The Sustainable Development of the Olympic Games: Critical Connections

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Abstract

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1.1 The 2012 London Olympics have been promoted globally as the most sustainable games to date. This article explores the very intimate relationship between the concept of sustainable development and the Olympics. It shows that, on the one hand a more sophisticated interpretation of sustainable development is necessary to understand the impact of the games, and on the other that the Olympics offers opportunities for investigating the complexity of sustainable development itself. In particular, the paper suggests a future research agenda for exploring reflexive modernity in a risk society. Initially, it is recognised that sustainable development is a contested and ambiguous concept whose definition and implementation is socially mediated. This is followed by briefly charting the co-evolution of sustainable development and the Olympics through consecutive Olympic Games. It is then argued that strong synergies exist between sustainable development and the Olympics which provide a fertile research ground for explorations into the nature of modernity and beyond. This is achieved with a particular emphasis on the idea of a reflexive modernity in a Global Risk Society (Beck 1992, 1999). Initially, a brief introduction to sustainable development is required that sets the context of the concept as fundamentally ambiguous and contested.

1.2 As an often used but necessary starting point sustainable development has been defined as '...development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987: 8). This definition is open to interpretation and critics suggest that the concept is so vague that it can be interpreted as all things to all people (Williers 1994) and that it is nothing more than well intentioned fantasy (Norgaard 1994). On the other hand others have suggested that: 'The strength of the idea of sustainable development lies in its ambiguity and its range' (Redclift 1992: 3). This will be revisited in the latter part of this paper following a discussion that explores the connections between the Olympics and Sustainable Development. Initially, the evolution of this relationship is discussed.

1.3 Early rhetoric within the Olympics that can be drawn into the realm of a sustainable development emphasised the advantages of urban renewal (Essex & Chalkley 1998; Fusey et al. 2012). The Rome games of 1960 saw significant renewal that extended well beyond the initial construction of sporting facilities. Tokyo in 1964 used the games to legitimise and strengthen an existing ten year renewal plan. The games of the 1970s highlighted the effect of external global pressures on the games in the wake of the oil shocks. The following games witnessed varying levels of investment with multiple and variable outputs and impacts. Importantly, the Seoul games of 1988 emphasised the need for increased environmental standards, especially in the areas of hygiene, air pollution, waste disposal and a significant effort to clean up the Han river. It is no coincidence that these efforts directly followed the publication of the Brundtland Report 'Our Common Future' by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (WCED 1987). It was here that the often quoted 'official' definition of sustainable development was coined. Such events have served to raise awareness of environmental issues and embed sustainable development in the global zeitgeist. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development or 'Earth Summit' was a pivotal event and the Rio +20 conference in 2012 has added a contemporary dimension to the debates. At the Earth Summit, Agenda 21, which is considered by many as the blueprint for sustainable development on a global basis, was published.

1.4 The following years saw a number of initiatives that gradually raised the environment and sustainable development on the Olympic agenda. In 1994 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) entered into partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme, following this the IOC established the Sport and Environment Commission in 1995 and in 1996 the IOC amended the Olympic charter to establish the

environment as the third pillar of Olympism. Perhaps the culmination of these events in 1999 the International Olympic Committee adopted Agenda 21 at the third World Conference on Sport and the Environment at Rio. The result of these activities were evident in the Sydney 2000 Olympics which saw a convergence between the Olympic Games and the language of sustainable development with environmental sustainability playing a prominent role in Sydney's Olympic developments.

1.5 A continued process of discursive reinforcement between the sustainable development and the Olympics is witnessed from the IOC as the Olympic Charter in 2007 stated that Olympic Games should '...encourage and support a responsible concern for environmental issues, to promote sustainable development in sport and require that the Olympic Games are held accordingly' (IOC 2007: 15). London's 2012 sustainability plan 'Towards a one planet 2012' (2007) outlined an array of mechanisms and procedures for promoting a sustainable games in five main areas. These include climate change, reducing waste, enhancing biodiversity, inclusion and healthy living. In November (2012) the commission for a Sustainable London published an in-depth review into whether the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics have produced a sustainable games. The post games report 'London 2012 – From Vision to Reality' concluded that the games broadly delivered against its sustainability objectives. The report indicated that ambitious sustainability targets such as zero-waste to landfill and 70 per cent waste to be re-used, recycled or composted are on track. Whilst these developments are useful and represent a progression in creating a relationship between sustainable development and the Olympics the interpretations of what it means to be sustainable remains largely linear and two dimensional with rhetoric embedded in a first modern industrial discourse (Borne 2010; Redclift 1987).

1.6 With the above in mind there remains the continuing challenge of translating the rhetoric and the good intention into tangible outputs. 'From Vision to Reality' is an appropriate title for the commission's report and there is a significant broader literature surrounding sustainable development on translating *form* into *function* (Lafferty 2004). Opening up the rubric of what constitutes sustainability is challenging but is essential if a true representation of what sustainability means for the Olympic Games is to be achieved. For example, Hayes and Horne (2012) take a critical look at the relationship between sustainable development and the Olympics. They emphasise that the approach taken by London 2012 to sustainable development is predominantly top down and that civic engagement has been very limited. They point out that sustainable development within the games has overly focused on decarbonisation, which is evident in the Commission's report (2012), and that:

'sustainable development in this context is more than 'creating a paradigm shift in the construction, catering and merchandising industries... such as whether it involves the creation of new lateral civic solidarities, the critique of the organisation and function of social economic and political systems the reduction of social inequalities and the attempt to find and develop innovative deliberative or participatory democratic forms' (Hayes & Horne 2012: 759).

1.7 These observations resonate with work that identifies the broader impact of the games. For example, it has been recognised that Interurban competition such as the bidding process for the games can produce socially wasteful investments which exacerbate rather than improve urban problems (Essex & Chalkely 1998). More recent observations on multiple dimensions of the games impact also reinforce these observations. Kennelly and Watt (2012) explore the sanitation of city spaces during and after the Olympic events and the impact this has on marginalised sectors of society, in particular they focus on homeless youths in London and Vancouver. This echoes Essex and Chalkley (1998) who used the Seoul games as an exemplar to point out that there was a concerted effort to hide the deprived areas of the city leading to claims that such mega events can actually heighten social tensions. Keating (1991) has suggested that the Olympic Games provide advantages only to those with power vested interest and investment in the games infrastructure. Maguire (2005) recognises that corporate branding, and the ideology that goes with it become naturalised in Olympic coverage, to an extent that a point has been reached where Olympic sport and commercialisation are almost synonymous. With reference to the London 2012 Olympics concerns have been raised over the monopoly of multinational corporations such as McDonalds and Coca Cola as event suppliers. It is on the basis of these broader socio cultural economic and political dimensions that leads Hayes and Horne (2012) to conclude that the London 2012 games are a fundamentally *unsustainable event*.

1.8 With that said it is not the intention of this paper to ascertain the sustainability or otherwise of the 2012 games. And perhaps definitive statements as to the unsustainable or sustainable nature of the Olympics is a symptom of an inadequate conceptual framing of sustainability. Indeed, the discussion to date has served to demonstrate the complex and dynamic nature of the relationship between sustainable development and the Olympic Games. This by default will feed into wider discussions that relate to the planning implementation and subsequently the legacy of the Olympic Games (Rowe 2012) but more germane to this discussion we reach a space of understanding that this relationship is fluid and contested. What follows is an exploration of the next stage of the relationship between sustainable development and the Olympics. This is a discussion that moves away from the managerial and technocratic relationship to explore a more epistemological relationship.

1.9 In parallel with the evolution of the relationship of the Olympics with sustainable development there has been a consistent evolution in the concept of sustainable development itself. Earlier in this paper the ambiguity and contested nature of sustainable development as a concept was emphasised. Its initial interpretation from an environmental perspective has expanded to explore what has been termed the three pillars, the interaction between society, environment and the economy. Beyond this the concept has facilitated the promotion of interdisciplinary and even trans-disciplinary fields of study and research. This has opened up the space for emerging fields of study such as sustainability science, it has facilitated work that uses the concept as a focus point for a broader transition in society (Grin et al. 2010). It

continues to evolve and inform the study of complex and uncertain interactions.

1.10 Here then there is a non-linear interaction between the Olympics and sustainable development particularly in light of the co-evolution already outlined. On the one hand using sustainable development within the management of the games opens up visions of what can be achieved. For example, a move away from a narrow environmental impact assessment to a more thorough sustainability assessment of the games. On the other hand the Olympics offer a space for the evolution of theoretical discourses on sustainable development that move this agenda forward and ultimately enhance both practical and policy domains. Furrer (2002) has recognised that the games '...represent a very interesting investigative field to shed a new light on the debate over sustainable development in the urban milieu of post modern cities' (2002: 2). Furrer points to discursive synergies between the Olympic games and sustainable development that open up an epistemological debate that focuses on the role of sustainable development.

1.11 Removing sustainable development from the discussion for a moment the Olympics has long been recognised and utilised as a case for exploring varying components of modernity (Boyle & Haggerty 2012; Maguire 2005; Guillianotti & Brownell 2012; Roche 2000; Toohey & Veal 2007). However, due to the aforementioned co-evolution of the games and sustainable development it is argued that the concept can be used as a litmus test to explore the transition from one state of modernity to another. In particular, drawing on previous work that emphasises a theoretical backdrop of a World Risk Society it is able to explore the proposition that society is in a state of reflexive modernity.

1.12 According to Beck modernity has turned inward and is questioning its most central tenets creating a stage of reflexive modernity. Reflexive modernity is a complex collection of processes operating at many different levels within society. For the purposes of this discussion it is sufficient to recognise that reflexive modernity is a recursive turning of modernity upon itself '... modernisation is becoming reflexive; it is becoming its own theme' (1992: 19). Reflexive modernity is a process of coming to terms with the contradictions and paradoxes of the modern order (see Borne 2010). However, whilst Beck's work is seen as relevant it is criticised for making generalisations as to the nature of contemporary society and particularly with reference to his belief in the emergence of a reflexive modernity (Elliot 2002; Mythen 2004).

1.13 As such, the number of synergies can be said to exist between the notion of a reflexive modernity, and sustainable development. These include an illumination of the relationship between humanity and the environment. Drawing into question notions of progress, science and rationality open up the boundaries between the global and the local, are concerned with intergeneration equity, and the incompatibility or geological and political timescales. This leads to a wider assessment of the World Risk Society thesis where a symbiotic relationship can be constructed which plays out as follows.

1.14 Perceiving sustainable development through a World Risk Society lens provides a level of sophistication and an overarching theoretical perspective essential for understanding the concept. This will ultimately lead to an informed assessment of how sustainable development is being articulated and the consequences this has for wider social formations. On the other hand, an examination of sustainable development within the context of the Olympics will make it possible to explore the assertions made within the World Risk Society thesis. Ultimately, this will result in a tightening up of the theoretical base and address multiple criticisms of Beck's work (Lacy 2002).

Conclusion

2.1 This article has briefly explored the complex interconnections between sustainable development and the Olympic Games. This is by no means comprehensive and can only offer the briefest of insights to the complex interactions and possible opportunities. It has shown that there is an intimate historical relationship that has been woven into the fabric of the games that is clearly evident in the London 2012 Games which had been promoted as the most sustainable Olympics to date. This has been achieved through a critical stance emphasising a broad literature that explores the different facets of the games. The paper extends this discussion to emphasise the ways that the games can expose diverse societal issues and open up the rhetoric of sustainable development whilst providing a constructive framework to examine the impact of the games that is complex and reflexive. As such, three principle areas for future investigation can be identified. The first is the evolution of sustainable development and the Olympic Games. The second is the opening up of a critical discourse of sustainable development as it relates to the Olympics that will ultimately lead to more effective and appropriate policies and programmes. And thirdly there is an articulation of a continued relationship between sustainable development and the Olympics that offer a fertile field for continued theoretical discussion on multiple fronts.

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