

Sport and culture in the UK

As the Australian sociologist John Hughson (2004: 320-1) points out, this recent drawing together of sport and the arts under the panoply of ‘culture’ in the UK is connected to attempts to reconcile the principles of ‘access’ and ‘excellence’ in policies for the creative industries as an intrinsic part of a New Labour strategy for developing a more ‘democratic’ agenda for present and future UK cultural policy.

It also has much to do with the current (rather overplayed) trend of urban regeneration in the UK and elsewhere to be seen to be substantially, and inexorably, culture-driven (Coleman, 2003). Recent UK competitors for nomination as European Capital of Culture in 2008 (Liverpool was the successful city, of course), for example, all included prominence given to successful professional sports clubs as part of their portfolio of supposedly indispensable *cultural* attributes.

Talking specifically of the plans for the cultural regeneration of the city of Liverpool and looking forward to 2008, Coleman (2003: 32) warns, usefully, of what he calls the dangers of an emerging ‘hegemony of aesthetics’ regarding who and what should be allowed to be seen in these newly branded Merseyside ‘streets of culture.’ These were once open and democratic public urban spaces, he claims, one available to all members of the community. Now such spaces are increasingly ‘privatised’ and sanitised and are characterised by what he suggests are officially sponsored and staged cultural events - and thus by a culturally and socially deadening ‘controlled spontaneity.’

We need not share, entirely, this rather extreme pessimism about the effects on the transformation of public space produced by a cultural regeneration of this narrow range, a kind of regeneration that occurs as a response to intensifying global competition and the so-called city ‘place wars’ of late-modernity. But we do need to be aware, of course, of some of the potential negative implications of these new dimensions of sporting and cultural policy – which are often pursued in the name of greater community cohesion and cultural integration - especially in a neo-liberal era in which categories of ‘acceptable citizenship’ seem, increasingly, to be defined by the capacity to consume and in which ‘failed consumers’ seem to be progressively ‘managed out’ of preferred images and experiences of urban space (Bauman, 1997).

It is probably also true that this specific policy focus on the *cultural* relevance of sport in this context has had the associated effect of driving up unrealistic and largely unfounded perceptions of the increasing capacity of sport, almost *alone*, to successfully unite the ethnically diverse and resolutely classed members of local urban communities in the UK in a putative and nostalgically cohesive ‘all embracing civic culture.’ Sport is sometimes portrayed, in fact, as the main, emergent hope for a more egalitarian, a more inclusive, future for an

otherwise economically and socially polarised late-modern city (Hughson, 2004).

But as John Hughson also points out, relying on sport and culture in this way - as the unifying totem of a cultural package that can, and will, deliver on issues of community cohesion, collective identity, social need and on a range of connected social ills in the city - is to mistake the kind of simple political rhetoric that is often effortlessly mobilised in debates such as these, for the real effects of urban 'difference' and for the consequences for marginalized communities of often deep seated, long term and impacted social inequality and poverty. He, convincingly, argues in this regard that:

'The attendant rhetoric proposes not only that culture will revive the economy, but also that it can reverse the social decline of the underprivileged. Reversing urban social decline and overcoming poverty and related problems is, of course, a reasonable and worthy aim for social planners, but when overcoming social decline is made too dependent on the success of programmes in culture sport and the arts, this tends to ask too much...' (Hughson, 2004: 328)