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London 2012 and Environmental Sustainability: A Study Through the Lens of Environmental Sociology

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Abstract

This rapid response paper examines the claim that Olympic Games hosting can encourage and/or accentuate the adoption of environmental sustainability (ES) policies by the host nation, with London 2012 as a case study. Six indicators that can be used in this examination are identified and subsequently tested in relation to changes brought by austerity/'Big Society' policies. The paper closes by suggesting that although the UK, unlike other hosts, had a relatively good ES standing; however, it appears that this has been significantly downgraded in the event and immediate post-event phases of the Games.

Keywords: Environmental Sustainability, Ecological Modernization, Olympic Games Impact, 'Big Society', London 2012

Introduction

1.1 Although 'nearly all Games by their sheer scale have considered how to manage their impact' (Toyne 2009: 232), the incorporation of the green dimension in the planning and organization of the Olympic Games took some time to develop alongside the rise of environmental concern since the 1970s (see Karamichas 2012a). In particular, starting with Sydney 2000 – the first *Green* Olympics – the green dimension has only now been fully incorporated into the planning and staging of successive Olympic editions. That development has also been accompanied with plans for the environmental legacy bequeathed by the Games, which can be attested by improvements in the environmental capacity of the host nation.

1.2 A crucial development on the environmental legacy front is the implementation of Olympic Games Impact (OGI) studies. An OGI study 'is designed to evaluate the Games' legacy for the host nation and city against a raft of social, economic, cultural and environmental indicators; hence, providing an 'evidence base' for measuring the positive societal consequences of the Games for its hosts' (MacRury & Poynter 2009: 304); and it was first introduced into the formal planning requirements for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. London was the first Summer Games host city that was mandated to carry out the study (ESRC 2010: 6), but Beijing 2008 also applied an OGI study raising in that way 'the bar for green ambitions' (UNEP 2009: 20). As such, the last two Summer Olympic editions marked a turning point in the evaluation of post-Olympic environmental sustainability (ES) credentials. Without losing sight of this development and in order to offer an evaluation of the post-event ES capacity of the UK, this paper adopts the following interrelated steps of analysis:

1.3 We start with an overview of ES in the bidding and pre-event event – preparatory – phase of London 2012[1]. We subsequently use reflexivity in identifying indicators that can be used to assess the post-Olympics environmental capacity of Olympic host nations. This is also followed by an overview of studies assessing post-Olympics environmental capacity by using these indicators. Last, we examine the London 2012 case by speculating on how these indicators have been affected by austerity cuts and 'big society' policies.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC), the environment and London 2012

2.1 Eight years before an Olympiad, the IOC publishes a manual for candidate cities (MCC) to inform their

bids for hosting the Games. The MCC dedicates a section to environmental matters, outlining the commitment to environmental protection by the IOC and guiding the candidate cities on the policies they have to employ to achieve a positive bid evaluation. An examination of the MCCs that guided Sydney 2000 and the Olympic editions that followed, demonstrates the emphasis given by the IOC on the environmental impact and legacy left by the Games. Overall, the ES standards set by the IOC appear to be substantial precedents for the transformation of the whole developmental plan of the host country. According to Karamichas (2012b: 155–156):

> [...] one would therefore think that the planning and ambitions for the Games goes beyond the successful preparation of a one off event and has a long-term impact in the policy, decision-making, organisation, scientific consultation and use of new technology of the host nation [...]. [w]e can see a process akin to ***engrenage*** here, in similar terms conceived for policy-making in the nascent European Community by Jean Monnet, in that the process of meeting the IOC's environmental standards could both drag with it the host nation's institutional framework and set a precedent that other nations would strive to emulate.

2.2 As far as London 2012 is concerned, the IOC (2010) claimed that the Olympic Games in London 'have sustainability at the heart for their preparation' (IOC 2010). This is clearly exemplified in the different constituting parts of the London 2012 sustainability plan, ***Toward a one Planet 2012***, which is very much based on the WWF/Bioregional concept of 'One Planet Living®' – to help us live within the world's resources. Among the five key themes that comprised the focus of that plan we can find 'climate adaptability' (see London 2012, 2007). In relation to this, the Sustainability Plan Update of December 2008 reiterated that 'the Games can make a real difference by minimising greenhouse gas emissions, from construction to after the Games, and by ensuring that permanent facilities are able to cope with the impacts of climate change' (London 2012, 2008a: 6).

2.3 All of the five sustainability themes (climate change, waste, biodiversity, inclusion and healthy living) were systematically appraised by London 2012 and in December 2008, satisfactory progress was reported on most of the commitments made in the London 2012's Sustainability Plan (London 2012, 2008b: 16). Nevertheless, certain 'refinements' were also outlined to the overall carbon management strategy of London 2012 (2008b). According to Hayes and Horne (2011: 754–755), 'London 2012 has not set a "carbon neutral" goal, has abandoned the highly contentious practice of offsetting, and has developed a carbon footprint methodology calculating emissions "when they happen", producing a reference footprint from the point of the bid to the closing Games ceremony, assuming development as set out in the bid dossier'.

2.4 It is interesting to note that the OGI pre-event study did not produce positive results about the environmental performance of the Games, but these were attributed to problems with the collected data (ESRC 2010: 25). There is hope that there would be a much better assessment in the 2015 follow-up study. Without any intension to dispute the quality of this study or the fact that more time needs to elapse in order to assess the environmental legacy of London 2012, we assert that projections can still be made about the environmental legacy of the London Games in relation to the engrenage dynamic that we identified in IOC's ES ambitions. One way to do so is by comparing and contrasting findings from different Olympic editions. For Preuss (2004:2), '[i]n order to make a successful comparison of host countries, it is necessary to homogenize the calculation methods employed to determine the final balance'. In this direction, we sought to identify a suitable method by exploring the theoretical insights offered by environmental sociology.

Environmental sociology and environmental sustainability

3.1 The main reasons that we are approaching environmental sociology in order to identify a suitable method has very much to do with the identification of a clear similarity between the emphasis by the IOC on the ES impact and legacy left by the Games and the principles outlined by the perspective of ecological modernization (EM).

3.2 According to Buttel (2000a, 2000b), EM is one of the two facets that compose reflexivity. The other facet is Risk Society, produced by Ulrich Beck (1992, Beck 1995) and seconded by Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991). The advent of reflexivity gave new momentum to environmental sociology and also established the environment as an important item of sociological engagement. EM, in particular, has both normative and prescriptive qualities that can inform the policy-making process.

3.3 Through engagement with the core EM literature (see Buttel 2000a, 2000b, 2003; Mol & Sonnenfeld 2000; Jänicke & Weidner 1997; Weidner 2002) and the green legacy aspirations of the IOC, the following six indicators for identifying and testing post-Olympics capacity in EM were singled out by Karamichas (2012a: 385; 2012b: 159):

1. average annual level of CO_2;
   Starting with data measuring CO_2 emissions at a given hosts nation since 1990, the baseline year of the Kyoto Protocol, in appraising a country's status on this indicator a range of socio-political factors that may have contributed to failures in adopting policies aiming to CO_2 emissions reduction is put under the microscope.
2. level of environmental consciousness;
   This indicator examines data from different social surveys to gauge the extent to which the general public in host countries exhibits environmental awareness and concern. The underlying rationale is that the highest concern is the more likely for the state government to adopt relevant policies. It is expected that major environmental disasters and adverse economic condition resulting in job

losses and politics of severe austerity may have a significant impact.
3. ratification of international agreements;
   This indicator assesses the willingness of a given polity to undertake an international commitment over what is a quintessentially global problem. The ratification of an international treaty, like the Kyoto protocol, can be a major point of political contention that revolves around the issues of economic growth and job creation.
4. designation of sites for protection;
   This indicator is assessed by counting the percentage of land acreage with this designated status and is also reliant upon the aforementioned issues. In other words, the designation of natural sites for protection is very much on the willingness of governments to impose environmental condition in economic policies.
5. implementation of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedures;
   The implementation of EIA procedures is an essential requirement in the MCCs produced by the IOC. In this case the rationale is directly underpinned by the aforementioned engrenage dynamic. However, this is a highly ambiguous indicator that is malleable by the prevailing socio-economic situation.
6. Environmental Non-governmental Organisations (ENGO) participation in public decision-making processes.
   This indicator is in direct connection to the degree of environmental consciousness exhibited by the host nation. The underlying rationale in this case is that high rates of environmental consciousness tend to encourage support for ENGOs pushing for environmental reforms.

ES capacity post- Sydney 2000, Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008

4.1 These indicators were used in a study that was completed in 2010, namely 10 and six years respectively after the Sydney and Athens Games. This was considered to be an adequate lapsing period since the running of the Games to make an assessment of the ES benefits accrued by them, found out that neither managed to achieve the ideal score in all six of the EM indicators. It also concluded that developments in post-Olympics capacity for ES policies in the host nation were tied to political changes, like the election of Labour parties in government in Australia (2007) and Greece (2009) (see Karamichas 2012b). Moreover, the positive projections that were made in that study about Greece, after the election of socialist PASOK in 2009, were tarnished with the acceleration of the economic crisis; and that any new study would have been obliged to use the economic crisis as an intervening variable (see Karamichas 2013). The economic crisis has been considered as an intervening variable in projections on the ES legacy of London 2012, which is proposed here.

4.2 In the bid made for Beijing 2008, it was claimed that it would 'leave the greatest Olympic Games environmental legacy ever' (UNEP 2007: 26). Indeed, not only did Beijing make good use of Sydney's example in its bid to host the Games (see Mol 2010; Mol & Zhang 2012), but it was also the first Olympic host city to produce an OGI study. Post-Olympics it's worth pointing that the latest Five Year Plan (FYP), produced by China in 2011, clearly aspires to delink economic growth from environmental deterioration, and that way it could be argued that China scores relatively well in all six indicators. This positive outcome could be attributed to incremental developments that were bound to take place in China after the 1978 modernizing reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping (see Karamichas 2013).

Capacity for ES policies in the UK post-London 2012

5.1 It has been supported that the UK has been in an advantageous position in catering for the environmental legacy of London 2012, when compared to the position that the two modern Olympiads that followed Sydney 2000 found themselves to be (Karamichas 2012a: 387–388). In particular, the UK, along with Germany, held for a long time a leading position within the EU on pushing for reduction of CO_2 emissions (Schreurs & Teiberghien 2007: 37–38). That was because of rising public concern and the switch to natural gas and the privatization of 'the large state energy monopolies' (Giddens 2009: 80; EEA 2008: 47). Moreover, available data has demonstrated that the UK managed a 5.37 per cent reduction of CO_2 emissions in 2007 (Karamichas 2012a: 388); and in relation to environmental consciousness, the British public has 'demonstrated one of the highest levels of environmental consciousness across the EU' during the first decade of the 2000s (ibid).

5.2 In terms of ratifying international treaties, the UK has 'taken climate change leadership roles within Europe' during the first decade of the 2000s (Schreurs & Teiberghien 2007: 25). Moreover, when London applied to host the Games, the UK was able to boast of an impressive number of National Nature Reserves (Karamichas 2013: 192), thus scoring high in the related indicator and it was also one of the first countries to introduce EIA procedures back in 1985. Thus, it appeared that the UK was well placed in absorbing the IOC guidelines without introducing any significant procedural changes. Moreover, during the 1990s and early 2000s, ENGOs had very good access and impact to the corridors of power (Dryzek et al. 2003: 180; Rootes & Miller 2000). Overall, it could be argued that, in relation to the identified EM indicators, the UK had traditionally occupied a leading position and initially showed good potential for complementing its existing capacity after the Games.

5.3 Nevertheless, in relation to reduction of CO_2 emissions, the Treasury started to show signs of reneging upon the most ambitious promises in cuts to greenhouse gas emissions – 80 per cent by 2050 and indicative target of 60 per cent by 2030 – with the spread of the economic crisis in 2010 adding more support to the view that these 'could become an added strain on UK businesses' (Porritt 2011: 14; Stevenson 2011). As far as environmental consciousness is concerned, an examination of the 2011 special Eurobarometer (327) on European Attitudes towards Climate Change shows that the UK public exhibited less concern about climate change, 44 per cent, when compared to the 2009 study on the same

issue. Interestingly enough, the European average (EU27) in the 2011 study was 51 per cent. Nevertheless, the slight decrease of concern exhibited by the British public in that study does not warrant a negative score over this indicator.[2]

5.4 As far as the ratification of international treaties is concerned, the current predicament of continuous economic crisis and accompanying austerity cuts subjects any environmental treaty ratification to challenges. Challenges such as advocating the protection of the national economic interest, similar to that mentioned above, in relation to earlier plans for a substantial decrease of CO_2 emissions. In any case, we cannot claim with certainty that the UK status in this indicator has been either maintained or changed. Similar doubts have been raised on continuing awarding a positive score on the Protected Natural Site Designation, due to cuts inflicted in the available funding for Natural England[3] (Porritt 2011: 25); along with these cuts was the earlier announcement of plans to sell thousands of hectares of forestland, which were folded after fierce public opposition in February 2011 (Karamichas 2013: 192–193).

5.5 The application of EIA procedures appeared to be incorporated as key elements in all planning procedures in the proposed reforms of the planning system, which were put forward by the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra 2011). These pledges can be seen as a commitment to complement existing EIA policies. However, at the time that EIAs are the responsibility of local authorities, which are under increased strain in the context of austerity cuts, there are many doubts on the effectiveness of EIA procedures. That way, this indicator can also have an uncertain status in the 'Big Society' context[4]. In many respects the 'Big Society' discourse appeared to initiate a new wave of positive collaborative arrangements between ENGOs and government institutions. In the words of Porritt (2011: 37), it is 'entirely compatible with the type of progressive, radical emphasis on decentralisation and civic empowerment that the Green movement has been advocating for many decades'.

5.6 Although the UK had a much better ES capacity status than other Olympic host nations when it submitted its bid to the IOC, it appears that the initiation of austerity cuts and 'Big Society' policies have significantly downgraded this status. In particular, although the UK never received a positive score in all six indicators, with the advent of 'Big Society' four of the indicators were downgraded to ambiguous or negative status. More specifically, the 'annual CO_2 emissions' and 'implementation of EIA procedures' were downgraded from an ambiguous to a de facto negative status whereas the 'ratification of international agreements' and 'Designation of sites for protection' from a positive to an ambiguous status.

Concluding remarks

6.1 Following OGI recommendations, the post-Olympics environmental legacy would be better appraised in 2015; but as things stand, it appears that out of the four Olympics host nations reviewed here, the nation that stood with the best ES standing, when it was awarded the Games, has been remarkably following a path towards the opposite direction after hosting the Games. Characteristically, and perhaps in what can be seen as a blatant exploitation of the ***panem et circentes*** euphoria that was brought by the Games, there was a cabinet reshuffle with the appointment of a climate change sceptic as Secretary of State for the Environment, Owen Paterson, and announcements for plans to relax environmental planning restrictions in order to stimulate growth by mega-projects (Grice 2013). The examination of post-Games ES capacity can be carried through to examine the true legacy of the Games by continuing to monitor the six indicators after the 2015 appraisal. These indicators should also be complemented with specific social indicators to offer an all encompassing sustainability overview, which after all was heavily promoted in the Olympic bid. The fact that the 2011 riots started in the socially disaffected Olympic Boroughs has given added impetus to such an endeavour.

Notes

[1]The designation of different phases was inspired by Hiller's (2000) work on mega-events.

[2]After all a range of other studies have demonstrated, even during the 'climategate' scandal, much higher levels of concern over climate change by the British public (see Karamichas 2013: 189–190).

[3]This organisation offers advice and support to farmers for natural site stewardship.

[4]'Big Society' signifies the commitment by the coalition government to move away from the 'big government' and the empowerment of civil society with 'a greater role in tackling social problems' (Hilton et al. 2010). This has been seen by some as a way to cut public spending and a continuation of Thatcherite ideology that also advocated an increased role by civil society in what was state provisions.

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