

Review Essay: Understanding Olympic Tourism

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Weed, M. (2007) *Olympic Tourism*, Butterworth Heinemann, 0750681616, 265pp

Coalter, F. (2008) *A Wider Social Role for Sport*, Routledge, 0415363500, 206pp

Theodoraki, E. (2007) *Olympic Event Organisation*, Butterworth Heinemann, 978-0-7506-8476-7, 186pp

The 2008 Beijing Olympics are likely to become one of the most controversial Games in recent memory. Perhaps not since the awarding of the Games to Moscow and the subsequent politically-motivated boycotts has a Games provoked so much debate and controversy. Ever since the International Olympic Committee announced that Beijing had won their bid, there have been consistent media stories that threaten to undermine the potential economic and social benefits to be gained from hosting the Olympics. These were enhanced around the time of the event itself as high numbers of journalists reported from the city itself. The major concerns about security, pollution, doping, and the political issues around Tibet and Darfur cast a shadow of negative publicity over the Games. A number of the world's more important politicians

refused their invitation to the opening and closing ceremonies. Some athletes spoke out against political issues. And there were protests during the period of the event by Chinese and foreign campaigners.

Despite all of these concerns, enthusiasts for sport-related tourism maintain their belief that hosting the Olympics can bring a wide range of tourism-related outcomes. In this case, that the Olympics will raise the profile of Beijing, improve tourist infrastructure, and 'open up' access (in other words, made it more Western-friendly). A well-planned strategy of modern development alongside ancient traditional attractions, might lead to short- and long-term gains. One need only check the official website of the event to find such optimism, an almost unflinching assumption that tourism and the Olympics will go hand-in-hand:

The tourism industry will be benefited the most directly by the 2008 Olympics. The Beijing Olympic Tourism Action Plan, developed and implemented by the Municipal Tourism Bureau, has identified the image of 'an Ancient Capital in the East and the Homeland of the Great Wall' as the visual attraction for the Olympic tours. The construction of tourist sites, the development of tourism products and the tourism marketing efforts shall be effectively integrated to help make Beijing a

first-class tourism city in the world, and the top tourism city in China. Efforts will be made to make sure that the city's revenue from tourism will be increased in correspondence with the increasing number of tourists (www.en.beijing2008)

However, this debate is not just about the host city, it is about what the Olympics mean in an international global tourism marketplace. What is striking is that the excitement surrounding the Games has continued despite all the public relations issues. Newspapers and sports fan discuss the hype and drama of the sports events almost at the same time as worrying about the social and political problems. So there is a fascinating sociology to the Olympics and tourism. There is an emotional pull that is part of the Games' magnetism that almost supersedes rational analysis and sober concerns of cost/benefit balance.

We can observe a similar phenomenon with the planning process for London 2012. It is more or less clear that the Government deliberately under-estimated the economic costs of hosting the event when the bid was presented in early 2003. Even at the time a number of critics pointed to the fact that costs always over-run and that London was already saturated with tourists. Nonetheless, the British public's appetite for the 2012 event remains largely intact: there have been very few voices of dissent. As the Olympics

continues to grow as a commercial, modernising force, and as other cities look to use it for image projection and tourism, so the time is ripe for good, systematic academic analyses about the relationship between hosting this huge event and the various strands, themes and theories in tourism studies. This review essays focuses primarily on Mike Weed's work as it purports to specifically address the question of the Olympics and tourism, the other two books will be considered for the further potential insights into the subject matter.

In the months preceding the Beijing Games, Mike Weed published *Olympic Tourism*. Clearly this was an opportunity to draw from past cases and discusses the potential of future ones, specifically Beijing and London. To his credit, Weed does not claim to have conducted much primary research. This is a synthesis of existing research in three areas: tourism, Olympic studies and sports tourism. The premise of the book is that by bringing these together he could add to the 'little research on Olympic tourism per se' and 'develop knowledge through the application of existing frameworks to a new context' (p. xiii).

The approach taken is to divide the book into two sections. The first deals with concepts and focuses on classification of sports event tourists and their behaviour, then going on to look at leveraging for

and planning for Olympic tourism. There is some interesting ideas presented here that draw from secondary sources. For instance, Weed uses a framework developed by Preuss to classify tourist groups. This looks at the various ways in which tourists arrive, stay, spend money and are therefore positive contributors to the tourism benefits equation. More helpfully the framework also includes those negatively affected: local residents who leave the city during the Games, or avoiders who would normally have visited but are not interested in the additional chaos and costs of coming during the period of the event. Weed then develops this classification when discussing leverage processes and planning. So a city should identify the various groups and target them accordingly. There are some interesting examples here, like the case for Sydney 2000 when some Australian regions advertised themselves as 'Olympic-free zones' to pick up some of the 'runaways'. Weed also discusses strategies for pre-Games and post-Games tourism.

By the chapter on planning, the book seems to be getting too generic. Weed uses a model called 'Olympic Tourism Policy Rings' in which 5 circles are positions like the Olympic rings with the central one being 'Olympic Tourism' and the others being 'Facility Issues, Information and Lobbying, Resources and Funding, and Policy and Planning'. These each have sub-categories like 'Sports Training' and 'Economic and Social Regeneration'. Big ideas are presented and

summarised but it's hard to get a feel for how they might be implemented. So much so that Weed writes, 'In planning for Olympic tourism, a wide range of substantive issues need to be considered in addition to understanding the problems of organisational and policy collaborations in relation to Olympic tourism in particular, and Olympic policy in general' (p.116). In this the reader can clearly see a partial admission that explaining the policy context and planning principles for the Olympics as an abstract model is so challenging that it becomes quite bland. The second section of the book offers the chance to balance this problem with case study examples.

The Calgary Winter Olympics of 1988 is one event for which Weed can draw upon some substantial body of research. However, the analysis does not return to the classifications outlined earlier in the book, which is disappointing because this undermines the consistency and sense of purpose. Neither does it ask the harder questions about how to differentiate tourism impact from economic impact, or how to distinguish the effect of the Olympics from the building of new resort facilities *per se*. Such vagueness is apparent in the statement 'the number of non-Canadian visitors to the wider state of Alberta has never dropped below pre-Olympic numbers' (p127). The obvious, but unacknowledged, questions are: what else is in Alberta for tourists? and what has happened in the 20 years

since that will affect tourism? The wider context and range of relevant factors in long term patterns is a central problem for any attempt to relate a sports event to tourist behaviour. Unfortunately, it is not good to offer superficial summaries such as the above.

The problems with a lack of empirical knowledge continue throughout the case study discussions. When discussing more recent Winter Olympics, Weed cannot provide information even on the basic question of whether the host city experienced a longer term boost to its tourist economy. The more challenging issues, like the negative impact on other resorts in the same country, are not addressed. Here again, the logic of ideas developed earlier in the text are not followed through in the development of a sustained, critical, hard-hitting analysis. It is far from clear how the author can then go on to claim that 'hosts of both the Winter and Summer Games attempt to leverage Olympic media to generate positive images of themselves as a general tourism destination, and in this respect they both benefit from an association with the Olympic rings' (p. 135). This simply echoes the sort of simplistic thinking and propaganda to be found on official Olympic websites, as illustrated by the Beijing case above.

Discussions of the Summer Games are intriguing not least because the historical example of Barcelona 1992 is referred to as a powerful

model of what can be achieved through hosting the Games. Weed does not question the assumptions surrounding this example and repeats assertions often found in the media that other hosts can follow the Spanish's city's lead. In fact, it is easy to develop a counter-argument. Barcelona had an existing historical city that was attractive to tourists, and developed industrial wasteland near the city to great effect. The long term pattern was greatly assisted by the arrival of flight routes in 1996 from the low-cost airline Easyjet. Moreover, the city is in each reach of large populations around Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. At the same time, the 'success' of Barcelona is not actually as great as with other similar sized European cities. Research shows that, using 1992 as a baseline, both Prague and Dublin have outperformed Barcelona for 'inbound tourism' (ETOA undated). Moreover, that the number of international visitor arrivals dropped around 25% between 1992 and 1993 (ETOA 2006).

Weed contrasts Barcelona with Atlanta, who hosted the next Games in 1996, and whose tourist industry did not achieve significant gains. It seems plausible to argue that Atlanta did not have similar contextual opportunities within which the Games could function as one salient element. Again though, Weed fails to deliver enough valuable empirical and analytic tools to answer the tougher questions about what exactly can we say the Olympics offers in

terms of tourism. He admits that 'Accurate measures of the impact of the Sydney Olympic Games on tourism are not available as little research to specifically examine this issue has been conducted' (p.149). A few pages later, he reveals that 'Empirical assessments of the actual or potential effects on tourism and business of the Athens 2004 Games are few and far between' (p.169). However, other sources show that the pattern international visitors to host cities fluctuates in the years prior to and after a Games, with cities like Sydney seeing a significant fall between the year of hosting and the 2-3 years after (ETOA 2006).

The final two case studies in Weed's book are speculative: Beijing and London. From a planning perspective, it's not clear what Weed's book might offer either of these cities. He argues that Beijing might suffer from the negative images of 'a state socialist system with a poor record on human rights' (p.185). And while London seem to have a good system for maximising benefits, only time will tell if they succeed. However, he does not deal enough with the potential risks; rather the tone of the discussion revolves around principles of good management in descriptive terms.

All of which leads to a more general reflection on the book. There is no question that it is interesting and informative. But it shies away from some of the more difficult questions and from critically

analysing the political nature of claims made for major sports events. Even if we did assume that tourism could be enhanced by the Olympics, what sort of evaluation timescale is appropriate and what sort of empirical information is meaningful? These questions lead to the more challenging one of whether it is possible to isolate the Games as the key influential factor in any evidence-based pattern? Should, for example, Beijing experience a 5 year rise between 2008 and 2013, critics could argue that the wider economic expansion and urban modernisation of China played a role in enhancing tourists' perception. Equally, should the city experience a dip after the event, pro-Olympic idealists will point to other contributive factors in the global economy like the rise in long-haul flight costs. It is almost impossible to isolate the impact of the event regardless of what pattern is observed simply because of the myriad of related influences and changes.

These sorts of issues have been addressed by Coalter (2007) in his book *A Wider Social Role for Sport: Who's Keeping the Score?* This is a wide-ranging review of the claims made by various agencies that sport can have an impact upon society beyond the proverbial field of play. When discussing the impact of major sports events, Coalter offers a sustained critique of the methodology underpinning economic impact studies and the political context in which such claims are made: 'This is a policy area in which ambitious and often

extravagant (non-sporting) claims are made as part of the extensive lobbying processes associated with securing national and local political and business support to bid for such events' (p.142).

The problem for tourism studies is not just the collection and careful analysis of information, but how to weigh up tourism input benefits against the cost of building new facilities, adapting these facilities to community use after the event, running the event itself, any transport infrastructure costs, the costs involved in bidding and in paying management consultants, and the general disruption to the host city. A further point to make is that tourists make their travel destination decision based on many variables. Quite what role the fact that a place hosted a sports event plays in that decision-making process is entirely unknowable.

Coalter's critical view of the gap between claims made and evidence for is explained partly through what he calls the 'mythopoeic' status of sport. He explains that mythopoeic concepts are 'based on popular idealistic ideas' that 'contain elements of truth, but elements which become reified and distorted and 'represent' rather than reflect reality, standing for supposed, but largely unexamined, impacts and processes' (p.9). All of which is really important for a closer consideration of the relationship between hosting a major event and developing short and long term tourism benefits.

Coalter's book goes far beyond tourism and into various aspects of sport and policy, but taken as a whole provides a sober reminder that the sorts of claims that get bound up with hosting sports events tend to resonate from either stakeholders with vested interests or from unquestioned common sense myths about the impact of sport.

The final book to be considered in this review article is Theodoraki's *Olympic Event Organisation*. Unfortunately, the outcomes of this book in terms of tourism and events can best be summed as: missed opportunity. The study draws heavily on primary research of the IOC and host organising committees for Olympics Games alongside detailed analysis of specific events such as the Games held in Athens in 2004. This information is presented within the framework of organisational theory and management planning processes. Here was a great opportunity to detail social benefits as a process, with the impacts identified related to planning decisions made, all explained by useful theoretical frameworks. The problem is – at least for the purposes of this journal – that tourism is not mentioned anywhere in the book. Given that Weed's book was speculative and hopeful, Coalter's pragmatism urged caution, then Theodoraki might have helped fill this gap. It would have been really fascinating to find out more about how tourism policy becomes embedded in event policy, to have read examples of good

and bad practice, to get a sense of potential, risk and how the effectively manage the process. Perhaps it is somewhat harsh to criticise the author if tourism was not one of her research objectives. However, one would have expected some discussion given that tourism is often cited as one of the key economic and social outcomes of investing new infrastructure for an event and for using that event to 're-image' a place.

Taken together these books offer insight as well as a sense of unfulfilled potential for tourism-related studies of major sports events. Tourism is now integral to legacy planning for many sports events. This is how the Department of Culture, Media and Sport sees London 2012 Olympics benefiting the wider tourism agenda:

The Games are an excellent opportunity to improve skills, especially in the construction, hospitality and leisure, sports and media industries ... With the Tourism Strategy, we should see a warmer welcome and a better visitor experience, not least as the quality of accommodation and tourist attractions will be improved. The Games will also be a showcase for the UK as a world-class destination for future major sporting, cultural and business events. (DCMS 2008:4)

It seems certain that economic resources will be put towards these objectives and that 3-4 years from now many claims will be made about the tourism benefits of hosting the Olympics in London. However, with proper research, conceptualisation and reflection on the process, another opportunity will have been missed to understand the relationship of hosting a major sports event and enhancing (and sustaining) tourism benefits.

References

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