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Talking about the ‘rotten fruits’ of Rio 2016: framing mega-event legacies

Abstract

Legacy has become a watchword of hosting mega-events in recent years, used to justify massive spending and far-reaching urban transformations. However, academic studies of legacy outcomes suggest there is only limited evidence for the efficacy of using mega-events to deliver broader policy goals. The discourse of legacy promulgated by the International Olympic Committee promotes a fantastical vision of the possibilities created by mega-events while obfuscating critical analyses of legacy. This paper explores legacy talk among a wholly different group – activists who have protested against the Olympic, specifically in Rio de Janeiro – based on interviews conducted two years after the Games as part of a broader ethnographic study. The positive connotations of legacy, even among these Olympic critics, places a straitjacket on conversation, leading activists to discuss specific legacy projects, at the expense of highlighting the very real harms of megaevent development, such as evictions, gentrification and militarization. As such, there is a need to deepen understanding that legacy encompasses all that is left behind after mega-events, not only the positive impacts.

Keywords: legacy, mega-events, Rio 2016, discourse, framing

Introduction

Speaking at the closing ceremony of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach proclaimed that “history will talk about a Rio de Janeiro before and a much better Rio de Janeiro after the Olympic Games” (IOC 2016). Despite this claim bearing a dubious relation to the evidence, the speech was broadcast live around the world through mass media outlets. In this way, powerful institutions like the IOC are able to set the terms of debate about contentious issues, with this framing playing an important role in the maintenance of hegemony. By focusing on the way oppositional activists talk about Olympic legacy, this article seeks to explore the extent to which space exists for critique within this dominant framing, with important implications for social movements both in sport and more widely. By understanding the ways in which dominant frames pervade into discourse surrounding legacy, we can better understand the likelihood of change and reform to the current model of mega-event hosting.

Claims of legacy have become a central part of hosting mega-events in the 21st Century (Thomson et al. 2018; Leopkey and Parent 2016; Preuss 2007). As mega-events like the Olympics have grown

exponentially, particularly following commercialisation and the influx of corporate sponsorship in the late 1980's, so has the need for justification of the massive public expenditure required to host the Games (Kassens-Noor et al 2015). While heritage has always been an important element of the Olympic Games, legacy has taken on broader importance in Olympic circles as a way of bridging the lofty ideals of the Games with the hard realities of the ballooning costs of hosting such events (MacAloon 2008). Mega-events have thereby come to be seen as catalysts for urban transformations, drawing on legacy as a tool for changing diverse elements of urban life, from mobility and policing to housing and leisure (Smith 2014; Preuss 2015).

Despite the prominence of such claims, a range of studies over several Olympic events show that many of the legacies claimed by supporters of mega-events are either short-term or never come into effect (Cohen and Watt 2017; Tomlinson 2016; Minnaert 2012). Alongside this, another body of literature shows that there are a great many negative impacts associated with mega-events, from public debt and militarization to evictions and gentrification (Talbot and Carter 2018; Zimbalist 2015; Kennelly 2015; Boykoff 2013; Toohey and Taylor 2012). These negative impacts are also legacies and should not be excluded from a clear-eyed analysis of the effects of hosting mega-events. While there is consensus among the academic literature that such negatives should be considered legacies (Kassens-Noor et al. 2015; Smith 2014; Preuss 2007), this paper argues that this academic appreciation of legacy is not widely shared outside of the ivory tower, and more work is needed in the public sphere to ensure negative consequences of hosting are part of legacy discussions.

Legitimate legacies

Discourses of development and legacy, as Hiller (2000) observes in relation to Cape Town's failed bid for the 2004 Olympics, serve to legitimate the hosting of mega-events. It is important to recognise that "legitimation is a *process* of normative evaluation" (Steffek 2009: 314 emphasis in original) through which legitimacy, the rightful use of authority which serves to generate compliance (see Barker 1990), emerges. This legitimation process is often contested in relation to mega-events. Millington and Darnell's (2014) analysis of online materials related to development and Rio 2016, for example, reveals a contestation between different forms development and modernity, between conceptualisations of modernity as condition versus representation. Similarly, Prouse (2012) argues, in relation to the favela pacification policy (see Barbassa 2017), that favelas are constructed in the popular imagination as threatening, legitimating violent state action, whereas residents contest this through challenging the focus on security and drawing attention to other priorities. In a similar and indeed related way, discourses of legacy serve to legitimise certain approaches to mega-event hosting and discussions of their impact.

Legacy, as I will demonstrate in this paper, holds a range of differing connotations, that is, socially constructed meanings beyond the primary denotation elucidated in the previous section. These connotations matter, as they inform the ways in which we feel and think about our social realities (Garza-Cuarón 1991). The words we use and the constructed meanings we attach to them provide “schemata for interpretation” (Goffman 1974: 21) of legacy promises and outcomes. The framing of issues in media reporting can be hugely influential on public opinions of contentious issues. Framing typically performs four functions: problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgement and remedy promotion (Entman 2007). In doing so, media framing serves to highlight certain aspects of events while obfuscating others, leading the reader to certain interpretations and solutions. The work of framing is not limited to journalists: rather, mass media provides a site in which framing contests occur (Gamson 2004) with powerful actors, including local governments and the IOC, using access to media to place emphasis on certain ‘problems’ to be solved in particular ways.

As such, the Foucauldian notion of power-knowledge is important here. Foucault (1977: 27) argues that power and knowledge are inextricably linked, such that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations”. The significant resources of the IOC and its local allies in government thus allows them to shape knowledge about legacy, promoting particular visions of neoliberal development (Ribeiro and Santos Júnior 2017) while generating an image of universal positivity. Media organisations have frequently been the subject of critique for a culture of media cheerleading around the Olympic Games (Lenskyj 2004; Boykoff 2013). In doing so, Olympic organisers are deploying their power to shape knowledge, or manufacture consent, to use Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) term. As I will argue in this paper, the notion of legacy is an important part of this knowledge, serving to legitimate forms of development that would otherwise be unfeasible and guide discussions of mega-event impacts towards positive projects and away from negative impacts.

Gaffney (2019: 267) bemoans the requirement for rapid assessments of legacy which follow the event almost directly, pointing out that the “constant drive for summary judgement on the part of the media and event organisers following the Games is so pervasive, self-congratulatory, and contradictory” when in some ways, mega-events only really begin at the final whistle. That said, the signs for positive legacies in Rio de Janeiro are not good – unsurprisingly, taking account of the lack of budgeting and planning for the majority of legacy proposals identified by Souza et al. (2014). Legacy plans for Rio 2016, listed by City Hall prior to the event (Prefeitura do Rio de Janeiro 2015), can be split into three broad areas: urban renewal, transport infrastructure and environment and sanitation. Urban renewal policies included transformation of areas of the city around Olympic venues and the renovation of the port, as well as ongoing pacification of favelas across the city (see

Barbassa 2017). Transport infrastructure upgrades across the city included a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) network in West Zone of the city, a light rail system for the downtown business district and a new Metro line to Barra, where the main Olympic Park was located. Finally, various upgrades in sewage treatment and environmental remediation were promised including the closure of the huge Gramacho landfill site. Other legacy promises were also made by Federal government including improving sporting participation (Souza et al. 2014), stimulating the tourism industry (Rocha 2016) and improving Brazil's image on the global stage (Rocha 2017).

Fitting within the existing trend of mega-events and sporting participation, Rio 2016 does not appear to have inspired increased sporting participation in the local population (Reis et al. 2017). Similarly in line with other mega-events, Rio 2016 left a legacy of debt for the hosts, having cost over twenty billion US dollars (Zimbalist 2017: 210) while providing no discernible increase in tourist numbers in return (Zimbalist 2017: 219). Even the normally reliable boosts to transport infrastructure have not had a positive impact, with cuts to bus lines elsewhere meaning urban mobility has suffered, even for accessing sport venues (Pereira 2018). This is partly due to the mega-event dynamic which forces cities to prioritise event outcomes over the needs of the local population (Kassens-Noor et al. 2018). Less tangible legacies, such as the perception of Brazil's place in the world, are harder to measure and although Brazilian diplomats interviewed by Rocha (2017) believed the event would change perception, no specific strategies or evidence were provided to support this claim.

Not only did Rio 2016 fail to capitalise on opportunities for these positive legacies, it actively harmed development in a range of ways. The linked impacts of favela evictions (Magalhaes 2013) and gentrification encouraged by pacification of favelas (Gaffney 2015) form two sides of the same coin, creating a process of formalization marked by state violence (Talbot and Carter 2018). While organisers in Rio made grand plans to address ecological issues through the Games, "a monstrous abyss emerged between Rio 2016's bold environmental promises and the on-the-ground reality" (Boykoff and Mascarenhas 2016). In sum, as Santos Júnior (2015: 31) puts it "the realization of sporting mega-events is associated with the diffusion of a new model of neoliberal market governance in host cities".

While there has been a great deal of research on mega-event legacies, the vast majority of this literature draws on discourses produced by mega-event organisers and boosters in the form of bid documents or interviews, even where these are critiqued (see for example Rocha 2017; Leopkey and Parent 2016; Girginov 2011). Where attention has been paid to contestation of legitimisation games around mega-event development, such as Millington and Darnell's (2014) research discussed above, this has often ignored grassroots activists, particularly in host locations where local activists do not

speak English as a first language. Alongside this, such research often occurs prior to the Games when legacy is a promise for the future, instead of post-Games where legacy should be happening. As such, just as scholars such as Lenskyj (2000), Boykoff (2014) and others have shone a light on the views and strategies of those critical of mega-events, there is a need to explore how this group conceptualise legacy, particularly after the event, which this paper seeks to explore.

Methodology

The discussions of legacy in this paper are drawn from a wider project examining activist responses to Rio 2016, particularly focussed around housing rights. This has involved 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil split into two periods, a year-long period from September 2015 to September 2016 and a two-month follow-up period in July and August 2018. Fieldwork consisted of observing activist events as well as the backstage planning, collecting data through informal conversations recorded in a field diary, supplemented by formal, semi-structured interviews with leading activists conducted in the follow-up fieldwork period. Seven of these interviews with activists were conducted, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes in length, covering a range of issues related to each interviewee's activism and views of the Olympic Games. Within these interviews, all activists were asked what they thought the legacy of the Olympic Games was¹. Discussions that followed this question form the backbone of this paper. All interviews were conducted in the language chosen by the activist before being transcribed and, where necessary, translated by the author. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model, which allows themes to be refined throughout the analysis process. These steps range from becoming familiar with the data and generating initial codes (such as failed transport projects), through searching for and refining themes to become more general (such as discussing failures), to naming themes and writing the report, where the example theme became 'legacy as defined by organisers'. Details of all activists quoted in this paper are given in Table 1 (for a more detailed discussion of the groups mentioned see Talbot and Carter 2018 and Talbot 2018).

Name	Activist Group(s)	Interview Language
Thainã de Medeiros	Meu Rio, Coletivo Papo Reto	Portuguese
Luiz Claudio Silva	Vila Autódromo, Museu das Remoções	Portuguese
Maria da Penha	Vila Autódromo, Museu das Remoções	Portuguese
Theresa Williamson	Catalytic Communities	English
Giselle Tanaka	Comitê Popular da Copa e Olimpíadas	Portuguese
Luiza de Andrade	Museu das Remoções	Portuguese
Orlando dos Santos Júnior	Comitê Popular da Copa e Olimpíadas	Portuguese

Table 1. Interviewees details

I conduct this ethnographic research explicitly, in Becker's (1967) terms, on the side of those protesting against the Olympic Games, following other scholars in the field (see Boykoff 2018). While this scholar-activist, or organic public sociologist (see Burawoy 2005), position is important to acknowledge, it does not compromise the rigour of scholarship. Indeed, my position as a critic of Olympic development stems from my engagement with academic literature regarding the impacts mega-events have on local populations, coupled with Becker's (1967) determination to represent the underdog, those left behind by mega-event led development. Such an approach is not uncommon in social movement research, where researchers tend to lean on the ethics of immediate reciprocity, giving some form of support in exchange for access (Gillan and Pickerill 2012). As such, readers should bear in mind that interviewees were discussing their views of legacy with someone they knew shared many of their criticisms of the event.

Talking about legacies

In this section, I will elucidate four themes drawn from the thematic analysis of interview data: legacy as a positive word, legacy as defined by organisers, challenges of 'proving' negative legacies, and when we talk about legacy. This will be followed by a discussion of these themes and their significance for mega-event legacies in practice.

Legacy as a positive word

The initial answers activists gave to the question about legacy were revealing. Many took an assumption that I wanted to know what was good about the mega-events, either explicitly stating this, or stating that there was no legacy:

In truth, there is no legacy. Because what is left behind, the legacy that stayed was a bankrupt State, a worse country. So it's not a legacy (Penha, interview)

I could say the negative legacy and the positive legacy, right? If you want, you want the positive legacy presumably, if there's anything good? (Williamson, interview)

It was nothing, right... social, financial, for all of society, except for the politicians, but even they are in prison (Andrade, interview)

I don't see [legacy] anywhere in this city. I see a mountain of concrete, in some places, and the practice of legacy should have happened, should have brought quality of life for people, it brought to opposite, it brought disgrace and destruction of families (Silva, interview)

The assumption that activists took, upon being asked about the legacy reveals the power of the word itself to shape our thinking. As these quotes illustrate, many of these people, all of whom spent a large portion of their time pointing out the problems created by the Olympic Games and in some cases directly lived those problems, initially assumed that legacy had to be positive. The notion that, as Penha stated, there is no legacy if everything is bad implies that all legacies have to be positive, in contravention to our academic definition of legacy, discussed above. This speaks to the power of the IOC and their local government and media allies in framing what we think of as a legacy: the word itself has been given a warm, fuzzy connotation that suggests it is an unalloyed positive.

Legacy as defined by organiser's

This powerful framing of legacy revealed itself in other ways, beyond viewing legacy as uniformly positive. Many activists' answers were guided by local government or organising committee priorities, even if they were critical of mega-events and legacies:

The only little legacy I find... was the BRT and Metro. It's a little legacy, because in truth this BRT, this Metro, they were already old projects, so they're not legacies (Penha, interview)

In the end everything went wrong, worse even than we said it would. Lots of unfinished buildings, buildings that won't be used for anything" (Tanaka, interview)

I think there was this idea for the middle and upper class of "ah, during the Olympics tourists will come and stimulate the economy, helping our Rio", but soon after came a crisis that I think is maybe unprecedented (Andrade, interview)

Penha talks about how the transport infrastructure improvements were pre-planned, so can't really be considered legacies, despite local government touting them as legacies. Tanaka points out that while a great deal of physical infrastructure was constructed for the Games, much of this infrastructure now either underused or unused. Andrade criticises the promises to bring tourism and stimulate the local economy, noting that this didn't really happen (see Zimbalist 2017). These are important and broadly accurate critiques of the failures of the governments' stated legacy objectives. However, this tendency to talk in terms of failures of legacy projects again highlights the importance of the framing work done by local governments and the IOC. Legacy remains their preserve, as legacy is conceptualised as the projects they plan to improve the city for residents, even where these projects are unsuccessful. However, this serves to omit discussion of whether these projects were well suited to local priorities and needs, as is often not the case (see Kassens-Noor et al. 2018). Perhaps the clearest example of this is Rio's transport legacy, where despite billions of reais invested

in new transport infrastructure, as mentioned by Penha, urban mobility has actually worsened as resident's travel needs differ greatly from Olympic guests (Pereira 2016).

Related to this speaking on terms defined by organisers was the paucity of criticism of missed opportunities, a common criticism of mega-events in academic debates about legacy (see Weed and Dowse 2009; Misener et al. 2015) and it would therefore seem a likely avenue for activists to critique the event. However, this kind of critique was only made by a couple of activists, somewhat implicitly:

[Vila Autódromo was] a community without militia, without traffickers, a community where you don't see shootouts, rape, assault, don't see people killing each other, as you see in many communities. It was a perfect community to be embraced by City Hall, and applied as how to really build a social legacy (Silva, interview)

There is a series of impacts that come from the economic crises the city is in, because I think the Olympics were also responsible, few people say this, but there is also a dimension related to the cost of this thing (Santos Júnior, interview)

In the case of Silva, he isn't discussing what could have been done instead of hosting the Olympics, but how the Games could have been organised differently to address social issues, not exacerbate them, based on the collaboratively developed Popular Plan for Vila Autódromo (AMPVA 2016). Such an approach tallies with scholarship on missed opportunities associated with mega-event legacy (Weed and Dose 2009; Misener et al. 2015). However, a broader conception of missed opportunities based on what could have been done had Rio not hosted the Olympics, was largely absent from the discussions, except for Santos Júnior' suggestion that cost of the Olympics is linked to the economic crisis and its multi-faceted impacts across the city, including healthcare, education and public security. But despite speaking about the failures of various legacy projects, activists rarely explicitly called into question the legitimacy of those projects by arguing for different approaches. This may be because with the event now in the past, alternative approaches are not now needed. Given their fundamentally hypothetical nature, missed opportunities can be difficult to conceptualise and communicate, although anti-Olympic activists elsewhere have successfully made use of the idea to argue against Olympic bids (see Dempsey and Zimbalist 2017).

Challenges of 'proving' negative legacies

While talk of failed legacy projects dominated the conversations, some activists discussed the active harms that had occurred as a result of hosting mega-events, which some may argue have only tenuous links to the hosting of the Olympic Games:

There's the hopelessness, in 2010, there was this palpable hope in the city that, you know, I had never experienced before, in Rio, and it influenced everybody... that was lost, and so whereas before people had gotten used to nothing, now people had grown expectations and hopes, and so now we're in a position in 2018 where those have been shattered and now we see crime rates through the roof (Williamson, interview)

We still have these rotten fruits from the Olympics and World Cup... the militarization is one of these, the federal intervention, the assassination of Marielle [Franco] are also part of this issue (Medeiros, interview)

It's a story marked by violence, a story associated with a project of urban and political restructuring of the city (Santos Júnior, interview)

For a variety of reasons, these critiques are hard to prove or disprove. Williamson's assertion that pervasive hopelessness is driving crime is based on her subjective analysis based on working with a range of community organizer around the city, not on any objective measurement of hope, making it difficult for this claim to gain traction in broader framing contests. Santos Júnior and Medeiros both point to concrete events and impacts, but their link to the Olympics is more tenuous: there are numerous other explanations to explain the impacts they point to, particularly the economic and political crises of the previous years. The challenge of evidencing these claims for activists reveals again the power of IOC framing. While intangible legacies, such as a change in mood among the populace, are hard to prove, they are routinely claimed as evidence of success by mega-event boosters. After the hosting of Rio 2016, the Brazilian Federal government (Portal Brasil 2016) hailed Brazilians "swapping a mood of pessimism for pride after the event", based on a single opinion poll and despite little evidence of this trend in the long term.

The degree to which certain issues can be traced back to mega-event hosting differs depending on who is making the claim. A reasonably straight line can be drawn from the Olympic Games to the assassination of Marielle Franco. Firstly, the Olympic Games meant the State of Rio de Janeiro (which is responsible for policing and security) was caught flat-footed by the economic crisis of 2014-15, unable to reduce costs because of the need to play host to the world's athletes (this is Santos Júnior's point, quoted in the previous section, which also applies to a range of other areas including healthcare and education). This led to the State declaring a financial emergency in June 2016 amid protests from public workers, including police and firefighters, that they were not being paid. The Federal government released emergency, short-term funds to support the State in an attempt to rescue the potential foreign policy benefits of hosting the mega-event. After the event, when these funds expired and the State was again facing bankruptcy, there was no emergency funding. As a

result of the bankruptcy, the Federal army was drafted in to the city of Rio de Janeiro in 2017 to support the police force, leading to an increase in the already astronomically high use of lethal force by authorities. Marielle Franco, a strident critic of this Federal intervention and the human rights violations linked to army occupations of favela communities, was then assassinated, seemingly for political reasons. That even the military intervention in Rio de Janeiro is rarely included in discussions of legacy, while the nomadic architecture of the Arena of the Future (discussed below) is hailed as huge success, further confirms the dominance of mega-event boosters in defining what counts as legacy.

When we talk about legacy

This is also influenced by when attention is paid to legacy by politicians and journalists. Discussions of legacy largely occur around the event itself, with limited attention given to legacy promises months and years after the event as both politicians and public move on:

Anywhere I go, whether the person is fighting for this candidate or that candidate, or is someone who doesn't vote, or wants to vote, fuck it, but everyone is talking about this subject, the rise of fascism, Bolsonaro, these things... World Cup and Olympics, I hardly hear anything (Medeiros, interview)

Discussions of legacy were largely absent from my observations of political meetings and debates around housing rights and evictions during the 2018 fieldwork as well. The subject of mega-events was only rarely brought up by anyone except myself. In a way, it almost seemed as if everyone had simply forgotten that the city hosted the Olympics two years prior, and moved on to new things (the only exception being the international airport, where Rio 2016 branded merchandising remained on sale). This may well be partly a consequence of the transfer of power in Rio's City Hall almost immediately after the Olympic closing ceremony in October 2016. With Olympic Mayor Eduardo Paes term-limited, his favoured candidate Pedro Paulo failed to reach the second round of voting in the election, meaning a major shift in the administration of the city, away from mega-events. Eventual winner Marcelo Crivella paid so little attention to Olympic legacy that his eight-page programme for government makes no mention of either legacy or the Olympics (Crivella Prefeito 2016 2016). Indeed, in 2018 Crivella stated that upon taking office "we found the government broke. The Olympic legacy was a real Olympic abandonmentⁱⁱ, a herd of white elephants that left only debts" (Cerqueira and Guimarães 2018), attempting to explain away his poor approval ratings.

Williamson, while thinking about her response to what the legacy left by mega-event was, noted that she'd "written about it, but it's been a couple of years". As part of her role, she spends time working with international journalists covering social issues in Rio and that she has not spent a great

deal of time thinking, talking and writing about legacy indicated a more general lack of engagement with notions of legacy across Brazilian civil society and among journalists. The practical management of legacy appears to have ground to a halt, with the much hailed Arena do Futuro, designed using nomadic architecture to be dismantled and used in constructing new schools, still in place due to a lack of funding to build the new schools (Castro and Mello 2017). In many ways, the Arena do Futuro sums up a broader pattern of Rio's legacy for the city: at the time of the Games, praise was lavished on the project by international media, but post-Games nothing has been done due to a lack of forward planning and exhausted finances.

Discussion

The ways we talk about legacy then, even among critics of mega-event led redevelopment, reflect a discourse of legacy that is constructed by host governments, local organising committees and ultimately the IOC. The ways in which the activists in this study spoke about legacy reflected the plans put in place by the event organisers, even when directly criticising these plans and their outcomes (or lack thereof). Indeed, for many, when asked what the legacy of the Olympics was, their thoughts turned to the limited positives that had come from the event, often then critiquing these as well. Even Santos Júnior, who spoke more directly about the negative impacts of the event began his answer by saying "I don't like the word legacy", preferring to talk about impacts and thereby avoiding the positive connotations of progress that come bound up with the term legacy. This suggests a disconnect in the way we as academics discuss legacy, as a range of both positive and negative impacts (Preuss 2007), with the way the term is used by wider publics.

Another disconnect comes on the notion of opportunity costs, often mentioned in academic discussions of legacy (see Weed and Dowse 2009; Misener et al. 2015). The activists interviewed in this study had ample opportunities to talk about opportunity costs, such as reports that hospitals were being denied funds as money had been spent on the Olympics during a healthcare crisis in December 2015, or cuts in the education budget leading to strikes in the lead up to the Olympics. Yet only Santos Júnior really came close to discussing these missed opportunities and the impact they had as legacies of the Games when he spoke about the cost of the Games being related to broader economic crises. Others, such as Silva, noted different approaches that could have been taken to hosting the Games, suggesting his favela community could have been supported to develop further as an example for the world of how to successfully develop informal communities. Opportunity costs are fundamentally hypothetical and counter-factual, presenting challenges in thinking through, articulating, and providing evidence for these opportunity costs. This may have led to their omission from discussions of legacy.

All this is particularly problematic given the scarcity of attention paid to the legacy after the event. While this may be due to political changes, meaning those responsible for the Games are no longer in office (indeed, many of them are in prison or awaiting trial on corruption charges [see Wickstrøm 2017]), this raises a broader question for policy in relation to mega-event legacy. Legacy, at least in the case of Rio 2016, seems to have been a political argument for before the event, not a policy prescription for afterwards. Thus, while Gaffney (2019) is absolutely correct to state that time is needed to see how the impacts of event will shape the future of the city and to criticise those who perform perfunctory assessments of legacy in the weeks and months after the event, this notion of legacy misses the reality of the way the word is deployed and used to legitimise the event, not to plan and secure lasting positive change.

The continued and pervasive framing of legacy as a universally positive notion, despite dubious evidence of positive impacts from a range of mega-events (Cohen and Watt 2017; Tomlinson 2016; Minnaert 2012), rests upon the power of the IOC, along with their local allies and corporate sponsors, to shape debates about their prized event. In essence, the legitimisation process for hosting these events takes place with a finger on the scales, pushing the idea of positive transformation of cities. The relative lack of critical journalism about the Olympics (see Boykoff 2013) means that despite the rhetoric not matching the reality, the idea of legacy as fundamentally positive is not tarnished. This is particularly the case with Rio 2016 – it was no surprise that shortly after the Games many of the international press who had made the city their home during its Olympic preparations moved on, with bureaus returning to São Paulo, Brasília or other Latin American cities (Michaels 2017).

As a result of this relative paucity of critical journalism, very few members of the general public are exposed to enough critical information about the Games to dispel the image projected by Olympic boosters, manufacturing consent (Herman and Chomsky 1988) for mega-events. Where critical journalism does exist (see for example Waldron 2018; Zirin 2014), it serves to create the necessary illusion of a balanced debate (Chomsky 1989). There may in fact have been an increase in critical journalism related to Rio's hosting of the Olympic Games, in part due to the myriad problems associated with the event (Bettine, Gutierrez and Graeff 2018). However, research has long shown that journalists are likely to be more critical of mega-events in the Global South (Manzenreiter 2010), where the object of critique is the host country, not the fundamentally flawed model of mega-event hosting (Dimeo and Kay 2004). This dilemma between assigning fault is reflected in the question posed by Gaffney (2019) – can we blame it on Rio? – who concludes that while Brazilian organisers deserve a share of the responsibility, a significant portion of blame also lies at the door of the IOC and their corporate sponsors who persist with a flawed model.

Reframing legacy

In light of this, a reframing of the notion of legacy is necessary if the term is to remain useful. The quote which opens this article, from IOC President Thomas Bach's speech at the closing ceremony for Rio 2016, reads like a bad joke when examining the evidence regarding legacies of the event. Yet it forms part of a powerful framing of legacy as a positive for host cities, illuminating the magical discourse identified by MacAloon (2008). Such discourse is promoted by the IOC and their various corporate and governmental supporters, clearly setting out legacy as a set of positive outcomes from hosting mega-events, often brought about through specific legacy projects. Such conceptualisations of legacy permeate, as this paper has shown, to Olympic critics, who tend to speak of legacy in the terms set by local organising committees, even when critiquing legacy projects. This contrasts with academic definitions of legacy, which clearly stipulate that legacy refers to the impact of hosting mega-events, both positive and negative. This framing thereby serves to obfuscate a clear-eyed analysis of the legacy of hosting mega-events. As has been shown throughout this article, discourses of legacy serve to legitimise the event prior to its occurrence, not to guide policy afterwards.

This poses a challenge for critical scholars: should we challenge the IOC's framing of legacy, or as Santos Júnior does, leave the terrain of legacy and prefer to talk about impacts? Given the latter would suggest withdrawing ourselves from a key aspect of mega-event hosting and an important part of the lexicon of Olympic events, this seems likely to be counter-productive in the long-term. What is required then is deeper public engagement by academics on the issue of legacy, going beyond traditional public sociology to work with local activist groups (see Boykoff 2018) and ensure that we consider both positive and negative legacies, but also that we consider all the impacts of a mega-event, not just those highlighted by local organising committees. There is also an important role for academics to play in fleshing out the complex terrain of opportunity costs, considering what could have been done instead. While challenging the dominant framing of legacy may seem an insurmountable battle, it remains important to contest the magical discourse of legacy which persists in IOC circles and ensure it is properly deployed and problematised in policy-making. More broadly, the ways in which powerful institutions like the IOC engage in framing contests to set the terms of debate, even among their critics, requires further exploration. In participating in these framing contests, such institutions are using their access to media to reinforce their own hegemony, rhetorically neutering the critique of contentious issues. If we are to move beyond this framing towards a clear-eyed analysis of these issues, sociologists need to deconstruct and challenge the obfuscation of inconvenient truths, both in the realm of sport and beyond.

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ⁱ The Portuguese word “legado” is a direct translation of legacy and is used in a comparable way, including in other contexts, such as a politician’s legacy. One activist, Thainã de Medeiros, was not asked this directly as the impact of the Games on the city came up organically from other aspects of our conversation, a consequence of the semi-structured interview research design.

ⁱⁱ The Portuguese word that is translated here as “abandonment” (largado) has become a common slang when referring to the Rio 2016 legacy (legado in Portuguese) due to the similarities between the words.