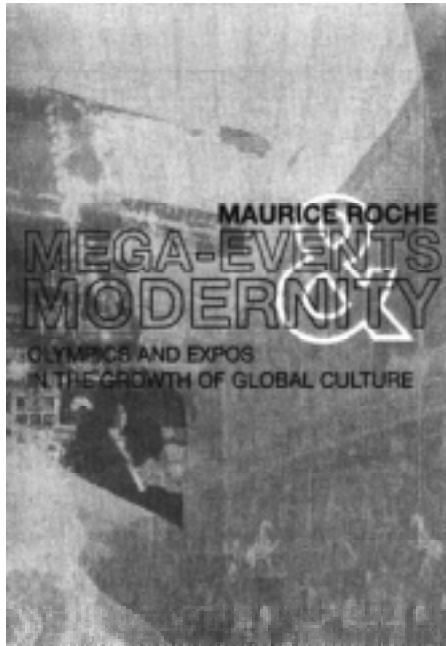

Book Reviews

Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture by Maurice Roche (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 281, including notes, bibliography, author and name index, and subject index. Reviewed by Douglas Booth, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.



Compared with their colleagues in history, sociologists have generally dismissed the Olympic games' as sporting trivia. Maurice Roche's *Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture* will encourage a re-evaluation of this assessment. Conceptualizing the Olympics as mega-events ('large scale cultural [including commercial and sporting] events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance' [p. 1]). Roche develops a pioneering analysis of 'the biggest and probably the most important cultural international non-governmental organisation . . . outside of world religions and scientific associations' (p. 196).

Mega-Events and Modernity comprises four sections. Chapter 1 identifies over a dozen factors that make mega-events sociologically significant. Olympic studies scholars will be aware of some of these factors: as cultural markers in the stories (biographies) of individuals and in the narratives of nations, mega-events contribute

to the formation of social identities; mega-events draw lucrative tourist trade to host cities; they enable local and national elites to 'project and disseminate old and new hegemonic and "official" ideologies to "the masses"' (p. 9). Other factors will be less familiar: mega-events send ambiguous messages that allow for alternative readings and a resistant popular culture; mega-events are 'actions which contain a reflection on structures . . . and which carry the potential to either reaffirm structure or to begin to mark a transformation' (p. 8).

Chapters 2-4 deal with the history of mega-events prior to the mid-twentieth century, emphasizing their production by power elites, their impact on mass culture, and the political uses and abuses of international sport. A key finding in this section—mega-events 'decisively influenced and helped create' new levels and forms of citizenship and public culture (p. 38)—provides a foundation for further analysis in chapters 5-7 which study the dimensions and problems of contemporary mega-events. One of many examples Roche discusses in this third section is the demand in contemporary Western states for free-to-air television coverage of the olympic games. Irrespective of whether they are interpreted as 'rights to information (public interest, civil rights) or as citizens' rights to choose (free markets, consumption rights)', Roche cites these demands as evidence of 'the defence and promotion of cultural citizenship' (p. 193).

Chapter 8 completes the book with a preliminary theory of mega-events. Roche employs three metaphors, 'bridges', 'hubs', and 'switching centres', to convey his theory. Mega-events are 'temporary "cultural and physical bridges" between ... elites and the people', and they are 'temporary spatial' hubs and broader 'temporal-historical' hubs which act as 'switching centres' (p. 234). Elaborating on the latter, Roche explains that mega-events initially bring together producers and cultural aficionados for the purpose of consumption but during this process participants may 'switch-on' (find) other common interests; or, as 'cultural reference points' for different generations, mega-events may 'switch-on' (precipitate) 'inter-generational communication' (p. 235).

Roche adopts a political sociological approach to the analysis of mega-events. Discussing the politics of mega-events, Roche observes that 'whether their impacts are positive or negative, urban mega-events are typically conceived and produced by powerful elite groups with little democratic input to the policy-making process by local citizens. On the contrary local citizens are typically expected to act as if they welcomed the event that is imposed upon them' (p. 126). Elite groups require local citizens to serve as volunteer workers and to contribute financially through taxation. This does not mean that elites can guarantee the success of every mega-event. Contemporary mega-events require social contracts between event organizers, television organizations, the viewing public, local politicians, sponsors and advertisers. And failure is almost certainly assured if one or other of the 'partners' do not deliver.

Sociologically, Roche's analysis hinges on three distinct temporal dimensions: event core, intermediate event zone. and event horizon. Analysis of the event core involves examination of the dramatological content, that is, the various 'ritualistic and theatrical features which contribute to the charisma, aura and popular attraction' of the mega-event (p. 12). The intermediate event zone includes the pre- and post-event processes, for all intents and purposes, local and national politics and national and international economics. The event horizon investigates the long term causes,

motivations and effects of mega-events; here the focus is the structural conditions of modernity.

Mega-Events and Modernity attempts a far-reaching and complex analysis of the Olympic games. Not surprisingly, there are problems. Roche concedes that *Mega-Events and Modernity* ‘principally explores’ the intermediate event zone or the ‘critical political sociology of intermediate-level processes and dynamics’ (p. 19). This terrain has already been well covered by the three standard political histories of the Olympic games—Allen Guttman’s *The Olympics* (1992), Christopher Hill’s *Olympic Politics* (1996) and Alfred Senn’s *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games* (1999). Not only are discussions of the immediate event core and the long-term event horizon subordinated to the intermediate event zone, there is no systematic linking of the three temporal dimensions. Moreover, with the motors of social change driven by intermediate processes—viz pre-First World War imperialism, interwar supernationalism, and post-Second World War globalization—long-term structural changes receive token attention.

An absence of political relationships—the heart of the intermediate event zone—from the theory of mega-events is an omission. Roche reminds readers of the negative political impacts of Olympic games, including housing relocations, and rises in rents and house prices. He observes that ‘urban leadership groups’, in their pursuit of hosting Olympic games, ‘cynically ... abuse’ their power, and ‘normalise and institutionalise practices of unaccountability [and] bribery’ (pp. 157-8). He refers to the shallow rhetoric surrounding the ideology of olympism, and to the ‘notorious lack of democracy and accountability’ in the Olympic movement (p. 216). It is difficult to reconcile these lively politics with the bland theoretical statement that the Olympic games are a “‘bridge’ ... between elites and the people’ (p. 234).

Mega-Events and Modernity is disjointed. I attribute this problem to analyses of three distinct temporal dimensions within a chronological format. Perhaps aware of this predicament, Roche provides abundant signposting to guide and position readers within the overall argument; too often, however, excessive signposting disrupts the flow of the text.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, most readers will find rewarding insights. I am intrigued by Roche’s arguments about expositions as the politico-cultural basis for the development of the Olympic games. More substantially, Roche’s structural analysis of sport in modernity makes the book a valuable text for historians. Olympic historians typically ignore structural analysis. They prefer to contextualize the Olympics around ideological forces (e.g., amateurism, fascism), institutional systems (e.g., Soviet Union), events (e.g., First and Second World Wars), and human agents (e.g., presidents of the International Olympic Committee) rather than within structures such as modernity, globalization, and capitalism. But as Roche points out, international mega-events are integral to the functioning of modernity. They offered early moderns an opportunity to review their lives and relationships with others in a world that promised to satisfy their needs for identity but which, under the impetus of industrialization, scientization, militarization and state violence, threatened their very social and individual existence. Contemporary mega-events offer late-moderns ‘cultural resources’ to help them adapt to ‘incessant technological and organisational change’ in the labour force, “‘information overload’ ... and the chaos of “choice” in consumer markets’, and an increasingly plural and complex cultural and political life (pp. 220-

21). The Olympics have contributed to the 'development and promulgation' of ideas about national collective identity, the 'inclusion' of different groups in the traditions and destinies of specific nations, and an understanding of the 'obligations and rights of participation' associated with national life (p. 198). Olympic games provide moderns with 'enduring motivations and special opportunities to participate in collective projects' that, *inter alia*, 'structure social space and time, display the dramatic and symbolic possibilities of organised and effective social action, and reaffirm the embodied agency of people as individual actors' (p. 222). Lastly, the allure of positive international images and status consolidated mega-events as permanent features of modernity with elite producers seemingly oblivious to fears about costs and public debt.

The central issue here is that structural analyses lead to quite different conclusions to those found in standard Olympic histories that privilege intermediate-level processes, and agents and agency. Roche's structural analysis of the event horizon (i.e. modernity) challenges John MacAloon's investment in the founder of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, as *the* agent of *the* mega-sporting event. Seen through Roche's lens of fairly consistent competition among cities to host Olympic games, MacAloon's claim in *This Great Symbol* (1981, p. xii), that 'it is impossible to understand the origins *or* the persistent "structure" of the Olympics without understanding [de Coubertin]', is less than compelling.

Roche concludes that 'to understand mega-events better is to understand something more broadly about the nature and fate of human agency and social structure, and of continuity and change, in modernity' (p. 235). Roche may be modest about his contribution to this research but it is substantial and a strong reason to read *Mega-Events and Modernity*.

Endnotes

1. Using capital 'O' in Olympics and olympism are small, but important, ways in which the olympic movement unjustifiably venerates and decorates itself. This reviewer rejects capitalizing these words.