and viewers are already on the point of thinking, even before they know it is in their minds. In this particular instance, Parsons was drawing attention to a key distinction which had been all but forgotten in the official discourse; namely, the distinction between London 2012 and the thirtieth Olympiad. In effect, he was re-instating, bringing back up to the surface, what had remained dormant – largely forgotten but by no means eliminated – in the mind of every sports fan: the *separation* of sport and society.

### **Sport versus Society**

Whether for the 90+ minutes of a football game, or the nine-plus seconds it takes gold medal winner Usain Bolt to sprint 100 metres, sporting events are removed from the rest of society. Each sport operates to its own rules, so that what is not permissible on track or field inside the stadium, e.g. handling a football or straying from a straight path, is perfectly acceptable behaviour in nearby Stratford station. The rules of the game serve to establish the borders between sporting events and the rest of our lives. But such boundaries are only a requirement because what goes on inside such events – the sport itself, is necessarily distinctive and different from everyday life.

Instead of being part of our day-to-day experience, each sport is an exception – an exception proved by its own particular rules – which offers rare insight into what we *could* be. The millions cheering on Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt or Britain's gold-medal winning, middle and long distance runner Mo Farah, are willing these athletes to perform to their utmost; and at the same time calling on them to show the rest of us the utmost (in terms of physical prowess) that we human beings can be. What is higher, stronger and faster for athletes such as these, is also higher, stronger and faster on behalf of everyone else – of interest to and in the interests of, the whole of humanity. Thus sport addresses our common humanity, presenting and extending it in the realisation of that incarnation of humanity – the elite athlete, which the mass of spectators readily identifies with.

This means that sport does indeed have a social role; but the role is realised primarily through the exceptional nature of sport and the special characteristics of elite athletes in whom the capacity to perform this role is most fully developed. For those who follow it, sport becomes an integral part of who they are, because it in its differentiation from the everyday, it transcends the banality of who they are obliged to be.

While this degree of separation is the *sine qua non* of spectator sport, at the other end of the spectrum sport is also connected to the timeless problem of man and nature. As from time immemorial humanity has been obliged to resist the arbitrary character of natural forces, so, from the Ancient Greeks onwards, sport has been a stage for dramatising the struggle to harness nature, including our own nature, for the betterment of humanity. In this sense, the arduous training programmes to which elite athletes subject themselves, along with the exertion and exhaustion entailed in all athletic performances, should be seen as the disciplined expression of humanity's tortuous relationship with nature.

In between on the one hand the separation of sport from society and on the other hand sport's connection to our continuous struggle with nature, there are a range of historically specific aspects in which sport and society have come to be reconciled. Please note, however, that society's subsequent reconciliation with sport, is predicated on that prior moment of separation without which sport as such could not exist.

For example, throughout the lifetime of the modern Olympics movement, i.e. since the closing stages of the nineteenth century, sport and society have been largely reconciled through *nation*. As capitalist society developed along national lines, so sporting activity tended to follow suit; hence the national league table of medal winners, which is as old as the modern Olympics. Moreover, when competition between advanced capitalist nations was at its most intense, i.e. during the twentieth century era of inter-imperialist rivalry, so too was the animosity between nation-based support for rival medal contenders. By contrast, in the current period of unprecedented international cooperation – a key factor in the continuous extension of credit throughout the world economy, it is interesting to note the increased emphasis on host cities rather than host nations; also what seems to be a growing readiness on the part of many sports fans to look beyond an athlete's country of origin.

Thus at different times nationhood has played either a greater or lesser role in establishing the context in which sport events take place, not only in the relation between individual sports fans and their chosen athletes, but also in regard to the reconciliation of sport and society.

### **Mis-reading elite sport, mis-reading the common people**

During the nationalist era, right-wing public figures were particularly explicit in their attempted use of sport for political ends. In other words, they were quick to identify sport with society, often reducing the former to a function of the latter; and they made no apologies for having done so. Recently, the direction of travel has been reversed. With London 2012 as the case in point, readiness to reduce sporting events to a function of society has tended to come from the left; or, more precisely, from politicians and policy makers whose characteristic way of thinking has its origins on the left. It is as if they have extended Lenin's aphorism that politics is the continuation of economics, so that sporting mega-events are deemed to be the further continuation of politics and economics, and sometimes a substitute for both.

Though it might be tempting to castigate this approach as an example of vulgar Marxism, this appellation would be doubly incorrect. First, in that subsuming sport within society in the forlorn hope of reconstructing society as a result, is not even a bargain basement version of Marxism; it is wholly antithetical to the analytical tradition developed by Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, all of whom are equally insistent on the specificity of cultural forms, i.e. their separation and relative autonomy from politics and the economy. Secondly, if 'vulgar' is understood through its association with the Latin *vulgus* (common people), use of this term belies the extent to which the *vulgus* of London only fully engaged with London 2012 when the sporting character of the event finally came into its own. In effect, the people sided with Marx, Lenin and Trotsky on the relative autonomy of cultural forms; meanwhile they discriminated against the reductionism inherent in the outlook of Britain's political clique.

This is not just a conceit about method. The substantial point is that East Londoners remained largely unconvinced about London 2012 as a discourse in which sport was subsumed within politics and economics. Instead they held out until the real thing came along. Meanwhile, politicians and policy makers continued to address them in the only language which they thought that ordinary people could understand – the language of personal self-interest and local advantage. The popular response to the Olympics shows that this was a gross underestimation of the common people and their capabilities.

Apart from being an additional example of elite contempt for the masses, this episode also serves to suggest that, unlike the common people, at least some elements within the current political clique may have lost the capacity to think or act in anything other than instrumental terms. It was not popular pressure which prompted them to restrict their discourse to aims and objectives which had 'nothing whatsoever to do with sport', and no connection whatsoever with the potentially sublime character of sporting events. In which case, they can only have done so of their own volition.

At least there is no need to wait for future generations to indict today's ruling clique for its paucity of imagination. In their response to the Olympics – shunning official discourse and saving themselves for the transcendent capacity of sport itself – the people of East London have already done so, if only indirectly.

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