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Active Citizens and Public Policy: The Example of London 2012 Olympic Games

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Abstract

The author argues how Olympism, the ideology underpinning the Olympic Games, when linked with youth can generate what Foucault called 'technologies of power'. This article first discusses the increasing rate of governmental interest for sport and the "active citizen", children and young people. In this light several interventions and policies across the western societies such as the United Kingdom, United States and Canada are examined. The author then argues how the youth agenda for the Olympic Games can also be seen alongside this neo-liberal increased interest for active citizenry.

Keywords: Olympic movement; Olympic Games; active citizens

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Introduction

Core to the discussion in this paper is the concept of '*governmentality*' which was first developed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in the later years of his life¹. Governmentality refers to technologies of power that can be understood as:

- the way governments try to produce the citizen best suited to fulfill those governments' policies;
- the organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed.

Although governmentality may be evident in a range of societies or social contexts, much of the work of Foucault and of political theorists who have engaged with the term focuses on governmentality in a neo-liberal, modernist context. Neo-liberal individualism is perhaps the dominant form of post-Enlightenment political ideology in the West which engenders a particular form of knowledge, with for example a predisposition to accept market mechanisms and a restricted remit for the state. This implies internalised and reflexive self-governing, and has implications for the way we² conceptualise truth. As Dean (1999) put it, we govern ourselves (and others) on the basis of what we take to be true and how we should behave to achieve appropriate ends, but that also, how we govern ourselves and behave, generates ways of producing truth.

This article discusses the concept of governmentality in relation to practices and policies of western systems of governance that focus on youth and sport. They ultimately aim to produce self-governing individuals which best serve the needs of society. In the following sections the author examines two different contexts which provide evidence of governmentality in relation to youth and sport. First the context of modernist, neo-liberal, western societies such as the UK, USA and Canada are considered in terms of the increased governmental interest for policies centered on sport and 'active citizenry' (i.e. young people). Secondly the author examines the context of the International Olympic Committee, perhaps the most powerful sport administration internationally, and the

¹ Approximately between 1977 and his death in 1984

² 'We' refers to us the individuals as part of a wider society

central role of youth in the Olympic policies and practices since the early years of the Olympic movement until today.

1. *Western societies: sport, youth and governmentality*

Governmentality particularly concerns the political management of bodies (corporeality) in the population as a whole and involves a set of techniques to achieve thisⁱ. Dean (1994: 171) has argued that “the rationalities, operation, techniques, strategies, and practices of governmentality are centrally associated with the governance of the social body”ⁱⁱ. The population’s health is regulated through the regulation of their bodies in modern governmentality and, it is argued, sport can play a major role in the process of governance of the health of the social body. Indeed Miller, Lawrence, McKay, and Rowe (2001) have argued that sport should occupy a central place in the history of modern governmentality. Sport, in this interpretation, constitutes a powerful cultural technology and a core disciplining force of a nation.

In contemporary neo-liberal contexts the disciplining of the bodies of the nation is rather obvious in the increasing expansion of 'health industries' in western economies (drugs and vitamins providing treatments of several conditions, health and exercise advice, or surgical body modification techniques). Moreover it is also evident in the heightened emphasis given to health issues in Physical Education (PE) and the broader school curriculum especially during the recent years in the USA, UK, Australia and elsewhere (Penney and Chandler 2000; Tinning and Glasby 2002). This is reflected in the UK, for example, in the development of curriculum discourse which relates to Health Related *Fitness* or Health Related *Education*.

Writing about Canada and the USA Fusco (2007: 43) claims that youth are increasingly subject to the invocation “to engage in healthy living in spaces that are replete with discourses of healthification’, civic engagement and consumerism”. Fusco claims that the focus on policies about youth has recently become intense not only as a result of anxiety about obesity and sedentary lifestyles, but also because of concerns relating to crime prevention and ‘anti-social’ behaviour among the young. Here there is a linking of disciplining the body – eat more carefully; exercise more regularly etc. - with promotion of the wider social discipline of civic engagement.

In the UK the concern with developing self-regulating citizenry is increasingly evident also in sport and sport-related policy. Green (2007: 64) notes that while, “historically, government interest in sport, PE and physical activity has at best been one

of intermittent action and at worst neglect and indeed outright disdain” there was an unprecedented embrace of policies for sport and physical activity by the government under New Labour. As seen in policies such as the PESSCAL (Physical Education and School Club Links) and PESSYP (Physical Education and Sports Strategy for Young People) strategies, the British government sought not simply to increase rates of exercise in England, but also to persuade young people to engage in volunteering, and to join community sports clubs outside the education domain. In short government was laying great emphasis on the generating of social capital as a key goal of sport / physical education policy.

Therefore, as shown in this section, western societies such as the UK, USA and Canada increasingly organize their practices (e.g. mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) around young people and sport. In this way governments use sport as a tool to produce the autonomous, independent and self-regulating citizen that is best suited to the modernist, neo-liberal societies.

2. *The Olympic Movement: governmentality, youth and Olympism*

However, it is not just the governments of western societies that seem to focus on policies and practices about young people and sport. The International Olympic Committee, perhaps the most powerful sport administration body internationally, always had a primary focus on youth. Especially the founder of the modern Olympic Games Baron Pierre de Coubertin had shown an interest in the Olympic Games partly as a result of his engagement with the project of social reform through physical activity and sport for the French government. Initially, his aim was the creation of a fit population (and army) for a strong nation through the regulation of the body (Müller, 2000).

The ideology of Olympism was an amalgamation of eclectic values and ideas, which would guide the individuals how they should lead their lives. There were several discourses and technologies of power in interlocking systems (Chatziefstathiou and Henry, 2009). First, Olympism was to play a role in incorporating the new neo-liberal class interests of the industrial bourgeoisie, while at the same time disciplining the emerging industrial working class to conform to neo-liberal ideas of a new world order in relation to leisure practices. This was particularly important in the period following the First World War when working class resentment of the sacrifice of human life in pursuit of what was perceived by many as class based definitions of ‘national’ interest was at its height in the West (Chatziefstathiou and Henry, 2009).

With the revival of the modern Olympic Games and other international sporting events like the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) World Cup, sport began to play a prominent role in demonstrating national power in international politics. As a result, many nation-states set the promotion of high-performance sport as a priority of the state policies (Houlihan, 1994). Beginning with the Cold War era, international sport events became a heated battleground of competing state ideologies. Winning international sporting games was often regarded as the quintessential proof of the power of the modern nation-state. The athletic body that symbolizes the state has become a signifier of state power (Hargreaves, 1994). However, Olympism was developed in Coubertin's writings and speeches as a philosophy consciously intended as a set of rules or propositions not simply about sport and its governance but about how one's life should be led, and thus clearly relates to what Foucault describes in his characterisation of technologies of the self (Chatziefstathiou and Henry, 2009).

It is no coincidence that Olympism has emerged along with the maturing of neo-liberalism in a post-Enlightenment context in which new relations between classes, genders, and nations (colonial and colonised; West and non-West; capitalist and socialist) were beginning to emerge. Olympism in effect operated as a source of governmentality in a post-colonial neo-liberal context (Chatziefstathiou and Henry, 2009). It generated technologies of power "technologies imbued with aspirations for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired ones" (Foucault *et al.*, 1988: p. 63) as well as technologies of the self, in which Olympism as an overt philosophy of behaviour, of how to proceed in life, provides a set of values, principles, behaviours which both instantiate and legitimate power from the micro inter-personal context, through meso-level contexts (the world of sport, or the Olympic world), and at the macro (societal) levels.

Also related to the bourgeois and the technologies of domination was the use of the body as a disciplinary force to train and produce male leaders who would undertake the imperialistic labours of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The masculinising practice of sport was seen as an appropriate vehicle to produce 'Muscular Christians' who would be appropriate servants and officials of the British Empire (Hargreaves, 1994). The discourses associated with Muscular Christianity reciprocally shaped the gendered Olympic notion of sportsmanship which emphasised fair play, modesty and the following of rules underpinned by competitive spirit and the pursuit of excellence. Olympism

historically was promoting technologies of power and self in terms of sexuality, moral betterment, national and military defence, imperialistic expansion and the bourgeois interests of capitalist mode of production and economic power (Chatziefstathiou and Henry, 2009).

Thus as the history of the early Olympic Movement demonstrates, the Olympic Games and the moral agenda of Olympism have been used by the key stakeholders of the movement (e.g. Baron Pierre de Coubertin) as a vehicle for instilling specific values to individuals. Through the practice of sport the Olympic movement generated technologies of power and guided young (male) persons how to lead their lives in accordance with the neo-liberal, industrial bourgeoisie values that the movement espoused (e.g. elitist, gendered etc.)

2.1 Young people and the contemporary Olympic Movement

Governmentality and generation of technologies of power are also evident in relation to young people and the contemporary Olympic Movement. It is rather obvious that a focus on young people has escalated in recent years and this is evident in the policies, programmes and interventions by the Olympic family, targeting young people around the world. The motives for this are expressed as a mixture of moral but also commercial factors.

In an unpublished presentation to the British Olympic Academy in 2006 Giselle Davies the IOC's Director of Communication reported that in studies of Olympic brand recognition commissioned by the IOC, the identification of the Olympic rings as an instantly recognisable brand image was weakest among young people particularly in Asia where for some age segments the rings were rivalled by 'youth' brands such as MTV in terms of levels of recognition. She also noted that while the Games represented the most popular media event its audience was beginning to show some signs of weakening among younger cohorts.

Against this background the IOC embarked on a significant campaign to foster the youth market with new initiatives such as: the introduction of the Youth Olympics; London 2012's International Inspiration Project for young people around the world; the use of new social networking technologies, the development of virtual participation in Olympic Congresses in the digital age (first introduced in Copenhagen 2009), and the addition of 'youth' sports such as snowboarding and BMX bicycle racing in the Olympic programme. The introduction of new youth sports to the Games is particularly striking

since Jacques Rogge had made it one of the priorities of his presidency to tackle the problem of gigantism, the increasing size and complexity of the Olympic programme, and while consideration of the Eurocentric nature of the programme did not result in the addition of new sports or disciplines to address this, the priority given to attracting the youth market reflected in the addition of youth events to the Games programme may be seen as even more impressive.

The targeting of the youth market through the use of social media is something which accelerated in the period from 2008. The urgency of dealing with the new media issue was also illustrated when the IOC announced in 2008 a deal to broadcast the Beijing Olympic Games highlights via YouTube on the internet in 77 countries which did not have access to the official provider NBC's internet coverage. Alex Balfour Head of New Media for London 2012 pointed out the IOC had little choice but to conclude a deal because "The Olympic Games will be played out on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter whether we like it or not" (Techshout, 2008). The IOC's Interim Report for 2009-10 entitled *Shaping the Future* reported the launch of multiple social media channels to capture the interest of the youth market

A further enhancement of the Olympic Games occurred with the IOC's first-ever use of Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube to engage younger Olympic fans around the globe, who are increasingly difficult to reach through traditional media.

The IOC launched its Facebook page one month before the start of the Games, enabling fans to stay up to date with activities and events whilst sharing their stories about Vancouver 2010. By the time the Games ended, the page had attracted more than 1.5 million fans and generated nearly 200 million impressions. (International Olympic Committee, 2010)

Of course special reference should be made to the Youth Olympic Games which have been characterised by the IOC president Jacques Rogge as "the flagship of the IOC's determination to reach out to young people". He has emphasised that "these Games will not only be about competition. They will also be the platform through which youngsters will learn about Olympic values and the benefits of sport, and share their experiences with other communities around the globe." (International Olympic Committee, 2008).

All the aforementioned new additions and developments within the Olympic Movement concern young people and are partly driven by the commercial interests of the IOC in strengthening the Olympic brand among youth worldwide. Hence key stakeholders of the IOC (e.g. the IOC President, the IOC Marketing Director etc.) prioritise policies and initiatives on youth, promote modernized values through new media and technologies, and introduce new sports and events for attracting younger audiences.

Concluding remarks

Public and sport policies focus on young people and children as the active citizens who will reduce the social costs and increase productivity for future generations. Through the regulation of the body the conduct of individual is normalised and their autonomy and self-control increases. Moreover, such regulation increases control and certainty over the manufactured risk society of high modernity, increasing the responsabilisation of individuals.

In the context of the early Olympic movement, several technologies of power existed in several interlocking systems in terms of gender, social class, race/ ethnicity guiding the individuals about how they should lead their lives. In the context of the contemporary Olympic Movement, this paper demonstrated that young people are a key priority. The IOC employs advertising companies to popularize the Olympic Games among world youth and implements programmes and initiatives that will increase the young audience of the Games. Hence the Olympic Movement has always been a political movement wherein technologies of power took effect in several discourses.

To conclude, the focus of the IOC on youth shall be seen alongside the increased governmental interest of the western societies for youth and sport that was discussed earlier. Both aim to instill values to youth as it serves best the interests of neo-liberal societies (e.g. self-regulating, independent individuals and consumers).

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ The question of the body and its social and political emplacements has been a significant site of investigation and analysis by 20th century philosophers, artists and writers. For example, familiar sites of focus include the body as a process of civilising forces, the body beautiful in commercial enterprise, the grotesque body in carnivalesque and dis-ease, the gaze in gender politics, the docile body in societal relations of power, the body politic, the body as gendered, racial and experiential site of knowledge, the medicalised body, the deterritorialised body as machine or set of vibrations, the body as an epistemological and ontological site, the social body (Foucault, 1988).

ⁱⁱ The idea of the social body suggests an embodied social life coming from the implicit regulating practices of social authority. Such practices can be identified through the distribution and reception of modes of representation and communication, and the rhetorical figure of the body in the production of social argument (Grierson, 2000).