

GLOBALISATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS, AFTER 2012

There are a number of grand narratives within which the Olympics might be evaluated, each of which inscribes the project in a very different value nexus. Perhaps the dominant paradigm on the Left is that of globalisation. The Olympics, and sports in general, are read as symptomatic of larger economic forces at work in the society, of which globalisation is paramount. This is not just down to fact that the Games are a sporting equivalent of the United Nations Assembly, but that hosting them is the material sign of world city status.ⁱ Their delivery presupposes a critical mass of facilities, including a networked infrastructure of transport and communications, that is integral to the global economy; a scale of procurement that only the largest companies with global resourcing and supply chains can provide and a level of national affluence sufficient to sustain such a large investment in public resource. Capitalism, according to this view, is the only Game in town and globalisation is its middle name.ⁱⁱ

This may be good news for the corporate sector, the construction, tourism and hospitality industries, property developers, and all those who for one reason or another are 'going with the flow'; but the benefits of globalisation do not, in the usual course of events, trickle down as far as the poorest sections of the host society. London's pitch for the 2012 Games, with its priority promise to deliver jobs and prosperity to the East End, staked a claim to be the exception to this rule, and to be judged within a rather different economy of worth.

Globalisation and its local dis/contents was very much at the heart of the 2012 pre-Olympics debate.ⁱⁱⁱ There was considerable overlap between anti-globalisation rhetoric and the arguments deployed against the Olympics. The nay-sayers pointed to the threat of gentrification and the pricing of local working class people out of the area as a subtle form of social, if not ethnic, cleansing; the new shopping city at Stratford, dominated by global brands, taking trade away from the local street market and local suppliers; small businesses being unable to compete with the big boys for the lucrative Olympic contracts; the level of corporate sponsorship required to make the Games commercially viable destroying any claim to ethical business practice; and finally the dislocation or erasure of existing cultures and communities, and the creation of a sanitised and heavily regulated piece of city.^{iv} Capitalism is here very much the villain of the piece: first it spoils our fun by importing the spirit of unhealthy competition and the protestant work ethic into sport, destroying its ludic joys and

then it ruins our health courtesy of MacDonal'd's and Coca Cola. Finally, to add insult to injury it uses tax payers money to subsidise an event that yields mega profits to disreputable private conglomerates, the likes of BP, Rio Tinto, Adidas, Arcelor-Mittal and Dow.^v Against these worst case scenarios the Olygarchs and Olygopolists point to Barcelona (yet again) as proof positive that it is possible for a city to stage an economically profitable Games whilst still delivering substantial benefits to its least well off citizens. London 2012 would show that the spirit of Capitalism and Carnival were alive and well and joint partners in the Olympic enterprise.

Whether mobilised for or against the Olympics, the problem with the globalisation thesis is that it dissolves their specificity, and treats them as an epiphenomenon. The Olympics are portrayed as a juggernaut flattening everything in its way. They can certainly often feel like that to those most directly in its path, like the inhabitants of the hutong in Beijing, or the favelas of Rio, not to mention the squatters of Hackney Wick. Unfortunately in this scenario the local and its avatar 'the community' is often reified, portrayed as an immovable object vis a vis the irresistible force of globalisation in a way that merely mirrors its effects. But, contrary to what many of its critics suppose, global capital is not only a homogenising force. It also articulates differential, even disjunctive, moments of history and culture into a consensual, commodified nexus of 'ethnicities'. Ethnicity becomes a source of social and cultural capital for minorities and aesthetic hybridity (alias multiculturalism) becomes *à la mode* for the affluent middle class at precisely the point when it is pressed into service to sustain the penetration of market relations into every nook and cranny of economic life. Once capitalism moves on from one-size-fits-all methods of mass production and consumption, it needs to operate through the diversification of brands. One way to do this is to 'ethnicise' commodities by associating them with an 'authentic' mode of local fabrication and a community of labour supposedly insulated from the globalisation effect: Shetland pullovers knitted by commuting crofters, genuine Irish malt whisky which tastes of its native heath courtesy of EU subsidies, Welsh lace knitted by the wives of ex-miners amidst the dreaming spires of long abandoned pits – these are the heraldic commodities of the contemporary consumerfest. Capitalism may be indifferent as to the colour of the hands it sets to work provided they are industrious, but it needs to create niche markets around difference. And this, in turn, can provide local leverage for working class and minority ethnic communities in the labour market.

The creation of ethno-commodities may be the key characteristic of multicultural capitalism, but I have argued elsewhere that multiculturalism itself has different, essentially pre-capitalist, roots in 18th century English landed society^{vi}. It belongs to a moral economy ‘where order in variety we see/And where, tho all things differ, all agree’ (Alexander Pope). This principle of ‘harmonious confusion’ today finds its commodified expression in the cultural mash up – the dominant idiom of the Olympic Ceremonies. Here what appears to be part of a democratising impulse to overthrow class-bound hierarchies of taste, in fact renders the most disparate cultural practices commensurable; they are all part of the same mix because their critical dissonances both aesthetic and ideological, have been artfully smoothed, or rather, kitschified, away so they become almost interchangeable. The mash up is free market economics applied to the sphere of cultural representation, hybridity is laissez faire neo-liberalism in symbolic action. And kitsch become the preferred aesthetics of bricolage.

In his brilliant comic strip book ‘The Carboard Valise’ Ben Katchor creates a surreal country of the mind where globalisation and its local discontents have taken root. The story centres on the conflict between Emile Delilah, the permanent tourist who is always seeking to escape from his own culture into someone else’s, and Elijah Salamis, the supranationalist who believes that all places are in the same, and that the only authenticity is to be found in repudiating any cultural artefact that has a local habitation and a name (suggest you reproduce one of the strips- Will send one appropriate)^{vii}. Katchor shows the absurdity of both multiculturalism with its fetishism of difference and the abstract universalism of those who think that humankind can only realise its ‘species consciousness’ by embracing some kind of cultural Esperanto.

What does this analysis imply for the development of an alternative legacy politics in the aftermath of 2012? I think it means that we have to construct a post-Olympics debate that goes beyond the current focus on globalisation and its local discontents and instead build on the fact that the communities of East London have already made a substantial difference to the delivery of the Games and, in so far as the Olympic Park is concerned, can impact importantly on the legacy. Secondly we have to recognise that sport has an intrinsic value and meaning within its own moral /aesthetic economy of worth, and is not merely the symptomatic expression of wider forces. Finally the forms of popular enthusiasm and participation which 2012 made momentarily possible give the lie to the carefully

orchestrated ecstasies of Carnival capitalism, if only because they remained grounded in the particular mutualities of everyday life. These countless small acts of generosity and kindness to strangers, on the part of East Londoners who had no material stake in the Olympics, or in its aspirational hype cannot be enrolled or recuperated by the rhetorics of ‘the Big society’. Rather they exemplify what Marcel Mauss called ‘the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure, the pleasure of hospitality in the public and private feast’^{viii}. They amount to what David Graeber has provocatively called ‘actually existing communism’ and as such they should offer the Left, so often cast in the role of party poopers, some encouragement and even hope for the future^{ix}.

NOTES

ⁱ See S Sassen *A sociology of Globalisation* New York W W Norton 2007

ⁱⁱ See M. Roche, *Mega Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture*, Routledge, London, 2000, and K. Young (ed.), *Global Olympics: Historical and Sociological Studies of the Modern Games*, Elsevier, Oxford, 2005. See also the contributions to J. Horne and W. Manzenreiter (eds), *Sports Mega-Events*, Blackwell Oxford, 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ See G. Hayes and J. Karamales (eds), *Olympic Games, Mega Events and Civil Society: Globalisation, Environment, Resistance*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2012.

^{iv} For a critique along these lines see J. Ryan-Collier, *Fool’s Gold: How the 2012 Olympics are Selling East London Short*, New Economies Foundation, London, 2008, and also M. Perryman, *Why the Olympics are Bad for Us and How They Can Be*, OR Books, 2012.

^v See the contributions to B. Carrington and I. MacDonald, *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, Routledge, London, 2009.

^{vi} See Phil Cohen ‘The Artificial paradise and the beautifying Lie’ *Soundings* 50 2013

^{vii} Ben Katchor *The Cardboard Valise* Pantheon Books 2011

^{viii} Marcel Mauss *The Gift* page 124.

^{ix} David Graeber *Debt : the first 5000 years* Melville House 2011

Phil Cohen is the author of *On the Wrong Track :East London and the Post-Olympics* published by Lawrence and Wishart next month.