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REVIEWS

POWER GAMES AND MEGA-EVENT CITIES

JOGOS DE PODER E AS CIDADES DOS MEGAEVENTOS

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OLIVEIRA, N. G. *Mega-events, city and power*. London: Routledge, 2021, 208p. ISBN 978-03-6719-698-1

This is an English language translation, adaptation, and fully up-dated revision of a book first published in Portuguese in 2015, *O Poder dos Jogos e os Jogos de Poder: Os interesses em campo na produção da cidade para o espetáculo esportivo*. Drawing on an award-winning doctoral thesis, de Oliveira (2021) has produced a very exciting contribution to scholarly and political debates about mega-events, especially of the sports variety, including the Summer and Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, and the FIFA Men's Football World Cup. These mega-events have increasingly attracted critical scrutiny in the past twenty years. It has been known for decades that mega-events carry considerable economic, political and reputational consequences, not just for the organizers and the sports associations involved, but also, and perhaps especially, for the host cities and nations involved in staging them. This excellent book explores in great detail and with great theoretical verve the background story to the production of the sport spectacles that results for cities that engage in hosting them. It offers valuable insight into the key actors and institutions that have been responsible for the bidding and staging of mega-events in the past twenty years.

The book is theoretically framed by the work of the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Bourdieu is widely considered to be one of, if not, the most influential sociologist of the 20th century. His writing, research and concepts have been adopted globally and in many disciplines beyond his own. The concept of 'field' in Bourdieu's work, and in de Oliveira's book, refers to an environment

or a set of relations between people competing or acting in a similar activity. The concept of field thus can refer to economic markets, educational disciplines, different forms of culture (art, music, film, sport) or even, as in this case, the production of spectacular sports mega-events. Importantly a field has a structure and an internal dynamic with competition between different people involved, and relative autonomy (its own history and culture). It is the relative autonomy of the production of sports mega-events field that this book thoroughly investigates and reveals with tremendous rigour and sophistication.

De Oliveira considers the field of production of sports spectacles at two scales: the global and the local. The first part of the book (consisting of three chapters) explores the historical processes that contributed to the formation of the relations and connections (that is, the field) that determines the conduct of the agents who act in the production of sports spectacles. She notes three broad connections between the production of sporting spectacles such as the Olympic Games and the production of the city that developed over time. The mobilization of political and economic capital interest in the field of sport itself took time but was consistent with developments in capitalism during the 20th century. The IOC could use this interest to attract local and national leaders to compete to host an Olympics. Finally with greater public reach and eventually global transmission, spectacularisation of the sports mega-event on the largest possible scale could be achieved. As de Oliveira notes, “the Olympic movement entered the second decade of the twenty-first century with a perfectly elaborated institutional structure that gave it the capacity to impose constraints on the political and legal order of host countries and cities” (p. 37).

One of the most useful contributions that the book makes to furthering our understanding of the production of mega-events is in chapters 2 and 3 where she discusses the ‘players and their strategies’ and the connection to urban politics of the production of sports mega-events. She reveals the agents, groups and coalitions that have started to operate within the field of the production of sports mega-events from the 1980s onward, and especially since 2000. A network of specialists has developed which both promotes competitions for mega-events among cities and at the same time dictate the standards and requirements established by the IOC and its partners. Urban projects based on these criteria have often been agreed between these specialists and political authorities at city and national levels before the local communities affected most by them can be involved. At the same time both the IOC and the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) have adopted a strategy of transferring financial responsibility away from organisers to

the local and national governments responsible for hosting. A key instrument in all this has been the Host City Contract (discussed on pp. 90-92). This is the formal, legally binding, instrument by which the sport spectacle retains its own autonomy and imposes judicial and financial constraints on territories that receive its events. Both the IOC and FIFA seek to maintain the spectacle and satisfy sponsors and broadcasters by “controlling the cities that finance the spectacles they sell” (p. 97). In this way de Oliveira argues, the field of producing sport spectacles and the field of producing the neoliberal city have converged.

The second part of the book (a further three chapters) reveals in more detail the basis for the creation of what she calls ‘cities of exception’ that host mega-events. She argues that “places that host mega-events produce profound regulatory and institutional ruptures and realignments across multiple scales of power” (p. 15). To illustrate this de Oliveira provides detailed consideration of Rio de Janeiro as a case study and examines the politicians, private entrepreneurs, real estate promoters and speculators, construction firms, services and technical and design specialists and media involved in the pursuit of mega-event hosting that began in the 1990s and resulted in the hosting of sports mega-events in 2007 (Pan American Games), 2014 (FIFA World Cup) and 2016 (Olympics and Paralympics). As noted in the first part of the book, the IOC and FIFA have increasingly transferred a greater share of financial responsibilities to host cities and countries. Developments in the production of sports mega-events fitted well with the increasingly market-oriented logic in urban planning theory and practice, often referred to as urban entrepreneurialism. Additionally she demonstrates how through the “condition of emergency and depoliticization that mega-events make possible in the cities and countries that host them” (p. 145) cities of exception are created.

For the Olympic Games to have a future will require greater public consultation prior to bids for events with such an impact on urban development, the avoidance of deleterious consequences for all citizens, and continuing involvement of citizens as the event / plans take shape and afterwards. At present the major beneficiaries are selected businesses, certain professions (e.g., law, accountancy, logistics) and if successful in sports events, national governments. Research shows that the Olympics negatively impact local citizens, especially those near the staging of Olympics-related building projects, small businesses not in the ‘honeypot’ zones, and the benefits are always overestimated whilst costs are underestimated. These groups tend to suffer most, especially if dwelling in the areas of development: migrants, semi-and unskilled workers, the low paid, ethnic minorities. These are the groups of people who tend to be displaced, since the Olympics essentially creates gentrified locations for the more wealthy and privileged sections of society.

A key consideration to help understand what has been happening with the production of sports mega-events is to consider developments within the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The IOC operates as a transnational body that is neither fully a corporation nor a governmental agency. In the hands of President Thomas Bach (who was recently re-elected for a third four-year term) it certainly takes advantage of this position and has sought endorsement from, and alliances with, global agencies such as the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and most recently the G7 club of wealthy nations, which all help to bolster its power and influence. This made it even more difficult for the Japanese hosts of the 2020 Summer Olympics (organizing committee, city, and central government) to call a halt, even if contractual obligations would also make this very difficult without great loss of face, reputation, and money. Criticisms of its operation beginning in the last decades of the 20th century created the context for further changes implemented by IOC President Thomas Bach since he took up his position in 2013. He once said the Olympics had to 'change or be changed'. As criticisms of the burden on individual cities and economies has developed in the past two decades the IOC has made changes to its charter. In 2019 for example the phrase 'host city' was replaced in its regulations by the vaguer 'host of the Games' opening up the possibilities for multiple hosts, regions, states or countries to stage an Olympics.

The IOC remains an elitist club that garners support from other elites and people (and countries) that aspire to joining the elite. From a sports perspective the IOC represents the custodian of the exclusive medals that athletes in numerous sports aspire to, acts as the chief promoter of the mythology of the healing power of sport, and the organization that most international sports federations (IFs) and national Olympic committees (NOCs) are reliant on for funding. Since its inception in 1894 the IOC has remained a private organisation, that only accepts invited members, acts in a self-interested manner and like most long-lasting organisations, has self-preservation as a core aim. It is thus open to accusations of lack of transparency and hypocrisy while it claims to be a movement and a 'family' based on a philosophy beyond politics. Alongside the myths and ideology of Olympism – with elements such as the creed and the motto that are borrowed from Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) – it is not surprising that quasi-religious claims are often made, such as upholding the 'spirit' of the Games.

The IOC has developed since the 1980s, and the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics especially, as an example of a business oriented international non-governmental organization (or BINGO). The IOC has become reliant on broadcasting revenue, and relatedly sponsorship money, and the Summer Olympic Games

featuring hundreds of events across 28 or more sports and 10,000 plus athletes from over 200 countries are its biggest media spectacular (the Winter Olympics and the Youth Olympic Games do not compare as mega-events since they attract fewer countries and global attention).

The impacts (expectations of costs and benefits) of sports mega-events for the hosts have remained remarkably similar in the past four decades. There is, or at least has been, a consistent overestimation of the benefits and an underestimation of the costs of hosting. This was partly to win over host city and national populations as a bid to host was announced, submitted and, if successful, won. There is now considerable and widespread scepticism about the accuracy of the estimated impact of hosting, and for example most economists who are not Olympic insiders consider the Olympics a drain, in terms of finance and human and material resources. Yet the exclusivity of being an Olympic host city remains one of the main attractions for civic elites and boosters who want to host an Olympics.

The Tokyo Games held in 2021 was unlike any other Olympics as they have developed in recent decades. The banning of all spectators in Tokyo, restrictions on spectators in the few other areas staging events not covered by the emergency measures, the absence of international spectators, reductions in the number of officials, media, movement and so on all had major consequences for the event. The Games as a TV spectacle can still attract audiences, however. NBC in the USA, for example, invested billions of dollars in securing exclusivity of US Olympic coverage until 2032 and went to great efforts to ensure audiences were watching to enhance the advertising revenue during the 2021 broadcasts.

At the time of writing this review it is too early to judge whether the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games 2020, staged in 2021, will be remembered in the future as a regrettable and forgettable COVID Olympics or as a triumph during a time of the global pandemic. The Japanese public remains divided over whether the country should ever host the Olympic and Paralympic Games again, a survey conducted shortly after the Games finished in September 2021 by the Nomura Research Institute concluded. When asked about staging the Games again in the future, 36 per cent of Japanese respondents were against, 36.3 per cent reacted positively, and the rest were undecided 27.7 per cent. The city of Sapporo, on the northern island of Japan, has been tipped to bid for the 2030 Winter Olympics and Paralympics, and the President of the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee, Seiko Hashimoto, has said she hopes that this will happen. Many objected to the Games going ahead during the pandemic, but often people who wanted a taste of the action, and who were not allowed to actually enter the sports venues, were seen gathering outside the venues. However critical opinion remains fairly clear that the Games went ahead primarily because of the money at stake.

By postponing the 2020 Games until 2021 some commentators suggested the possibility existed for the event to act as a boost to the reputation of each of the main stakeholders involved and provide an upturn in the attraction of the global spectacle. This was certainly the hope of Olympic supporters, such as the IOC President Thomas Bach and the Tokyo 2020 President Hashimoto. Yet there is much more to be said about the dark side of the Olympics. Arguably, Tokyo 2020 has starkly revealed the relationship of the host city with the IOC and the tight contractual stranglehold the IOC holds in that relationship, and this will have long lasting impacts – possibly deterring other potential hosts and boosting critics of the mega-event. The value of de Oliveira’s analysis is that without taking either of these sides it clearly and dispassionately details the games behind the games and ultimately the negative consequences of hosting for cities.

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OLIVEIRA, N. G. *Mega-events, city and power*. London: Routledge, 2021.

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