

## Book Reviews

The Beijing Olympiad: The Political Economy of a Sporting Mega-Event by Paul Close, David Askey and Xu Xin (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2007), 250 pp. Reviewed by Deane Neubauer, University of Hawaii, Manoa, Hawaii, USA.

Any numbers of lenses have and will be employed to frame, describe and analyze the Beijing Olympic Games. It promises to be the largest and in many ways most spectacular in history. Close, Askew and Xin set out to provide a treatment of the event that is rigorous, textually rich and anchored in an intellectual frame of reference – political economy – that in terms of its own historical richness is sufficiently robust to sustain the magnitude of the event.

Olympic Games, in the authors' view, are global reach events. In this case it means that the event simultaneously takes place within and creates a complex textuality that connects Beijing to a complex variety of global circuits in ways that constantly make and redefine both what the city "is" and what the Games are within its elaborated global transformation (p. 15). This action, hosting the games, is both a centre stage event – and one of enormous magnitude – and an instance of a process that has emerged as a trend, as world-wide cities seek the vehicle to become "located" in global time and space. "The trend whereby more and more cities are trying to make the global connection – to become world cities – is part and parcel of the processes of globalization" (p. 15). Globalization scholars have long viewed the world in terms of a global north – the countries and cities of affluence, wealth, and power that make the rules for global commerce and exchange – and the global south – the countries and cities of the rest of the world largely subject to the rules and processes established by the wealthier "other" (Sassen, 2003). This particular rendition of Olympic Games is, among other things, Beijing's effort to transition from a major "nodal city" of the global south into one of the global north. In doing so, the city leads the nation (with currently the fifth largest GDP in the world, but one which persistently describes itself internationally as a "developing country") to developing new and ever evolving linkages to this global context in ways that involve capital, people, ideas: physical, social and symbolic realities. These ideas are provided in the introductory chapter fashioned as a theoretical essay that touches a good deal of ground with respect to the nature of political economy, some prevailing ideas about globalism, and the history of the Olympic movement and interpretations of its historical manifestations.

The book is in effect made of various essays. The first of these entitled "Olympism, individualism and nationalism," explores the tensions, very much evident in China, between the nation's use of the event to symbolize its coming

of age as a global superpower, and the political move toward an embrace of the ideals of the Olympic Movement, "...with, that is, Olympism; and connectedly, with the values enshrined in universal human rights, and so the principles embodied in the global human rights regime" (p. 39). This chapter cobbles together a number of elements that touch on both individualism and nationalism, but offers very little that anchors these points on what many would regard as China's greatest political vulnerabilities, namely its record on human rights and continual abridgements of freedom of communication and expression, subjects that are matters of continual occurrence in the world press. For many, the chapter may appear eclectic in its choice of subjects and the lack of connections it makes toward generating a coherent theme. The very elements one might expect to find in this chapter focused on the individual and the place of the individual within Chinese thought and current practice, appear in later chapters that raise the issue of the tension between Chinese practices and the ideals articulated as exemplars.

The second major essay presented in the third chapter, "The Olympics, the nation-state and capitalism," engages the reader in a useful treatment of some of the transformations taking place within the form and substance of capital under the current regime of globalization. Of particular interest is the development of private capital in China in the absence of a formally legally dedicated social space, such as that which exists in liberal capital in its many national forms. As many others have pointed out, some of the particular characteristics developing in China may be typical of Asian capital in general (such as the close links between powerful social groups and governmental bureaucracies – the source of the famed "crony capitalism") and those that arise particularly out of China's historical moment: the legacy of Mao, the social entrenchment of the Communist Party, a cultural willingness to borrow without attendant ideological baggage, and elements of liberal capitalism based on simple pragmatism. In the centre of this issue, and returning us to the subject of the previous chapter is the question of how movements toward enriching the space of civil society will fare under the impress of continued expansive capitalism in China, and what enduring role, if any, the Olympiad and its Games will play in this process of infusing Chinese society and the Chinese state with values that originate in a liberal value system. The authors conclude the chapter with a sense of optimism. My observations of the interface between the Chinese economy, the domination of its political economic structure by privileged groups, and the residual commitment of the regime to resist those elements of liberalism that it believes to be potential threats to social stability and security lead me to a more cautious view.

Chapter Four focuses on the social contractual nature of the Olympic commitment and gives considerable attention to how the IOC processes bids and makes decisions, and the subsequent form that promotion of the Games will take, ensuring that they constitute, in effect, a market-oriented, private sector approach to the financing of the games and their development (p.98). Apart

from these lengthy descriptive elements, the chapter then turns to the perhaps more interesting substantive issues of how China's pell-mell continued economic growth will affect the conduct of the Games. The critical element of the chapter, and perhaps the book, emerges from this discussion, namely whether the events of "coming out into the world" – the Olympic Games included – will propel China toward a society and regime that look more like those of the "global club" of prosperous economic nations that it is joining, a process the authors term elective affinity:

A realignment between the economic and political spheres of Chinese society may be inevitable and already well underway. This may be because there is an elective affinity between the ideals and tendencies of market capitalism on the one hand, and those of liberal democracy, on the other, something which means that eventually the economic and political spheres will become aligned, congruent and harmonious around these ideals and tendencies in spite of attempts by the Chinese state to prevent this from happening. (p. 117)

The authors go on to suggest that there are grounds for assuming that the Olympic Games will act as a catalyst in this realignment.

This is an important argument and one that deserves to be taken seriously. The two following chapters tend to let it off the hook, providing a broad picture of some of the macro political considerations of China's quest to enter the "Northern" world of nations, including its entry into the WTO. The concluding chapter brings the question back to focus by pointing to many of the ways in which China has yet to demonstrate its elective affinity with the standards of the international and Olympic communities in various areas of comportment, such as the exploitation of athletes, including children and women. The critical issue in the final chapter, however, is whether on balance it is a better thing for the world to have provided China the opportunity and the platform for the Games and its opening, therefore, to elective affinity, or whether by doing so one serves to legitimize further a regime whose abuses remain large and without justification. This hopeful tension is clearly expressed in the book's concluding paragraph:

The enthusiasm which the PRC's leaders and people have shown for the Games is a sure sign of the PRC's commitment to being a full member of the global community. What remains to be seen is whether this enthusiasm will be translated into not only the greatest but the most successful mega event ever; and whether this commitment will be translated into serving the common interests of humankind, sporting and non-sporting alike. (p. 178)

I suggested above that the book is a set of essays following from a chapter that seeks to provide an overall theoretical framework for those that follow. It is clearly the case that the authors do not intend it as a series of essays, but rather as a coherent argument sustainable in its own right. I do not find that it reads

that way. Rather, I find a choppy incoherence in almost every chapter, leading the reader to search for the thread that ties its materials to the ostensible covering argument of the chapter and the conclusion that the interior argument and data support. In spite of this I found myself well informed by the range of references and footnotes.

It is certainly clear that increasing global interdependence is changing the world in both predictable and unpredictable ways. The Beijing Olympiad will be probably the “greatest” mega event the world has seen: greatest in the sense that through this act 1.3 billion Chinese are “entered” into global symbolic circuits in a way from which they have been previously excluded; greatest in the sense that the dynamics of constantly expanding exposure through global circuits ensures an unparalleled level of coverage to the games.

As the traffic of these global circuits of exchange increases, the value of what they carry is becoming increasingly problematic. Most obviously, it is clear that as the economic stakes of each set of Games increases, the “value” of the economic returns, however calibrated, may outstrip the putative substantive value of the Games as an activity, whether judged as a sporting event, or as an instance of the Olympic performance meant to symbolize and embody its founding and continuing values.

Peter S. Goodman illustrates this problematic nature of value in our global culture in a recent piece in the *New York Times*. We live in a peculiar age with respect to the assignment of economic value, as attested to by the complexities represented by instances as distant as the crisis in the US subprime housing market and its global financial linkages and the contract negotiations of the New York Yankees star Alex Rodriguez. The argument is that the well accepted notions of how markets function and serve to develop prices are complexly related to notions of value. Both the subprime markets and Rodriguez’s contract are subject to changes in the historic price-determining mechanisms as a result of their repositioning by global dynamics. In the subprime case, as we have seen, the issue of value has little to do with an actual house sitting on an actual street as it does with the value of a financially bundled package which is part of the new currency of an emergent global financial market. Similarly, the value of Rodriguez’s contract has vastly less to do with what he does on a baseball diamond in effecting the outcome of games as it does his emergent status as a global brand: a New York Yankee destined to hit more home runs than any player in history. As Goodman says:

It [the value equation] begins to make sense only when the game is seen as an industry re-shaped by technology and globalization. A-Rod then provides crucial content for the cable television channel owned by the Yankees, and a means of hawking caps and jerseys on interactive Internet services. Factor in how he may break the all-time home run record wearing Yankee pinstripes, which convey a global brand, and perhaps – but only perhaps – does the money make sense.

As Mark Zandi, chief economist at *Moody's Economy.com*, argues, "A-Rod could be worth trillions if you get enough eyeballs in China to start watching him."

The point here is that I think another book waits to be written about another set of games, in this case the Olympic Games from the perspective of an industry reshaped by technology and globalization. It is within this frame of reference that we need to seek a broader understanding of the value of the Beijing and subsequent Olympiad Games.

## References

Saskia Sassen, "Economic Globalization and World Migration as Factors in the Mapping of Today's Advanced Urban Economy" (paper commissioned for the Globalization Research Network, 2003); <http://www.global.grn.org>.



*Silent Gesture: The Autobiography of Tommie Smith* by Tommie Smith, with David Steele (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 267 pp. Reviewed by Robert K. Barney, *The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada*.

Arguably the most famous and enduring picture in the photographic record of the now more than 100 years of Olympic history is that storied 16 October 1968 shot of Tommie Smith, Peter Norman, and John Carlos arranged in the gold, silver, and bronze medal positions, respectively, on the 200 meters victory podium at the Mexico City Olympic Games. The photograph, reflecting Norman standing at attention, and Smith and Carlos with heads bowed and black glove-clad fists (Smith's right, and Carlos's left) thrust aloft in the night sky, constantly appears and reappears, year after year, decade after decade, whenever the subjects of race, politics, crises, and climactic events of Olympic history are discussed. Indeed, as one might imagine, the graphic moment is captured on the front of *Silent Gesture's* dust-cover. Today, just short of 40 years later, silver medalist Peter Norman is deceased (both Smith and Carlos travelled to Australia to serve as pall-bearers); John Carlos still lives, teaching and coaching at a private school in Southern California; and Tommie Smith seeks final peace by biding his time in retirement in Los Angeles and Georgia, the locale of his wife's family.

Physical monuments as testimonies to people and events can be looked upon as punctuation marks to history. On 16 October 2003, thirty-five years to the day after his Mexico City 200 meter sprint triumph and subsequent controversial victory podium "gesture," the graphic moment was reborn by the commemoration of a statue on the campus of Smith's and Carlos's alma mater, San Jose State University. The statue, conceived and sculpted by artist Rigo 23, depicts a replication of the Mexico City stadium podium scene, except that the