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The Anti-Olympics

Description

Always an avatar for the international order of the day—Victorian imperialism, Cold War rivalry, Pax Americana—the Olympics have joined the WTO and G20 as focus for alter-globo protest. Lessons for London from the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver, where artists, activists and indigenous organizers took on the spectacle of the five-ring circus.

Disciplines

Political Science

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THE ANTI-OLYMPICS

WALKING ALONG EAST Hastings Street in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver one crisp January morning in 2010, I came across a perplexing set of white panels on the outer flank of the refurbished Woodward's building. The panels featured an explosion of repudiation: stark, black-lettered phrases like 'HELL NO', 'I SAID NO', 'NO BLOODY WAY', and 'NO WAY JOSÉ'. Four placards simply read 'NO'. Later I learned that this was a site-specific installation by Vancouver artist Ken Lum for Simon Fraser University's Audain Gallery, challenging a '2010 Winter Games By-law' passed by the City of Vancouver in the run-up to the Olympics. The by-law outlawed placards, posters and banners that did not 'celebrate' the 2010 Winter Games and 'create or enhance a festive environment and atmosphere'. The ordinance criminalized anti-Olympic signs and gave Canadian authorities the right to remove them from both public and private property.

The following month I returned to Vancouver to see how anti-Olympic organizing was taking shape. Strolling near the Olympic Village in the days before the Games, one encountered a contradiction-laden mélange of genial sports enthusiasm and ostentatious surveillance state. The place was teeming with sprightly tourists, athletes, Olympics officials and journalists with cameras and press badges swinging from their necks; awash with teal, one of the perky, focus-group-tested colours of the 2010 Winter Games. At the same time, it felt like entering some sort of immaculate repression zone. Officers from the newly formed Vancouver Integrated Security Unit—headed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and comprising more than 20 policing agencies—hunkered together on every corner and patrolled the bustling footpaths around the False Creek inlet. Surveillance cameras were pegged to poles at regular intervals around the perimeter. Helicopters whirred

overhead. CF-18 Hornet fighter jets zinged by. Ersatz Christo and Jeanne-Claude-style banners, also in Olympic teal, enveloped chain-link fences that channelled people into permissible zones while concealing chunks of so-called public space.

Brawn and brass

The Olympic Games has become the world's greatest media and marketing event; huge corporations vie for association with the 'Olympic brand' in the hope of gaining a worldwide marketing audience of billions. Somewhere between multinational corporation and global institution, the International Olympic Committee sits at the heart of a vast interlocking structure of national and international bodies, sporting associations and sponsoring firms; in recent decades the Games, Summer and Winter, have been receiving the blessing of the UN, which ritually adopts a never-observed resolution on the Olympic Truce with every new Olympiad. The IOC weighs the bids for hosting the Games, put forward by the National Olympic Committees. Based in Lausanne, Switzerland, where it is registered as a not-for-profit NGO, and enjoying tax exemptions wherever it touches down, the IOC made a profit of \$383 million on the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, after routing a very substantial share of the \$2.4 billion total revenue to other parts of the 'Olympic Movement'. It is subject to no independent financial audit; the ultimate destination of much of the revenue that flows into its coffers remains mysterious, the salaries of IOC executives unreported.¹

The modern Olympics are the brainchild of French aristocrat Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937), an eccentric Anglophile who saw in the sporting culture of Thomas Arnold's Rugby School the magic formula for Britain's imperial dominance.² Here, in the mix of rigorous discipline with manly self-display, lay the means to reinvigorate the French nation

¹ Tripp Mickle, 'IOC cashes in on Beijing', *Sports Business Journal*, 13 July 2009; Christopher Shaw, *Five Ring Circus*, Gabriola Island, BC 2008, p. 72.

² 'Arnold, the greatest educator of modern times, is more than any other responsible for the present prosperity and the prodigious expansion of his country. With him athletics penetrated a great public school and transformed it; and from the day on which the first generation fashioned by his hands was launched on the world, the British Empire had a new look': Coubertin, 'The Olympic Idea', *Discourses and Essays*, Stuttgart 1967, p. 8; quoted in Ljubodrag Simonović, *Fascism and Olympism*, p. 14, available on the Cirque Minime website.

after the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War. Coubertin was a straightforward adherent to the Social Darwinism of his time: 'The theory that all human races have equal rights leads to a line of policy which hinders any progress in the colonies'—'the superior race is fully entitled to deny the lower race certain privileges of civilized life'. He was no less clear-cut on the Jewish Question: 'clever and shrewd in business', perhaps, but 'deep in their hearts they remain Asians' whose role in history has been 'insignificant'.³ His inspired move was to marry imperial athletics with the massive World Fairs of the time—the early Olympics actually took place as sideshows to the Fairs—and to add a topping of pseudo-classical hymns, banners and laurel leaves. In 1896 the IOC, with Coubertin as President, organized the first Games. From the outset, Thomas Cook was official Olympic travel agent; American sportswear entrepreneur, Albert G. Spalding, soon joined the ranks, thereby gaining plentiful opportunities for product placement.

The Games were postponed during the greater display of manly virtue that erupted in 1914 and languished in the 1920s, though Winter Games were added in 1924. But Coubertin was delighted by the enthusiasm shown by Nazi Germany in its preparations for the Berlin Olympics of 1936: 'illuminated with Hitler's strength and discipline', they should serve as a model for subsequent Games.⁴ Equally enthusiastic was Coubertin's protégé, and later IOC President, the Chicago property tycoon Avery Brundage (1887–1975), who defied anti-fascist protests, telling a Madison Square Garden rally in 1936: 'We can learn much from Germany. We, too, if we wish to preserve our institutions, must stamp out communism. We, too, must take steps to arrest the decline of patriotism.'⁵ As IOC president from 1952–72, Brundage was an enthusiast for the white-only teams of apartheid South Africa and had an

³ Pierre de Coubertin, 'Histoire universelle', vol. 2, p. 447.

⁴ Hans Joachim Teichler, 'Coubertin und das Dritte Reich', *Sportwissenschaft*, 1982, p. 12, quoted in Simonović, 'Fascism and Olympism', p. 3.

⁵ 'Brundage extols Hitler's regime', *New York Times*, 5 October 1936. The 20,000-strong rally ended by singing 'The Star-Spangled Banner', 'Deutschland Ueber Alles' and the Horst-Wessel song. As he had told the Chicago Association of Commerce in 1929, Brundage looked forward to 'the development of a new race of men, actuated by principles of sportsmanship learned on the playing field . . . a race physically strong, mentally alert and morally sound: a race not to be imposed upon.' Cited in Maynard Brichford, 'Avery Brundage and Racism', University of Western Ontario paper, October 1998, p. 131.

evident fondness for Franco's Spain, holding the IOC's 1965 congress in Madrid where the Generalissimo himself read the opening speech. Brundage responded with fulsome praise for Franco's excellent grasp of the principles of amateurism.⁶ Indeed Brundage's favoured successor Juan Antonio Samaranch (1920–2010), the IOC president from 1980 to 2001, was a Falangist who regarded himself as 'one hundred per cent Francoist' up to the dictator's death.⁷

The Games had been going through troubled times before Samaranch took over: the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City would be remembered for the Black Power salutes of the victorious US athletes, tear-gas traces lingering over the stadium as police brutalized protesting students outside. Black African states organized anti-apartheid boycotts in 1972 and 76, and the massacre of the Israeli team and their Palestinian captors in a bungled operation by German police overshadowed the Munich Games. The response of Samaranch and his colleagues was to scale up the money by auctioning broadcast rights, proclaiming—of course—that politics has no place in sport. The 1984 'Reagan Olympics' in Los Angeles set the trend: a globally televised feeding-frenzy for sponsoring corporations, with a Disney-designed official mascot.

From this point on the IOC became the transnational giant that we know today, sailing on the vast streams of revenue generated by broadcasting contracts and by a corporate-sponsorship programme, TOP, which grants 'The Olympic Partners'—Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Dow Chemicals, Visa, Panasonic—the rights to use the IOC's trade-marked Five Rings and flood global markets with 'authentic' Olympic-brand merchandise. Inside the stadium, doping grew so prevalent that even the IOC was forced to take note and establish its own Ethics Commission. In tune with the times, recent Games have combined debt-fuelled credit bubbles with the opportunity of a symbolic embrace by the 'international community'. The 2004 Games in Athens incurred costs of nearly €7.2 billion, a significant

⁶ 'Proclamation of Opening by the Head of the Spanish State, Generalissimo Franco'; and 'Address by President Avery Brundage to 63rd Session of the IOC', *Bulletin of the International Olympic Committee*, Lausanne 1965, pp. 64–66.

⁷ The son of a textile magnate, Samaranch married into old money and was rewarded in 1991 (by Felipe González) with an aristocratic title for his life's work. See Andrew Jennings, 'Why Juan Antonio's right arm is more muscular than his left', transparencyinsport.org; Dave Zirin, 'Burying Juan Antonio Samaranch', *Huffington Post*, 22 April 2010.

contribution to Greece's deficit. The 2008 Beijing Olympics offered a spectacular coming-out party for global capitalism's latest recruit: the opening ceremony alone cost \$100 million; naturally the IOC, now led by Belgian yachtsman and sports bureaucrat Jacques Rogge, turned a blind eye to the accompanying crackdown in Tibet.

If the Games have always represented the grand political logic of the day—classical imperialist muscle-flexing, Cold War inter-bloc rivalry, Pax Americana—they now typically also summon an upsurge of political contestation wherever they go. The IOC's official charter forbids the expression of anti-Olympic dissent, stating in Rule 51, 'No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas'. Nevertheless, when the Olympics touch down in a host city, protest soon follows. Global summits like the WTO and G20 became the focus for a major wave of international activism with Seattle. The Games, too, have been revealed as the avatar of an unaccountable world order of power, wealth and spectacle, wreaking permanent social damage on the urban environment.

Event coalitions

Activists in Vancouver were early adopters of anti-Olympics dissent. Campaigners emerged in 2002—even before the city had won the bidding process—and built momentum right through the 2010 Winter Olympics. And while the *Vancouver Sun* pegged protesters as a collection of 'whiners and grumble-bunnies' who could not 'hold their tongues even on a special occasion', anti-Olympics activists produced a spirited critique: taxpayer money was being squandered on a two-and-a-half week sports party rather than going to indispensable social services; civil liberties were being threatened by a massively militarized police force; the Olympics were taking place on unceded aboriginal (Coast Salish) land.⁸ Groups like the No Games 2010 Coalition pinpointed the dangers of the Olympic-industrial complex, and began a long-term public-education project to demystify the ostensibly win-win nature of the Games. The Impact on Community Coalition adopted a neutral stance at first, before shedding its non-aligned status once the contradictions of hosting the Olympics became too saw-toothed to downplay. Already extant groups

⁸ Barbara Yaffe, 'PM's strategy of controlling message fails to silence opponents', *Vancouver Sun*, 12 February 2010.

like No One Is Illegal and the Anti-Poverty Committee lent a radical analysis of the Olympic juggernaut, with religious, environmental and aboriginal groups also getting involved. Streams of Justice, the Power of Women Group, No 2010 Olympics on Stolen Native Land, Van.Act!, and Native Youth Movement were other prime movers. Many people in these groups also worked with the Olympic Resistance Network—a decentralized, non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian alliance.

The activism in Vancouver has been closer to the conception of organizing that Tom Mertes described in the global justice movement—‘an ongoing series of alliances and coalitions, whose convergences remain contingent’—than to an older model of mobilizations based on ongoing social solidarities.⁹ In fact, it might be more accurate to call anti-Olympic resistance an ‘event coalition’ since the activism is barely sustained through time and from site to site. Aware of this distinction, activists concertedly called their actions ‘a convergence of movements’ around ‘the Olympic moment’ rather than a ‘social movement’—a term that tends to flatten out heterogeneity and overstate continuity.¹⁰ Movements are finding ways to organize with greater flexibility, spontaneity and lateral solidarity, and anti-Olympics resistance in Vancouver provides a prime example of these dynamics.

In February 2003, Vancouver voters were presented with a plebiscite to gauge public support for hosting the Games. Though pro-Olympics boosters spent \$700,000 persuading the public—140 times more than the ‘no’ side—only 26 per cent of those eligible voted in favour, on the basis of a total turnout of 40 per cent.¹¹ This weak yet media-trumpeted endorsement of the Games did nothing to stunt dissent. An uncommon blend of activists joined forces—indigenous dissidents, anti-poverty campaigners, environmentalists, anarchists, civil libertarians and numerous combinations thereof—resulting in a cross-cutting solidarity in opposition to the Games. Resistance went far beyond the NGO circuit, taking the form of a two-track fight-back, with one wing working inside the

⁹ Tom Mertes, ‘Grass-Roots Globalism’, NLR 17, September–October 2001, p. 108.

¹⁰ The term ‘event coalition’ is from Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Alliance*, Cambridge 2005. See also the discussion on new organizational forms in Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, eds, *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, New York 2005.

¹¹ Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, *Olympic Industry Resistance: Challenging Olympic Power and Propaganda*, Albany 2008, p. 65.

institutional corridors of power and another applying pressure from the outside through direct action.

Indigenous resistance

Indigenous activists played a vital part. It is worth underlining that First Nations have a unique relationship with the Canadian state in British Columbia. When British colonies became confederated as Canadian provinces in 1867, London had already signed treaties with aboriginal groups in alignment with the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which declared that only the Crown could obtain indigenous lands. When British Columbia joined the Confederation in 1871, only fifteen such treaties had been agreed, leaving aboriginal title to the remainder of the region unresolved. With the exception of Treaty 8, negotiated in 1899, and the Nisga'a Treaty, which was completed in 2000, aboriginal title has still not been legally extinguished in British Columbia.¹² Lacking treaty relations, British Columbia remains—according to indigenous intellectual Taiaiake Alfred—'in a perpetual colonialism-resistance dynamic'.¹³ In 2010, this dynamic was evident in full-force in anti-Olympics activism.

In what became known as the Eagleridge Bluffs Blockade, environmental and First Nations activists teamed up to oppose the expansion of the Sea-to-Sky Highway connecting Vancouver to Whistler. In late May 2006 First Nations elder and activist Harriet Nahanee was arrested along with veteran environmentalist Betty Krawczyk. Despite their age they were both unceremoniously tossed into jail. In February 2007, with Krawczyk and Nahanee still languishing behind bars, two activists disrupted the 'Olympic Countdown Ceremony' staged by the official Vancouver organizing committee (VANOC). Anti-poverty campaigner David Cunningham and aboriginal dissident Gord Hill spontaneously hopped onto the stage, seized the microphone and led chants of 'Homes not Games' and 'Fuck 2010'. Tragically, Harriet Nahanee had contracted pneumonia in jail and

¹² See Hamar Foster and Alan Grove, 'Trespassers on the Soil', *BC Studies*, no. 139–9, 2003, pp. 51–84; Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance and Reserves in British Columbia*, Vancouver 2002. There are currently sixty First Nations in the province participating in various stages of the BC treaty process. See www.bctreaty.net.

¹³ Taiaiake Alfred, 'Deconstructing the British Columbia Treaty Process', *Balayi: Culture, Law and Colonialism*, vol. 3, 2001, p. 42.

died a month later. In March 2007, activists caused a stir when they made off with the gargantuan Olympic flag that had been hoisted at City Hall. Shortly thereafter, a photograph of three masked activists posing in front of the flag with a photograph of Nahanee was released by a group calling itself the Native Warrior Society.

First Nations peoples had good reason to be sceptical that they would be treated with respect during the Olympics. For the closing ceremonies of the 1976 Summer Games in Montréal, nine First Nations agreed to participate in a ‘commemoration ceremony’, in which their 200 representatives were joined by 250 non-indigenous dancers sporting costumes and paint, in an effort to pass themselves off as First Nations people. According to the Games’ Official Report, the ‘sumptuous procession’ was ‘made even more exciting by the play of lights and the theatrical music based on André Mathieu’s *Danse sauvage*’.¹⁴ In the end, as one critic noted, ‘non-Aboriginal performers dressed and painted to look like “Indians” led the Aboriginal participants through their own commemoration’.¹⁵ Nevertheless, leaders from the Lil’wat, Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations agreed in 2004 to work together on hosting and assisting the 2010 Games—the first time the IOC had permitted aboriginal people to be official host partners. The official mascots were also First Nations-inspired: Miga, a mythical sea bear; Quatchi, a sasquatch; and Sumi, an animal spirit. *Indian Country Today*, a weekly that focuses on indigenous issues across the Americas, declared that the event was ‘a showcase for Native culture’, where ‘the vibrant and integral involvement of Native people in the Games’ was evident.¹⁶

Anti-Olympics activists were quick to point out that even though the Olympic charter endorses ‘promoting the preservation of human dignity’, the IOC chose to hold the games on unceded Coast Salish territory. Thus, the spectre of dispossession haunted the Olympics and ‘No Olympics on Stolen Native Land’ became one of the leading anti-Olympic slogans.

¹⁴ Comités d’organisation des Jeux Olympiques, *Montréal 1976, Games of the XXI Olympiad, Official Report*, vol. 1, Ottawa 1978, p. 306.

¹⁵ Janice Forsyth, ‘Teepees and Tomahawks’, in Kevin Wamsley, Robert K. Barney and Scott G. Martyn, eds, *The Global Nexus Engaged*, London, ON 2002, p. 72.

¹⁶ Hans Tammemagi, ‘Olympic Games a Showcase for Native Culture’, *Indian Country Today*, 24 March 2010.

Despite massive financial inducements, 80 of the 203 indigenous bands in British Columbia flatly refused to participate.¹⁷

Integrated security

Military-grade fortressification has become standard procedure for host cities during mega-events, and Vancouver was no exception. The security budget was originally estimated at \$175 million, but eventually skyrocketed to more than \$1 billion, a process indigenous activist Gord Hill characterized as ‘police extortion from the ruling class’.¹⁸ Canadian authorities used the Olympics as an opportunity to jack up the Kevlar-per-capita quotient. Even the *Globe and Mail* was alarmed: ‘You don’t have to be a disciple of dissent to be dismayed at the amount of money being spent on security for the Vancouver Olympics’.¹⁹ Canadian officials used the money to establish a surveillance-blanketed urban terrain, employing 17,000 security agents. The Canadian Border Services Agency inserted their officers—essentially the immigration police—into the Downtown Eastside, demanding residents provide proof of citizenship. Police confronted demonstrators with semi-automatic weapons, normalizing authoritarianism and proliferating fear. More importantly, the high-tech policing equipment for today’s state of exception becomes tomorrow’s new normal: military-style weaponry that can be employed day-to-day.

The heavy police presence was accompanied by the installation of nearly 1,000 CCTV cameras in greater Vancouver. The city’s Integrated Security Unit promised to take them down after the Games were over, but ‘take down’ does not mean ‘go away’.²⁰ Surveillance went beyond these ever-winking red eyes. Police Chief Jamie Graham bragged about the infiltration of anti-Olympic groups by security agents: a police spy had wormed his way into becoming a bus driver who transported activists to a protest of the Olympic torch relay.²¹ Outspoken Olympics critic

¹⁷ Kim Pemberton, ‘Aboriginal Groups Divided on Whether to Support Olympics’, *Vancouver Sun*, 6 February 2010.

¹⁸ Personal interview, 18 August 2010.

¹⁹ Gary Mason, ‘The Real Threat to the Olympics Could Be a Bloody Protest’, *Globe and Mail*, 11 February 2010.

²⁰ Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, ‘Privacy and Security at the Vancouver 2010 Winter Games’, August 2009.

²¹ Darah Hansen, ‘Victoria Cop Infiltrated Anti-Games Group, Jamie Graham Says’, *Vancouver Sun*, 2 December 2009.

Christopher Shaw, the author of *Five Ring Circus*, experienced intense harassment from VISU. Beginning in June 2009, he was approached by VISU at home, at work and on the street. Sometimes officials would be holding a copy of his book, saying they had found ‘disturbing information’ that they wanted to discuss, or that VISU investigator Jeff Francis ‘says hi’. By 2010 these visits were almost daily occurrences, with VISU also questioning his friends, girlfriend and ex-wife.²² Almost everyone involved in the Olympic Resistance Network was visited by VISU for questioning.

All this was supplemented by a slew of extraordinary rules and laws. At the provincial level, British Columbia passed the Assistance to Shelter Act, which effectively criminalized the homeless, allowing police to herd them forcibly into shelters. Michael Barnholden, author of *Reading the Riot Act: A Brief History of Rioting in Vancouver*, put it this way: ‘During the Olympics it was like you could have all the human rights you could afford’.²³ A legal challenge helped defang the ‘sign by-law’, but in line with the IOC’s ‘Clean Venue Guidelines’, the revamped by-law still forbade signs that undermined the logos of Olympic corporate sponsors.²⁴ In December 2009 City of Vancouver staff insisted Jesse Corcoran remove his anti-Olympics mural from the front of the Crying Room Gallery in Vancouver. The mural depicted Olympics rings as faces—four frowning, and one smiling. After an outcry from artists, activists and civil-liberties groups, the city backpedalled, arguing that the mural was actually removed because of an anti-graffiti by-law, before ultimately relenting and allowing it to be reinstalled.

These micro-struggles exemplify the push-back on the part of civil libertarians and activists in advance of the Games, and their success

²² Shaw’s book analyses the IOC’s trajectory from ‘a relatively modest venture, more or less focused on sports’ to ‘an international megacorporation’. He aptly warns: ‘Once a city has embarked on the path to win the Games, especially once it has been successful, the IOC sets the agenda for the next seven years: virtually everything done in the city and surrounding region is done for the Olympics, for the profits of the IOC and for those driving the local organizing committee.’ Shaw, *Five Ring Circus*, pp. 74–5. VISU paid yet another visit to Shaw just before the G8/G20 summit in Toronto, attempting to flip him into becoming an informant, an offer he refused point-blank. Personal interview, 17 August 2010.

²³ Personal interview, 19 August 2010.

²⁴ International Olympic Committee, *Brand Protection: Olympic Marketing Ambush Protection and Clean Venue Guidelines*, Lausanne 2005.

demonstrates the importance of organizing early and often around questionable measures. The BC Civil Liberties Association was an important part of this process, but so were direct-actionistas. In the lead-up to the Games, VISU purchased a Medium Range Acoustic Device—the notorious military-grade sonic weapon that was used in Pittsburgh during the G20 protests in 2009. But because of negative press and intense pressure from activists, VISU promised before the Games to erase the weapon function from its hard drive, essentially reducing it to an expensive megaphone. In the end, the MRAD was kept in the box during the Games.²⁵

Condos and campers

The IOC would introduce British Columbians to ‘celebration capitalism’, the whipsaw inverse of Naomi Klein’s ‘disaster capitalism’. From day one, the Olympic party was a full-on budget-buster. The five-ring price tag was originally estimated at \$1 billion; by the month before the Games, costs had ballooned to \$6 billion, and post-Olympics estimates soared into the \$8–10 billion range, with the City of Vancouver alone kicking in nearly \$1,000 for every single person in town. The model followed was so-called public–private partnerships, in which the public pays and the private profits. Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson—a New Democratic Party-style liberal—was no exception; when it came to the Olympics, the co-founder of the Happy Planet organic juice company was guzzling the public–private partnership Kool-Aid.

Vancouver has become a poster city for neoliberal-era gentrification, the gap between rich and poor widening into an abyss. As a measure of what Henri Lefebvre would have called its ‘spatial contradiction’²⁶: Vancouver is reputedly the most liveable yet the least affordable global city. In 2010 the median house price was \$540,900, while median household income was \$58,200.²⁷ Nowhere is the difference between nouveau riche and

²⁵ With an apparently lighter touch, officials promised ‘safe-assembly areas’ for the Olympics. Ostensibly a sop to protestors awarding them a clear space within sight of Olympic venues, media and spectators, the ‘safe-assembly areas’ still raised the hackles of activists, who saw them as tantamount to the ‘free-speech zones’ or ‘protest pens’ at US political conventions and the Beijing Olympics. Ultimately the authorities were forced to abandon this measure after widespread public outcry.

²⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford 1991, p. 365.

²⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Global Liveability Report*, January 2010; Frontier Centre for Public Policy, ‘International Housing Affordability Survey: 2010 Ratings for Metropolitan Markets’, p. 39, available online.

old-school poor more glaring than in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, an 8-by-15-block strip of gritty urban intensity that—outside aboriginal reserves—is Canada's poorest postcode. Yet the sharp juxtaposition between high 'liveability' and dire poverty does not undermine Vancouver's status on the silver-frosted terrain of global capitalism. Hosting mega-events like the Olympics tends to enhance this status, a massive extra boost for turbogentrification.

An instructive example of 'spatial contradictions' emerged on 15 February 2010, a few days after the Games' opening ceremonies. Following a rally at Pigeon Park that challenged the twin processes of gentrification and homelessness criminalization, campaigners descended on 58 W. Hastings Street where they took control of the space owned by *bête-noire* developer Concord Pacific and leased to the Games for use as a parking lot. The site was strategic: a highly visible location where spatial injustice is indelibly inscribed in the social landscape. Concord Pacific had a permit in hand to develop a nest of high-priced condominiums on the plot; it was capacious enough to fit the hundred-odd tents that were eventually pitched there.

The first thing one saw upon entering the tent village was a sacred fire tended by aboriginal elders. Music, workshops and skill-share sessions filled the area. Food Not Bombs provided victuals. Activists from Streams of Justice, a Christian social-justice group, and Van.Act!—an outgrowth of the University of British Columbia's Students for a Democratic Society—helped with logistics. A security crew prevented unwanted outsiders, such as the camera-wielding media, from entering camp and helped ease tensions that arose inside the village, at one point ejecting two suspected police infiltrators. Leadership emerged organically from the organizing efforts of the Power of Women Group, a collection of Downtown Eastside residents—many of them aboriginal elders—with deep roots in the neighbourhood, widely respected within activist circles. People from this group, along with Dave Diewert of Streams of Justice and Harsha Walia of No One Is Illegal, served as media spokespeople. Every day or so community meetings helped set and enforce camp protocols and create work schedules.²⁸ Such necessary activities have been dubbed the 'nano-level processes of

²⁸ Personal interview with Dave Diewert, 17 August 2010; personal interview with Harsha Walia, 18 August 2010.

forging solidarity': unpredictable, open-ended and desirably untidy, 'the life-blood of any movement'.²⁹

Creating safe spaces for dissent is important; they offer non-competitive contact points where a diversity of individuals and organizations can work together. The Olympic Tent Village led to unique social interactions, with university students intermingling with street people, the professoriat with the subproletariat; rich exchanges that would not have happened with more traditional forms of protest.³⁰ Originally, the plan was to run the Tent Village for five days, but because of the energy and political considerations, it was extended beyond the end of the Olympics. Numerous activists I spoke with stressed that the creation of the Olympic Tent Village was not merely a symbolic act, but a material victory too: because of the action, approximately eighty-five people secured housing through the City of Vancouver and the state agency BC Housing.³¹

The Olympic Tent Village was not the only shelter-related protest in town; the Pivot Legal Society spearheaded a Red Tent Campaign whereby bright red tents were plunked down around town to raise awareness of homelessness and to press for a national housing policy. For \$100, one could sponsor a tent emblazoned with the slogan 'Housing Is a Right', which would be given to a homeless person for temporary shelter. Influenced by the French anti-poverty organization Children of Don Quixote, which used a similar strategy in late 2006 to raise consciousness about homelessness in Paris, Red Tent campaigners in Vancouver erected tents in high-traffic areas outside Olympic venues, leafleted event-goers and wrapped the Canadian Pavilion in red tarps, in the process going for a Guinness Book World Record for longest banner wrap. Though the group embraced a legalist approach—aiming to pressure the federal government to create a national housing strategy—they also donated red tents to the Olympic Tent Village, an illegal seizure of space where confronting the state was a goal, not conversing with it.³²

²⁹ Mertes, 'Grass-Roots Globalism', p. 110.

³⁰ Although more than 100 organizations signed on in support of the action, numerous activists noted the conspicuous absence of the labour movement from anti-Olympics organizing.

³¹ Interviews with Diewert and Walia. Around 45 individuals gained housing in the first round and about 40 more subsequently.

³² Personal interviews with Am Johal, 5 February 2010 and 17 August 2010.

Another vital ‘counter-space’ was forged at the artist-run *VIVO* Media Arts Centre, whose ‘Safe Assembly Project’ featured ‘Afternoon School’ workshops, screenings, art productions and a pirate-radio poetry project. A vital contribution was the ‘Evening News’ forum, organized by Am Johal, Cecily Nicholson and Nicholas Perrin, which occurred every other night for the duration of the Games. At Evening News events, video activists showed raw protest footage, practising artists responded to the Olympics industry and its effects, and panels of activists and scholars debated particular themes. The events at *VIVO* demanded that art play a pivotal role in reformatting anti-Olympics resistance, rather than be relegated as colourful window dressing. Organizers effectively brought together Vancouver art and activist communities, in a neutral space devoid of political-historical baggage. *VIVO* scheduled formally innovative poets and artists who levelled more questions than answers, more open-endedness than tidy poetic closure.

Poetry at Evening News was supplemented by ‘Short-Range Poetic Device’, the pirate-radio programme hosted by poet-activists Stephen Collis and Roger Farr. The ‘Poetic Device’ was part of a broader practice of poetry, politics and anti-Olympics resistance; it featured readings and discussions with local poet-activists such as Donato Mancini, Rita Wong, Jeff Derksen, Kim Duff and Naava Smolash. These shows played periodically throughout the Olympics.³³ Although the radio station was shut down in the early days of the Games by Industry Canada—the governmental body that oversees radio, spectrum and telecommunications standards across the country—whose intervening officials were sporting Olympic apparel, the poet-activists pressed ahead, streaming their show online.

Debating tactics

VIVO’s Evening News forum played a crucial role in mediating disagreements over ends and means. At stake here was the ‘diversity of tactics’ approach to which, in advance of the Games, numerous anti-Olympics entities had signed up. This approach involves protesters with diverging styles and preferred methods making a pact to support—or at least not publicly denigrate—each other during episodes of contention. Particular tactics are not ruled out from the get-go, and criticism is to remain internal to the movement, not blabbered to the mainstream media. One

³³ See shorrangepoeticdevice.blogspot.com.

outcome may be what some social-movement scholars have termed ‘the radical flank effect’ whereby movements benefit from having a radical wing that makes progressive goals, tactics and strategies seem relatively moderate—and thus more palatable to the power structure.³⁴ The ‘diversity of tactics’ approach can also form a solidaristic bridge between ardent supporters of Gandhi-style nonviolence and those who accept property destruction as a legitimate tactic—but this is where cracks usually emerge.

The 13 February Heart Attack March—to ‘clog the arteries of capitalism’—was Vancouver’s Seattle moment: militants broke off from a planned march and used newspaper boxes and metal chairs to break plate-glass windows at corporations like the Hudson’s Bay Company, setting off intense discussions around tactics and strategies both inside and outside the movement. For supporters, the company’s historical ties to British colonialism justified property damage; after all, the Hudson’s Bay Company was an integral actor in the Canadian state’s effort to extinguish aboriginal title in British Columbia during the 19th century.³⁵ But critics maintained such tactics would only alienate the general public and invite the wrath of the cops. In particular, the BC Civil Liberties Association’s David Eby was quoted in the media, saying he was ‘sickened’ by the ‘thuggery’ of the window-smashing.³⁶ A few days later Eby attended an Evening News forum, where he was slated to speak on a civil-liberties panel, and was pined by a disgruntled activist, who felt he had violated the spirit of solidarity undergirding the ‘diversity of tactics’ approach.

This event sparked a lively debate at VIVO where the conversational temperature was high, but calming yet forceful interventions by Nicholson kept the event moving forward constructively. ‘The dialogue we created didn’t come to a resolution based on Habermasian rationality’, Perrin remarked, ‘but even when there were deep divides, people stayed in the room and continued the conversation’.³⁷ Months after the pie incident Eby dryly noted, ‘It began a conversation with groups that are concerned about how we make a better world. It began a conversation about tactics . . . and about the black-bloc tactic in particular and

³⁴ Doug McAdam, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, eds, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, New York 1996, p. 14.

³⁵ Foster and Grove, ‘Trespassers on the Soil’, p. 53.

³⁶ Robert Matas, ‘Olympics Protest’s Vandalism Denounced’, *Globe and Mail*, 15 February 2010.

³⁷ Personal interview, 18 August 2010.

whether or not it's actually helping move towards, from a civil-liberties perspective, a more democratic, equal and participatory kind of culture in Canada, or otherwise'. He said he learned a lesson: not to act as a legal observer and be perceived as a movement lawyer during the same episode of contention.³⁸

VIVO's Evening News forum helped bring to the surface the ever-present tension between direct-action activists and NGOs. Activists in Vancouver made clear this tension is not reducible to dichotomous camps, with 'the traditional parties and centralized campaigns' on one side and 'the new movements organized in horizontal networks' on the other.³⁹ Evening News offered a safe space where decisive issues could be raised, questions with significance that extends forward to London 2012 and beyond. Does a 'diversity of tactics' approach socialize an alibi for property destruction? Does it dull the knife-edge of direct action's effectiveness? Does it alienate bystander publics? Does it pave a path for symbolic solidarity? Does it allow the media to slide into the well-worn grooves of dissident denunciation? Has it ossified into a hollow catchphrase that distracts activists? Does a focus on diversity of tactics mean we are not talking about strategies anymore? Do debates over tactics need to happen during the episode of contention or should they happen afterwards? Do hyper-masculinist shout-downs—or belligerent pie-smashing—create a fracture point that the state can take advantage of, by having macho infiltrators enter movements as agent provocateurs, since what some in Vancouver were calling 'the angry anarchist white boys' are relatively easy to emulate?

Since the days of Samaranch, TV broadcasting revenues have provided the ocean of money that floats the IOC's ship. An exemplary case of the alternative media strategies which emerged from the anti-Olympics movement was the Vancouver Media Co-op. Born from the Olympic Resistance Network's Media and Communications Committee, the VMC had the radical-media machine firing on all cylinders, providing the public with up-to-date information, politically driven art and all the news 'unfit to print' in the corporate media. Reader-owned, the VMC runs on a revenue model in which sustainers chip in between \$5 and \$20 per month. During the Games, the VMC mobilized alternative versions of

³⁸ Personal interview, 6 August 2010.

³⁹ Michael Hardt, 'Today's Bandung?', NLR 14, March–April 2001, pp. 115–6.

the Olympics, producing two segments for *Democracy Now!*—the leading community media outfit in the US—and a broadsheet called *Balaclava!* which has continued to the present.

But Dawn Paley of the VMC pointed out that media activists cannot confine their work to alternative media: while for Paley mainstream media are ‘SQUM’—status-quo media—they set the agenda and so cannot be ignored. Yet social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Flickr provide no real alternative to the somnambulistic mainstream. Though the received wisdom is that such media enable people to create content and document experience in lateral fashion—and they may help generate numbers at protest events—for the VMC’s Franklin López, these primarily ad- and event-driven services are the ‘social-media mafia’. López used YouTube during the Games, but found that a number of VMC videos were swiftly removed: ‘During the Olympics it was almost as if they had it automated to take down anything the IOC didn’t like’.⁴⁰ The VMC had neither the resources nor the time to fight this censorship. Well aware of such problems, activists in Vancouver placed op-eds in newspapers like the *Vancouver Sun* and appeared as sources in numerous outlets, offering quotes that helped educate the public about why they were protesting.

Reinvigorating resistance

Having poured \$8 billion-plus into the 2010 Winter Olympics, Canadian officials have announced severe budget cuts. Funding for the arts was slashed drastically, leading to the BC Arts Council Chairwoman’s abrupt resignation in August 2010. The Vancouver School Board announced an \$18 million funding shortfall for the 2010–11 school year, which translated into reduced music programmes and hundreds of Vancouver teachers receiving pink slips. Adding insult to injury, the province made receiving money from its ‘2010 Sports and Arts Legacy Fund’ contingent on participating in ‘Spirit Festivals’ designed to fabricate a positive Olympic legacy.⁴¹ Vancouver got a new and much-needed train service, connecting downtown to Richmond and the airport; but it also acquired a massive debt. As activist Am Johal put it, ‘the Olympics are a corporate

⁴⁰ Personal interview, 18 August 2010.

⁴¹ Peter Birnie and Tiffany Crawford, ‘“Discouraged” Chairwoman Quits Over Lack of Provincial Support’, *Vancouver Sun*, 19 August 2010; ‘School Board Riled Over Budget Review’, CBC, 14 April 2010; Rod Mickleburgh, ‘BC Arts Groups Blast Funding Cuts’, *Globe and Mail*, 12 July 2010.

franchise that you buy with public money'.⁴² In addition, the City used its loan guarantees to rescue developers who went belly up while the Olympic Village was only half built. Those who have tried to follow the Olympic money have been stymied at every turn. The complex patchwork of public–private partnerships screams out for an audit, but neither the Auditor General of British Columbia nor the Canadian Auditor General have been granted access to VANOC's books.

The government also reneged on promises—ostensibly because of fiscal exigency—to convert a sizeable swathe of the Olympic Village along the False Creek inlet into social housing. The athletes' living quarters were supposed to be the crown jewel of the social sustainability promise, but the city government prioritized market rental units instead.⁴³ The building of the Olympic Village has been described as 'an aluminium-clad symbol of spatial injustice' that:

marks the long reterritorialization of the waterfront as an elite space, burying its working-class history deeper into the mud to have the waterfront transformation emerge as a real-estate gamble that hopes to shape the city's future yet again.⁴⁴

On 15 May 2010, activists capitalized on widespread disgruntlement with the government's *volte face* to organize a post-Olympics protest, 'False Promises on False Creek'. Campaigners descended on the condo site during the grand opening and disrupted sales for the day. Dissident citizens from groups like Van.Act!, who had been radicalized by the anti-Olympics round of contention, were joined by activists from Streams of Justice, the Power of Women Group, the Citywide Housing Coalition and the Impact on Community Coalition. Again, this was not the emergence of a single movement but, as Diewert put it, 'a sense of solidarity or camaraderie so when a group calls for an action, then others come along and participate'.

The anti-Olympics movement has reinvigorated activist circles. Diewert points to a 'deepened sense of trust' emerging from actions like the Olympic Tent Village, which 'has led to a strengthening of communities of resistance' and 'a deeper appreciation of the collective wisdom of

⁴² Personal interview, 5 February 2010.

⁴³ 'Olympic Village Social Housing Units Still Empty', CBC, 13 August 2010.

⁴⁴ Jeff Derksen, 'Art and Cities during Mega-Events', *Camera Austria* 111, September 2010, pp. 60–1.

people'. The Olympics undoubtedly gave longtime Vancouver activists a positive boost and refreshed the ranks with energetic younger protesters who were given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to soar over the hurdles that might have been present during 'normal' political times. As Franklin López put it, 'it's a really special time to be in Vancouver'. Poet-activist Reg Johanson chimed in, 'if the goal of the anti-Olympics convergence was to get people more involved in their activism, then that happened'; poet Mercedes Eng adding, 'and it was really, really, really fun'. Now the fun is shifting to London for the Summer Games of 2012.

Walking along east Hastings Street in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver one crisp January morning in 2010, I came across a perplexing set of white panels on the outer flank of the refurbished Woodward's building. The panels featured an explosion of repudiation: stark, black-lettered phrases like "hell no", "i said no", "no bloody way", and "no way josé". Four placards simply read "no".