

The cultural politics of sport mega-events

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2024 has been the year of the XXXIII Summer Olympic Games. The Paris Games have catalysed the attention of millions of people all over the world, aroused mixed feelings, and triggered transformations whose effects could be fully grasped in the coming years. To coincide with the Olympic year, Eracle is pleased to dedicate the volume 7(1) to sports mega-events.

The scholarly investigation of sport mega-events constitutes an articulated field of inquiry with solid roots in the international debate. Over the last two decades, since Roche's early explorations (2000; 2003) (see also: Black, 2014; Guala, 2015), much effort has been given to distinguish, in the configuration of "modern society's great *shows*" (Lee Ludvigsen, Rowkood & Parnell, 2022, p. 705), organizational models and contents that are diverse and variegated – i.e., small / large / mega events, sporting / commercial / recreational events. It is not surprising that increasing attention is paid to sport events. According to Roche (2017), sport mega-events, as global mediatized spectacles, have steadily replaced other forms of the "mega" – such as the Expos – even though these continue to be arranged and attract visitors.

In addition, it is perhaps in the context of sport that experimentation and variations on the forms of the events and their organizing processes are at play. By analysing the English Premier League as a social phenomenon, Giulianotti (2011) has introduced the concept of "large-diffuse" sport events to specify that, nowadays, event *time* tends to be *diluted*, and *space deconcentrated*. Even the football World Cup, usually hosted by a single nation – the only exception being the 2002 edition in South Korea and Japan – seems to be moving towards a logic of co-organization which involves several countries: Canada, Mexico and the United States will host the World Cup in 2026; Morocco, Portugal and Spain – with three matches in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay – will host the World Cup in 2030.

Beyond the classificatory interest, and its relevance to grasp a phenomenology capable of giving us a better understanding of the society where we live in, sport mega-events allow to shine a light

into the transformation of “territories”, in a constant tension between the local and the global. As the essays in this volume exemplify, the topic can be addressed from a variety of analytical gazes and interpretive perspectives, as well as considering specific case studies – despite the Olympics and the football World Cup largely remaining the main empirical foci.

First of all, talking about territory refers to the issue of governance and its scales: different actors which, at different levels, are involved, excluded, delimited in the dynamics of governing spaces and populations. Mega-events are fully part of the “soft-power” (Nye, 2021) – to quote an established concept that recurs in the following papers – strategies of the ruling elites conceived for ensuring economic development and achieving political prestige. In the contemporary soft-power diagram, research on mega-events has well highlighted the weight of stakeholders not always driven by public interests as they do not belong to the State structures. Because of the complexity of the soft-power workings, the outcomes of the mega-events can be critical for the growth and welfare prospects of the venues, as in the case of the 2004 Greek Olympics that contributed to the default of the country in the immediately following years (Bustad, 2021). The political elites of countries bidding to host sporting events need to negotiate with international federations and require massive sponsorships that are deployed by corporations and major media players. In recent years, the international sport governing bodies have hence assumed a major role in power relations, even beyond the specific sports world (Wloch, 2013). More precisely, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) increasingly act as a collector of huge economic-financial interests and impact on the characteristics of territories according to a dynamic of “delocalisation of the local” (*one fits all*) that fosters a convergence – and often a normalisation – of culturally, spatially and socially different contexts.

Moreover, the meaning of “mega” has also to do with the symbolic value of the sport events. Indeed, they reverberate to an extremely important extent on the narratives that surround and (re)define territories, their representations, boundaries and connections. It is well known that sport, in everyday life, is a sphere of production and reproduction of cultures (Bausinger, 2008). Within the contemporary global mediatized culture, sport mega-events magnify this anthropological function (Horne, 2022). For instance, the ceremonies of the major international competitions are civil liturgies of enormous cultural value for communities. In particular, the opening of the Olympics celebrates the participating countries, and the host nation (re)constructs its collective memory and identity (see: MacAloon, 2006). The Games receive media coverage throughout their duration. All their aspects are subject to media scrutiny and become part of collective imagination. By narrating the technical deeds and the sportified bodies, an overproduction of social categories, discriminations and stigmas – especially related to gender, ethnicity / nationality, (dis)ability – takes place; a process which is being magnified by new social media currently.

The stakes of competitions go far beyond the sport records. Mega-events can thus provide a platform for expressing contrasting worldviews. Athletes are aware of the power of the media, as well as of the mega-events visibility. Throughout modernity, (fe)male athletes have tried in many ways to convey specific messages, denouncing the authoritarian politics of the organizing states in some cases, or becoming spokespersons for the collective movements present in society in some others. The glaring example is provided by the Black Olympic activism in the United

States for the civil rights of the Afro-American population, symbolised by the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the podium in Mexico City 1968 (Hartman, 2003).

More recently, LGBT campaigns in opposition to the Russian regime's homophobic ideology which began in 2013 – when Russia passed a law whose aim was to ban the “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” – and lasted throughout the course of the 2014 Sochi Games, have been of great media impact (Davidson, McDonald, 2017). In the opening ceremony of Paris 2024, the Algerian delegation threw a bouquet of flowers in the Seine River to commemorate the martyrs of the independence war. The gesture aimed to raise public attention on the crimes committed by Maurice Papon's French police. On October 16, 1961, during a demonstration organized by the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), more than 11,000 civilians were arrested and moved to the *Palais des Sports* and the *Pierre de Coubertin stadium*. Several Algerians were killed. The number of the victims remains unspecified to this day.

Concerning the “contentious politics” (Tilly, Tarrow, 2015), alongside the commitment of the athletes, mega-events are characterized by their magnitude in attracting civil society opposition. Significant, to address this topic, are the reflections of Cottrell and Nelson (2010), who emphasise the Olympic Games as favourable contexts for the activation of specific networks of actors and the deployment of specific repertoires of collective action, but also marked by a series of responses that follow recurring path throughout history. In this vein, Giulianotti and Armstrong (2015), as well Boykoff (2011; 2014; 2017; 2020), provide interesting insights for examining social movements against sport mega-events. Focusing on the opposition to London 2012 and the critique about the legacy of territorial transformation, Bykoff and Fussey (2014) identify a particular dynamic that exists between activism and repression at the Olympics. Under certain conditions, such a dynamic can lead to terrorist escalations, as it happened in Munich 1972 following the kidnapping of Israeli athletes by the Palestinian Black September Organization (for a more in-depth discussion on Olympic terrorism, see: Spaaij, 2016).

The prevention of terrorism, together with the security measures introduced to limit the city access – also in the light of recent events with France as the target of international terroristic organizations – have been widely discussed on the media concerning the Paris Games. Speaking of Paris 2024, another narrative of relevance is that of “sustainability”. Public authorities have celebrated Paris as the most “inclusive” Olympics of the history, even from the perspective of environmental protection and rights.

Considering how contemporary public discourse is developing, the representation of sustainability is becoming a key aspect in the framing process of the mega-events, which seems to be necessary – for the stakeholders – for building consensus about the hosting of sport mega-events. On the other hand, forms of opposition draw, more often, on a critique of the instrumental use of the sustainability narrative adopted by the public authorities and the large investors. As the report “Playing against the clock” (Goldblatt, 2020) points out, sports organizations, in particular all those that are involved in mega-events, should receive more attention from the public in order to induce them to act with respect to the sustainability of competitive events, carefully considering the environmental impact of the infrastructures and their territorial legacy. The critique against the instrumental use of sustainability by the elites is summed up by the term “sportswashing”, which is gaining traction in popular culture and which one of the papers included in this volume attempts to address.

The essays in this volume

The research agenda on sport mega-events is broad and expanding. Here, we have introduced a few established strands of inquiry to better position the following essays and guide the reading. Every paper presents an original research article that explores, through a case study, a set of topics and issues revolving around specific areas of (empirical) analysis and (theoretical) reflection.

Infrastructures of soft power

The first three articles of the volume reflect on the strategic relationship between mega-events and the territory at various levels. *The spatial dimension of the Winter Olympic Village* focuses on the local scale. The assumption is that the sport mega-events produce the urban space and modify it. The case of the Winter Olympics Villages shows the growing capacity of the events to involve different “territorialities”, develop widespread projects and pave the way for structural / long-lasting transformations. The systematic nature of the transformations discussed by the author, who apply a “geo-historical” perspective to approach the Winter Olympic Villages projects, can be identified in the shift from reception facilities conceived to host occasional entertainment and populations to stable infrastructure designed as a driver for economic development. The focus on the Turin Olympic Village provides a seminal case study to bear an interpretive hypothesis capable of accounting a process at work in contemporary mega-events. The proposal is extremely timely given the upcoming Winter Olympic Games “Milano Cortina 2026” and, above everything, the controversial Winter Olympic Village of Milan, that is, an urban regeneration project involving multiple stakeholders that is conceived by the public and private actors for the economic and social renewal of a huge area of the city.

The paper *Des stades, des Lions Indomptables et des liturgies politiques à la CAN Total Energies Cameroon 2021* focuses on a national scale. The politics of sport mega-events is multi-faceted. The Africa Cup of Nations hosted by Cameroon in 2021 is analysed by the author in its complexity with particular attention to its political implications. Through the liturgy of the event, on the one hand, and the spatialisation of the infrastructure, on the other hand, specific images of the country are provided. The Africa Cup of Nations allows to define a coherent image of the nation, and to define the strategies of the Cameroonian political personnel, creating a specific narrative of Cameroon in comparison to other African countries, but also in comparison to European or Chinese financiers.

Azerbaijan’s Sports Diplomacy and Relations with the European Union addresses the issue of sports relations, focusing on the international scale. This paper helps to shed light on an understudied geographic context, providing several insights about the rationality of sports mega-events. In the case of Azerbaijan, the choice of participating in the game of hosting major sport events and investing in new sport stadia and buildings is adopted by the political establishment to gain importance in the chessboard of international relations with Western countries, particularly the EU. According to a soft power perspective, which is being adopted by the author, building sports

infrastructure and mobilizing relations related to the sports field produces relevant effects in international diplomacy, both enhancing the state's reputation as a country that is following the path of modernization in the eyes of international political and economic actors, and obtaining results in terms of internal (geo)politics.

Narratives of modernity

The following articles explore the sport mega-events as a means to spread some sort of “modernity *Zeitgeist*”. *Cuerpos en pantallas* investigates the interplay between two (modern) cultural products: the documentary film and the Olympic Games, whose contemporary origins are identified and deepened. The author compares Leni Riefenstahl's documentary on the 1936 Berlin Games with Kon Ichikawa's documentary on the 1964 Tokyo Games. The analysis of content and formal aspects reveals correspondences and divergences between the two movies. Despite the common adherence to the narrative codes of modernity, the representations of the sporting bodies reveal the different temporal and social location of the Olympic Games, and, together with it, it is revealed a dissimilar set of aspirations, beliefs, expectations, fears and worldviews, even though both cultural products are affected by a common nationalistic undertone.

The coach in a sport mega-event deals with the sport mega-event as a space-time where the collective imaginary related to a highly symbolic figure in Brazil, such as the coach of the national football team, is redefined. Examining the chronicle of the Brazilian team's performance in the 2014 World Cup provided by the leading national newspaper, “O Globo”, the article focuses on the narrative of Felipe Scolari. Here, the *Seleção's* journey overlaps with the coach's journey. They both experienced a “miserable” conclusion in the 7-1 loss in the semi-final against Germany, the winning team of the tournament. In addition to recalling the drama of the defeat, the authors emphasise how a personalisation of collective events unfolds. In the media representations of the matches, the national team manager embodies “shameful” values and images, since they are misaligned with the ideals of efficiency, performativity and instrumental rationality. The newspaper suggests that these values – as they represent the culture of neoliberalism – should instead be introduced in (and embraced by) the Brazilian context thanks to football which is still one of the genuine expressions of popular culture, although it is influenced by processes of financialization and commodification as it occurs in several contemporary Western (neoliberal) contexts.

A device of cultural change

Sticking with the analysis of social representations, the following three articles deconstruct, from a critical angle, the mega-event as a device of cultural transformation. *Marta versus Neymar* reflects on the topic of “the war of sexes” in sport, considering the contrast between two celebrities in Brazil, the male footballer Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior and the female footballer Marta Vieira da Silva. In the comparison between the narratives of “O Globo” and “Folha de São Paulo” that appeared during the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, the authors convey the contrast, emerging in the

country at that time, between conservative instances and the battles against gender discrimination. In this way, the paper addresses the political contrast between Bolsonaroist conservatism (Neymar) and social and reformist political options (Marta). Above everything, considering the “football-ification of politics” (Demuru, 2021) process that Brazil is experiencing, the “war of sexes” offers the opportunity to dig into the growing discontent of the population with regard to sport mega-events – the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics precisely – because of the economic trouble and social inequalities caused by the hosting of the events, and made particularly acute following the expenses imposed on Brazil by FIFA and the ICO.

Qatar 2022 and sportswashing discusses the way in which the countries hosting mega-events strive to celebrate their public image, while systematically silencing the enormous critical issues that these events raise, that is, the issues of environment degradation and human rights violations. Focusing on the latter, the authors analyse the role of sports journalism in supporting the washing processes that take place globally with the support of international governing bodies. The article considers Qatar 2022 – one of the most contested World Cup editions (see also: Issekin, 2023) – and examines the Italian sports press. In addition to describe the main narratives proposed by national media, which have discussed too little the controversial aspects of the mega-event, the article proposes a framework on sportswashing whose main merit is to explain the (journalistic) discursive practices by taking into account the system of power relations both within and outside the corporate sports journalism field. This attempt is summarized in the original notion, proposed by the authors, of “the sport-media-politics triangle” that could be inspiring for future inquiries. *Towards the amplification of children’s rights within Olympic discourses* breaks the ground for a rather novel reflection, not only for the journal itself. If – as the previous articles also testify – the links between sport mega-events and the politics of rights on labour, gender, “race” and sexuality have been commonly addressed, the analysis in relation to children remains underexplored. As the author of the paper explains from a human rights perspective, children can experience several forms of exploitation in the organization of the Olympics. They can suffer the consequences of the displacement that often accompanies major events and produces outcomes in terms of homelessness, imprisonment, as well as execution in the worst-case scenario. This seems to be due to the framework of the securitisation policies associated with the sites where major events are held. At the end of the text, the contribution calls for the need to pay special attention to these aspects, making the sport institutions and the organizing committees responsible for the condition of the young generations. In conclusion, the issue of sport mega-events as an engine of normalisation and hegemony is forcefully raised. Even for ethical reasons, as the author suggests, several dynamics regarding the organization and the multiple effects of the mega-events need to be continuously investigated.

We are delighted to publish such a variety of essays. They are written in English, Italian, French and Spanish. The authors have different backgrounds, and they experience specific academic trajectories. We mention these aspects to underline the transdisciplinary vocation of the journal and its cosmopolitan and anti-colonial posture. Open confrontation between scholars led as much on the absence of any intellectual impositions as on the rejection of scientific benefits

based on the personal academic position constitutes a cornerstone for Eracle. Given the richness of the contents and of the perspectives proposed by the articles, we hope that this volume can offer new insights into the cultural politics of sport mega-events.

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