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ARTICLE

# Mega-events and the minor

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**Abstract**

Mega-events like the Olympics and the football World Cups remain popular around the globe, regardless of their record of damaging host cities and societies. In parallel, research on mega-events continues to grow across a range of disciplines, including geography. Much of this literature remains fixed at global levels of analysis. In this light, mega-events suffer from a double problem: their planning and articulation too often cause harm to cities and societies and, simultaneously, research on mega-events focuses too much on the macro. This paper endeavours to address both problems by proposing to make sense of mega-events by thinking through the minor. This concern valorises micro scales and marginalised people, those who most often lose during mega-event hosting. The paper argues that geographers are uniquely positioned to conduct nuanced mega-event research across a globally diverse range of political-economic contexts, and calls for more geographers to contribute to this project in a move towards a critical geography of mega-events.

**KEYWORDS**

exclusions, mega-events, micropolitics, minor theory, Olympics

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Mega-events are a regular feature of modernity, gathering huge audiences from around the globe to watch the world's top athletes. While the study of sport is valuable in its own right, mega-events are important for research because they are an inflection point for global processes of development, accumulation and geopolitical signalling, while simultaneously providing an exceptional view into the political, economic and social functioning of a host society. They are global events that are assembled locally, and have inspired a growing body of work on their economics (Fett, 2020; Müller et al., 2022), political dimensions (Horne, 2017; Koch, 2017), planning and governance (Raco et al., 2018), urban impacts (Wolfe et al., 2022), ecological costs (Karamichas, 2013) and protest movements (Dart & Wagg, 2016).

This paper identifies a lack in the interdisciplinary literature on mega-events, and posits that geographers are uniquely positioned to ameliorate it. Since mega-events are by definition *mega*—oversized in space and spectacular in time—they tend to inspire research at similarly grand scales (see Byers et al., 2020; Cerezo-Esteve et al., 2022). Subsequently there is a relative oversight in the literature regarding the inclusion and analysis of the small and the intimate, just as there is a tendency to focus only on the preparations and the event, and then move on once the global spotlight disappears. This is

particularly problematic given the propensity for mega-events to inflict damage on the most vulnerable elements of a host society, regardless of where in the world they take place (Duignan et al., 2019; Gruneau & Horne, 2016).

In this light, the paper argues for more attention to the micro in mega-events, particularly the implications for individuals, neighbourhoods and communities in the host city. It is crucial to explore beneath the spectacular surface of the mega-event and investigate the marginalisations and exclusions tied to hosting. To do so, the paper suggests working through minor thinking both to perceive and to make sense of the small in context with larger developments. Reframing the mega to take stock of the minor encourages more nuanced scholarship and has implications for mega-events research in geography and beyond.

## 2 | MEGA-EVENTS AND THE GEOGRAPHIES OF SPORT

Mega-events are short-term gigantic spectacles of sport or culture that travel the globe, cost and generate fortunes, reach audiences around the world, and have significant impacts on host cities and societies (Müller, 2015). They are also political, functioning at scales from the global to the urban and the individual (Bairner et al., 2017; Lauermann, 2019). Mega-events remain popular worldwide, even as they continue to damage host cities and societies despite periodic efforts at reform (Pielke, 2014; Wolfe, 2023). Regardless of where and when they take place, the long-standing tendency of mega-events remains: 'An already rich minority benefit a great deal, but the poor and marginal tend to become poorer and more marginal' (Short, 2004, p. 17).

At the heart of the most prestigious mega-events is sport, and across the social sciences, there have been periodic efforts to make sense of sport beyond the game. Much of this work stems from Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (2014), framing sport as a cultural phenomenon of leisure, offering respite from the quotidian challenges of social and economic reproduction. This conceptual foundation begat a critical sociology of sport, grounded primarily in an analysis of power (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002b). This sociology is oriented in a relevant historiography; a tradition of critical ethnography; and a cautious affinity towards investigative journalism that penetrates guarded areas and uncovers secrets (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002a). These approaches to the sociology of sport (Giulianotti, 2015) contributed significantly to geographers working on mega-events (Gaffney et al., 2018).

Other scholarship centres mega-events as a research object on its own (Horne & Whannel, 2016; Lenskyj & Wagg, 2012). This work focuses on issues tied to hosting, such as the challenges of governance (Frawley, 2016), the pitfalls of sustainable development (McCollough et al., 2022), and the so-called legacies of hosting (Holt & Ruta, 2015; Leopkey & Parent, 2012). Despite this diversity, much of this scholarship tends to privilege larger levels of analysis, fixed at the global, the national or the urban. In this light, synecdoche is a persistent problem and too often mega-event scholarship presents a host nation or city as unified and homogenous singularity. This is dangerous reductionism, particularly given the tendency of mega-events to inflict harm at the level of the neighbourhood and the individual.

In this context, geographers have much to contribute. With few exceptions, sports geography has been relatively underappreciated as a subdiscipline within human geography (Koch, 2018; Wise, 2015). Acknowledging the relative reticence of geographers to engage with sport, Jansson and Koch (2017) advance an agenda for a critical geography of sport, focusing primarily on intersections with nationalism, popular resistance, neoliberalism, and race, ethnicity and gender. Wise and Kohe (2020) see sports geography as concerned with the impact of sport on society, making meaning in space and place, while Hall and Lin (2024) address the pedagogical possibilities. In all this, the focus is more on the geographies of sport writ large, rather than what could be called the subdiscipline of critical mega-event geographies, though these engagements offer fruitful ideas for future research.

This delineation between sport and mega-events is not pedantic. A critical geography of sport can focus on any space, scale or temporality; whereas mega-events have special characteristics and are uniquely spectacular, oversized and temporary—though they leave durable after-effects. These mega-event specificities open up avenues for exceptional developments that affect host cities and societies in ways that diverge from 'ordinary' sport. They require a related but different sort of attention, and an approach that can appreciate their unique features.

Koch (2023) proposes the methodological tool of 'event ethnography' as a specialised form of political ethnography, exploring questions of power and politics brought to light during the specific conditions of an event space and time. Koch's approach can be applied to events of any size or stature, such as conferences or festivals, and not only mega-events. This broad understanding of what constitutes an event is advantageous, sidestepping definitional debates of what exactly makes an event 'mega'. Notably, however, event ethnography takes the *event itself* as the research object, rather than examining the impacts that the event engenders on the host city and society. This is an important distinction,

given the tendency for mega-events to affect social and material landscapes beyond the event. As such, an attention to these impacts requires a different focus. Along these lines, Wise (2017) advocates for the value of ethnographic methods to bring attention to local voices. While this sensitivity is crucial, this approach also elides the specificities inherent to mega-events.

On this foundation, this paper suggests that mega-events be understood as research objects in their own right, with unique multiscalar, sociospatial and temporal characteristics. Here, an attention to the micro is necessary, given the tendency of mega-events to harm the marginal and most vulnerable. The Anglo-American academy needs more attention to these exclusions. At the same time, the larger developments at play in municipal, regional, national and international contexts should not be ignored. This paper argues that geographers can contribute to the project of highlighting and potentially ameliorating deleterious mega-event outcomes by employing the discipline's sociospatial sensitivities. Here, this move begins with minor thinking.

## 3 | MINOR THINKING FOR THE MARGINAL AND THE MICRO

Thinking through the minor is, among many other things, a way to make sense of exclusions (Katz, 1996). It is a way of theorising that is based on difference—different ways of knowing and doing—but also endeavours to transcend the limitations of binary thinking or the limited dichotomies into which so much of modern life is crammed (Katz, 1996, p. 488). The minor is a sensitivity to the fluidities, subjectivities and messiness of everyday life (Katz, 2017), but engaging a minor register does not mean ignoring larger levels of analysis. Rather, a minor approach spotlights the small and seemingly mundane, and in so doing unpacks political developments at multiple scales without relying only on the representations of the powerful (Barry, 2017; Jellis & Gerlach, 2017).

One of the hallmarks of mega-events is an interruption to ordinary life, where hosting engenders a state of exception and unleashes particular social and material effects in the host city and society (Gogishvili, 2018; Gray & Porter, 2015; Müller, 2017). A minor sensitivity is valuable because it helps make sense of interruptions and ruptures (Secor & Linz, 2017), and brings to light unexpected inclusions, exclusions and marginalities—all necessary ingredients in building a fuller picture of what hosting does to cities and societies. To be sure, it is not entirely novel even in mega-event geography to focus on sociospatial exclusions (e.g. Gaffney, 2016; Wolfe, 2020), but the focus here is specifically on engaging minor thinking to do so, which brings different registers to light.

The minor entails a relational way of working that is sensitive to marginalities and exclusions, but also aware of the political immediacy inherent in moments that might otherwise be dismissed as mundane. It is conditioned by the Deleuzian understanding that 'everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a *macropolitics* and a *micropolitics*' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 249). This micropolitics is crucial for understanding mega-events, where dramatic effects on individual lives are often eclipsed by spectacle, grandeur, discourses of national importance, and the imperatives of international prestige. If the major slips into synecdoche and abstraction, thinking through the minor is a way of opening spaces of ambiguity or betweenness—fundamentally an emancipatory move to imagine and enact different ways of living (Katz, 2017, p. 597). The minor often incorporates an ethnographic sensibility, but it also transcends categorisation as an ethnographic method because of this dedication to creating new and better forms of theory, knowledge production and social relations. It is more than practice—the minor is also a project.

Yet valorising the marginal and the micro should not reify binaries, dichotomies or hierarchies in the analysis of a mega-event. Rather, the approach advocated here is built on an understanding that macro and micro, central and marginal, major and minor are mutually constitutive and inextricable (Jellis & Gerlach, 2017). All are required to build a fuller and more nuanced exploration of what mega-events do to cities and societies. Ultimately, thinking mega-events through the minor reveals how typical, majoritarian interpretations are incomplete. Instead, the minor encourages research that is attuned to the everyday and the seemingly mundane within the smaller registers in a host city, and that is sensitive to moments of rupture, interruption and betweenness. The goal is to recast the textures of mega-event research, building a richer understanding of the totality of mega-events inclusive of macro and micro, that takes exclusions into account, and that might then contribute to better outcomes.

To demonstrate one approach to thinking mega-events through the minor, the paper turns now to an autoethnographic exploration in thick description of the preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. Many studies explain Sochi 2014 through the major lens of President Putin and great nation geopolitics (see Gronskaya & Makarychev, 2014; Orttung & Zhemukhov, 2017). Instead, looking at Sochi with a minor eye (Faria, 2017) renders visible different varieties of exclusions tied to developments at larger scales, all brought to bear in the ruptures of hosting.

## 4 | AUTHORITARIAN TEA IN SOCHI 2014

It is 2012, and there are two epicentres for Olympic construction in Sochi: two clusters of sports venues sited about 40 km apart, one nestled in a Caucasus Mountain valley and the other on the coast of the Black Sea. Passing the Coastal Cluster, I see the shells of new stadiums rise like ribcages from monumental carcasses on the shore. This used to be an undeveloped beach, far from the boardwalks with their souvenir stands and sunburned tourists. The territory was raw and unmanaged. Just up from the water, there used to stand a warren of handmade shacks—a semi-informal settlement with a single water pump to share. Once I spent the night there, struck by the contrast of the beach and the corrugated asbestos roofs. None of it remains.

Other nodes of Olympic construction in Sochi are less dramatic than the venues. A new airport and train station replaced the Stalin-era neoclassical architecture with a glassy post-Soviet aesthetic that is all at once impressive and kitschy. My friend called it 'porno-chic'. Almost everywhere you look, the city is sprouting new shopping malls and tourist attractions, new hotels and high-rises and housing developments. There are new and expanded highways, repaved roads, and a commuter rail running between the mountains and the coast. Powdery brown dust from the relentless construction covers everything. You can smell it and taste it and feel it in your lungs (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1** A mother and daughter walk in a formerly quiet neighbourhood in Sochi, under the shadow of a highway newly built for the 2014 Winter Olympics (photo: author).

I am visiting a friend in one of Sochi's sub-cities. Olya—not her real name of course—is an ecologist. She works with the Russian Geographic Society, which serves as the affiliation for her ecological activism. Sochi is sited largely within a National Park and a Biosphere Reserve, both of which are protected under national and international law. Much of the construction underway for the Olympics is taking place in protected areas. There are endangered species at risk of extinction. The devastation is immense, catastrophic and illegal. My friend is part of a group trying to catalogue it.

Why catalogue? Why not try to stop? I ask this over tea in her kitchen. Olya explains there are two reasons. First, the pace of construction/destruction is unimaginable. 'We can't even share our findings', she says. 'By the time we're ready to publish, the areas we've catalogued as in danger have already been destroyed. We speed up and try once more, but it happens again. We can't keep up'.

The second reason is because of the Federal Security Service, the FSB. 'Once a week I have a meeting with my agent', she says casually. Noting my surprise, she smiles and lays it on a little. 'Sure, he usually sits right where you are now'. I learn that the agent wants to keep abreast of what she and the group are doing. After she explains what endangered areas they're trying to catalogue and publish on this week, he asks if they're planning any protests. No protests, no. He smiles and leaves. A week later, he arranges another visit.

At the time, what struck me in that conversation was not just the intimate surveillance, but actually how blasé Olya seemed. She was more piqued by my reactions than the fact of hosting weekly visits from a dedicated FSB agent. What strikes me now is how this interaction with state security prefigured the political closures that would come nationwide in the next decade, shifting Russia from semi-authoritarian functioning to what is realistically a totalitarian configuration (Gel'man, 2015; Gessen, 2017).

Hosting the Olympics played a crucial role in this transformation. The Russia that bid for the Olympics in 2006–2007 was a different country than the Russia that hosted in 2014. At bid time, the discourse both domestically and internationally was on building stronger links with the West, and even President Putin spoke about inviting the international community to look at Russia with fresh eyes (Putin, 2007). As the 1964 Tokyo Olympics helped smooth the entry of a different Japan onto the world stage (Abel, 2012), so too did Russian organisers hope to use Sochi 2014 to introduce a new, modern and open Russia to the world, fully recovered from the Soviet collapse and ready for improved partnership with the West (Alekseyeva, 2014). Results were mixed. In Sochi, residents were more concerned with infrastructural promises and the disruptions to daily life; nationally, Russians largely approved of the Games and the president's handling of them; but internationally, any potential soft power gains were destroyed by the state's hard power incursions into eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea (Wolfe, 2016). Matters have not improved in the years since.

The Russia that now stifles dissent, punishes protest, attacks all of Ukraine, and threatens the globe with nuclear war, was first introduced in Sochi. Olya and her activist friends were prevented from protest by a system of surveillance and control that relies on information technology deployed and tested for the security of Sochi 2014, and then spread to the host cities for the 2018 men's football World Cup (Soldatov & Borogan, 2015). But there is more to the story than simply marrying the internet to Soviet-era secret police practices. Olya's nonchalant attitude to the agent reveals how well she understood the spaces for movement within the semi-authoritarian configurations of the time. She perceived the demarcation of the authoritarian Red Line (Glasius et al., 2018) and stayed on the safe side of it. The authorities did not care if her group collected and even published information about the crimes of Olympic construction. What mattered was the public face. Information and speech were allowed; protest was not.

The Red Line shifts, though. In the years since Sochi, the spaces for movement have grown dramatically smaller. After the Olympics, one of Olya's colleagues asked about the visible waste problem in the city. He was taken in and questioned for hours. Another colleague tried to write about a private mansion newly built in the national forest. He was sent to prison. A third fled the country. The Red Line shifted and the spaces for movement grew ever smaller. After each tightening, Olya grew smaller herself. She rationalised the repression of her friends: one was too bold, the other too stupid, a third simply unlucky. Soon she stopped speaking politically. By the time of the 2018 men's football World Cup, she alienated herself entirely from activism. When the Russian state launched the full-scale war against Ukraine, she did not protest. This is terrible, of course, she explained over text, 'but matters are complicated'.

Even this is not the full story. On the beach, the Coastal Cluster of Olympic venues is now surrounded by new hotels, malls, restaurants and housing. Olympysky Prospekt—sited on the beach where the shacks used to be—runs between an amusement park and a federally-funded educational centre for gifted children. The Mountain Cluster is the same: an entirely new city has risen in the valley, buzzing with activity, and no one asks about the environment—at least not out loud. Sochi is flooded with tourists both summer and winter. The hotels are full and the city has become an economic model for the country, though the benefits are uneven (Golubchikov & Wolfe, 2020). The effects are not limited to this region. In far-flung parts of Russia, people tell me how they dream of moving to Sochi and changing their lives.

## 5 | CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF MEGA-EVENTS

Examining Sochi 2014 through the minor unsettles the traditional narratives about mega-events, whether critical or hagiographic. The top-down Moscow-led planning that remade Sochi for the Olympics transformed the city and region into an economic success and a dream destination for many, but this came at an extremely high cost. Many irreplaceable aspects of the city and surrounding natural environment were annihilated. This came alongside a political reconfiguration that curtailed and then eliminated spaces for independence and opposition. These are brutal and banal developments in the life of the country, with mega-events as midwife.

Mega-event research is transdisciplinary and rich, but it suffers from a tendency to focus on the grand and the global. A major lens on Sochi 2014 focuses on the geopolitical, the international stage, and the great power aspirations of the Russian president, but these abstractions render invisible the human-level impacts of hosting. Instead, thinking through the minor highlights the small and the seemingly mundane, and explores ruptures and exclusions in a different range of registers, but remains cognisant of the co-constitutive relationship with larger developments, and never relies on the representations of the powerful (Katz, 2017). Sochi 2014 through the minor shows not just how the Olympics remade the city and with what effects, but also the processes of authoritarian closure and the implications on everyday life.

Geographers are uniquely positioned for this sensitive sociospatial work, and geographers are needed in the wider literature on mega-events. There is growing interest in a critical geography of sport, oriented primarily on power, nationalism, resistance and gender (Jansson & Koch, 2017; Koch, 2017). Inhabiting a corner of that field, this paper encourages geographers to participate in what could be called the subdiscipline of a critical geography of mega-events. Tracing its lineage to the sociology of sport, sports geography and the critical geography of sport, this attention to mega-events requires different sensitivities and approaches, since mega-events are unique research objects with particular spatial and temporal features. Minor theory opens up new understandings of how inequalities and privileges in a host city are exacerbated or diminished by mega-events, in the preparatory phase, during the event itself, and after the Games have passed. This approach, inclusive of the individual and the global, represents a significant potential contribution to the study of mega-events that geographers should not ignore.

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