Studie

Die Olympischen Spiele 2008 in Beijing und Chinas neoliberales Projekt

Christopher J. Smith und Katie M.G. Himmelfarb

Abstract

Die Olympischen Spiele 2008 in Beijing haben Anlass zu zahlreichen Spekulationen über die Vereinbarkeit der von der Olympischen Bewegung transportierten Ideale und der Förderung universaler Menschenrechte, der Beseitigung von Diskriminierung und des weltweiten Friedens gegeben. Die machtvolle Ideologie des „Olympismus" weist viele Gemeinsamkeiten mit dem zunehmend verbreiteten Phänomen des Neoliberalismus auf, darunter auch die Betonung von „Mega-Events" und Mega-Projekten, ein Vokabular von individueller Freiheit, Wettbewerb und Leistung, sowie eine unausgewogene Erfolgsbilanz bei der Umsetzung solcher Werte in die Realität. Dieser Beitrag skizziert eine multiskalare Agenda für die Bewertung der Folgen der Olympischen Spiele in Beijing, in dessen Mittelpunkt die voraussichtlichen geografischen Auswirkungen und ihr potenzieller Einfluss auf räumliche Aspekte sozialer Gerechtigkeit stehen. (Manuskript eingereicht am 02.11.2007; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 28.03.2008)

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Introduction

> By hosting the Olympic Games [in Beijing in 2008], we are able to fully display to the world not only the Chinese nation's longstanding history and brilliant culture and China's remarkable achievements in reform, opening up and modernization construction, but also the fine quality of Chinese peoples' civilization. (Li 2007)

In the current environment of urban entrepreneurialism, it has become commonplace for cities to make elaborate bids to host "mega-events" such as international festivals, exhibitions, and sporting events. The ultimate goal of such bids is to enhance the visibility and prestige of the host city, and to boost its competitive market status in the world economy. In the early 1990's China launched its first bid for the 2000 Olympic Games, with Beijing as the host site. This bid was ultimately (although narrowly) rejected (in 1993), but in 2001 the announcement that Beijing was to host the 2008 Games was met with great enthusiasm among politicians and citizens alike in Beijing.

The Olympic Games can be considered to be the ultimate "mega-event" in terms of the amount of publicity and television broadcasting they generate. They are also the most geographically inclusive of all global sporting events, but unlike most other events the Games have an underlying philosophy that far surpasses sport per se. The Games, in fact, are supported by what is generally referred to as the Olympic "Movement", which has its own philosophy ("Olympism") that is related to global peace and harmony among nations.

With one eye on the underlying philosophies of the Olympic Movement and the other looking at the promises China's leaders made to its citizens and to the rest of the world after winning the bid in 2001, this paper presents an agenda for evaluating the impacts of the Beijing Games. A multi-scalar approach is undertaken, beginning briefly at the global level, by focusing on the issue of human rights, and attempting to evaluate the extent to which China's hosting of the Games in 2008 has brought about a new level of concern for the humane and equitable treatment of its citizens in the new millennium. At the national level, the potential for the Games to enable or encourage change in the Chinese system of government can be examined by looking for evidence suggesting increasing political participation and a greater degree of separation between state and society. The major focus of this paper is directed at the regional and local levels, by investigating some of the potential consequences of the Games

in socio-spatial terms, looking at the extent to which Olympics-related activities have transformed the city of Beijing, and at some of the social justice implications of these urban changes.[1]

Underlying the argument we are making here is our perception of an overlap in the meaning of two concepts that are key to understanding the context of the 2008 Games: neoliberalism and Olympism. Debates about neoliberalism and its socio-spatial impacts have featured regularly in recent academic work (see Leitner et al. 2007, for a comprehensive overview). The most important characteristics identified thus far in the literature include: the existence of a significant gap between the actual impacts of neoliberal policies and their professed aims (Brenner & Theodore 2002); the use of non-explicitly political means (economics) to promote political change (Harvey 2005); and conversely, the use of the supposed political outcomes to promote a set of non-explicitly political (economic) policies (Harvey 2007).

We have observed that Olympism, in the way it has been implemented during the last half century at least, exhibits a parallel set of characteristics, including: a mismatch between rhetoric and reality; the suggestion or implication that sporting events can play a role in bringing about political change; and at the same time, the recognition that political outcomes are able to influence sporting events. History shows that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has not always been consistent in its stand on politics: at some times it professes to be nothing more than a sporting organization, and claims that taking a position against states with poor human rights records, for example, is not within its purview. On other occasions, however, the IOC has worked to exert its political agency, as when it acted to isolate "rogue regimes" like South Africa during the apartheid era, and, arguably, in the case of its rejection of China's bid for the 2000 Games (Maguire 2005). Less than a decade later, and in the absence of any significant change in China's human rights record, the approval of its second bid suggests that the IOC had reversed itself and was once again claiming to be an apolitical organization.

With all of this in mind we argue that an evaluation of the Beijing Olympics needs to bear in mind that China's bid to host the Olympics, and its eagerness to the use the 2008 event to solidify its status in the global economy, are wholly

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the Second Global Conference on Economic Geography Beijing, China, June 25-28, 2007.

consistent with its enthusiastic implementation of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). Before focusing on the Beijing Games, therefore, and examining the ways China has interpreted its mission as host, we begin by scrutinizing briefly the tenets of China's neoliberalism and some of it's apparent impacts.

Will the Boat Sink the Water? China's Neoliberal Project and its Outcomes

Neoliberalism is a code word for a set of economic and political practices that are based on the assumption that the best outcomes for society can be achieved "by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2007). As Harvey points out the "hands-off" role attributed to government is largely a myth, since it is clear that the state works in manifold ways to create and secure the institutional frameworks that such policies need to work successfully.

In global terms neoliberal practices began at different times, have taken many divergent routes with varying degrees of success, and can be described in many different ways. For this reason Brenner and Theodore (2002) have suggested that, rather than adopting one simple and single definition of the term, it perhaps should be referred to as "actually existing neoliberalism", a compromise that we have embraced in the title of this paper (in the case of the Olympic Games, see below). One consistent theme among all of this diversity is the observation that neoliberalism effectively serves to "redistribute, rather than generate, wealth and income" (Harvey 2005:159). Another realm of consensus operates at the other end of the economic hierarchy: namely that workers in many parts of the world are being trapped in the new neoliberal world of flexible labor regimes characterized by short-term contracts, part-time work, chronic job insecurities, lost social protections, and inhumane working conditions [...] a situation aptly referred to as a "race to the bottom" (Chan 2003; Villalon 2007).

In China, policies adopted since the early 1990's can be characterized by the urge to deregulate most aspects of the economy, coupled with an intense desire on behalf of the nation's leaders for China to become a fully-fledged member of the global economic community. Despite the relative absence of involvement in this process of major international free trade organizations, China's transformation has many of the characteristics of neoliberalism, in the sense that considerations of economic growth and development have largely outweighed all other concerns,

including the goals of democracy and social justice that would seem to be consistent with the aspirations of a socialist state. Chinese scholar Wang Hui argues that much of what we have seen in the new China has resulted from:

> Highly manipulative, even coercive, governmental acquisitions on behalf of economic policies that favor a particular schema of capitalist acquisition [...] [which is not the result of truly free markets or the sequence of spontaneous events] [...] but [...] state interference. (Wang 2003:6)

Wang notes that those with political power in China have participated directly in economic activity and have become agents for large corporations and industries, to such an extent that "political and economic elites have been completely conflated" (ibid.:26).[2]

One of the strongest points to emerge from a reading of Wang Hui's treatise is his belief in the fundamentally undemocratic nature of China's neoliberal revolution, and his outrage at how far China's elite have traveled in their repudiation of socialism and its emphasis on social equality issues and justice. He argues that the social crisis facing contemporary China derives from the stresses that have been caused by neoliberal strategies, and he argues – in what is probably seen as a highly politically incorrect view in Beijing – that the only way to prevent this predicament from plunging China into a situation of collapse and chaos, is for the state to re-adjust its economic and social insurance policies and "in a significant way [...] refuse the radical program of neoliberalism" (ibid.:128-129).

The most frequently mentioned indicator of social crisis in China involves the income inequality between the cities and the countryside, accompanied by the depletion of natural resources of many rural areas that has resulted from deliberate state policies favoring the cities (Wang 2003:128; Walker 2006). In addition, there has been what Wong (2004) refers to as a "serious paradigm shift" in China's welfare regime. In the socialist era the right to work and the ubiquity of public goods provided the foundations for a collectivist and

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[2] Some scholars have expressed this idea more vehemently. Walker (2006), for example, describes what has happened in China during the past two decades as an example of "gangster capitalism", which, she argues, is a modern version of "primitive accumulation". This idea has its roots in Marx's description of developments in rural England in the 16th to 19th centuries, in which "an alliance of landlords, nascent capitalist farmers, and the state used enclosure movements and other methods to separate peasant producers from the means of production, and, thereby, establish class relations" (Walker 2006:6).

rights-based approach to life support. Today, the state no longer takes on all of the responsibility for welfare, and state enterprises – traditionally the suppliers of the "iron rice bowl" support system – have cut back sharply on the services they provide. The incursion of markets into such realms as education, welfare, healthcare, and housing has meant that residents are now required to pay much more for the goods and services they consume. The wider use of fee-charging works particularly against the poor, the unemployed, and the vulnerable groups who have lost out significantly in China's neoliberal revolution, and it is no surprise that discontent has been rising – focused on the escalating income gaps and the pervasiveness of greed, selfishness and corruption that appear to be rampant.

Naturally, this did not go unnoticed by China's leaders, and in September 2004 a new ideological campaign was officially announced at a plenary session of the CCP's Central Committee, focusing on the need to create and maintain a "harmonious society" in China. The campaign marked a shift in state rhetoric away from a simple emphasis on economic growth, toward an acknowledgment that the transition had created or was likely to exacerbate social problems that might have serious political consequences (Holbig 2006). In 2005 President Hu Jintao launched the new campaign with a speech to the NPC, and at about the same time Premier Wen Jiabao promised to spend 10.9 billion CNY (USD 1.3 billion) on the "re-employment" of millions of laid-off workers, and another 3 billion CNY to improve industrial safety, especially in China's coal mines (Miller 2006).

Both the Premier and the President have reinforced this same message at intervals during the past few years, but the continuing emphasis on a pro-growth and pro-efficiency economic strategy means that concerns for equity and social justice remain secondary goals, in spite of Party rhetoric to the contrary. It is important to point out, of course, that for many Chinese the quality of life has improved significantly as a result of the economic reform project. All across the country citizens now appreciate the abundance that markets have brought to China, and the access to commodities and freedoms they could only have dreamed about in the recent past. The state takes credit for steering the country in the direction of growth and abundance, and it was probably in this context that popular pride, bordering on nationalist euphoria, accompanied China's successful bid in 2001 to host the 2008 Olympic Games.

"Actually Existing" Olympism: Beijing 2008

Olympism is an offshoot of late nineteenth century European modernism, and the ideas and aspirations of Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937). Coubertin recognized that the Olympic Games held the possibility of bringing peace to the world through the medium of sporting events (Muller 2006). By the end of the 20th century, it was clear that the function of the Games had changed significantly, with Coubertin's dream about human emancipation replaced largely by the aspirations of corporate capitalism. The Games grew bigger and bigger: every four years the hosting nation would outdo all its predecessors in terms of the lavishness of is preparations; and as this was happening, more and more nations entered the competition to host the Games of the future.

On the day Beijing's success was announced (in Moscow, July, 14th 2001), the *Washington Post*, which was clearly unhappy with the decision, focused its criticism on the IOC, which it characterized as a "profiteering, junketeering cartel" that was thinking primarily about China's vast consumer base, rather than world peace or human rights, when it granted the Games to Beijing (Maguire 2005:155). The lead article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* the same day echoed this sentiment, observing cynically that: "The Olympics are a noble concept overwhelmed by reality. Prospective hosts hold out the bribes. IOC members hold out both hands" (ibid.).

At first sight we are tempted to think of all the hoopla associated with the current Games as a far cry from the original aristocratic and idealistic goals of Pierre de Coubertin. When he reintroduced the modern Games at the end of the 19th century, Coubertin had in mind spreading the cause of democracy within an atmosphere of "peaceful internationalism". Further reflection, however, suggests that the contemporary Games and all of their commercialisms are not aberrations at all: they are perfectly well matched with the age in which they exist. The globalization of technology has created an almost infinite expansion of media outreach for the Olympic Games, bringing with it an ever-increasing level of commercialization and commodification.

Urban "mega-projects" have been commonplace in China during the past two decades (Xu & Yeh 2005; Smith 2008), but hosting the Olympic Games represents one of the world's largest and probably the most publicized urban event. Hosting the 2008 Games in Beijing, in other words, suited China's global aspirations admirably: representing an extension of the global economy

into China; inviting tourists and business-people to visit, spend time, and most importantly, spend money; while at the same time offering the rest of the world the chance to take in the full impacts of China's vast neoliberal project.

Political Outcomes: Human Rights and Domestic Politics

When the announcement about the 2008 Games was made in Moscow, reactions around the world were more subdued than those observed on the streets of Beijing. One of the questions being asked, by journalists and politicians alike, was why China had not been brought to task more about its human rights record (Brownell 2008). On the more optimistic side of the issue, some observers felt that the vote for Beijing might have a generally positive effect if the Chinese government was to grant some political concessions while the world had its collective eye firmly fixed on Beijing in the run-up to the Games. Indeed, after winning the bid, Chinese officials had publicly stated that hosting the Games would contribute significantly to national economic and social progress, and it was hinted that there would also be some concomitant liberalization in the area of human rights. Zhen Liang, a member of the IOC Executive Board, sent out a very optimistic message when he addressed the council in 2001. As he observed "Olympic values are universal, and the Olympic flame lights the way of progress for all humanity" (Maguire 2005:152).

The apparent disconnect between Olympic rhetoric and reality – between what is promised and what actually happens – is partially enabled by the behavior of the IOC. As noted already, history shows that more often than not the IOC has chosen to look the other way on the issue of human rights abuses in the countries hosting the Games. This was clearly the case with the 1936 Games in Berlin, the 1968 Games in Mexico City, the 1980 Games in Moscow, and the 1988 Games in Seoul. The same can be said of the decision made about the 2008 Games in Beijing, but in light of Zhen Liang's optimism (see above) there was much speculation about what, if anything, China would do to improve its record on human rights. Seven years later, however, China had still not made any public proclamations about human rights, even though pressure remains intense (Worden 2008). International organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have publicly criticized such abuses as the absence of free speech and fair trials, misapplications of the death penalty, the use of torture, and forced evictions related to Olympic Games venue construction.

Importantly, significant critiques have also been launched from other sources:

an EU-Asia summit mentioned violations in its condemnation of China; British Cabinet Minister David Kilgour released a damning account of organ "harvesting" from Falun Gong practitioners and other prisoners of the state; the US State Department's *International Freedom Report* blacklisted China for its lack of concern about the human rights of its citizens; and a UN special reporter, Manfred Nowak, described multiple cases of torture of Falun Gong practitioners in his address to the United Nations Human Rights Council (United Nations 2007). All of this might suggest that a different – and perhaps a more fruitful – discourse about human rights in China is now underway, which might in some small way at least be attributable to the Olympic Games being in Beijing this year. In the new millennium the debate over this old and contentious topic has at least been taking place on a different and less familiar topography, in the sense that it is occurring outside the deeply rooted counter-narratives of international human rights institutions (Black & Bezanson 2004:1259).

In the realm of political change, an editorial in the official Party newspaper (in 2001) promised that "in seven years, Beijing and the whole of China will be home to a stable society, a prosperous economy and a well-off population" (*People's Daily* 2001). More specifically, at exactly the same time it was stated that as a result of having the Games in China "the cause of democracy and [...] [the rule of law] [...] will continually advance" (ibid.). While such claims may be dismissed as the hyperbole of success, some China scholars began to talk-up the prospect of the Games resulting in significant changes in China's political situation; others have even set out a reasonably optimistic agenda for such changes (Gilley 2004). Story noted that:

> the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is in a phase of metamorphosis [... and] is in effect engaged in slow political suicide by changing its inner nature while discarding its outer skin. (Story 2004:305)

What he is implying here is that class conflict and most of the other symbolic and real aspects of Chinese socialism have been sidelined, while the pursuit of economic development has been privileged. Accession to the WTO in 2002 effectively put global business norms at the center of China's economic system, and as a consequence, Story argues "one may expect the introduction of discrete changes in the political terminology of the CCP in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic[s]" (ibid.).

This is a familiar line of reasoning: suggesting that political change will follow from the economic changes being made in China. There was also some reason

to believe that China's center-stage position in the 2008 Games would act as powerful force for increasing progress toward democracy. The model for such an argument was established with the 1964 Tokyo Games, and more dramatically in Seoul in 1988. Staging the Olympics, Story declares, "heralded the presence of Japan and South Korea as recognized players on the world stage", and he fully expected (in 2004 at least) that "an announcement by China's new leadership of a shift to new political forms [...] [would be] [...] an opportunity to cast China in a favorable light in the global media" (ibid.:318). Most seasoned China hands think this was a pipe dream: and in fact by 2008, as Beijing prepared for the Games, no such public announcement had been made.

Socio-spatial Outcomes: Building a New and Socially Just Beijing?

The success of China's economic reform is no longer in question, but as noted earlier there are concerns about the socio-spatial impacts it has had, at all scales. Given the triumphalist nature of the reform discourse in China, it is by no means certain that mechanisms to alter the course of the post-reform transformations will be put in place, and even if they were, whether they would be successful in the short-term. What are the prospects then for any progress towards a more socially just Beijing as a result of China's hosting of the Games?

From a theoretical perspective, geography as a discipline is particularly well positioned to ask this question. As David Harvey observed over thirty years ago:

> We are not likely in the near or distant future to be able to formulate a generally acceptable social welfare function for an urban system [...] [but this] [...] should not be allowed [...] to divert our attention from the mechanisms which connect allocational decisions (whether public or private) on such things as transport networks, industrial zoning, location of public facilities, location of households, and so on, with their inevitable distributional effects upon the real income of different groups of the population. (Harvey 1973:51)

It is exactly these sorts of issues that must be considered to interrogate the social justice outcomes of Olympics-related developments, and to assess the extent to which benefits will accrue to the people of Beijing as a result of the Games.

The "Action Plan" for the Beijing Olympics introduced three concepts which were to guide all future developments in the city: "Green Olympics", "Hi-tech Olympics", and "People's Olympics". To make progress toward the first goal, the

plan called for considerable improvement in the ecological environment of the Beijing region, with a primary emphasis on reducing air pollution and protecting drinking water sources (see Figure 1). In addition to the proposed strategies, the plan emphasized the need to increase environmental awareness among Beijing's residents, who were encouraged to engage in "green consumption", and to get involved with environment-improving activities wherever and whenever possible (Wei & Yu 2006:391). China's leaders are well aware that the Beijing Games may define the country's international image for decades, so officials have spared nothing in their efforts to disseminate the "green" discourse.

Figure 1 *The Beijing Sustainable Development Plan*

In an effort to meet World Health Organization standards, the plan outlines strategies to:

- Reduce coal consumption almost 50 percent by 2007 and adopt strict Euro III auto emissions limits by 2005;
- Minimize industrial air, water, and noise pollution through stricter enforcement of laws and forced migration or closure of large polluters, particularly iron, steel, and cement producers;
- Protect drinking water sources by cleaning Beijing's major reservoirs and increasing urban sewage treatment in Beijing to 90 percent coverage by 2008;
- Tighten control of solid waste with targets of 80 percent industrial waste reuse and 30 percent domestic waste reuse by 2005;
- Expand adoption of ISO 14000 environment management certification and cleaner production systems.

Additionally, the plan seeks to encourage ecological development in Beijing by:

- Dismantling illegal buildings and installing greenery throughout Beijing with the goal of one park per 500-meter block;
- Preventing soil erosion in 70 percent of mountainous areas and 100 percent of sandy areas by 2008;
- Promoting water conservation through higher water prices, cuts in water consumption, and increase of water reuse rates to 50 percent by 2008;
- Setting aside 10 percent of the city's area as natural reserves;
- Shifting local agriculture from grain crops and husbandry to organic, high-value crops;
- Protecting biodiversity by establishing plant and wildlife monitoring systems by 2005, and a wildlife first-aid center by 2008;
- Improving the ecological awareness of citizens through 24-hour complaint hotlines, expanded youth education programs, and increased government transparency in environmental decisions.

Source: Beijing Olympic Action Plan n.y.

In reality the neoliberal current underlying the market reforms in China means that the current climate of privatization, marketization, and rapid economic growth has complicated the role the Olympics have played as the city began to focus on environmental issues. As Beyer (2006) has observed, Beijing's comprehensive environmental planning involved "venue construction, pollution control, and waste management", factors that deeply influence the "environmental justice" of the city. Environmental justice refers to the need for a society to offer equitable protection from environmental harm, and access to environmental resources for its people (Bryant 1995); and as Harvey (1997) has noted, this concept is central to any spatial notion of social justice. As the burgeoning literature describing the vast and impressive urban developments in many of China's cities has made clear (see, for example, Xu & Yeh 2005), urban mega-projects have not been noted for their impact on socio-political distributional issues or issues of environmental quality, so it is reasonable to be skeptical about the possible salutary effects of the 2008 Olympics project.

To date the evidence from Beijing on environmental issues seems to be slim at best, and contradictory. One reporter from the United States noted in 2005 that, "On clear days it's now possible to look down Chang'an Avenue and see the peaks of the Western Hills, which has been obscured for years" (*Business Week* 2005). Much of this change is attributed to industrial relocation, pollution control devices, and the upgrading of power stations. However, in January 2006, other reports, including those from official organs of the Communist Party, suggested there only half as many "blue sky" days as there had been in January of the previous year (Xinhua 2006). Visitors in the summer of 2007, and observers of China's lavish celebrations as the one-year countdown began in August, would concur with this evaluation: in fact during the summer months air quality appeared to be as bad as ever.

It is important to note that the environmental impact of the 2008 Games-related construction projects will be experienced in a city that already struggles massively with pollution issues caused by poorly regulated industrial emissions, household energy usage, and the recent boom in automobile traffic (Liu et al. 2006; Dahl 2005).[3] In addition, there are many questions about the regulatory

[3] Much media attention was given to Beijing's first experiment with banning more than one million cars from the roads of Beijing for one day, in August 2007, with an eye toward establishing a strategy for improving air quality for the Games. There were reports that traffic moved much

and spatial scope of the overall environmental plan. Changes in Beijing, such as reducing emissions by relocating polluting industries, may be compromised by insufficient limitations on emissions in adjacent towns and counties. All of this must be considered in tandem with the harsh reality of Beijing's geography: the city's meteorological conditions make it likely that poor air-quality days will occur in August 2008, during the Games, even if the city reduced its human-generated emissions to zero (Streets et al. 2007). The relatively narrow goal of the 2008 Olympic Games seems to have restricted the focus of environmental solutions to a geographical area too limited to yield effective results (Chung 2007).

Closely linked to the environmental issues are the infrastructure changes proposed for the 2008 Games. Hosting the Olympic Games is often used by urban planners and policymakers as an opportunity to push through hefty agendas of urban improvements that are more likely to be supported and publicly financed when they are part of the overall planning needed to make the Games function smoothly (Essex & Chalkley 1998). In terms of social equity and the Games' distributional effects, the traditional concern here is about whether the public investment that goes into urban restructuring represents an unfair subsidy to affluent consumers of the events and other international visitors, at the expense of urban projects that could yield greater collective benefits (Olds 1998). As Essex and Chalkley state:

> Investment in new buildings and infrastructure [...] may lead to the neglect of other community needs such as education and training, affordable housing, or the quality of social services. (Essex & Chalkley 1998:202)

In the case of Beijing 2008, it is not easy to provide a definitive answer to this question, but it is possible to highlight a few areas of concern. With over a year left before the start of the Games, for example, the government announced that the publicized goal of providing potable tap water for the whole city would not be reached by 2008: in fact, only in the Olympic Village would it be possible to drink from the faucet (*USA Today* 2007). Meanwhile, the rest of the city and its full-time residents will still not have access to drinking water in their homes. For

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better on the designated day, and that the air quality improved slightly. According to a *Washington Post* story: "For the Olympic Games next summer, Beijing has pledged to enforce a full two weeks of driving restrictions, responding to fears that the capital's foul air could endanger the health of athletes and spectators" (Cody 2007).

those who can afford to purchase drinking water this is not significant, but for many the lack of free access to potable water creates one more level of inequality. As Swyngedouw has observed:

> The water problem is not merely a question of management and technology, but rather, and perhaps in the first instance, a question of social power. (Swyngedouw 2004:175)

Another aspect of urban infrastructure with great powers of equalization or division is public transportation. How well it works, especially in comparison to the infrastructure provided for private automobile traffic, and also where it goes can have a significant impact on the access to services and job opportunities for residents in lower income brackets. The Beijing "Action Plan" included major goals for public transportation improvements for the Games: it declared that 60 percent of all daily commuters in Beijing would eventually be able to use the public transportation system, and that transit's share of the daily trip load would increase from 26 percent to 40 percent. There are serious questions, however, about whether the public transportation improvements have been adequately directed toward the parts of the city that are – over the long term, not just for 2008 – most in need. The new subway lines intended to service the Olympic sites are impressive, but they tend to focus mainly on the Olympic Green area at the heart of the Games events; meanwhile, it has been reported that the existing subway lines remain as they have been: outdated and in varying states of disrepair (Reuters 2007).

Furthermore, while the planned transit improvements are impressive, they are dwarfed in their impact on the urban environment by the automobile-oriented changes that have accompanied the Olympic project: thousands of kilometers of new highway construction and repairs to existing roads, both within the city itself and extending far out into the suburbs (Beijing Olympic Action Plan n.y.). Roadway construction on this scale often has negative impacts on a city's permanent residents: in part as a result of the effects of increased traffic levels on air pollution and noise; and also because of the housing, industry, or green space that it displaces. The colossal increase in the number of automobiles on Beijing's roads in the recent years also creates more hazardous traffic situations for those who continue to rely on walking or bicycling as their main mode of transport (Cherry 2005). As in the case of water, it appears that the transportation improvements associated with the Games will bring fewest benefits to those on the lowest rungs of society, and there is a suspicion that whatever benefits are

provided for poorer citizens will be the first to be abandoned if money runs short.

In the realm of construction, the state has made some effort to satisfy local needs by diligently encouraging responsible work practices and providing some constraints on the construction frenzy that hit the city once the decision about the Games was announced. In all instances, project managers were required to ensure that decisions correspond to the needs of the Olympic Games; to ensure that new venues will leave a legacy for Beijing residents in the future; to guarantee that the use of existing facilities will be maximized; and to make sure that as many temporary venues will be used as possible in order to avoid building unnecessary facilities.

In spite of this, Olympic construction has been one of the main contributors to Games-related residential displacement in Beijing. Residential displacement is one of the most insidious results of urban mega-projects worldwide, since the individuals who are most disadvantaged by displacement are usually those who wield the least power in society. As the Geneva-based Center on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) has argued:

> The human cost and trauma of forced eviction on individuals, families and communities cannot be overemphasised. [...] Forced evictions take away people's livelihoods, their land, their belonging to a community, and the dignity of a place to live in peace without the fear of losing their home. (COHRE 2007:34)

Academics, non-government organizations, Western media sources, and a number of international human rights organizations have drawn attention to multiple instances of residential displacement that have been related to Beijing's Olympic project since 2001. These situations have arisen for a number of reasons, including the demolition of residential structures for pre-Games construction (*New York Times* 2007); the development of unwanted land uses and unsafe construction practices in close proximity to existing residences (*New Statesmen* 2006); and as a result of the rising land values that have accompanied the urban developments associated with the Games (*New York Times* 2006). Another concern associated with the housing issue is the observation, made in the case of many of the Games' cities in recent years, that new construction and development results in a spike in house and land prices. One report claimed, for example, that:

> [...] affordable housing has become such a serious problem that many people from old Beijing have been forced to the city's outskirts because they can no longer afford to live in their old neighborhood. (Ibid.)

In a more recent report it was noted that since construction on the new north-south subway (Number 5) line began in 2003, the prices of houses along the route have risen by 17.8 percent per year on average (China Economic Net 2007). The opening of the new line means those who live far from the city center will be able to commute faster into the city, and it also represents a lucrative opportunity for real estate developers in the area.

Table 1 *Households and Persons Displaced by Construction Projects, Beijing 2000-2008*

Year	Households affected by demolitions	Persons per household	Persons affected by demolitions
2000	58,550	3.0	175,650
2001	58,550	3.0	175,650
2002	69,000	3.0	262,200
2003	50,000	2.9	145,000
2004	24,000	2.9	69,600
2005	72,000	2.6	187,200
2006	60,000	2.6	156,000
2007	60,000	2.6	156,000
2008	60,000	2.6	156,000
Total	512,000		1,483,300

Source: COHRE 2007.

The COHRE study estimated the total number of evictions as a result of Games-related construction between 2000 and 2008 to be in excess of half a million households, involving almost one and a half million individuals (Table 1). A central government directive was issued to local authorities to manage Beijing relocations in a way that is consistent with residents' legal rights, but the COHRE researchers found that violent and illegal evictions have continued. Many families that have resisted evictions have found themselves left adrift in a sea of construction; these isolated households are referred to as "nailed-in households" (*dingzihu*). While in the last few years there have been government orders to maintain services to these residents, it is clearly both unsafe and unhealthy for individuals and families to remain in these otherwise abandoned neighborhoods.

Accounts of violent or illegal evictions, as well as unfair treatment of families that have refused to move, are denied by most official sources, which claim that the press is exaggerating, and that those affected have been relocated at government expense. Previous research on post-reform development in Beijing, however, suggests that residential displacement has been an ongoing problem, with many families left without homes or government assistance as a result of the city's fast-paced development over the last two decades (Smith 2008).

A final concern in the realm of social justice has been associated with Beijing's plans to improve the overall image of the city by removing urban "squalor" in advance of the Games. The Action Plan states that the government will:

> Deal with the mess in some parts of the city, which arouses intense public concern and tarnishes the image of the city. To enforce the related laws, all unapproved and temporary buildings will be demolished and stronger control on outdoor advertisement will be imposed. (Beijing Olympic Action Plan n.y.)

While there may be some practical justifications for such a policy, its broad scope seems to condone measures that could severely impact some of the city's most vulnerable populations, bearing in mind that most of the "messy", "temporary", or non-code-compliant housing usually provides shelter for individuals with few resources to relocate themselves in the event of condemnation or demolition.

Abuse of this regulation has been evident in older neighborhoods in central Beijing (*New York Times* 2006), as well as in the "villages in the city" (*chengzhongcun*), which is the name given to informal settlements that are home to much of the city's large population of migrant workers. These residents are generally not afforded urban citizenship, and therefore have no rights with regard to forced evictions. Situations such as this reveal the status of the "floating" population as one of the blind spots in any agenda that China has had for political liberalization, the creation of a civil society, and the protection of human rights. The Olympic Games might have provided an opportunity for China to address the national plight of the "floating" population in all Chinese cities, by setting a highly visible precedent in Beijing; but it now looks as if the only precedent to be set will clearly be inconsistent with the Olympic principles discussed earlier, and will do little to advance the goals of human rights and liberty in or outside Beijing.

Conclusion

It is impossible – and impractical – to try to separate the actual Beijing Games from their greater political and economic significance. In the context of globalization and neoliberalization, international mega-events like the Olympic Games have become stages for world-wide spectacle and, especially in locations outside the traditional core nations of the global economy, crucial moments in the political and economic development of the locales that host them. There has been extensive speculation in the popular media and in academic circles about the influence the 2008 Games might have had on China, in terms of the country's economic development and its ongoing political and social evolution. This paper has approached this topic from a different perspective, examining some of the changes at the global, national, and local scale.

Although social justice, in the form of human rights and political liberalization, is considered to be a central theme in the Olympics movement, the evidence to date (late 2007) suggests that the "actually existing" Olympism – for example, what has happened in Beijing thus far – does not live up to these expectations. The legacy of the Olympics Games in cities such as Moscow, Mexico City and Seoul suggests that rights-abusive practices have been overlooked before, in stark contrast to the official image and language of the Olympics movement. As this paper was going to press, the issue of China's extensive pattern of human rights abuses was coming to a head in the global media, focusing on the earlier unrest in Tibet. At this point it is difficult to predict what will happen during the last 100 days before the Games begin in August, but within Europe and the United States there has been internal political tension over whether or not heads of state should boycott the opening ceremony.

The lack of connection between rhetoric and reality, and the different manifestations that Olympism has taken in different locations, are analogous conditions to those that Brenner and Theodore identify as the defining characteristics of global neoliberalism. Because of the conflicting language that has been used, as well the inconsistencies in policies and outcomes across space, they conclude that neoliberalism is a hard-to-pin-down phenomenon that should be:

> Construed as a historically specific, ongoing, and internally contradictory process of market-driven socio-spatial transformation, rather than as a fully actualized policy regime, ideological form, or regulatory framework. (Brenner & Theodore 2002:353)

In this paper, we have argued that a similar conclusion can be reached in the case of Olympism and the modern Olympic movement, rendering invalid predictions based simply on a purported and generally salutary "Olympics effect".

When Olympism is contextualized in the case of the 2008 Olympics, the version of neoliberalism that is flourishing in China must be considered. One of the ideas that have been invoked both in relation to the Chinese version of neoliberalism and of Olympism is that of the "quality" (*suzhi*) of China's citizens (Murphy 2004; Kipnis 2006). Elevation in human performance level has been demanded: to create national pride and sporting achievement in the case of the Olympics; and to promote entrepreneurial competition and market growth in connection with China's economic reforms. This focus on human "quality" is part of a shift of responsibility for the well being of the population away from the state and onto the backs of citizens. This has sent a clear and chilling message to those who are less well-off in society – particularly to urban migrants and peasants in the countryside – that they must raise their *suzhi* level if they are to survive in the new China (Anagnost 2004).

The political process of Olympic planning appears to have done little to advantage those who live on the margins of society, and so the same state agenda that demands that Beijing's residents increasingly fend for themselves also renders them less able to do so. The acceptance of the Beijing bid and the majority of the preparations for the 2008 Games reveal the realities of the Olympic movement: an uneven political record; an increasing connection to the global economy and the profit-making of rich transnational corporations; and an ever-tenuous connection to the egalitarian and universal goals that Olympism originally professed.

This is not to say that the potential for increasing liberalization in China has been found and then wasted in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympic Games; rather, it reveals the necessity of looking beyond Olympism to more localized movements of resistance for future change. In their pioneering study of "rightful resistance" in rural China, for example, O'Brien and Li have observed that there is often a "huge disparity between what is promised [...] [by the state] [...] and what [...] [the people] [...] experience" (O'Brien & Li 2006:123). This disparity creates openings on a daily basis for Chinese citizens "to challenge blatant misconduct, obvious evasion of central intent, and flagrant violations of announced right" (ibid.). As we have argued here, there is also a significant disparity between what the government promised the Chinese people when it won the right to host the

Olympic Games, and what has thus far been witnessed in and around Beijing. Many observers argue that most Chinese people still extend the benefit of the doubt to the central authorities, which suggests that the state in China still has a reserve of legitimacy to draw upon. But, as O'Brien and Li conclude:

> Popular faith in the beneficence of the Center will weaken if [...] [citizens] [...] repeatedly fail to receive the protection and assistance they expect. At a certain point, the Center's good intentions will no longer matter unless they are backed up by a capacity to right wrongs. (Ibid.:126)

In the case of the Beijing Olympics, we suspect that those initial good intentions will result in too little, too late.

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