

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

HELEN JEFFERSON LENSKEYJ, *The Best Olympics Ever? Social Impacts of Sydney 2000*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, x + 236 p., Index.

There is no longer any doubt that the Olympic Games are simply athletes competing against each other. As Lenskyj pointed out in her first book, *Inside The Olympic Industry*, and has been pointed out by others as well, the Olympics has become a complex multi faceted operation, and the marketing of Olympic athletes as well as the operation of the International Olympic Committee have been the subject of much debate and criticism. The nature of the modern Olympics is such that it is more than a newsworthy event that happens every four years as Olympic issues and controversies are part of the news almost on a daily basis.

The conception of the Olympics as more than sport has meant that the analysis of the Olympics has moved beyond those interested in sport performance. For example, there are economic, social, urban, and political impacts that require careful analysis. Lenskyj's latest book gives us a broader sense of how far reaching the Olympics is in touching so many elements of life from labour issues to the environment, indirect costs and not just indirect benefits, and even legislation to control public behavior. Her case study is the 2000 Games in Sydney, Australia which she followed over a ten year period from the bid phase to the actual Games themselves.

There are three distinctive features to her analysis. First, it is framed by the presupposition that the Olympic industry is arrogant, lacks transparency, and is not accountable and therefore does not conform to the principles of participatory democracy which is the goal against which it should be measured. Second, a major theme is that the goal of the Olympics is to make the world safe for global capital which is demonstrated by the sponsorship arrangements with multi national corporations whose practices and use of the Olympics then become fair game for criticism themselves. Third, the Olympic media machine attempts to dupe the general public by creating an image of a "problem free" Olympics by mystifying and depoliticizing what is very much an ideological process and event. These assumptions then serve as the foundation for what could be termed a "critical analysis."

The result is a book which takes a radical perspective. The author states upfront that she is a "radical feminist scholar" and that her analysis does

not follow traditional scholarship or pretend to be comprehensive or balanced. She does not deny that the Olympics might have had some positive outcomes but that that is not her purpose. Instead her goal is to disclose what was suppressed and to counter the imbalance of the public relations information provided by the Olympic industry. She also acknowledges that she was a member of the Steering Committee of the Toronto Bread Not Circuses Coalition and that she was an active participant in the Anti Olympic Alliance in Australia. All of these disclosures make it clear that this book represents a particular point of view.

What I found most useful about this book was that it systematically tried to present the positions of those who might not otherwise be heard. It is true that there is a political will to make the Olympics a highly successful event as reflected in the goal to be declared the “best Olympics ever.” But beyond that, this book is really mistitled. Instead, the book is really about the underside of the Olympics or better yet, resistance activities at the Sydney Olympics. It was fascinating to read about the wide range of activities that either would not have been reported in the media or have only been reported in brief such as the Mock Olympics, the Alternative Opening Ceremonies, the Torch protest, the Hemp Olympix, the Alternative Media Centre, cyber humour, or television satire that were strong indicators of Olympic resistance. It was interesting to learn about many of the counter organizations involved such as the Anti Olympic Alliance, the Olympic Impact Coalition, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, or Rentwatchers, and many more represented in a sometimes confusing list of acronyms.

The stance which this book takes ensures that it will play an important role in the literature on the Olympic movement. On the other hand, the reader is repeatedly confronted with questions about the adequacy of what is presented in terms of understanding the full story. For example, the displacement and gentrification which occurred in Homebush Bay is acknowledged to be more complex than just blaming the Olympics and yet there is no systematic research presented that evaluates or sorts out these outcomes. Similarly, the relationship between anti globalization protest and Olympic protest could have been analyzed using the literature on protest movements so that we could tie these resistance movements together more carefully. As a participant, it was often difficult for the author to obtain the distance necessary to do this kind of analysis.

Blaming the Olympics for everything negative or only looking for negatives sometimes produces an imbalanced picture. Hopefully the kind of argument which Lenskyj presents can continue to sensitize us to issues that are too easily swept under the table and forgotten, but it should not detract from our attempts to provide a more balanced comprehensive picture of how and why the Olympics both evolves and survives.

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