

BOOK REVIEWS

LINDSAY, IAIN. **Living with London's Olympics: An Ethnography.** New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 204 p. ISBN: 978-1-137-45672-4 (hardcover).

The Summer Olympics have allegedly become the largest spectacle and social gathering of people on earth but to date anthropologists have paid surprisingly little attention to this sporting 'mega-event'. Iain Lindsay's ethnographic account of the 2012 London Olympics, published in a series called Palgrave Studies in Urban Anthropology, contributes to filling in this gap. Set in the borough of Newham, an East London neighborhood where most of the Olympic events were held, the study deviates from the previous social scientific accounts of the Olympic Games in two important ways.

Firstly, it goes against the relatively common trend to emphasise the importance of the Olympics for certain aspects of society and to regard the hosting of the Olympic Games as leading to increased economic openness, capital flows, and eventually also to raising the living standard of the local population. Lindsay paints an entirely different picture of how the 2012 London Olympics was experienced by the residents of Newham. As the author eloquently puts it, the book is an account of 'life in the shadow of the Olympic Games' (p. xvii). Although in the official discourse the Games were seen as a political, economic and cultural catalyst in generating momentum for the regeneration of Newham, the prevailing attitude towards the Olympic spectacle that Lindsay encountered among his interlocutors was resentment.

Secondly, most previous studies have taken what Lindsay (p. 150) calls an 'Olympic outcome' perspective and produced rather depersonalised 'before and after' analyses (e.g. Preuss 2004; Gold & Gold 2008), building on the above-mentioned argument that becoming an Olympic host is sociologically and/or economically beneficial. Lindsay's primary focus, on the contrary, is on the Olympic *delivery*. In other words, if previous accounts have often compared post-event outcomes and pre-event promises, this book scrutinises the implications of the Games for local life *during* the event.

Lindsay provides a detailed ethnographic description of Newham, ethnically the most diverse district in England, marked also by high levels of poverty, crime, and life governed by fear. As Lindsay (p. 19) puts it, prior to the Olympic regeneration Newham was 'a community that, though "real" and with a defined boundary, lived with a little sense of ownership of place; a community where the underlying belief was that life is a transitory and frequently nomadic experience.' Following Marc Augé (1995), Lindsay presents pre-Olympics Newham as a 'non-place'—a neighborhood without tangible and definable place-identity, without shared history, and even without a shared relational culture. Building also on the ideas of Lefebvre, Bourdieu, and Pardo, to name a few, Lindsay addresses such diverse issues as inclusion, exclusion, power relations, securitization, control, ideology and identity.

What eventually emerges from Lindsay's description is a dichotomous picture of an Olympic reality governed by two competing and largely incompatible narratives of the implications of Olympic delivery. Officially, the Games were to serve as 'a panacea to make East London healthy—literally, socially, and economically' (p. 18). However,

this view was based upon the assumption that everybody shared the same idea of what constituted a ‘better life’ and that everybody had an equal ability to take advantage of the opportunities presented therein. Such an assumption, Lindsay argues, proved to be groundless, at least for the many local residents who felt that the Olympic delivery period was primarily oriented towards the needs and goals of Olympic migrants from different backgrounds, as opposed to enhancing the lives of those living in Newham. Although London 2012, deemed the ‘Best Games Ever’, spoke to the urges, interests and desires of contemporary Britain, and was attuned to the mental and emotional bent of British society (p. 135), it did little to meet the needs of local people, among whom common experiences related to the Olympics were detachment, restriction of movement, racial stereotyping and neighborhood policing. In the words of one of Lindsay’s interlocutors, ‘with the Olympics around the corner the whole of Newham has been made into a control zone’ (p. 113). In the opinion of many locals, the Games simply segregated the ‘Olympic’ and ‘non-Olympic’ Newham—socially, culturally, but also physically by means of fences and walls. As Lindsay (p. 159) ironically asks in the end of the book, ‘how many of the millions who attended the events at the Olympic Park actually saw Newham?’

Living with London’s Olympics is a necessary, eye-opening and highly readable book, although lamentably short. Taking a critical micro-level view on the contestations, ambiguities and contradictions of the Olympic delivery, it provides a reversal of this massive spectacle. As such the book could be of interest to a wide range of students and scholars well beyond the subdiscipline of urban anthropology.

REFERENCES

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