



Olympic Violence: Memory, Colonialism, and the Politics of Place

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Abstract

This paper proceeds as a brief intervention in response to Andrew Foxall's article 'Geopolitics, genocide and the Olympic Games: Sochi 2014'. I address the violence that is associated with the Olympic Games and the politics of place that are involved in site selection. In offering some reflections on how the Olympics are irrevocably tied to colonial processes, my primary contention is that it is necessary to ask critical geographical questions about the Games. Such interrogation opens up a dialogue wherein greater awareness for the legacies of violence may be established, which has the potential to interrupt its ongoing unfoldings.

Keywords: colonialism, genocide, memory, place, Olympics, violent geographies

Andrew Foxall's (2013) "Geopolitics, Genocide and the Olympic Games: Sochi 2014" is a thought provoking, critical, and timely commentary on the forthcoming Winter Olympics, which will be held in Sochi, Russia (in the northwestern part of the Caucasus, formerly known as Circassia) during the month of February 2014. Foxall calls the awarding of the Games to Sochi into question, unpacking some of the violent geographies that have come to be associated with the chosen site, even though there is a significant lack of media attention being paid to the Circassian genocide of 1864. In many ways Foxall's discussion recalls the debate surrounding the ethics of holding the International Geographical Union



(IGU) regional geographic conference in Santiago, Chile during November 2011. The meeting was held at a former military installation and a petition was sent around many of the geography listserves in protest of the association of place that was potentially being evoked by holding the conference there. One of the issues that came to mind then, as well as in response to reading Foxall's commentary, is the notion that every location on the globe that could ever possibly be chosen to stage an event is inherently politicized, and more than that, has a problematic history of pogroms, wars, and general malevolence. The issue then is not so much the actual place where the IGU, the Olympics, or any other major world event is being held, but whether or not there is room to critique and thereby challenge the association of place. To bring memory for what has been draws attention to the mistakes of the past but also invokes the potential alternative possibilities for the future (Legg 2005), which is why openness to critical reflexivity and debate within the space where any given event is being held is so crucially important.

Many geographers were in Washington DC for the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) a few years ago, and there is obviously much to be said about this location as a site wherein the American military-industrial-media complex dominates, but there was also significant scope for debate and critique at the meeting itself, which undermined any particular or singular association of place and allowed for a remembering and politics of a different sort. The AAG meeting then was not one that necessarily celebrated military dominance (although there seemed to be at least a few papers that leaned in this direction), but in many ways it instead served to actively undermine militarism through the discussions that took place and the critical papers that were presented. Likewise, with the IGU meeting being held in Israel in 2010, it caused a lot of concern for the message it was sending to the occupied peoples of Palestine. In this instance there was significant fear among geographers that a space for debate could not be opened up. The problem with both Santiago and Tel Aviv as locations for an IGU meeting then was the limited potential for a critical space of engagement, as contemporary political circumstances worked to stymie any such development. In the case of Santiago, local organizers effectively censured the speech that IGU President Ron Abler had planned for the closing ceremony. He was prohibited from mentioning the historic connections between the Chilean Military Geographic Institute, who hosted the 2011 regional conference, and Augusto Pinochet's regime, or the violent history of the venue, the Bernardo O'Higgins Military School, which is linked to the torture, killing and disappearance of thousands of civilians between 1973 and 1990, and is the institution where Pinochet once taught geography (Hirt and Palomino-Schalscha 2011). But Chile and Israel should also prompt us to think about the occupied peoples of Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and virtually every other place you can think of where conferences or international mega-events are held. This is precisely what makes critiques of the sort that Foxall articulates so important, as it is a necessary intervention that raises consciousness about the geopolitical issues at play. In acknowledging what Derek Gregory (2004) refers to as the 'colonial present', there

is a profound need for reflexivity about the major events—in this case the Olympics—that take place in those sites where the processes of primitive accumulation and colonialism were initially meted out long ago and the resisting populations have already been largely subdued, assimilated, or silenced, rather than just in those sites where these sorts of processes are current events. So while China's human rights record was vigorously debated by mainstream media outlets all across the globe in the lead up to and during the 2008 Beijing Summer Games, four years later when the Olympics were held in London, the same sorts of questions were not being raised about Britain's historical and contemporary abuses—from its bloody colonial rule in Kenya during the early years of the previous century (Branch 2009), to its more recent brutality in response to the 2011 riots that swept across the country after Mark Duggan was murdered by police (Till forthcoming).

In Foxall's focus on the Olympics and genocide in particular, Vancouver is only mentioned in passing, which is surprising given that during the recently hosted Winter Games of 2010, First Nations groups drew significant public attention to the city as a site of colonial violence, both past and present. There was a full-fledged genocide in 'British Columbia' during the later part of the 19th century, a space that is today known primarily by its colonial name and demarcated by its colonial boundaries (Woolford 2010). This abhorrent history is well recognized by First Nations peoples in the area, and yet it is not part of the official discourse of the Province of British Columbia, or of Canada, largely because it threatens the sovereign authority and territories that these governments lay claim to. This violent history has witnessed a similar erasure to the one that Foxall raises here, and indeed there is a case to be made about this genocide continuing into the present via other means through social marginalization and cultural commodification. The series of disappearances of First Nations women from Vancouver's lower east side over the past decade and the lack of initiative and coordinated effort to examine this or prevent it serves as a good example of colonial-style othering being fueled in the present (Jiwani and Young 2006). We can say the same thing about Atlanta, host to the 1996 Summer Olympics, which was a hotbed of slavery, while the State of Georgia is now recognized as an origin point for Cherokee removals along the Trail of Tears (Donahue 2010). Although slavery has officially ended in Georgia, and even if this past is a well-known issue to most in the Anglo-American sphere, segregation continues on in the form of economic disparity, neighborhood isolation, and racial tensions (Spivak et al. 2011). In contrast, the plight of Native Americans in Georgia has long since passed into relative obscurity, representing little more than a historical curiosity in mainstream media discourse. So why does Foxall single out this particular Olympic Games in Sochi as his focus? Of course it is 'next', which makes it an ideal place to start the discussion, but I think there is much more to be said in terms of relating our criticisms to the other sites of genocide where Olympic Games have taken place.

At one point in his intervention Foxall (2013) asks "Why did the IOC [International Olympic Committee] deem Sochi a better location for the Olympics

than Salzburg (Austria) and Pyeongchang (South Korea)?". A close examination of competing sites to Sochi would reveal a very similar set of problems, which feeds into my point that no space can be claimed as innocent, and as I have argued elsewhere, there is an inescapable interconnectedness between the places in which violence occurs (Springer 2011b). The world is old and its landscapes long profaned by malice and human suffering. Such violence is not actually site specific, but instead reflects a relational assemblage where violence is more appropriately understood as an unfolding process, derived from the broader temporal patterns and geographical phenomena of the social world we share. At the start of the Korean War, South Korean authorities engaged in secretive executions of tens of thousands of Leftists (Kim 2004), while the year 1492 saw Jews banned from Salzburg after years of threats that their mass murder was imminent should they choose to remain in the city (Fraenkel 1967). Neither of these locations saw these processes of violence develop in isolation from the world at large. Thus would these really be any more ideal locations than that of Sochi, whose history is also plugged into wider relational geographies? Are not these histories of Salzburg and Pyeongchang also relatively obscured? Does the fact that these events happened many years ago make the violence any more tolerable? I don't mean to undermine the profoundness of what has occurred in Sochi, as Foxall does well to draw this to our attention, but we also need to think through the place-based politics of other potential sites and the violent geographies that characterize them. This also invokes a larger, and I would suggest unavoidable, theoretical question concerning the nature of space-time. No space is static, and as the world turns, the wind blows, and the ground shifts beneath our feet, we should ask if the geography of yesterday is the same geography as today? If we could bear witness to a larger geo-temporal timescale, we would see mountains turn to dust and vast oceans retreat into streams. It is only through our associations and invocations that meaning is afforded to space and place, categories that only exist as constructs of our collective imaginations to try and order and makes sense of the way that we as humans perceive 'reality'. My point is not to be overly esoteric, but to suggest that we should actively question where we draw our boundaries in relation to space and place. How do we know 'where' something occurred, except through particular conceptual lines that we collectively portray in our imaginations, or conversely that are portrayed for us through the institution of the state? There are powerful imaginative geographies afoot, and such is the nature of geopolitics! Does Russia lay exclusive claim to Sochi? Was it Canada's Winter Games or Vancouver's Olympics? Or was it neither, and instead what we witnessed was yet another colonial occupation folded out on top of traditional Squamish territories? When we start to ask such geographical questions we begin a political conversation, a dialogue that encourages greater awareness for the histories of violence and the potential to interrupt its contemporary unfoldings.

With this critique in mind, there are nonetheless some important differences between Sochi and Vancouver—or any other host city of the Olympics—in terms of the available opportunities for residents to publicly challenge certain associations

of place. The ability to mount counter narratives that call historical and ongoing political problems into question differ widely between countries and societies in terms of what can and cannot be said on site. Russian political elites have demonstrated a general tendency to circumvent and manipulate participation in memorialization processes, and a lack of willingness to engage the question of genocide in Circassia in particular, stemming from what Forest et al. (2004) view as a typical reluctance to deal with a totalitarian past. Although a similar unwillingness to acknowledge Canada's violent history exists, on 11 June 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly apologized for elements of the Canadian genocide, notably the residential school system that the Canadian government operated between the 1840s and 1996, which claimed the lives of thousands of Aboriginal children and left a lasting legacy of trauma for those who survived (Churchill 2004; Miller 1996). There are, as Waterstone and de Leeuw (2010) recognize, significant questions to be asked about the legitimacy of this state-sanctioned apology, but at the very least we can acknowledge that First Nations peoples in Canada were able to publicly voice their criticisms as to the sincerity, or lack thereof, of this political performance. We can compare this with the recent movement by Russian police to shut down a protest at the Sochi Olympic site on 29 April 2013, where organizers were charged with coordinating unsanctioned gatherings (Human Rights Watch 2013). Similarly, while Vancouver has had an open approach to sexuality and sports, playing host to the Gay Games in 1990 and establishing a Pride House at the 2010 Winter Games, Russian authorities have engaged a regressive heteronormative politics by banning a potential Pride House for LGBTQ athletes at the Sochi Games, a decision that was upheld by the Russian court (Harley 2012). The actions of Russian power brokers demonstrate a lack of concern for the notion of freedom of expression with respect to both local residents and the athletes who will gather in Sochi. Even still, we can't simply paint in a black and white binary, as the context for dissent surrounding the Winter Games in Vancouver illustrates just how monochromatic the stain of our contemporary post-democratic moment truly is (Springer 2011a; Swegedow 2011). Vancouver police were accused of using undercover agents to infiltrate anti-Olympic demonstrations and incite protestors to commit illegal acts so that the organized rallies and marches could be shut down (Hui 2010). And while Vancouver police denied this accusation, there is considerable room for skepticism as a spokesperson for the Vancouver 2010 Integrated Security Unit had previously indicated that he wouldn't rule out the use of agent provocateurs (Lupick 2009). Even in a city like Vancouver, Canada, which unlike Sochi, Russia, has a global reputation for liberty and accountability, state authorities have attempted to drain the colour from democratic expression. It would seem then that the graying of politics is part and parcel of the Olympic experience.

Should we have an Olympics at all then could perhaps be a central question. But this also invokes a larger theoretical debate that relates to identity, and importantly how states themselves facilitate and promote violence. Given the bloodletting of democracy that has become so closely associated with the Games,

Foxall is absolutely correct, to treat the Olympics as non-political is absurd. The Olympics are the embodiment of nationalism, which in itself is fundamentally both political and divisive. It is an ideology that is so entrenched that we scarcely recognize nationalism as ideology at all, and through its banality it attempts to cast identities in stone by playing a biopolitical game of capture and submission (Billig 1995). Are not the Olympics a form of chest beating, a symbolic performance of vigor and might? The message seems clear enough: any county that can train a legion of athletes is certainly capable of training an army of soldiers. Is it any surprise that military dominance can be mapped almost directly onto the number of gold medals that are won? But aside from the bad taste that this spectacle of brawn and bravado leaves in one's mouth, there are other ethical questions, questions that relate to the staging of the event itself and appeal not to history, but to the *here* and *now* of the ongoing war against the urban poor (Lenskyj 2008). The criminalization of the homeless, the destruction of low-income housing, and the revanchist gentrification that preceded the Summer Games in Beijing, Vancouver, London and now Rio barely register within the mainstream media, buried beneath the fervor of promised economic rewards as the eyes of the world turn to each respective host city (Cornelissen 2010). These are recurrent themes found in virtually every contemporary Olympic Games, where in the aftermath, the world collectively gazes not at the wreckage of urban colonialism where stadiums lay empty and communities divided, nor at the hefty price tag left to tax payers, but insatiably towards the future and the next Games. So it is not just the story of the Olympics themselves that is intensively political, but also their preface and their afterword. These earth writings can't actually be separated from the Games, even if such accumulation by dispossession is treated as an 'externality' by the IOC in the very same way that capitalism has always and everywhere discursively washed its hands of the social ills it sows (Springer 2013). Hidden behind the glitz and glamour of the Games, and shielded by intensive securitization and the mundanity that such regimentation has taken on in the current conjuncture, there exists an odious blood sport. The Olympics offer a pretext for waging war on the poor, an opportunity to celebrate the segregation of humanity rather than our unity, and a politics of forgetting. While masked beneath a rhetoric of peace and prosperity, we would do well to recognize that the problematics of the Games being held in Sochi are simply part of a larger and deeper logic, wherein the Olympics have become irrevocably linked to violence and ruination.

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