

BOTH SPECTACULAR AND STRUCTURAL: REFLECTIONS ON MEGA EVENTS AND MASS DISPLACEMENTS

Maria Persdotter examines urban displacement as a structural, ongoing process rather than an isolated event, using the Paris 2024 Olympics games as a case study. The Games displaced nearly 20,000 precariously housed residents, echoing patterns from other Olympics like Vancouver 2010, where mega-events exacerbated housing crises and gentrification. The article looks at the structural motivations and causes behind such effects.



By **Maria Persdotter**, senior lecturer in Social Work, Linköping University, Sweden

“The Olympics and other mega events often serve as an impetus for increased surveillance, repression and expulsions of their most marginalised residents.”

Urban displacement takes many forms, unfolding at varying tempos. While the notion of displacement may evoke images of an exceptional event – a sudden uprooting – it is more often a slow and largely normalised process. Here, I will offer some thoughts on why it is useful to understand displacement as a pervasive, structural phenomena rather than as a singular act or event.

The impetus for this issue of *Homelessness in Europe* came from the mass displacement of precariously housed city-dwellers in the lead-up to the Paris Olympics. According to a recent report, nearly 20,000 people were displaced between April 2023 and September 2024.¹ *Le Revers de la Médaille (Other Side of the Medal)*, a network of organizations working to support marginalized and housing-insecure communities in Île-de-France, has been monitoring these actions and describes them as part of an effort of “social cleansing”, targeting squats and tent encampments near the Olympic venues. Poignantly, many of the displaced are street-homeless migrants who had already been uprooted once, if not many times, before the Games.

1 *Le Revers de la Médaille (2024) Rapport final*. Available at https://lereversdelamedaille.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Rapport-final-Le-revers-de-la-medaille-4_11_24_compressed-1.pdf (accessed 27 December, 2024).

What happened in Paris is reflective of a global pattern. While the specific features and politics of urban poverty are unique to each host city, the Olympics and other mega events often serve as an impetus for increased surveillance, repression and expulsions of their most marginalised residents, such as drug users, sex workers and street-homeless people. Just as the French authorities engaged in a strategy of mass displacement to clear space for the spectacle of the Olympics, so too did the authorities in Tokyo 2020,² in Rio de Janeiro 2016,³ and in London 2012,⁴ to name just a few examples.

2 Boykoff, J. and Gaffney, C., 2020. The Tokyo 2020 games and the end of Olympic history. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 31(2), pp.1-19.

3 Mickelena, L. (2017) A year later, Olympic displaced are left to rebuild lives. *AP News*, 4 August. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/298bd6f3e4434aea93c132b97ed6b339> (Accessed 27 December, 2024).

4 Watt, P., 2013. 'It's not for us' Regeneration, the 2012 Olympics and the gentrification of East London. *City*, 17(1), pp.99-118.

I personally received my most formative education on the realities of urban displacement in the context of the popular mobilisation against the 2010 Winter Olympics, which took place on the surrendered lands of the Lil'wat, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples in that what many know as Vancouver, Canada. For one thing, I learned that displacement is less a singular event than an ongoing process, unfolding through a series of smaller aggressions. Just as in Paris this past summer, many of those who experienced displacement because of the 2010 Olympics were used to being moved along and pushed around by the authorities, having endured the same treatment for years while living and working on the streets.

Singular acts of displacement must also always be understood within locally and historically specific formations of class exploitation and (post)colonial dispossession. This was, in fact, the core message of the 2010 campaign calling for “No Olympics on stolen native land”. The campaign sought to highlight that the Vancouver Winter Olympics were being held on lands never legally ceded to the colonial state, and to challenge what was seen as the shallow and strategic appropriation of Indigenous culture by the local Olympic organizing committee. Central to the campaign and the popular mobilization against the Games was a focus on their devastating effects on the local urban Indigenous community.

At the time, fifteen years ago, Vancouver was experiencing a severe housing crisis, disproportionately affecting its Indigenous population. In fact, it still is. According to recent estimates, over a third (33%) of the city’s street-homeless population identifies as Indigenous, despite Indigenous people comprising less than three percent of the overall population.⁵ This pattern can be traced to a long-standing history of colonial dispossession, including the shameful legacy of the residential school system.

Notably, the Olympics exacerbated the homelessness crisis, driving an extraordinary, speculation-driven surge in property values and rents, which, in turn, contributed to a marked increase in homelessness.

⁵ Crompton, N., Yang, T., & Withers, AJ (2024) Homelessness in Vancouver: Numbers, Trends, Analysis for 2024. The Mainlander, August 23. Available at <https://themainlander.com/2024/08/23/homelessness-in-vancouver-numbers-trends-analysis-for-2024/> (accessed 27 December, 2024)

“Displacement is less a singular event than an ongoing process, unfolding through a series of smaller aggressions.”



“Olympics exacerbated the homelessness crisis, driving an extraordinary, speculation-driven surge in property values and rents, which, in turn, contributed to a marked increase in homelessness.”

Simultaneously, the Games ushered in new forms of urban surveillance and police technologies, all while diverting public resources that could have been used to meet the service needs of residents. Local Indigenous communities were not the only ones affected by these developments – broad swaths of the city’s impoverished and precariously housed residents also felt their impact. Still, an awareness of the ongoing effects of colonialism is essential to understanding the specific dynamics and effects of displacement in connection with the 2010 Games.

In line with this, the Olympics and other mega events are most usefully characterised, not as a discrete cause of displacement, but as a catalyst that accelerates pre-existing processes of displacement and dispossession. The Vancouver homelessness crisis did not start or end with the Olympics. The same can be said for Paris.

For *Le Revers de la Médaille (Other Side of the Medal)* the Olympic-induced mass displacements are just one aspect of an ongoing crisis affecting the capital’s most marginalised residents. According to the collective, the last year has witnessed a “spectacular increase” in

extreme poverty and street-homelessness – and a similarly dramatic increase in state-led evictions of informally-housed persons.

The current situation is indicative of a global urban crisis, often attributed to the rise of neoliberal and financialized urbanism, and the expanding gentrification and touristification of inner-city areas. In the French case, this is compounded by persistent housing welfare retrenchment and the punitive turn in social and urban policy.⁶ Furthermore, the Paris homelessness crisis has an undeniable racialized dimension and is linked to the cruelties of the European internal and external border regime.⁷

6 Dikeç, M. (2011). *Badlands of the republic: Space, politics and urban policy*. John Wiley & Sons; Guibard, L., & Le Goix, R. (2024). Those who leave: Out-migration and decentralisation of welfare beneficiaries in gentrified Paris. *Urban Studies*, 61(10), 1990-2010.

7 FEANTSA (2022) European Migration and Asylum Policies and their Impact on Homelessness: An analysis of ‘The New Pact on Migration and Asylum’. Available at <https://www.feantsa.org/en/report/2022/12/21/european-migration-and-asylum-policies-and-their-impact-on-homelessness-an-analysis-of-the-new-pact-on-migration-and-asylum?bcParent=27>

Scholars of colonialism – specifically settler colonialism – have urged us to think of colonialism, not as an event with a definitive beginning and end, but as an enduring structure. Mindful of the risk of flattening the particularities of settler colonialism, I would suggest that we might think of contemporary urban displacements in Europe and elsewhere in a similar way.

The phrase “settler colonialism is a structure, not an event” is often attributed to the late historian Patrick Wolfe. Along with others in the fields of settler colonial and Indigenous studies, Wolfe argued that settler colonialism – particularly in its historical and contemporary Australian, Canadian, and U.S. American variants – is distinct from other forms of colonialism in that it seeks not only to exploit but also to replace the Indigenous population. To say that settler colonialism is not an event is to insist that it cannot be treated as a thing of the past; rather, it must be understood as ongoing, demanding the continuous dispossession of Indigenous communities – even in the present. As a structure, settler colonialism is woven into the very fabric of settler societies, sustained by the workings of colonial ideologies, laws, and government institutions.

As in Vancouver 2010, contemporary urban displacements are often continuous with a longer history of settler colonial dispossession and violence. However, even in cities that do not share this historical trajectory, it can be useful to conceptualize displacement as a pervasive, structural phenomenon – rooted in what Marx once referred to as the “silent compulsion” of capitalist economic relations and the persistent crisis of housing unaffordability.

The Olympics are the quintessential example of a spectacle: an unusual event that attracts attention, interest – or disapproval. Mass displacements that occur in connection with such spectacles tend to provoke moral outrage. As they should. In fact, it is a problem that not more people know and care about the negative impacts of the Olympics. That said, while it is important to draw attention to the ways in which the spectacle is used to justify displacement, it is also important to acknowledge that the problem is not confined to the event as such.

Urban displacements are sometimes spectacular, capturing the attention of the broader public. More often, however, they are slow and normalized processes that unfold over an extended period. Displacement does not necessarily begin or end with a specific event, such as an eviction. Instead, displacement pressures often build incrementally, causing residents to feel profoundly “out of place” long before – and even if they are never – physically dislocated.

Spectacular events can serve as a flash point for popular opposition to displacement – the real challenge is how to organise and sustain effective resistance to the more everyday, normalised forms of displacement.

*Author biography: Maria Persdotter is an urban researcher, currently working as Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Linköping University, Sweden. Her PhD thesis, entitled *Free to Move Along: On The Urbanisation of. Cross-border Mobility Controls – A Case of Roma 'EU migrants' in. Malmö, Sweden* analyses the spectacular eviction of the largest Roma – EU migrant’ encampment in recent Swedish history and its politics.*

