

# Sport Mega-Events and Public Opposition: A Sociological Study of the London 2012 Olympics

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## Abstract

This article examines the diverse forms of public opposition, protest, criticism, and complaint in the United Kingdom on the staging of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London. Our discussion draws heavily on empirical research, primarily fieldwork and interviews in East London with local residents, opposition groups, business people, politicians, and other stakeholders. The article is separated into three main parts. First, we explore the setting and political–economic context for London 2012. The main Olympic setting—the London Borough of Newham—features very high levels of poverty and ethnic diversity. We argue that London 2012 represented a form of “festival capitalism” that was part of a broader set of “New Right two-step” policies in poor urban areas, involving initial Keynesian investment, followed by a deeper and far-reaching array of neo-liberal measures. Second, in the main part of the article, we identify and examine, in turn, six forms of public conflict, criticism, and complaint that centered on the Games, specifically national criticisms (e.g., on distribution of Olympic resources), local criticisms (e.g., on lack of jobs and business benefits), issue-specific campaigns (e.g., on the environment), “glocal” protests against specific nations and sponsors (e.g., campaigns against BP, Dow, and Rio Tinto), neo-tribal transgressions and situationist spectacles (e.g., mass cycle rides near Olympic venues), and anti-Olympic forums and demonstrations (e.g., critical web sites, multi-group marches). Third, we set out briefly the importance of conducting research into

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critics and opponents of sport mega-events, and discuss different arguments on how the social impact of protest movements might have been intensified at London 2012. The findings in this article may be extended to examine critical public responses to the hosting of other mega-events in different settings.

### **Keywords**

Olympics, mega-events, opposition, resistance, community

### **Introduction**

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games represented the United Kingdom's largest and most expensive peacetime event. The Games were widely praised for succeeding in delivering secure venues, spectacular athletic performances and event ceremonies, and sustained post-event support from the U.K. public (*The Guardian*, December 25, 2012). However, the Games were marked by a diversity of public conflicts and criticisms, particularly in East London where the main events were staged, ranging from complaints over organizational detail to concerted anti-Olympic campaigns.

In this article, we examine the full range of these critical and oppositional responses to the 2012 Olympics at national and community levels. Our discussion is separated into three broad parts. First, we set the scene by detailing the relatively poor and dislocated social context in which the London Olympics were primarily situated, in the London Borough of Newham. Second, we differentiate six specific fields of conflict, criticism, and complaint surrounding London 2012, and examine these in turn. Third, in conclusion, we consider several reasons for the relatively limited socio-political impact of these expressions of opposition and criticism. Our analysis is broadly empirical, as we draw on a rich volume of research data accumulated before, during, and after the Olympics to draw out the diversity and complexity of public experiences and perspectives with regard to hosting the world's biggest sporting mega-event.

In terms of its sociological context, this article engages with two fields of research. First, as we explain below, London 2012 was a heavily commodified event with major implications for the local host communities. Hence, our study is broadly located within prior critical analyses of the impacts of the commodification of sport. Much of this prior work has been undertaken in the United Kingdom, notably on local, largely working-class football communities and subcultures, revealing how commodification processes engender senses of disenfranchisement and marginalization, expressions of resistance and opposition, and "market pragmatic" views on how sport clubs should be run within a commercial environment (see Critcher, 1979; Giulianotti, 2005; Hargreaves, 1986; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012; Taylor 1970, 1971; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007).

The second and more substantial research context for this article relates to the body of critical literature on the hosting of sport mega-events. Critical social scientists in political sociology, urban geography, and the sociology of sport have explored the

negative impact of hosting these events in terms of astronomical costs, loss of affordable housing, weakening of civil liberties and human rights, intensified policing, and the creation of sterile zones of neo-liberal consumption and residence. This research has largely focused on the hosting of specific sport mega-events, such as the 2000 Sydney Olympics, 2006 Germany World Cup finals, 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, 2010 South Africa World Cup finals, and 2012 London Olympics (see, for example, Armstrong, Hobbs, & Lindsay, 2011; Boykoff, 2011; Boyle & Haggerty, 2011; Cornelissen, 2012; Dyck, 2012; Fussey, Coaffee, Armstrong, & Hobbs, 2011; Klauser, 2008; Lenskyj, 2002; Rowe, 2012). These studies have also been largely conducted in situ within event locations and often with a particular emphasis on the impact of policing and security on the transformation of urban space. Some of this work—especially by Lenskyj (2002, 2008), as well as Armstrong et al. (2011), Fussey et al. (2011), and Cornelissen (2012)—has discussed how local institutions and social movements in these host cities seek to influence or to resist the staging of these events. Recently, London 2012 has been the subject of several critical publications, for example, by Houlihan and Giulianotti (2012) and Silk (2011), and, in the more empirically based, substantial research by Armstrong et al. (2011) and Fussey et al. (2011) on the pre-event impacts in East London, by Timms (2012) on workers' rights campaigns surrounding the event, and in our other studies of how mobility issues adversely affected local communities (Giulianotti, Armstrong, Hales, & Hobbs, 2014).

Evidently, these two research fields have produced highly insightful and influential bodies of work. However, one significant research gap centers on the lack of a comprehensive case study of the full range of critical public responses to the hosting of a heavily commodified sport mega-event such as the Olympic Games or football's World Cup finals. One particular research lacuna has related to engaging with, and capturing the views of, a wide diversity of local people, including those who are not involved in community-based organizations or anti-event activism.

This article seeks to address directly this research gap by setting out the full range of critical responses to London 2012 that emerged within the public sphere, with particular reference to the host community. In doing so, we develop a model of six fields or types of public opposition, criticism, and complaint toward the hosting of London 2012. The model that we generate here may be applied to examine and understand other hallmark events in sport and beyond.

Our article is substantially empirical in focus for two main reasons. First, we are committed to giving full expression to the very rich and substantial data that we collected before, during, and after London 2012. Second, to develop this sixfold model, we relied broadly on a form of "thematic analysis," in which we subjected our substantial data to several layers or stages of analysis to identify the key themes within critical public responses to the Olympics. As we show in the main part of the article, this mode of analysis also enabled us to identify, within each of the six fields, several sub-fields or "sub-themes" of public critical response.

Our research has not been "theory-led" in the sense of having a pre-established theoretical lens before entering the field and then using such a perspective to select and analyze data, and write up research findings. Such an approach would not have allowed

us to draw out the richness of the data or to generate our sixfold model. However, we do utilize and develop theory to situate our study, notably with reference to the research context and, in particular, the commercialization processes surrounding London 2012. Moreover, our sixfold model is intended to be portable and open to critical application and development in other contexts; in this way, the model is intended to enhance significantly the sociological theorization of sport mega-events and the commercialization of sport.

## **The Research Setting: The Olympics in Stratford/Newham**

Our study was undertaken as part of a wider 3-year project on the policing and community impacts of London 2012. Our primary research focus was on Stratford, located within the London Borough of Newham, in London's East End. Stratford hosted the new, 560-acre Olympic Park, containing the Olympic Stadium, Aquatics Centre, Basketball Arena, Copperbox, Riverbank Arena, Velopark, Water Polo Arena, Athletes' Village, and Media Centre. Other Olympic venues included the ExCel Arena in South Newham.

We comprised a team of four researchers conducting concerted research in and around Newham, using multiple methods that primarily consisted of extensive ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Further data were drawn from official documents such as public reports on the Olympics and statistics on Newham's demographic profile, and from the mass media, notably U.K. newspaper reports and commentaries on the social impacts of the London 2012 Games. In addition, the project built heavily on our extensive prior personal knowledge and research experience in East London and on sport mega-events, respectively (see, for example, Armstrong et al., 2011; Giulianotti, 1991; Hobbs, 1989).

For this article, data were drawn from our long-term ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation; 70 semi-structured interviews with key community stakeholders, including local residents (10 interviews), business owners and representatives (8), employees (8), politicians (8), faith group representatives (5), and service-sector officials (4); leaders and participants within Olympic-related opposition and protest movements (15); and individuals from social groups that came into different kinds of conflict with Olympic-related organization and security (12). Participant observation was undertaken at 12 anti-Olympic events and demonstrations in East London, and at 20 Olympic-related community events such as resident and police-public meetings convened before, during, and after the Games.<sup>1</sup>

Newham represented an exceptionally poor, diverse inner-city "home" for the Olympics. Official data positioned Newham at the extreme ends of many demographic league tables as the sixth most deprived local authority in England (only 56.7% of the population aged 16-74 in employment), having the highest national levels of household overcrowding (25.4%), London's youngest borough (average age = 31.8 years), the United Kingdom's most ethnically diverse borough (71% of residents classed as "non-White"), and having London's highest number of recent U.K. residents (27,000

had lived in the United Kingdom for 2 years or less).<sup>2</sup> Behind these official figures lie many marginalized, submerged populations, notably irregular migrants, or the numerous denizens of illegal “supersheds,” which had quietly mushroomed in Newham’s back-gardens over the past decade. Newham’s community dislocation is further underpinned by high levels of population “churn” (annual household moves): In Stratford, where short-term rental property predominates, informal estimates placed annual household churn as high as 30%.

The proposed catalyst for transforming Newham, and East London more widely, was the London 2012 Olympics, as a form of what we term *festival capitalism*. By festival capitalism, we are referring to those aspects of a major public event that are organized to advance private, commercial, and free-market interests, usually with strong financial, political, and discursive support from civic authorities, such as through large subsidies, infrastructural investments, and broader “regeneration” policies.

In London, political leaders insisted that Olympian festival capitalism offered a remarkable economic solution. For Newham Mayor Sir Robin Wales, the Games would be “a catalyst” for transforming the borough, offering an “abundance of land ripe for development” and “an investment opportunity on a scale unmatched anywhere else in Europe.”<sup>3</sup> For Prime Minister David Cameron, the Games would lift East London, “from being one of the poorest parts of the country to one that shares fully in the capital’s growth and prosperity” (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 2010, p. 11).

In Newham, Olympian festival capitalism was to be driven in political economic terms by what we term here as a classic *New Right two-step*: First, an initial, seemingly Keynesian<sup>4</sup> approach would feature vast public spending on facilities, infrastructure, and wider redevelopment; second, a neo-liberal approach would then come to dominate, through the financial booms enjoyed by construction and property companies, and in the establishing of privatized, commercial, and sanitized post-industrial urban spaces, to entice new inflows of transnational capital and wealthier residents and consumers. This New Right two-step has been prominent in much large-scale urban gentrification in the United Kingdom since the mid-1980s, notably in the £3.9 billion spent on London’s Docklands to support the finance center that is Canary Wharf (*Guardian*, April 22, 2000). In sport, the Keynesian-to-neo-liberal two-step typically occurs in the hosting of sport mega-events. The New Right two-step might be seen as a U.K. variant of American “corporate welfarism,” wherein civic authorities spend billions of dollars of public money on new sport stadiums and infrastructure to attract or to retain privately owned franchises. In the context of the Olympics in Newham, we identified three types of Olympic-related development, which we explain below, that were associated with festival capitalism and Keynesian-to-neo-liberal two-step policies.

The first type of Olympic-related development involved *direct Olympic development projects* that were centered on Olympic Park, with the stated aim of establishing 12,000 permanent jobs, over 14,000 new household properties, and a new parkland environment.<sup>5</sup> To facilitate construction, more than 400 residents on the Clays Lane

Housing Estate and more than 200 businesses were evicted through compulsory purchase orders (Fussey et al., 2011). Post-2012, the Olympic stadium eventually acquired, as long-term tenants, West Ham United, an English Premier League football team owned by two sex industry entrepreneurs.<sup>6</sup> The deal clearly benefited the club: West Ham would sell their current stadium in London to take a 99-year lease on a world-class 54,000-seat stadium, worth more than £600 million, for an initial £15 million down payment and £2 million in annual rent (*Telegraph*, March 22, 2013). To support West Ham's move, Newham council borrowed £40 million to help fund the transformation of the stadium for football purposes; soon afterward, the council confirmed budget cuts of £100 million spread over 3 years.<sup>7</sup>

Second, *transnational consumer development projects* were centered particularly on Westfield Stratford City mall: A £1.45 billion development opened in September 2011, touted as Europe's biggest urban shopping mall, owned by the Australian–Israeli Lowy family, and filled with more than 250, primarily transnationally branded retail units. Westfield was perfectly located for Olympic-related visitors, being sited between Stratford overground train and underground stations, and facilitating the main entrance to Olympic Park. Although reportedly offering entry-level service-sector employment for more than 1,000 Newham residents, and hoovering up consumers from across South-East England's High Street shops, Westfield was described to us by many locals as “too expensive for me” and “not for us.”<sup>8</sup>

Third, *broader redevelopment projects* were encapsulated within the Stratford “Metropolitan Masterplan,” a Newham Council blueprint for the area's long-term redevelopment. Masterplan objectives were to create 46,000 jobs, build 20,000 homes, and transform the area's long-term education, transport, retail, and cultural provision (Newham Council, 2011). Some residents informed us of their suspicions that the borough would be subject to an artificial demographic makeover to produce higher scores on population tables (such as on employment, income, or child poverty): That is, although new, wealthier residents might be attracted into the borough, the incomes or livelihoods of established local people would remain largely unaffected.

Overall, these developmental aspects of Olympian festival capitalism, and the demographically complex and impoverished borough of Newham, provided the social and political–economic contexts for the emergence of diverse forms of opposition and contestation regarding London 2012.

## London 2012: Six Fields of Conflict, Criticism, and Complaint

Through a thematic analysis of our substantial data, our research revealed six themes or fields of public conflict, criticism, and complaint over the hosting of the Olympics. Each field contained two or three particular types of discontent or opposition. Overall, these fields engaged with diverse Olympic-related issues associated with political economy (e.g., jobs), the environment (e.g., redevelopment of green spaces), civil rights (e.g., freedom of movement), security (e.g., levels of policing), and social justice (e.g., industrial rights, the rights of less powerful community members). We turn now to consider each field.



## 1. National Criticisms: Costs, Core-Periphery, and Resource Distribution

Three broad strains of public criticism were directed at key political-economic aspects of the event. First, widespread criticism centered on the event's perceived *overall public cost*: U.K. media widely reported that the public sector budget for the Olympics had risen from an initial £2.37 billion in 2005 to £9.3 billion in 2007, while later assessments of the overall costs ran as high as £24 billion, when including transport, security, legacy, land depreciation, and other costs (*Telegraph*, January 26, 2012).<sup>9</sup> Such spending on a 4-week sports festival contrasted directly with the program of economic austerity pursued by the United Kingdom's Conservative-led Coalition government; claims that the event represented an alternative, Keynesian strategy to boost the local economy were also criticized for being excessively expensive and unrealistic (*The Economist*, July 22, 2010; *Financial Times*, July 24, 2011, January 8, 2012).

Second, *core-periphery* criticisms arose, as strong concerns were expressed that the Olympics would have little meaning or economic benefit for U.K. regions outside London.<sup>10</sup> In Scotland, for example, many politicians and officials from the sport, tourism, business, and voluntary sectors argued that the Olympic legacy there would be low or non-existent, while criticizing the diversion of public funding for national sports and cultural activities into paying for the mega-event in London (*Scotsman*, June 19, 2011; *Telegraph*, April 1, 2012; *Herald*, January 8, 2012).

Third, national media and wider publics criticized the *inequitable distribution of Olympic-related resources*. Olympic elites appeared to commandeer key resources at the expense of ordinary U.K. citizens. Influential right-wing newspapers such as the *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* were among the strongest critics of the Olympic Route Network (ORN): 280 miles of special road measures in and around London, including 30 miles of "Games Lanes," reserved solely for the "Olympic family" (in effect, 80,000 accredited Olympic VIPs) to the exclusion of normal London traffic. Games Lanes were quickly derided as "Zil Lanes," in reference to Moscow traffic lanes reserved exclusively for Soviet elites.<sup>11</sup> Further criticisms centered on unfair and corrupt ways of distributing Olympic event tickets. International sports leaders were exposed selling tickets on the black market, while Olympic organizers were criticized for lack of transparency over the public allocation of 11.3 million tickets for events that were mostly over-subscribed (*Sunday Times*, June 17, 2012; *Telegraph*, February 16, 2012; *Guardian*, February 23, 2012). As the Games began, U.K. media spotlighted the swathes of empty Olympic event seats, in prime viewing positions, allocated to sponsors and other "Olympic Family" members who had simply failed to show up (*Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, July 30, 2012). Shamed into action, Olympic organizers brought in volunteers and army personnel to fill empty seats, particularly those most exposed to television cameras. After the Games, U.K. media widely reported an official review of Olympic ticketing, which revealed the disproportionately large numbers of prestige tickets given to the "Olympic Family"; for example, the wider public received only 44% of tickets for the Opening Ceremony, 43% for some major cycling finals, 3% for some top tennis fixtures, and 0.12% for one sailing final (*Daily Mail*, December 19, 2012; *Telegraph*, December 19, 2012; *Guardian*, December 19, 2012).

## 2. Community Complaints: Impacts, Movements, and Costs

Our research encountered a wide range of criticisms and complaints directed at the Olympics by residents, local politicians, public sector officials, business leaders, and representatives and members of civil society organizations (e.g., churches, voluntary agencies, and youth groups). Although not opposed to hosting the Games, most critics highlighted broken promises and false assurances from Olympic organizers on the purported local benefits. Three broad criticisms were advanced.

First, a major criticism centered on the Olympics' *lack of local economic impact on jobs and businesses*. One Newham business leader informed us,

The clarion call from the government and the Olympic games people at the start that the Olympics are going to be the big lift off for local businesses has turned out to be a load of rubbish . . . The same applies to employment: most Olympic workers are from outside and coming to live here for a fixed period of time to get the jobs. They aren't local people. The unemployment levels in Newham are ridiculously high and the Olympics have had little or no impact. We are not impressed. We're appalled by it. (Mike, Newham business representative, November 2011)

Many local people routinely commented that they knew no one employed on the Olympic Park construction site. During the Games, many local businesses reported significant losses in trade, which were blamed mainly on harmful Olympic transport and brand protection strategies. Transport arrangements ensured that millions of Olympic spectators and visitors, funneled along specified Olympic travel routes by thousands of volunteers and security personnel, hardly ever moved into the wider Stratford and Newham areas. Local traders criticized heavy-handed Olympic authorities for banning advertisements for Newham businesses along specified Olympic routes and zones. Meanwhile, "scaremongering" (in the words of some local residents) by Olympic organizers over impending transport chaos in Newham served to dissuade local people and other potential Olympic visitors from visiting local shops or Olympic-related events. Thus, it was an eerie experience to walk within a 100 meters of "the world's biggest festival" to find sparsely populated streets, shops, restaurants and pubs, and few signs of Olympic activity beyond blanket policing and road restrictions. Of all the local businesses that suffered, perhaps the most dramatic losses were incurred by more than 30 stallholders who had spent up to £27,000 to join a temporary "Olympia Market" in nearby Leyton, with the promise of up to 40,000 daily visitors; marooned on a quiet side road, the market attracted hardly any customers and folded after a few days.

Second, households and businesses criticized the *adverse local impacts of Olympic-related redevelopment*. The most extreme circumstances involved businesses and households that received compulsory purchase orders to clear land for construction of Olympic facilities. One prominent business figure, otherwise supportive of hosting the Olympics, criticized the unnecessary upheaval:

We had just spent two years building a brand new facility for the business with some grant funding from the London Development Agency [LDA] and within a year of moving in we



were told, “You’ve got to move out because that’s where we want to build the Olympic stadium.” For four years we were fighting a battle, basically because there was a huge gap between what the LDA were offering us to relocate and what the actual cost of relocation was . . . So the Olympics was a huge diversion, it was the way it was handled that was the problem . . . Our focus was taken off our core business and we lost customers, we lost business, we lost our way. (Marcus, business owner formerly located in Stratford, January 2012)

Most residents on the demolished Clays Lane Estate in Stratford were relocated into public or social housing; post-move, 39% of former residents believed themselves to be “worse off,” with 49% considering themselves “better off” (Safe Neighborhoods Unit, 2008, p. 15). One of the strongest critics viewed the development as part of a wider Olympian process of dispossession and dissembling:

This is a land grab. It’s about removing from some people what they have and giving it to some other people, and in the process not adequately compensating those people who have been deprived of what they had . . . They go on so much about how they’re supporting communities and sustaining communities, it’s a sort of mantra, the whole language of “legacy” and “benefits” is deployed all the time. What really makes you cynical is: you know that this is just rubbish, when you look at the details then it just falls apart in your hands. Our experience is that the claims which they were making for what they were going to deliver, and you might say their ambitions for doing things for local people, just didn’t add up to anything. (James, activist and former Stratford resident, February 2012)

The largest community adversely affected by Olympic-related redevelopment in Stratford was the Carpenter’s Estate: built in 1969, largely owned by Newham council, directly adjoining the Olympic Park, and earmarked for sale by the local authority since the mid-2000s. More than half of the 700 households had been “decanted,” in Olympic authority parlance, but the remainder were left in limbo as a site buyer was sought. In interviews, local people criticized the lack of information and transparency from council officials on their futures. Some had formed a protest movement (Carpenters Against Regeneration Plans), while during 2012, a critical exhibition of photographs was mounted on the boarded-up windows of one block of flats, capturing the stress endured by old residents in having to leave their homes.<sup>12</sup>

Third, a broader set of complaints centered on the *everyday Olympic-related costs* incurred by the local community, with few direct benefits. One local community worker summarized the situation as follows:

People round here have had nothing from the Olympics. They’ve had to live with the dust and pollution from the building work since 2005—you can’t hang your clothes out to dry or they get filthy. They’ve had all the noise from the site. They’ve had all the uncertainty about what happens here afterwards. And they’ve had nothing from it. If the organisers said, “OK, we appreciate how it’s been here, let’s put a few hundred tickets for different events into a ballot for the people all round here,” that would be something, but there’s been none of that. (Angela, Stratford community worker, July 2012)

### 3. Issue-Specific Community Protests: Environment, Security, and Industry

The London Olympics attracted direct protests by community members on three specific local issues. First, a series of *environmental protests* were staged against Olympic-related installations on local public land. At Leyton Marsh, located on the border between the boroughs of Hackney and Waltham Forest and around two miles from the Olympic Park, a group of local residents, with backing from the Occupy movement, sought to block construction of a large, temporary basketball training facility.<sup>13</sup> When the Olympic authorities exercised their legal powers, the protest camps were forcibly evicted, three protestors were jailed, one received an “Asbo” (anti-social behavior order) that banned him from Olympic areas, and eviction costs of up to £335,000 were threatened for any future protestors. One legal ruling in favor of the Olympic authorities was made by a judge who had tickets for an Olympic basketball event. One protestor explained to us how their opposition had been intensified through their perceived maltreatment by political, legal, and Olympic authorities:

Initially we said we're not against the Olympics, that's not what we are about. We're an environmental group that's objecting to what's being done in the name of the Olympics. But increasingly more of us see that there's a much bigger agenda, that there's a whole international thing . . . I think it tells a story in itself about how just a simple environmental campaign, from people who don't want a building in their backyard, suddenly politicizes a whole group of people and criminalizes them for protesting against it . . . We've been so horrified that this is in the name of the Olympics, and many of us would never have thought that, this time last year. (Karen, Leyton Marsh protestor, April 2012)<sup>14</sup>

Further protests centered on the Manor Garden Allotments—a community resource for more than 100 years, enabling scores of local families to grow vegetables—located on the proposed Olympic Park site. Tenants were relocated onto land that turned out to be inadequate, particularly due to waterlogging.<sup>15</sup> At Wanstead Flats in Waltham Forest (a borough adjoining Newham), some residents initiated an unsuccessful campaign against the installation of temporary Olympic accommodation for thousands of police and horses. At Greenwich Park, in the borough of Greenwich (bordering Newham), some residents formed the No to Greenwich Olympic Equestrianism (NOGOE) group to oppose the imposition of Olympic equestrian events on this *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. Following their Olympic requisition and use for a variety of sporting and security purposes, large areas of land in both Wanstead and Greenwich were reduced to muddy fields and remained as such several months after the event.

A second set of local protests centered on Olympic-related *security impositions*. We attended one protest by the “Open Our Towpath” campaign that opposed the unexpected closure of a popular river towpath along the west side of Olympic Park for stated security reasons.<sup>16</sup> The “Stop the Olympic Missiles” campaign protested against the installation of surface-to-air missiles on East London apartment blocks during the Olympics.<sup>17</sup> Fieldwork at the sites of two installations revealed residents' mixed views: Most were critical but resigned to hosting the missiles; for strong opponents, the missiles were a severe safety hazard and potential target for attack; yet, a large minority were either unconcerned, more critical of scaremongering solicitors touting

for trade, or indeed supportive of the measure as the army and police presence would curtail local anti-social behavior.

Broader concerns were reported by local young people and civil rights groups on the local impacts of security impositions. Throughout the Olympics, Newham was filled with thousands of police officers from across the United Kingdom, resulting in substantially more police interaction with local young people, particularly in the evening and at night. Police introduced a dispersal zone in Central Stratford before and during the Games, with an overnight curfew on young people (under 16s), and empowered officers to disperse groups of two or more people.<sup>18</sup> “Stop and search” or “stop and account” powers were also used by police in Newham, as had been the case over the previous 2 years. Thus, for many young people, particularly those from ethnic minorities, the Olympic epicenter in Central Stratford became a forbidding space that they were dissuaded from accessing.

A third set of campaigns centered on *industrial disputes*. For example, London’s “Hackney cab” taxi drivers protested against their exclusion from the designated “Games Lanes,” discussed earlier; more than 200 taxis brought Central London to a standstill 1 week before the Games, whereas at a later demonstration, one protesting driver dived off Tower Bridge into the Thames as a publicity stunt.<sup>19</sup> Various civil service and transport workers also staged protests and threatened strike action during the Olympic buildup to challenge job cuts and low pay. Most disputes produced negotiated settlements before the Games, but London transport cleaners held several small-scale demonstrations during the Games, including outside Olympic Park, in pursuit of a London “living wage.”<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. “Glocal Protests”: Competing Nations and Sponsors

The Olympics were a focus for “glocal protests” by diverse campaign groups and social movements. These protests were “glocal” as they centered on global issues (such as industrial rights in developing nations) while having specific “local” contextualization or application (in this case, with regard to the London Olympics; cf. Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004, 2012; Robertson, 1992).

Two categories of glocal protest were evident. First, various campaigns against *participating Olympic nations or regions* were staged. The most substantial international media attention was accorded to “sextremists” from the international Femen network who staged a topless protest near Tower Bridge in Central London over the treatment of women by Islamic states participating at London 2012.<sup>21</sup> Conversely, on the last day of the Olympics, a radical Muslim group staged a peaceful demonstration outside Olympic Park over the treatment of Muslim populations by some nations that were participating at the Games. Elsewhere, members of the Circassian diaspora demonstrated against the hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics by the Russian resort of Sochi; campaigners were descendants of the Circassian peoples killed or expelled from the Sochi area by invading Russians in 1864, exactly 150 years before the 2014 Games. Some demonstrations were isolated from large public gatherings and thus captured little attention. A Tamil protest camp, drawing up to 150 protestors and including one hunger-striker, was stationed on Stratford High Street, a clear distance from

major Olympic crowds, to demonstrate against Sri Lankan human rights abuses. Kashmiri groups also staged low-impact protests along the same road against their homeland's control by India and Pakistan.

Second, various social movements developed glocal protests against *Olympic sponsors*. The arising campaigns registered strong forms of opposition toward particular forms of festival capitalism at the Olympics, with a substantial focus on issues surrounding the environment and human rights. Campaigners contrasted Olympism's stated humanitarianism with harmful sponsor practices; a longer-term aim was to "toxify" these corporations before large audiences and the organizers of future hall-mark events. Thus, in campaigns, the Olympics' professed greenness was juxtaposed with sponsors' environmental records: For example, Dow Chemical had bought over Union Carbide, the corporation responsible for the 1984 Bhopal gas-leak disaster in India, which killed tens of thousands and seriously injured more than 500,000; BP were responsible for the 2010 oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico and had recently initiated controversial oil extraction in Tar Sands, Canada; and Rio Tinto's mining operations were accused of severely damaging developing nations to the extent that the government-controlled Norwegian Pension Fund had withdrawn all investment in 2008 due to "grossly unethical conduct" (*The Guardian*, September 9, 2008). Disability rights groups protested against the Games sponsor role of the French information technology giant Atos that had been accused of forcing sick and disabled people back into work as part of its £100 million contract with the U.K. government to help cut welfare spending. The anti-poverty group "War on Want" publicized exploitative conditions in Adidas merchandise plants in developing nations. Some media commentators and opposition groups contrasted the Olympic health and physical activity rhetoric with the "Olympic world partner" status of fast food corporations such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola; even IOC (International Olympic Committee) President Jacques Rogge had openly pondered these ties before signing further deals up to 2020 (*Financial Times*, July 8, 2012).

Some Olympic-centered campaigns unified social movements to strengthen public impact. For example, the Greenwash Gold campaign amalgamated the Bhopal Medical Appeal, London Mining Network, and U.K. Tar Sands Network that protested against BP, Dow Chemical, and Rio Tinto. For other glocal protests, London 2012 was part of wider or recurring campaigns at sport mega-events. Thus, for example, War on Want social justice campaigns encompassed football World Cups in South Africa (2010) and Brazil (2014), and the 2016 Rio Olympics. Underlying these glocal campaigns was a sophisticated critical social analysis of the Olympics as a form of festival capitalism:

We're also looking at the Games in terms of projection of corporate power. So it's not just a projection of the state, but also the projection of capital and again the appropriation of public space by capital . . . So instead of it being Olympic Games which are celebrating the achievements of humanity and jumping higher, running faster and swimming further or whatever it is, it's actually about monopoly capitalism moving in on that space, excluding those who wish to take part in it, whether it be traders in Cape Town or whether

it be businesses locally which aren't allowed to put up things saying "Special Olympic Offer" on your tea and toast. (Stuart, anti-poverty activist, April 2012)

## 5. Situationist Spectacles and Neo-Tribal Transgressions

Some of the most striking ways in which different social groups caught wider public attention centered on relatively spontaneous and informal forms of protest or transgression in prominent social settings. These types of event took two main forms.

First, there were various *acts of transgression by neo-tribal formations*. We use the term *neo-tribe* in the sense of Maffesoli (1996) here, to refer to relatively loose social formations and spaces, communities of sentiment and feeling, which arise often in response to social fragmentation, enabling participants to drift in and out of participation. The most spectacular incident featured the Critical Mass cycle ride on the evening of the Opening Ceremony. Critical Mass are a neo-tribal, informal social gathering of diverse cyclists, which meets monthly in London to cycle an unplanned route in relative safety; earlier police attempts to closely regulate and potentially ban these gatherings were rejected by the courts on the grounds that the rides are a "customary" rather than "planned" procession (*The Guardian*, November 26, 2008). On this Olympic occasion, our entire research team watched from the steps of Westfield mall as around 200 cyclists emerged outside Stratford train station in mid-evening and, creating a carnival-like spectacle, pedalled around the Stratford area to cheers and applause from Olympic onlookers. Police vans and officers pursued, intercepted, and "kettled" the cyclists within a controlled space approximately one mile from the Olympic Park; 182 participants were arrested under Section 12 of the Public Order Act, on the grounds that they might "cause serious disruption to the life of the community" (*The Guardian*, July 29, 2012). Some of those arrested later claimed that police had intervened to clear the way for VIPs such as David Beckham to travel to the Olympic stadium. We understand from senior police sources that the Queen's car traveled on an overhead flyover as Critical Mass cycled underneath, as both made their way to Stratford.

Second, various *situationist spectacles* were created by both formal protest groups and informal social groupings. The situationists were a group of radical European theorists, artists, and activists, which was active from the mid-1950s to early 1970s. The leading situationist theorist, Guy Debord (1970), argued that modern life had degenerated into a "society of the spectacle" in which individuals were passive "spectators," as modern social relations were artificially shaped and defined by commodities, media images, and ideological representations. The situationists indicated that the media-led spectacle might be exposed or opposed through the staging of satirical, unsettling, and libertarian actions and situations before public spectators. One situationist strategy is *détournement*, which points to both diversion and subversion, and refers to how commodities and images associated with the spectacle or capitalism may be adapted or imitated to produce critical or radical messages (cf. Plant, 1992). Contemporary examples of *détournement* may include "subvertising" (subversions of advertising) wherein corporate adverts are adjusted or amended by campaign groups to produce critical messages on these corporations.

In the Olympic context, situationist actions may seek to highlight and expose the festival capitalism that envelopes mega-events. The most striking illustration of *détournement* at London 2012 featured the subvertising activities of the campaigning organization, War on Want, which adapted the adverts of the Adidas brand to include the anti-sweatshop message “exploitation—not OK here, not OK anywhere”; a 20-meter-high image of this “subvert” was then projected onto a block of flats outside Olympic Park and viewed by crowds exiting the Olympic Stadium after the men’s 100 meters final.

Other situationist spectacles included Greenwash Gold activists who staged an impromptu mock award ceremony at Trafalgar Square in Central London, which featured pretend “officials” from Olympic sponsors being soaked in green custard before onlookers; a further situationist twist was added when police arrested participants on the grounds of possible criminal damage, thereby increasing national media interest in this public action (*Guardian*, July 20, 2012). Elsewhere, around 50 anti-Dow protestors, wrapped in white shrouds, staged a mass “die-in” outside the Olympic Park to increase public awareness of the chemical company’s links to the Bhopal disaster. Two members of the art-anarchist group Love Police performed at the steps to Westfield mall; one artist, wearing a high-visibility jacket marked “Legal Observer,” made mega-phone pronouncements on the banality of modern materialism, such as “Everything is OK” and “Do not waste valuable shopping time.” While packing up, the artists were provided with future material when an Olympics official approached and, in all seriousness, warned them to refrain from selling or advertising products on the concourse.

## 6. Anti-Olympic Movements and Forums

The two main forums for drawing together anti-Olympic movements and information were the Counter Olympics Network (CON) and Games Monitor. CON emerged in effect in 2012—in part from an earlier movement, the No London 2012 group, which had opposed the original London bid—and sought to facilitate stronger ties between diverse Olympic protests and campaigns, primarily through its website and the publicizing or organizing of demonstrations. Games Monitor has been a long-standing public resource and outlet for critical research, news, and information on the Olympics.<sup>22</sup>

The most significant public protest events were the Counter Olympics March and the Olympic Protest Torch Relay. Both events highlighted the transnational reach and connectivities of the anti-Olympic movement. We would also argue that both events represented forms of *festival anti-capitalism*, in terms of drawing together diverse groups that shared *inter alia* substantial opposition to different aspects of Olympic “festival capitalism,” to produce forms of protest that were socially informal, colorful, and celebratory. However, both events also highlighted some of the limitations surrounding the mobilization of critics and protestors regarding the Olympics.

First, the relay featured an anti-Olympic torch, handed on by 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic protest movements to the London protestors, which was then



transported around London by teams of cyclists and concluded on the day of the Olympics Opening Ceremony in a party picnic at Leyton Marsh, attended by around two dozen protestors.

Second, the next day, the major anti-Olympic demonstration was staged and drew around 1,000 protestors from a very wide variety of local, national, and international movements, such as red and green political parties (e.g., Communist Party of Great Britain, Socialist Party, Socialist Worker Party), environmental movements (e.g., Save Leyton Marsh, Green Party), residents' groups in East London, various trade unions, anti-corporate protest groups (e.g., the Greenwash Gold campaign), arts movements (e.g., Art Not Oil, Association of Musical Marxists, Reclaim Shakespeare Company), and broad anti-austerity movements (e.g., Coalition of Resistance, Disabled People Against Cuts). The demonstration also drew an impressive range of international television stations and reporters, although much of the U.K. media, particularly the BBC (which held exclusive U.K. television rights to the Olympics), were conspicuously absent. The demonstration route, agreed with police, was well-removed from Olympic venues and incoming spectators. The closest engagements with Games-related activity occurred when the demonstration paused at an apartment block where surface-to-air missiles had been installed. The strongest media images were offered when, as the demonstration moved through Stratford High Street, three local bystanders unfurled Olympic flags, provoking a short argument with several protestors; a scrum of photographers and cameramen rapidly converged around the incident, which soon petered out. The march concluded at Wennington Green, some 2.5 miles from the Stratford entrance to Olympic Park, with speeches from participating organizations to around 200 people.

## Concluding Comments

In this article, we have sought to advance social scientific understanding of the staging of sport mega-events with reference to the diverse forms of opposition, criticism, and complaint that emerge within host societies. There are many reasons why this area of research is important for sociologists and other social scientists. To summarize, we may note the following: First, the staging of these expanding, hugely expensive events is a major public issue for host societies and is therefore a significant subject of research inquiry; second, there are critical social justice issues to examine here, particularly in how local communities (often already poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised) tend to experience the worst impacts of event hosting; third, this research may have democratic and political benefits, in revealing significant yet submerged counter-perspectives, as event hosting otherwise tends to secure cross-party support and media backing, thereby restricting the scope for dissent and criticism to be aired within the public sphere; fourth, more broadly, this research registers diverse forms of public unease and opposition toward the wider commodification of sport, the construction of "festival capitalism" around major events, and "New Right two-step" policies on sport-related urban redevelopment and regeneration. We would therefore urge social scientists to investigate future mega-events by engaging with individuals and social

groups within local communities while also exploring the full range of critical stances toward the hosting of these events.

In studying London 2012, we have endeavored to advance several concepts and an explanatory model on the Games that may be used to research other mega-events. First, we introduced the concepts of “festival capitalism” and “New Right two-step” policies to explain the event’s political economic context. Various public criticisms of London 2012 were linked to the festival capitalism surrounding the event, notably regarding the specific choice and ubiquitous celebration of corporate sponsors, the Olympic mobility system that funneled visitors and spectators into mall shopping, and the event’s overall public cost. Moreover, several of our research groups and interviewees highlighted in broad terms how public expenditure was being directed to assist the privatization of urban spaces through the Olympics. Here, we witness the confluence of the New Right two-step and festival capitalism through the wider privatization of urban neighborhoods: Inspired by the mega-event planning agenda, vast public expenditure is harnessed, first, to clear the ground, build infrastructure, and reinvent spatial identity, in order, and second, to draw in primarily private owners, investors, residents, and consumers. At London 2012, the New Right two-step policies featured three types of development initiative: First, direct Olympic projects (notably, the construction of Olympic Park and other venues); second, transnational consumer projects (specifically, the Westfield shopping mall); and third, broader development and infrastructure projects (encompassed in one master plan). These three categories may be used to examine the political economy of urban redevelopment projects that surround other sport mega-events.

Second, we have sought to advance beyond prior, partial studies of resistant movements at sport mega-events, to examine the full spectrum of critical and oppositional responses at national and community levels to London 2012. Specifically, we identified six fields of public opposition, criticism, and complaint:

- first, national criticisms, centered on costs, core-periphery issues, and resource distribution, such as tickets and transport routes;
- second, community criticisms, centered on the low impact of the Olympics on local jobs and businesses (including loss of trade), the negative impacts of redevelopment (such as relocation), and the everyday negative experiences of living in an Olympic construction area;
- third, issue-specific campaigns and protests, centered on the environment, security, and industrial disputes;
- fourth, “glocal” protests, centered on the participation of specific nations and sponsors;
- fifth, neo-tribal acts of transgression and situationist spectacles; and,
- sixth, anti-Olympic forums and demonstrations, which offered strong actual and virtual platforms for different opponents and critics.

In terms of scale, the first two categories here were by far the most substantial: At both community and national level, primary and secondary data pointed to a large volume of criticism, ranging from skepticism to opposition, over the hosting of the

Olympics. In some contrast, Categories 3, 4, and 5 reflected relatively small-scale and often localized forms of opposition, resistance, and transgression toward different aspects of London 2012. Overall, these six fields may be applied as a model to examine critical public responses to the hosting of other mega-events, in sport or otherwise.

To conclude, we ask whether more substantial or unified political impacts might have been achieved by the multifarious critical voices at London 2012. In response, three points might be made that are relevant to this and other events.

First, the individuals and social groups within these six fields were not assembled into a relatively unified movement. Indeed, the coordination of a collective opposition movement only came into full effect in 2012, relatively late, as the Olympics were awarded to London in mid-2005. Overall, the first two fields (national and community critics) remained relatively separate from the other four fields. Future protest groups on mega-events might look to bridge this gap; at London 2012, there was common ground for exploring such links, given wider public and media criticisms on issues such as “Zil Lanes” and ticket distribution. In addition, some interviewees believed that the counter-Olympic movement might have engaged more fully with local community members whose Olympic experiences were relatively negative. As one participant on the counter-Olympic demonstration commented to us,

It was a bit too focused on abstract things, theoretical things, like corporate power. You’d get that from a white, middle-class, often older audience which was there, which is fine. But I can’t see that it offered much connection with local people, with the problems faced by younger black men round here for example. They could have done more on local issues, like local policing here. (Natalie, anti-Olympic activist, August 2012)

Second, most Olympic-related protests were the subject of close regulation by police and typically squeezed out into locations where contact with wider publics, particularly Olympic-related visitors, was relatively low. For example, the route for the major anti-Olympic march, and separate protests on Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Towbridge footpath, did not come near to Olympic Park or to any large Olympic-related crowds. This spatial marginalization undermined the engagement of particular opposition movements with wider publics and the media at London 2012.

Third, we might also consider whether the old, conventional formats of opposition—public demonstrations, formal organizations—remain the most effective ways of resisting or challenging festival capitalism. We noted earlier the impact of transgressive actions by neo-tribal movements, as demonstrated by the Critical Mass bike ride and situationist performances. Alternative strategies might have included working locally with radical community-based organizations, such as civil rights groups. For some volunteers in these organizations, greater impact may be demonstrated than on formal counter-Olympic marches, as one informed us,

I’ve been on plenty demonstrations and marches but I feel like I’m doing something constructive here. If you go on a march, you can walk around for three or four hours and make a lot of noise but are you meant to be happy with that? If you put that energy by all

those people into something direct and constructive you can have a much bigger effect: you can see the consequences of your activities. (Jenna, anti-Olympics protestor, August 2012)

Future sport mega-events and other forms of festival capitalism will continue to attract diverse forms of opposition, criticism, and complaint. If critical forces are to enhance their impacts, it is important that they engage fully with a wide cross-section of critics at community and national levels while also seeking to avoid peripheral spaces for the location of public protests. More significantly, such opposition groups might also note the potential of other approaches toward resisting or transgressing festival capitalism. Spectacular neo-tribal activities, situationist performances, and engaging with radical community-based organizations all provide ways in which public attention might be diverted and captured. At the same time, these practices also seek to evade, or to mock, or to challenge symbolically, some of the key issues surrounding the hosting of sport mega-events with regard to political economy, security, and social justice.

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### **Notes**

1. For reasons of brevity, it is not possible to provide direct comments, notes, and quotes from all interviews and fieldwork exercises.
2. See <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/733520.pdf>; <http://data.london.gov.uk/datastorefiles/documents/2011-census-snapshot-labour-market.pdf>; <http://data.london.gov.uk/datafiles/demographics/average-age-borough.xls>; <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rft-table-ks201ew.xls>; <http://data.london.gov.uk/datastorefiles/documents/2011-census-snapshot-ethnic-diversity-indices.pdf>; <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rft-table-qs803ew.xls>; <http://data.london.gov.uk/datastorefiles/documents/2011-census-snapshot-housing.pdf>
3. See <https://www.newham.gov.uk/Documents/Business/2012-Games-press-pack.pdf>.

4. Our thanks to Helen Symons, a research student at Loughborough University, for initially drawing our attention to potential claims on the Keynesian aspects of hosting mega-events; on this point, see also Despiney and Karpa (2010) and *Financial Times* (24 July 2011).
5. See <http://www.newham.info/Custom/JSNA/Chapter10AmbitiousNewham.pdf>; and *Guardian* (November 26, 2013).
6. Club owners, David Sullivan and David Gold, made separate fortunes from ownership of various adult stores, publishing houses, and film companies.
7. See *The Telegraph*, January 27, 2011; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-12602957>
8. See <http://www.newhamworkplace.com/JobsInNewham.htm>
9. The initial £2.37 billion figure that was widely referenced had excluded around £1 billion in public sector spending on Olympic Park infrastructure and £738 million from the private sector (National Audit Office, 2007). As Olympic security costs doubled to almost £2 billion, one parliamentary committee lambasted the event's poor budgetary planning (*Guardian*, March 9, 2012); meanwhile, a senior police officer leading local Olympic security preparations reminded us that this figure ignores many other Olympic-related costs borne by police and other security services (*Telegraph*, March 9, 2012; field notes, May 2012).
10. Our thanks to Roger Penn for recommending that we include this point in our analysis.
11. See *Daily Mail* (December 28, 2008); one *Telegraph* (June 6, 2012) columnist sensed a popular negative reaction from "Londoners who find their city grinding to a halt while the privileged few take precedence."
12. See, for example, <http://savecarpenters.wordpress.com/>
13. Occupy is a transnational social movement that protests against social and economic inequalities, particularly in the context of governmental neo-liberal austerity policies following the post-2007 global economic downturn.
14. See, for example, <http://saveleytonmarsh.wordpress.com/>
15. See, for example, <http://www.lifeisland.org/>
16. See <http://openourtowpath.wordpress.com/>
17. See <http://stoptheolympicmissiles.org/>
18. These powers are drawn from the Anti-Social Behavior Act 2003, particularly, Section 30.
19. See *Telegraph*, July 17, 2012, and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-18957635>
20. In 2012, the London living wage was calculated by the Greater London Authority at £8.55, while the national minimum wage for adults was £6.08.
21. Femen is an international feminist movement, which originated in Ukraine in 2008, initially to protest against the sexual trafficking of women.
22. See <http://counterolympicsnetwork.wordpress.com/>, <http://www.gamesmonitor.org.uk/>

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