

# *SPACE MATTERS: THE 2010 WINTER OLYMPICS AND ITS DISCONTENTS*

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## **Abstract**

The history of the Olympic Games is fraught with racism, class privilege, and questionable leadership from the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In the modern era, the Olympics have generated an increasing scale of dissent. Activists challenging the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver adopted concertedly spatial strategies and tactics. Organizing around three main issues—indigenous rights, economic concerns, and civil liberties—they linked in solidarity with civil libertarians, human rights workers, and bystander publics. This article analyzes these activist actions through the lens of geographical theory, examining how the production of space, scale bending, and the calculated construction of discursive space helped anti-Olympics activists build camaraderie and foment a meaningful challenge to the Games that resonated with the general public. Activists in Vancouver were effective, and before the Olympics dock in London for the 2012 Summer Games, it makes sense to pause and reconsider their methods of dissident citizenship.

**Key words:** *activism, Olympics, dissent, space, scale, media*

## **El espacio es importante: Los Juegos Olímpicos de Invierno 2010 y sus conflictos**

### **Resumen**

La historia de los Juegos Olímpicos está llena de cuestiones de racismo y privilegios de clase, e incluye el controversial liderazgo del Comité Olímpico Internacional (COI). En la era moderna los Juegos han generado un creciente nivel de disenso. Lxs militantes que lucharon contra los Juegos de Invierno de 2010 en Vancouver adoptaron estrategias y tácticas espaciales explícitas. Organizadxs en tres temas principales (derechos indígenas, problemáticas económicas y libertades civiles), se vincularon con militantes por las libertades civiles, trabajadorxs por los derechos humanos y transeúntes. Este artículo analiza las acciones de lxs militantes desde la teoría geográfica, estudiando cómo la producción de espacio, el no respeto por las escalas existentes y la construcción discursiva de un espacio particular ayudó a los movimientos a generar simpatía y a constituirse en una amenaza significativa a los Juegos que se hizo eco en el público en general. Lxs militantes fueron efectivxs, y antes de que los Juegos lleguen a Londres en el 2012 sería bueno hacer una

pausa y reconsiderar sus métodos de ciudadanía disidente.

**Palabras clave:** Militancia, Juegos Olímpicos, disenso, espacio, escala, medios de comunicación masiva.

### The Olympics and Dissent

A full decade after the Battle in Seattle, social-movement activists and critical geographers are appraising the political topography of resistance, reassessing the socially produced spaces of dissent and the ways these spaces are shot through with conflict. Whenever supranational groups like the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the G8/G20 roll into a host city, activists spring into action (Mertes 2004). In recent years, the Olympic Games has emerged as an international mega-event that has generated a steadily increasing scale of dissent, despite the fact that Rule 51 in the International Olympic Committee's official charter outlaws activism: "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas." Such questionable regulations did not stop anti-Olympic activists in Vancouver who springboarded off the 2010 Winter Olympics to re-scale politics to their advantage.

Simultaneously, these dissident citizens sliced against the zeitgeist of deterritorialization whereby the "multitude" harnesses its "deterritorializing desire" as it struggles against Empire's domination. Instead, dissidents undercut the notion that "the strategy of local resistance misidentifies and thus masks the enemy" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 124, 45) and concertedly *re*-territorialized the struggle, foregrounding the production of space. In short, activists in Vancouver got their space on. At the same time, they exploded the dichotomous, either-or discussions around strategy and dispensed with the tired reform-versus-revolution narrative. During the 17-day party known as the 2010 Winter Olympics, activists did a whole lot that was right and effective, and before the Olympic Industrial Complex docks in London for the 2012 Summer Games, we'd do

well to pause and reconsider their concertedly spatial strategies, tactics, and actions.

"Sport as a collective experience crosses the social and political divisions of everyday life," notes Xu Guoqi (2008: 4), "and the study of it offers a unique window into larger historical processes. It is an effective vehicle for studying society-to-society, people-to-people, and culture-to-culture interactions." While this is true, international sports have also proven conducive to ramping up flag-flailing hyper-nationalism that all too often rears its head as rampant xenophobia. As George Orwell (1950: 152, 153-154) famously quipped, "international sporting contests lead to orgies of hatred." He added, "There cannot be much doubt that the whole thing is bound up with the rise of nationalism — that is, with the lunatic modern habit of identifying oneself with large power units and seeing everything in terms of competitive prestige."

Nevertheless, to some, protesting the Olympics is like mugging Mother Theresa—it's not only unseemly, but sacrilegious, too. In public opinion polls in the United States, for example, the Olympics earn high approval ratings, with three in four opining the Olympics have been successful in fulfilling its stated mission of "building a peaceful and better world through sports."<sup>1</sup> Public interest also runs high, with the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing drawing the biggest television audience in U.S. history (Hiestand 2008). Yet, upon closer scrutiny the Games' three-legged stool of ethics, politics, and economics has become increasingly wobbly in the modern era.

In fact, the history of the Olympics is fraught with racism, class privilege, and dubious leadership. It all started with Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics. In 1923, while addressing the 22<sup>nd</sup> IOC Session in Rome, Coubertin (2000: 498) dished up a hefty dose of colonialism-twined racism in pressing for African countries' admittance to the Olympic Games:

And perhaps it may appear premature to introduce the principal of sports competitions into a continent that is behind the times and among peoples still without elementary culture – and particularly presumptuous to expect this expansion to lead to a speeding up of the march of civilization in these countries. Let us think, however, for a moment, of what is troubling the African soul. Untapped forces – individual laziness and a sort of collective need for action – a thousand resentments, and a thousand jealousies of the white man and yet, at the same time, the wish to imitate him and thus share his privileges – the conflict between wishing to submit to discipline and to escape from it – and, in the midst of an innocent gentleness that is not without its charm, the sudden outburst of ancestral violence...these are just some features of these races to which the younger generation, which has in fact derived great benefit from sport, is turning its attention.

Coubertin went on to say sport might help Africans “calm down” since it “helps create order and clarify thought.” He concluded, “Let us not hesitate therefore to help Africa join in” the Olympics competition. The following decade Coubertin enthusiastically supported the groundwork Hitler and the Nazis had laid in advance of hosting the 1936 Games in Berlin. His admiration was shared by U.S.-born Avery Brundage, who in 1952 became the President of the IOC, a position he held until 1972. In an article titled “Brundage Extols Hitler’s Regime,” (1936) the *New York Times* reported the American Olympic Committee Chairman praising the Reich: “No country since ancient Greece has displayed a more truly national public interest in the Olympic spirit in general than you find in Germany.” He perorated, “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.” Brundage traveled to Germany where he drank wine from a historic goblet that previously had only been presented to

German leaders like Bismarck and Hitler (“Honor U.S. Olympic Heads” 1936). Later he defended Hitler, denying he had snubbed African-American gold-medal-winner Jesse Owens by refusing to shake his hand (“Denies Hitler Story” 1948).

For years a jaunty proxy for Cold War realpolitik, the Olympics have morphed into a full-throttle cornucopia for corporate capitalism. Juan Antonio Samaranch—the IOC chief during a sizable chunk of the neoliberal era (1980 to 2001)—played a pivotal role in this transition. The impenitent Falangist blended an autocratic leadership style with personal charm, stacking the IOC with sycophants who assisted in sacrificing the Games’ amateurism on the altar of profitability. By the time Samaranch passed the IOC baton to Belgian Count Jacques Rogge—an orthopedic surgeon with a penchant for yachts and rugby—multinational corporations sat squarely at the center of the Olympics spectacle. The contemporary Games are sponsored by business behemoths like GE, Panasonic, Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, marking the mega-event’s full-blown assimilation into the neoliberal fold, with sponsors stratified into “partners,” “supporters,” and “suppliers” (International Olympic Committee 2010).

On the other hand, modern-day five-ring devotees—and even some human rights advocates—argue that the light cast by the Olympic flame can spotlight the negative, anti-democratic aspects of host countries, thereby moving them a step closer to concerted ameliorating such conditions. For instance, many credited the 1988 Olympics in Seoul as jumpstarting momentum toward democracy in South Korea. Boosters of Beijing’s bid to host the 2008 Summer Games anted up a similar logic; Beijing’s Deputy Mayor Liu Jingmin told the *Washington Post* (Pan 2001: A18), “By applying for the Olympics, we want to promote not just the city’s development, but the development of society, including democracy and human rights.” Offering what the newspaper described as “a tantalizing promise,” Liu then went further: “If people have a target like the Olympics to strive for, it will help us establish a more just and harmonious society, a more

democratic society, and help integrate China into the world.”<sup>2</sup> Longtime IOC member Richard Pound (2008: 87) revealed the effectiveness of this approach. During the Olympic bidding process, such optimistic logic was an explicit element of China’s presentation to the IOC, with Chinese delegates peddling “a preemptive suggestion” that bestowing the Games to China “would result in even more media attention to the issue and likely faster evolution.” Pound disclosed, “It was an all-but-irresistible prospect for the IOC”—and Beijing was granted the bid. But the Beijing Olympics brought more of the same: social dislocation, the ‘cleansing’ of undesirable rabble, massive state subsidies, and burgeoning corporate profits. The repression even extended to the meant-to-be-feel-good Olympic torch relay as it passed through places as wide-ranging as Argentina, England, France, Japan, the United States, and Hong Kong where dissidents attempted to hammer a symbolic dent in the shimmering sports spectacle (Tang 2008). Radical sportswriter Dave Zirin (2007: 133) sums up the Olympics phenomenon as “a familiar script replayed every two years, with only the language changing.”

In Vancouver, activists organized around three main issues: indigenous rights, economic concerns, and civil liberties (Boykoff 2011). Due to British Columbia’s unique aboriginal history, treaties ceding indigenous land were few and far between; activists perpetually acknowledged that athletes were skiing the slopes and hitting the halfpipes on First Nations land. As aboriginal scholar Christine O’Bonsawin (2010: 152) noted, “The inclusion of colonial narratives has tacitly been enshrined in the Olympic formula... Such storylines position the subjugation and containment of indigenous peoples within national histories, thereby removing them in time and space from present-day realities.” Anti-Olympics activists thrust forth an alternative, historically anchored narrative, adopting the spatially rooted slogan “No Olympics on Stolen Native Land” as one of its central battle cries. On the economic front, Andy Merrifield’s (2006: 69-70, emphasis in original) description of the neoliberal city fits Vancouver like a spandex speedskating suit: “cities *themselves* have

become exchange values, lucre *in situ*, jostling with other exchange values (cities) nearby, competing with their neighbors to hustle some action.” Part of the “hustle” involved the ever-bulging costs of the Games, which skyrocketed from an estimated \$1 billion to \$8-to-\$10 billion. To be sure, the economic collapse of 2008 couldn’t have come at a worse time for Olympic organizers, but they had already made a habit of incessantly low-balling costs. The Canadian state doled out \$1 billion—up from an initial estimate of \$175 million—to feed what Neil Smith and Deborah Cowen (2010: 38) have called “the intensified *weaponization* of social control.” The Games also accelerated the militarization of everyday life, with Vancouver assuming the pallor of Beijing 2.0. Vancouver-based activist Harsha Walia (2010a) described it as “an encroaching police and surveillance state.” The City of Vancouver purchased a Medium-Range Acoustic Device as well as approximately 1,000 surveillance cameras,<sup>3</sup> and passed a “Sign By-Law” outlawing placards, posters, and banners that were not “celebratory,” though



Figure 1: Protest poster featuring indigenous imagery and the prominent slogan “No Olympics on Stolen Native Land” (care of Nicholas Perrin)



people were allowed to display “a sign that celebrates the 2010 Winter Games, and creates or enhances a festive environment and atmosphere.” The City seemed to be telling its citizens that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was being granted a temporary vacation while the Olympic juggernaut rolled into town. The Canadian state’s questionable lawmaking highlights the ever-present dialectic of restriction and resistance, the socio-spatialities of dissent and its suppression. \*



**Figure 2:** A mural by artist Jesse Corcoran at the Crying Room Gallery in Vancouver that seemingly violated the controversial “Sign By-law” (photo by author)

Tom Mertes (2002: 108) has written about the Global Justice Movement that it’s “useful to conceptualize the relation between the various groups as an ongoing series of alliances and coalitions, whose convergences remain contingent. Genuine solidarity can only be built up through a process of testing and questioning, through a real overlap of affinities and interests.” The activism in Vancouver aligns with this transitory conception of activist organizing more than the idea of an old-school social movement. In fact, if we consider a widely accepted definition of social movements—“collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow 1998: 4)—then anti-Olympic resistance coheres better with W. Lance Bennett’s (2005: 213) definition of an organizational hybrid he dubs “embedded networks” whereby direct-action activists

nestle within “established NGO-centered networks in sprawling, loosely interconnected network webs populated by organizations and individuals who are more resistant to conventional social movement practices.” Activists preferred the term “Olympic moment” to “Olympic movement” since the latter veered toward minimizing multiplicity and overplaying temporal duration. Viewing anti-Olympics activism in this way is not simply an academic exercise in definition construction; it’s a clear reflection of 21<sup>st</sup>-century activist groups negotiating the geographies of resistance and restriction with an inside-outside strategy of engagement.

### Space Matters

With the ‘spatial turn’ in critical geography, a baseline assumption is that space is not an empty, apolitical parcel of turf waiting to be trodden with bodies and ideas. Nor is it a passive receptacle, wooden-stiff in its physicality. Rather, space is dynamic, ever-unfolding, and socially produced through material and discursive practices playing out on the uneven geography of power relations. As Henri Lefebvre (1976: 31) noted, “Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic.” The production of “political and strategic” space highlights multiplicity, heterogeneity, and conflict—three concepts key to understanding anti-Olympics resistance. Space conceived in this way points toward what Edward Soja (2010: 89) calls a “socio-spatial dialectic” whereby the social and the spatial are indissolubly linked, mutually constituting one another. As such, space produces and reinforces social relations but also sometimes challenges them. This chimes with Lefebvre’s (1991: 365, emphasis in original) critical insight that, “Socio-political contradictions are realized spatially. The contradictions of space thus make the contradictions of social relations operative. In other words, spatial contradictions ‘express’ conflicts between socio-political interests and forces; it is only *in* space that such conflicts come effectively into play, and in so doing they become contradictions of space.”

“Contradictions of space” were brought into sharp focus at the outset of the Olympics by the fact that there was a lack of access to Olympic cauldron, which the IOC fenced off like an ancient shrine undergoing archaeological renovation. This hypersensitivity for security raised the highly symbolic spatialized contradiction whereby Olympics-goers were unable to secure snapshots of the torch without them coming out like Dachau reenactment photographs, a contradiction widely reported in the mainstream press.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the Canadian state and dissident citizens engaged in spatial struggle, with the state attempting to construct, constrict, and regulate public space while activists engaged in spatially conscious politics, flexing their right to protest and a wider right to the city as they engaged in the process of “seeking spatial justice.” Activists foregrounded the fact that space is an active aspect of social-movement organizing and demonstrated that the production of space is vital to counter-hegemonic practices. Mustafa Dikeç (2001: 1792, emphasis in original) points us to a valuable socio-spatial heuristic for thinking about anti-Olympics resistance: the dialectical relationship between the ‘the *spatiality of injustice*—from physical or locational aspects to more abstract spaces of social and economic relationships that sustain the production of injustice—and the *injustice of spatiality*—the elimination of the possibilities for the formation of political responses.”

Anti-Olympics activists made the Downtown Eastside neighborhood of Vancouver—the poorest postal code aside from aboriginal reserves—an anchor of resistance. As activist and local professor Reg Johanson (2010) put it, “The Downtown Eastside crystallizes issues around space in Vancouver.” Dissident citizens joined forces in solidarity with the annual Women’s Memorial March, bolstering its ranks for one of its biggest-ever turnouts. Downtown Eastside residents were the targets of extraordinary laws such as the Orwellian Assistance to Shelter Act, a provincial law passed in 2009 that allowed police to force the homeless into shelters. Before that, Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan pushed “Project Civil Society,” a measure designed

to curtail panhandling, homelessness, drug use, and public nuisance complaints in the lead-up to the Games. This allowed Vancouver police to engage in a selectively enforced ticketing blitz for minor infractions, effectively criminalizing homelessness. Activists took to public space in the Downtown Eastside to challenge the Assistance to Shelter Act, reframing it as the “Olympic Kidnapping Act,” taking the battle straight to the spaces where the law would be enforced. Activists linked this laterally to a persistent critique of the “increasing organization of sport as spectacle, sport as industry” (Walia 2010b). Cecily Nicholson (2010), activist and Coordinator of the Downtown Eastside Women’s Center, said, “Our physical presence of a diverse collection of people in a public space, does create a kind of solidarity with those who are always there [on the streets] long before the Olympics and will be there long after...A greater interconnectedness has been established.” Numerous activists emphasized the strategic and ethical importance of centering resistance in the Downtown Eastside where spatial injustice is unmistakably etched into the socio-political landscape.

For the anti-Olympics resistance, participatory democracy was a contact sport. Dissidents dealt directly with spatial injustice as they captured corporeal space and produced it in line with the values that motivated them. Against the frictionless notion of “the deterritorializing power of the multitude” constructing “a powerful non-place” concretely realized on the global terrain, activists in Vancouver resolutely reterritorialized their struggle, rejecting the repudiation of “the *localization of struggles*” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 61, 208, 44). They forged a place-based spatial analysis, and according to anti-Olympics convergence participant Aaron Vidaver (2010), within that analysis “the seizure of space was crucial, central.”<sup>5</sup> Nathan Crompton of VanAct!—a group of younger activists that emerged in the lead-up to the Games and that has remained active in its wake—added, “when you take a space and make it concrete, people can get empowered” (Crompton 2010).

An example of concertedly spatial strategies

within repertoires of resistance emerged in the early days of the Olympics on 15 February 2010. After a rally and march condemning homelessness and gentrification, activists commandeered a space in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside that the aggressive development firm Concord Pacific was leasing as a parking lot for the Olympics before executing out plans to build luxury condos. Activists took over the space, dubbing it Olympic Tent Village, eventually pitching dozens of tents and producing space their own way. Activists used the direct action to reframe gentrification as new-wave recolonization. The action helped crystallize relationships between groups that hadn't worked together before, bridging what Lefebvre (1996: 112) dubbed the "double morphology" of the city—"practico-sensible or material on the one hand, social on the other." Vidaver (2010), who worked the graveyard security shift, touched on this "double morphology," noting the importance of "these autonomous or semi-autonomous reclamations and then the kind of interactions that one has with people within those spaces once they're set up and can be defended and made safe." He pointed out that the Olympic Tent Village was not only a symbolic endeavor, but "a material moment-by-moment interaction between individuals self-managing illegally occupied space." All these horizontal, space-producing processes sliced backward against what Dikeç (2003: 93) describes as "the spatialization of the Other" by which he means "depriving the inhabitants of certain areas of their rights to the city in the political sense of the term." Those who moved into and volunteered at the Olympic Tent Village lived politics through the quotidian interactions of self-management. In the age of breakneck globalization, they found ways to slow down and relate to each other.

### Solidarity and Scale

If Vancouver was a "relational incubator" for dissent and social movements, as geographer Walter Nicholls (2008: 842) has suggested the city can be, then the Olympic Tent Village was its praxis-inducer. This praxis has fed a spate of protest events that have emerged from the solidarity achieved during the Olympics moment. Numerous activists I spoke with

rattled off lists of subsequent activist interventions emanating from the anti-Olympic struggle, including actions around the Olympic Village, which was originally slated to be converted into social housing before the state reneged upon its promises to the poor. This was extra-scurrilous since the City of Vancouver kicked in significant funding for the project and used its precious loan guarantees to rescue dithering developers who went belly up while the athletes' Olympic Village was only half built. Vancouver-based social critic Jeff Derksen noted, "The Olympic Village in Vancouver, hunched on the post-industrial waterfront, is an aluminum-clad symbol of neoliberal governmentality and of a specific production of spatial injustice."

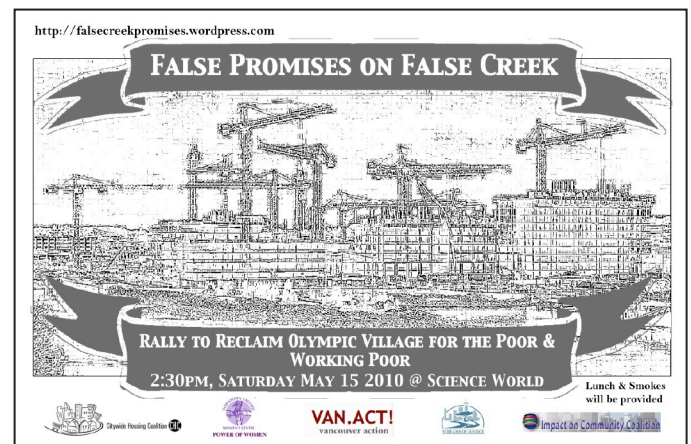


Figure 3: Promotional flyer from Olympic Village protest on 15 May 2010 (care of Van.Act! and Nathan Crompton)

While city planners channeled their inner Milton Friedman, activists ramped up their dissent. In a well-timed action called "False Promises on False Creek," dissidents led by VanAct! hijacked the grand opening for the condos, halting the day's sales. While a range of ages participated, the resistance benefited from the fact that during the Olympics, local universities opted to cancel classes for the duration of the Games, which meant a fresh infusion of young people with more free time for activism. They continued apace with their activism after the Games concluded, including the "False Promises" action. In fact, the microgeographical battles over the Olympic Village condos—which have been renamed "The Village on False Creek"—persist to this day, with the



city placing the condos in receivership in late 2010 in a desperate attempt to recoup public funds for the project (Sherlock and Lee 2011). Meanwhile, the objective conditions for continued dissent are in place, with Vancouver—and British Columbia more generally—experiencing severe budget cuts that only the most causality-challenged are not connecting to the Games.

As with the concept of space, scale should not be viewed monochromatically as fixed, if nested, levels of analysis (e.g. local, national, global). Scale is not an inexorable, hierarchical stairway-to-spatial-heaven, but a temporary, ever-emergent outgrowth of human agents struggling within and stretching social structures and assumptions. As such, scale both demarcates the boundaries where socio-political contestation occurs and plays an important role in how these contests play out. In the run-up to the Olympics, activists engaged in what Neil Smith (2004: 193) calls “scale bending,” the production of geographical scale in ways that the “entrenched assumptions about what kinds of social activities fit properly at which scales are being systematically challenged and upset.” The 2010 Winter Olympics was an international mega-event that doubled as a fulcrum for scale bending, a ready-made platform for restructuring scale through social struggle. Harsha Walia (2010b) articulated this fact: “The Olympics provided a foundation for a much longer-term analysis and debate and vision of our terrain of struggle. It was pivotal for bringing the local terrain of struggle to a national and international scale.” Her remarks highlight the possibility of dissident struggle at multiple scales simultaneously.

An example of this is the multi-scalar work Am Johal and his group Impact on Community Coalition did with representatives of the United Nations. In late 2009, Johal teamed up with Miloon Kothari, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, to raise global awareness of the social stakes. Kothari visited Vancouver in the lead-up to the Olympics to take stock of the effects the Games were having on low-income housing. The UN official was alarmed by the rampant diminishment of low-income housing units, and did

the favor of publicly stating the obvious that “the real estate speculation generated by the Olympics” was likely “a contributing cause” (Kothari 2009: 24). After taking the baton from Kothari, UN Special Rapporteur Raquel Rolnik (2009) issued another report critical of Olympic spending and the lack of an adequate housing strategy, critiquing Olympics-induced real estate speculation and the use of private security guards to remove homeless people from commercial hotspots.

The spread of contention beyond the local occurred through the work of globe-trotting political-cultural entrepreneurs who bridged grievances and identities, which helped bend the scale of dissent. Activists from Salt Lake City, which hosted the 2002 Winter Olympics, traveled north to Vancouver to give talks and tips in the run-up to the Games. Anti-Olympics activists from London and Sochi—who will host the Olympics in 2012 and 2014 respectively—were in Vancouver to register their dissent and to coordinate efforts with local demonstrators. Activists from Vancouver have shuttled to London to strategize with anti-Olympics groups there. Transnational scaffolding among people opposing the Olympics on their home turf helps us think through the politics of scale.

### Discursive Space

One way activists can bend scale to their advantage is, as geographer Paul Routledge (2000: 27) puts it, by “going globile.” He notes, “Through their use of media vectors social movements can escape the social confines of territorial space,” combating the mass media’s tendency to deprecate activists. In Vancouver, the prospect of using mainstream media to carve out strategic freedom was not especially promising. Both Canwest—which owns the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Vancouver Province* newspapers—and the *Globe and Mail* were official sponsors, or “print media suppliers,” of the Games (International Olympic Committee 2010: 35). On top of this, the IOC’s International Media Centre engaged in scale squelching (Boykoff 2007) when it refused to distribute the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association’s press releases during the



Games. The group applied to have its work sent out through the centre months in advance but were informed they would not be allowed to participate a mere three days before the Games began, thus precluding the possibility of appeal (BCCLA 2010).

The U.S. mainstream media's was predictably parochial, essentially ignoring dissent while Canadian press coverage was more complex, breaking down into three sequential phases: pre-Olympic articles that made space for dissent; articles appearing once the Games commenced where media slipped into the well-established ruts of activist deprecation, and; articles appearing toward the end of the Olympics that extolled the police and hailed the mega-event as a "unifying force" for Canada (Boykoff and Nishimura 2010). The Canadian mediascape also featured the remarkable emergence of the Vancouver Media Co-op. Started by Franklin López and Dawn Paley, and comprised of numerous volunteer journalists and techies, the VMC's roots go back a half-decade to a publication called the *Dominion*. Once the magazine incorporated as a federal cooperative, Paley helped set up a co-op local in Halifax in January 2009 and then in Vancouver the following summer. The VMC infrastructure, which activists across the anti-Olympics spectrum pointed to as a chief legacy of the Winter Olympics, formed an online node for system-change sociability where independent journalists could post their blow-by-blow documentary work and critical analysis for a wider audience. Gord Hill (2010), an indigenous activist of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation, remarked, "the VMC reenergized and raised the standard of the radical alternative media structures that we have in this country."

VMC activists were skeptical of social media like Facebook and Twitter because of their corporate roots and potential disconnection from boots-to-pavement dissent. VMC journalists' critique of social media jibes with Jodi Dean's (2009: 49, 24, emphasis in original) conception of "communicative capitalism," which deftly reframes the proliferation of social media as ersatz political participation: "Communicative capitalism captures our political interventions, formatting them as contributions

to its circuits of affect and entertainment—we feel *political, involved, like contributors who really matter.*" She adds, "the intense circulation of content in communicative capitalism occludes the antagonism necessary for politics, multiplying antagonism into myriad minor issues and events." Although many anti-Olympics activists employed social media to get the word out about events (e.g. using Facebook's 'events' function), it was striking how many activists reported hopping offline and into the streets for most of the Olympics. They argued that keyboard activism may supplement boots-to-pavement protest, but it cannot—and should not—supplant it.

Some contend the Global Justice Movement may well be the first that doesn't need the mainstream media as a communication conduit (e.g. Bennett 2005). We're certainly at a unique moment in history when the mainstream media are becoming increasingly immaterial, yet they still matter in terms of reaching a general audience. Even if we don't admire the mass media, they're not obsolete information dinosaurs, as they set the socio-political agenda. Social media may help generate numbers at protest events, as evidenced by recent events in Tunisia and Egypt. And independent media activists who are taking and tweaking predominant journalistic norms—for instance, sourcing standards—and subverting the mainstream media with content should be supported at every turn. But when it comes to proliferating messages and images to bystander publics, the mainstream media still matter. Activists in Vancouver knew this, permeating the discursive space of the mainstream media to help spread radical ideas and critiques. This opens up a key question for activists: how to infiltrate and build relationships with mainstream media while continuing to establish and nurture alternative and radical media? As with many dichotomies that were exploded in Vancouver, the mainstream media-alternative media quandary was not an either-or but a both-both.

### **The Right to the City?**

Coubertin, the Olympics founder, once said, "The important thing in life is not the victory but the

contest; the essential thing is not to have won but to have fought well.” Anti-Olympics activists “fought well” in Vancouver and many of them carried this momentum east in June 2010 to the G8/G-20 meetings in Huntsville and Toronto where they faced a very different scenario (Smith and Cowen 2010). After debuting in Vancouver for the Olympics, the Integrated Security Unit had its coming-out party as the new normal for policing international mega-events in Canada. Its own website divulged, “The approach to the Summit would be best described as an expanded version of our approach to previous events based on best practices and the lessons learned.” With a whopping \$1 billion security budget, one of the “lessons learned” appears to be to milk state coffers to build the arsenal whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Unlike the Olympics convergence where the Vancouver Police Department—which had years of experience policing protests—took the lead, often looking the other way at key junctures, the Ontario Provincial Police came out with batons flying in Toronto, arresting more than ten times as many protesters as were cuffed and stuffed in Vancouver. With the preemptive arrests, snatch squads, kettling tactics, dire detention conditions, and conspiracy charges, you’d think the authorities in Toronto were under the impression they were policing a US political party convention. Harsha Walia (2010b), who traveled to Toronto, noted a key contextual difference between policing strategies in Vancouver and Toronto: “The Olympics is a brand protecting the tourist industry where the police are actively trying to avoid a police confrontation” whereas Toronto could go into temporary lock-down mode—dispensing with legal niceties like the presumption of innocence—to protect the G-20 plenipotentiaries flooding their city for the weekend. Also, the people of Toronto learned only months before the summit that they’d be hosting, as Huntsville was deemed inadequate for the G-20 event, so both activists and the state had a tighter timeline to prepare, whereas activists and civil libertarians in Vancouver had years to plan and coordinate their strategies and tactics.

One palpable, albeit problematic, legacy of the

Vancouver Olympics is a revivification of the coercive capacity of the Canadian state. But a more hopeful legacy is an emergent Right to the City Coalition. This coalition goes beyond the legalistic framework of rights and freedoms-based discourse to grapple with ways we can collectively reshape the urbanscape by vamping the processes of urbanization in a more participatory, equitable direction. Vancouver activist Am Johal (2010) summed it up, “It’s about asserting human rights in the urban domain.” The movement draws energy from both the theoretical writings of Lefebvre (1996: 158)—who saw the right to the city as “a transformed and renewed right to urban life”—and the Right to the City Movement in the United States. This movement faces a propitious moment in Vancouver. As David Eby, the Executive Director of the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, told me on the eve of the Games, “There is a real unanimity of purpose around NGOs in Vancouver as a result of the Olympics,” with the activist atmosphere “cooperative and reinforcing.” Soja (2010: 59) points to the strategic savvy of building such a Right to the City movement: “Grounding the global justice movement in the right to the city creates more tangible and achievable targets than simply organizing against neoliberal capitalism, globalization, or global warming, especially as all three are primarily generated from and made concrete in the major city regions of the contemporary world.” Now the anti-Olympics current is swerving toward London where campaigners—drawing from the lessons of Vancouver—are already ramping up their resistance to the shenanigans of IOC bigwigs and their corporate cronies.

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## Notes

i Associated Press-Ipsos poll, 7-11 August 2008, available at: <http://www.pollingreport.com/olympics.htm>

ii Liu also claimed, "In the past few years, we've improved a lot. . . . There are fewer poor people, grass-roots democracy is developing bit by bit, and the media have more freedom and criticize the government regularly."

iii The British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) submitted freedom-of-information requests to the Vancouver Police Department regarding surveillance cameras, but were dished up a heavy dollop of evasion as to whether they intend to exercise their option to purchase. By standardizing tactics of obfuscation—or as BCCLA Policy Director Micheal Vonn puts it, "wielding the mighty sword of vagueness"—the Canadian state has turned the democratic ideal of transparency into over-



determined political theatre. “It’s the kind of shell game we’ve come to expect around CCTV,” she said. Personal interview, 18 August 2010. The BCCLA’s Executive Director David Eby noted, “There are some cameras that are still in public space now that are the ‘legacy’ of the Olympic period.” The BCCLA is concerned that the “legacy cameras” might eventually end up in public schools. Personal interview with David Eby, 6 August 2010.

iv For example, see “Olympic Cauldron Fence Thwarts Visitors,” *CBC*, 16 February 2010. VANOC eventually moved the

fence closer to the cauldron and added a rooftop viewing area to accommodate disenchanted Olympics-goers who were unable to secure an unobstructed glimpse of the torch.

v In 2002 Vidaver participated in the Woodward’s squat, an important precedent to the Olympics space seizures. He edited a special issue of *West Coast Line* (fall-winter 2003-2004) called “Woodsquat,” that collects many of the key documents from that episode of contention.

