

BOOK REVIEW

Juliet Davis, 2018

London 2012 and the Post-Olympics City: A Hollow Legacy?, edited by Phil Cohen and Paul Watt, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 460pp £65 HB, ISBN 978-1-137-48946-3

Olympic legacies are the subject of grand promises made within the timeframe of competitive bids and in the run up to the Games. But afterwards, they often melt into the background, to be supplanted by disappointment and regret. At the time of London's bid for the 2012 Games, legacy was characterised by a promise of regeneration 'of an entire community for the direct benefit of everyone who lives there'¹. This fascinating book is about the relationship between this promise and its aftermath.

The editors and contributing authors are long-standing scholars of East London and the Olympics, and bring different conceptual resources and concepts to the task of interpreting legacy, from Gramsci's theory of 'hegemony' to Rancière's 'dissensus', and Agamben's 'state of exception', all of which add to the richness of the book. Their accounts are essential reading for anyone interested in the history, making and politics of mega event legacies, and also in the history and transformation of East London. While the book may seem to dwell on struggles rather than optimistic perspectives, it offers a salutary corrective to official claims of unbridled success, painting a far more complex picture of legacy as an uneven, privatised development process, and of regeneration as far from being for 'everyone'.

Cohen and Watt set out with an ambitious aim: to change the field of Olympic studies. They identify three key issues within existing scholarship, relating in different ways to the temporality of change, promises, events and legacies. First, they argue that there is a problematic disjuncture between the *times* of pre-Olympic and post-Olympic legacy which also informs the evaluation of legacy. In the early years when promises are proliferating attention is concentrated on what the future might hold. But interest in the Games often drops off afterwards, leading to blind-spots in the interrogation of how it unfolds. Second, the authors argue the need for longitudinal studies to explore the dynamic processes through which legacy materialises over time in contexts of planning, governance and everyday life. Third, they argue that the tendency to adopt a comparative approach between cities to analyse Olympic legacies fails to acknowledge the contextual specificity of 'the political economy, social history, cultural geography and physical fabric of each host city'².

The first three parts of the book focus on the legacy of the London Olympics, while the final section includes chapters on Rio, host to the 2016 Games, and Tokyo, the forthcoming 2020 host city. Issues of contextualisation are addressed in the first part. Gavin Poynter explores how London's Olympic legacy is being 'shaped by the underlying trends evident within the wider city economy' and reveals the challenges of delivering a local legacy in this context³, while Pete Fussey and Jon Coaffee focus on London's Olympic security strategy, arguing for the need to understand these processes as far more than 'simple colonial impositions of external defined practice' but as also rooted in locally situated practices of security management through which particular communities, and/or locales may be routinely stigmatised, construed as threats and/or marginalised.

The second part of the book involves a shift of view from contexts to the sites and social situations in which legacy is materialising. Paul Watt and Penny Bernstock examine housing in East London, considering the extent to which, in light of rising property values, policy changes related to social housing, and strategies of 'social-mixing', an inclusive legacy has resulted for East Londoners. Phil Cohen identifies the 'hysterical materialism' at work in claims-making related to London's

¹ LOCOG, 2012 *London Olympic Bid Candidate File*.

² Cohen and Watt, 9

³ Poynter, 47

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regeneration legacy and goes on to explore how this embeds within the experience of legacy by 'those in whose name Olympic-led regeneration is carried out'⁴. Debbie Humphrey uses ethnography and photography to tell a 'story of living in the Olympic legacy site' and offer a thicker, more complex representation of new development than that offered by the hyperbolic promotional literature used to sell it as 'The Best New Place to Live'⁵. Chapters 7 and 8 explore issues of change in one of the existing neighbourhoods adjacent to the Olympic site, Hackney Wick. Isaac Marrero-Guillamón explores the politics of urban regeneration in terms of community participation in legacy planning and how, despite claims to the contrary, these processes can become 'anything but democratic'⁶. In contrast, Francesca Weber turns to the ways in which notions of community are themselves mobilised within planning discourse and examines disjunctures and discontinuities between official conceptions of community and those of local people constructed as the subjects of regeneration. In chapter 9, Jack Fawbert evaluates the translocation of an important symbol of East London's working-class community to the Olympic Park – the West Ham football club. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, he explores the struggle 'for hearts and minds' that this proposal, and the later move, created between the owners of the club and its supporters, drawing out the significance of this for local, cultural legacy. Finally, Antony Gunter focusses on young people's struggle to acquire the skills necessary to be part of the transition from an industrial to higher-paid, post-industrial economy.

The third section examines social and health impacts of the Games, with Mike Weed exploring the extent to which the anticipated health legacies have materialised, David Howe and Shane Kerr exploring the legacy of the Paralympic Games through its media coverage, and Ian Brittain and Leonardo Jose examining the more and less positive social impacts of the Games as perceived by over 1,000 residents of the Host Boroughs. The final part of the book turns from the London experience to explore aspects of Rio's legacy and Tokyo's preparation stage for its Games in 2020. Notwithstanding Watt and Cohen's argument for the specificity of legacy-building contexts, the reiteration of claims around drivers of change, evictions and harms comes across strongly in their contribution to this section and Grace Gonzalez Basurto's, highlighting the continual interweaving of local and global processes in the political economy of development.

One of the challenges of edited books is to sustain an argument across a book made up of diverse projects and findings. In this case, the editors use the collection to illustrate the need for ongoing work to characterise the experience and politics of transition, and situate Post-Olympic studies firmly in the gulf 'between Olympic dreams and realities'⁷. This book marks a key moment in the scholarship of London's Olympic legacy, but it highlights the fact that the process of making legacy is far from finished, creating a need for sustained research, and especially longitudinal studies that track transformation over time. As the editors themselves point out, 'the sociological imagination of London as a Post-Olympic city is not yet exhausted'⁸.

References

LOCOG [London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games], 2012 *London Olympic Bid Candidate File*.

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⁴ Cohen, 174

⁵ Humphrey, 182, 202

⁶ Marrero Guillamón, 228

⁷ Cohen and Watt, 449.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 451.

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