

‘One year on from the Paralympic Games – what is the positive legacy for the Cultural Sector and what are the challenges and opportunities ahead of us?’

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1. I was delighted when I was invited to take part in today's event, but have to admit my first thought was to decline the invitation because I know next to nothing about the Paralympics and, if I'm honest, had little interest in the television and media coverage of it, apart from the possibility that we might see new cultural representations of disabled people - something I AM very interested in.

However, my identity as a disabled person makes me very interested in disabled athletes - but I want them all to do well generally, especially as my ideas of belonging are more tied up with disabled people rather than my national identity and team GB. Even so, I have such an aversion to sport that I subconsciously avoided most of the television coverage but it was impossible to escape the news coverage of the event and the lionisation of particular athletes, so I find myself knowing more than I'd like to.

So, unsurprisingly I thought I wasn't a suitable person to speak today until I got to thinking that my responses to sport were actually central to some of the debates about legacy. Although we all use the word 'legacy' I am sure that we don't all mean the same thing. Before the games, official statements of legacy promised improvements in sports venues, new homes, transport links and the regeneration of communities. Over time, this seems to have changed somewhat, in line with a more individualistic political focus which emphasises

people's health habits and ways of living. Beyond this, the word legacy seems to have taken on other meanings. Having trawled through a number of articles, and putting to one side the idea that discussions of legacy are promoted to provide a justification for massive expenditure on public events when the welfare state is being demolished (another reason I chose to avoid the games), the notion of legacy seems to be interpreted in two main ways, both of which could be seen as positive.

The first understanding of legacy seems to relate to the effects of the Paralympics on public attitudes to disabled people (and disabled people's beliefs in themselves). For example, Lord Coe spoke of the legacy of the Paralympics in terms of 'a seismic effect in shifting public attitudes' which would have lasting benefits. The second main way that legacy seems to be interpreted is in discussions of how we can provide better opportunities for disabled people to take up, or become more interested in sport.

Before I go on to talk a little more about legacy I just want to say that I don't feel qualified to say anything about the gains made for disabled athletes per se and that questions such as this and how we map new territory for potential future athletes and paralympians are best answered by those who are involved, an area which is clearly outside my knowledge.

2. Legacy.

My own lack of interest in sport of any kind is a position which seems to resonate with one of these central themes; such uninterest or beliefs that we are unsuited for sports, can be closely related to an array of cultural discourses which are persuasive in making people think sport and achievement is 'not for them' (from media representations, to PE teachers' attitudes and public attitudes about the normal or ideal body). If the need to persuade more disabled people to take up sports is the major theme in legacy debates then part of the solution

becomes one of how to build people's ideas of their own personal value and to provide encouragement and facilities to seek higher forms of achievement, through better education leisure services and the media for example. I am also ambivalent about ideas of achievement which can reinforce prescriptive ideas of social valued roles and lifestyles and am not convinced that disabled people are not inspired and motivated in the first place. In fact, I firmly believe that many disabled and ill people are being forced into such untenable circumstances that getting through the day can and should be seen in itself as an achievement against unsurmountable odds.

Media has a central role to play in this and much of the coverage I saw of the paralympians seemed to shift away from less pity-orientated representations towards images of disabled people as super-human. The Channel 4 campaign was actually named 'meet the superhumans', reinforced by the title of Public Enemy's song 'Harder than you think'. This advertisement, asking us to forget everything we previously thought, was arguably a preferable image to previous coverage of the Paralympics, in that it at least echoed the treatment given to non-disabled Olympic athletes, reflecting similar images of strength and invincibility. Statistics on audiences might indicate that these portrayals worked well with record-breaking audience figures; two thirds of people surveyed in a Channel 4 survey said that the coverage had a good impact on their perceptions of disabled people, and most viewers considered disabled people to be equally talented as non-disabled athletes (Channel 4 survey, BDRC continental and YouGov).

However, as positive as raising people's aspirations to be superhuman may sound, I think it is crucial to examine how such concepts of achievement are ideologically loaded, how they feed the cult of celebrity culture and serve to maintain, or exacerbate, social hierarchies and cultural stereotypes which

reinforce negative public attitudes and legitimate cuts in income and services etc, especially in this climate.

-Despite the dim view I am taking of legacy here, I do think that anyone who has high ambitions should be supported and get opportunities to pursue their goals but I think we should be wary of the way we use portrayals of success and that we should take a critical view of what we mean by legacy, particularly as this often seems to be a deficit-led concept, when used in discussions of the Paralympics *and* Olympics. I think this can work to distract us away from any real investments in our collective futures (such deficit led images were exemplified in a recent pro-sport advert I saw on the underground which was premised on the idea of channeling young, working class men's tendencies towards violence into sporting achievements).

So, I believe that even the battle for defining legacy, on our terms, is going to be tough, framed as it is in individualistic terms of our lack, our need for motivation and the huge chasm between portrayals of elite athletes and images of ordinary disabled people, both of which are anchored in the emerging bio-psycho-social model of disability being promoted by the likes of UNUM and Atos (a major Paralympic sponsor). Debbie Jolly and others involved with DPAC have warned us of the dangers of the Americanised 'can do' ethos and the 'new paralympian politics of the welfare state' (i.e. the manufacturing of scarcity, the psychologising and demonization of disabled people and others amongst the poorest in society). Although I'm guessing that most of us are aware of this increasingly influential model of disability, for anyone who doesn't, this new model is defined by UNUM in these terms:

‘Illness, Sickness and Incapacity are Psychosocial rather than medical problems. More and better healthcare is not the answer.’

Reflecting Cameron's statement that the paralympics would 'teach people what they can do, rather than what they can't do' it is obvious that the legacy of the Paralympics will be approached the same way in terms of sports provision; that it is up to us to improve our attitudes and slay all our barriers, that we should buy our opportunities rather than expect better provision for education, sports and cultural facilities.

On a slightly more positive note, in terms of legacy, I do feel that the Paralympics have provided an important site for contesting disabling imagery and attitudes, not least because they received such a wide audience but also because analysis of Paralympics coverage exposes some of the dilemmas of cultural imagery and public attitudes which have proved difficult to resolve. This event is one such opportunity and hopefully this will contribute to further change, especially in highlighting and challenging the dualistic ways in which media tends to work; in this case going from patronising portrayals of us as abject to images of superhumans, doing little to acknowledge the multiple realities of living with disability and impairment.

3. Before I finish I want to say something about segregation. There is another important issue I think we must grapple with; the continuing separation of disabled people from non-disabled people in sport (and elsewhere), and of course, the further separation of disabled people into the Paralympics and the Special Olympics.

An academic article, ‘Crippling Paralympics?: Media, Disability and Olympism’ (Goggin, Gerard¹; Newell, Christopher) argues that the paralympics fits well within the established power relations which oppress people with disability in society.

They say:

‘While there have been some changes and improvements, we contend that overwhelmingly, the separation between the Paralympics and Olympics is not questioned and that if the Paralympics are reported at all disabling media representations still very much persist’.

I understand that this is not a simple matter and understand some of the complexity for finding solutions to these dilemmas. I also want to mention here that this paralympian category of ‘disabled people’ is not inclusive due to the absence and the exclusion of people with learning difficulties who, as we all know, are further segregated in the special Olympics and importantly here from discussions of legacy.

Concluding comments

As you can see, I believe that the concept of legacy of the Paralympics and Olympics is overwhelmingly a political one. Sadly, it is my belief that any gains which may have been made in terms of the representations of disabled people and challenges towards public attitudes, are marginal when considered against the kind of news coverage of disabled people found by Nick Watson’s study. If Lord Coe was right in his analysis of the positive change in public attitudes, it is clear that there is much to be done in building on any gains made,

and that we will need to fight to get a real legacy for all of us – starting with key areas such as employment, media representations, hate crimes, welfare which helps us live our lives, education, housing, public building and transport.

The Chief executive of the British Paralympic Association, Tim Hollingsworth said that the paralympics was successful in making people realise that disability is not the issue and that is the ‘quality of the individual’ and ‘their ability to do things that matter.’ Although this is clearly true for competitive sport it *cannot* be transferred to disabled people as a group without selling out to the bio-psycho-social model which poses a threat to so many of us.