

London 2012, governmentality and youth

Contact details

Name author(s): Dikaia Chatziefstathiou
 Institution(s) or organisation(s): Canterbury Christ Church University
 City and country: Canterbury, UK
 Email address for correspondence: dc130@canterbury.ac.uk

Aim of paper and research questions

This paper discusses the increasing rate of interest for the “active citizen”, and children and young people in several interventions and policies across the country during the period leading to London 2012. It will demonstrate how the Olympic ideology when linked with youth can generate technologies of power and technologies of the self, while it will consider this child-centred focus as a response to the ‘manufactured risk’ created by ‘human environments of uncertainty’ in the neo-liberal context of western societies.

Literature review

Core to this discussion is the Foucauldian concept of ‘governmentality’, which refers to socio-political contexts where power is decentred and where members of a society play an active role in their own self-government (Foucault, 1980; 1991). Although governmentality can be applied to a range of societies, much of the work of Foucault and of political theorists who have engaged with the term focuses on governmentality in a neo-liberal context. Neo-liberal individualism is a post-Enlightenment governmentality, which is engendered by a particular form of knowledge, with for example a predisposition to accept market mechanisms and a restricted remit for the state. This implies internalised and reflexive self-governing, and has implications for the way we conceptualise truth (Foucault, 1988). As Dean (1999) puts it, we govern ourselves (and others) on the basis of what we take to be true about who we are and how we should behave to achieve appropriate ends, but that also, how we govern ourselves and behave, generates ways of producing truth. The argument of the present paper draws upon Foucault’s account of bio-power and governmentality linking the development of a healthy, skilled and educated population with that of a productive society and an efficient economy.

Discussion and conclusion

The education and health of a population becomes a concern for the modern state, fostering the development of physical education in the curriculum of most Western states. Modern Olympic movement’s interest in youth engagement and physical activity through most recent initiatives such as the Youth Olympic Games or Olympic education programmes focusing on sustainability, especially in relation to London 2012, can be seen as technologies of power to regulate and shape bodies for the social transformations within western neo-liberalism. As Chatziefstathiou and Henry (2008) have also demonstrated, the construction of the Olympic ideology underpinning the Olympic Games may be treated as a discourse promoting the internalisation of behaviours generating technologies of power and fostering and legitimating Olympism upon the grounds of the worldviews of universalism and humanism.

Thus, drawing upon Foucault’s account of bio-power and governmentality linking the development of a healthy, skilled and educated population with that of a productive society and an efficient economy, it can be argued that the youth agenda for the Olympics may act as regulatory model of self-discipline, responsibility and autonomy for the individual. In the UK context this should be also examined within the context of the emergent so-called ‘social investment state’ which has grown since the election in 1997 of a New Labour Government.

Green (2007) has argued that interventions favouring the 'active citizen' and children and young people are aiming at reinforcing the construction of a social investment state within the wider political context of 'advanced liberal rationalities'. It can further be claimed that this becomes even more of a necessity in high modernity wherein its ambiguity calls more for a need of regulation of individuals during a period of manufactured risk in the light of terrorism, political instability and 'risk society' (Evans & Davies, 2002).

References

- Chatziefstathiou, D., & Henry, I.P. (2008). Olympism, Governmentality and Technologies of Power. In R.K. Barney, M.K. Heine, K.B. Wamsley & G.H. MacDonald (Eds.), *Pathways. Critiques and Discourse in Olympic Research*. London, ON: ICOS.
- Dean, M. (1999). *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London: Sage.
- Evans, J., & Davies, B. (2002). Body Knowledge and Control. *The Association for the Active Educational Researchers (AARE) Conference*, 1-5 December 2002, Brisbane, Australia.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon & P. Muller (Eds.), *The Foucault Effect* (pp. 87-194). Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the Self. In L.H. Martin, H. Gutman & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
- Green, M. (2007). Governing under advanced liberalism: sport policy and social investment state. *Policy Science*, 40, 55-71.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of Freedom: reframing political thought*. Cambridge.