



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Rationales and Foundational Concepts

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Abstract This introduction shares the book's theoretical and empirical ambitions and sets out a common conceptual ground that is employed to greater or lesser degrees by the authors of each chapter, in respect to the uniqueness of each individual case. Overall, this book is concerned with the aftereffects of hosting mega-events. It makes sense of developments around the globe through the notion of soft power, aimed both internationally and at the domestic host audience; the Potemkin relationship between spectacular but superficial promises and the deleterious outcomes that occur under that surface; and the uneasy linkages between hosting and the (geo)politics of authoritarianism and great nation populism. Each chapter highlights a different global region, featuring cases from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Australia, South America, and North America. By offering a standardized conceptual toolbox in this introduction, the book presents a more coherent picture of the implications of hosting mega-events in disparate areas around the globe.

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RATIONALES

Mega-events are powerful. They have the enduring capacity to affect both individual hearts and entire nations. Billions of people love them, despite their history of damage to host cities and societies. How and why does this happen? What do they leave behind after the global spotlight moves on?

My first glimpse of the contradictions inherent in mega-events came in 2011, during a visit to relatives in London and Sochi. It was coincidence that both cities were preparing to host the upcoming Summer and Winter Olympics in 2012 and 2014. They were in frenzies of preparation and the Games were a frequent and easy topic wherever I went. From afar, I had thought that preparing to host the Olympics would be breathlessly exciting in the host city, all glamor and anticipation. I still remember the surprise of hearing how many residents actually felt.

Instead of the popular support I expected, I found apathy, frustration, or outright disdain for the Games. I began recording conversations to preserve this seeming paradox. Listening now, over a decade later, two quotations stand out:

“I’m absolutely not staying [in 2012]. ... It’s already mad here and next summer it’ll be impossible. Not a chance.”

—North London resident, 2011

“It’s non-stop construction, you can’t imagine. ... But if they fulfil their promises, if they just provide us with gas, then we’ll forgive everything.”

—Sochi region village resident, 2011

These snippets reveal some of the everyday realities that hide under the mega-event spectacle. In London, the resident was complaining about Olympic-related disruptions to her commute and working life. It was already difficult for her in the preparatory period, so the idea of staying in London during the actual Games seemed unendurable. She unabashedly shared her plans to escape the coming chaos. Her neighbors felt similarly and, with a mixture of exasperation and pride, they traded ideas of where they should go during summer 2012. It felt natural to leave the country for this well-to-do set, and there was no mention of support for Team GB.

Living in a relatively underserved mountain village, the Sochi resident had similar complaints about disruption, though hers were grounded in more foundational problems. Previously, the string of villages between the two new clusters of Olympic venues were quiet, rural, and removed from the bustle of the urban coast. Poorly connected to municipal infrastructure, villagers were accustomed to a certain self-reliance. Power outages were common and repairs were slow. Water came from a local well with an unreliable pump, so those who could afford it kept backup cisterns of non-potable water. There was no gas connection, so villagers heated their houses with wood or coal, and cooked with propane in tanks they replaced themselves. For all that, complaints were few. This was the way it had always been.

Once the Olympics were announced, however, the atmosphere changed. Local authorities pledged to harness the development energies of the Games and improve quality of life for everyone. They promised paved roads, connections to a new highway, stable electricity, potable water, and gas. In the first years after the announcement, I saw alienation and cynicism give way to hope—particularly as authorities shared concrete plans for improvements. But by 2011, already four years into the preparations, there were no improvements for locals. Instead, maximum effort was being poured into the mega-event, building an entirely new tourist town around the mountain cluster of venues. Construction was constant, loud, dusty, and dangerous. Enormous open-bed trucks roared up and down the mountain at all hours. Relentless jackhammering echoed through the valley and at night the spotlights for the workers blotted out the stars. None of the promised improvements had come to pass (see Wolfe, 2020a, 2025, for more on Olympic-led development in these villages). For the woman quoted here, hosting the Olympics was not about sport or national pride, but about bringing basic material provisioning to her everyday life and enduring upheaval until that day arrived. The drilling put so much broken rock into the air that she dusted her windowsills four times a day.

Given this history, I was floored by the profound transformation of attitudes once the Olympics began. During my next UK visit, I learned that the same North London crowd had completely altered their perception of the Games. They were happy and proud—not only of hosting and sport but also of their city and nation. They did not recall wanting to leave London, and instead seemed almost smug that their city had hosted and their athletes had triumphed. This Olympic afterglow was the positive psycho-social impact, the “feel-good factor” that makes mega-event

hosting such a draw for political figures and leaders the world over (Hiller & Wanner, 2015). It is potent stuff.

I found similar emotional patterns in Sochi, where I gathered with relatives and friends around the living room television to watch the Opening Ceremony (who among ordinary people could afford tickets?). It was remarkable to watch the televised spectacle melt away their years of frustration. Without exaggeration, the ceremony moved people to tears—and no one remembered the lack of gas or the dozen other broken promises and Olympic-related disasters. I witnessed the magic of the feel-good factor in real-time, shifting the hearts of people who had suffered and were continuing to suffer because of Olympic-led development.

Naturally, this euphoria could not last. It began to fade soon after the Closing Ceremony, leaving what could be called the mega-event hang-over (Hall & Hodges, 1996). Like the regrets that follow an evening of overindulgence, the “morning after” a mega-event too often comprises a dawning recognition of the many planning and management disasters that occurred during the pressures of the preparations. These problems are well-documented in mega-events around the globe and include underestimated costs, busted budgets, oversized and unnecessary infrastructures, and a variety of other deleterious social, political, ecological, and economic impacts (Flyvbjerg et al., 2021; Karamichas, 2013; Müller, 2015a). They are universal, though their severity varies. Examining mega-events after the spotlight reveals that broken promises are less an exception and more of a rule.

Regardless of nation or political-economic context, the mega-event story remains largely the same: a preparatory phase filled with promises and then disruptions, an event phase where the feel-good effect works its magic, and a hang-over phase where the actual impacts come to light—by which time most media and scholarly attention has moved on to the next Games down the list. The promises of economic booms, urban revitalization, increased participation in sport, environmental progress, and any of the many meanings of “sustainability” achieve limited or selective successes at best, and at worst are outright deceptive and destructive (Baade & Matheson, 2004; Horne & Whannel, 2016; Mair et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2021; Weaver et al., 2021). Typically, mega-events succeed at spectacle but at little else. In many ways they are classic examples of Potemkinism, where a superficial surface masks less savory realities underneath (Broudehoux, 2017; Wolfe, 2021, 2023).

Yet there is more to the story than this. Alongside the too-familiar tales of broken promises, marginalization, displacement, destruction, and loss, the feel-good factor can have real implications on cities and societies. Sometimes fleeting but sometimes durable, the social dimension of mega-events is all at once subjective but real, artificial but authentic. Often, it is one of the only positive aftereffects of hosting (Cornelissen & Maennig, 2010; Musikavanhu et al., 2021; J. Sugden & Tomlinson, 1996). At the same time, the feel-good factor is not necessarily innocent: it can be created, coopted, or instrumentalized. It can be shaped by state actors for (geo)political purposes.

One of the goals of this book is to explore the political implications of hosting mega-events across a range of cases from around the globe, combining the sensitivity of grounded local research with broader perspectives on geopolitics and global affairs. Each chapter comprises a unique case, where the articulation of the event is contingent on the host country's specific national, cultural, political, and economic contexts. But mega-events are also global productions, enrolled in and dependent on dense translocal networks. Thus, local processes are enmeshed with broader regional and international developments. Each mega-event is simultaneously hyperlocal and in deep conversation with the wider world.

Against the backdrop of the mega-event story (preparatory phase of promises and disruptions, event phase with the power of the feel-good factor, and hang-over phase of realization and regret), the chapters collected here unpack some of the paradoxes of mega-events (Müller, 2017). In so doing, they uncover the (geo)political ramifications of hosting at a variety of scales, and from the vantage point of multiple academic disciplines and traditions. They begin from a common concern for the everyday impacts that continue to affect host cities and societies after the global spotlight has moved on.

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

This is a collective work composed by an international and multidisciplinary team of experts, all of whom have unique expertise in their regions. To avoid the disjointed character that sometimes plagues edited volumes, the authors work with the same basic theoretical vocabulary, introduced here. This conceptual foundation remains consistent throughout the book, meaning that each chapter is relatively shorter, more empirical, and with less theoretical background than might be expected in a more

traditional academic endeavor. The aim is to spare the reader the redundancy and potential confusion of parsing different authors' particular conceptual engagements. Each author or author team engages with the book's foundational concepts to whatever degree they wish and follows their cases to their own conclusions, but the overall goal is the same: to engage similar tools to explore the (geo)political implications of hosting mega-events at a range of scales, from the individual to the global.

We begin with the basic definition of mega-events. These hallmarks of modernity are short-term, one-off celebrations of sport or culture that cost and generate fortunes, attract global attention, and engender long-term impacts on cities and societies (Horne, 2007; Müller, 2015b; Roche, 2002). They are inseparable from international and domestic politics, and are the perennially popular subject of a global and interdisciplinary academic literature (Bairner et al., 2017; Cornelissen, 2010; Koch, 2017). This literature has some problems, however: first, most scholarly and media attention occurs during the preparatory phases, and there is a tendency to forget host cities after the Closing Ceremony, when global attention shifts to the next Games down the list. Work on the aftereffects of hosting—even simply following up on the promises from the preparatory period—is too rare. This book returns past mega-events to the spotlight.

To be sure, there is some literature on mega-event legacy, a term that refers broadly to a host-city's post-event condition. Despite the fact that it appears in some chapters here, I personally prefer to avoid the term because of its conceptual fuzziness: organizers and boosters employ it in an exclusively positive sense, while scholars tend toward a more heterogeneous and sometimes critical view (Koenigstorfer et al., 2019; Leopkey & Parent, 2012). For me, the crucial aspect is to acknowledge that "legacy" is contested and using it risks contributing to a normative positive framing that presents hosting experiences as an unalloyed good for all (see Wolfe et al., 2024 for more on this and other contested terms). Instead, I endeavor to frame the lingering impacts of mega-event hosting as *aftereffects*, which carry less conceptual and ideological baggage. My hope would be that work on mega-event aftereffects does justice to actually existing complexities, while also reminding global audiences of the importance of remembering and contextualizing with previous host cities and societies. Regardless of terminology, the fact remains that for all their global attention, mega-events—and especially the host city population—largely disappear from public attention after the Games leave town.

Another problem in the mega-events literature is that most of the field is composed of single case studies. The comparative studies that do exist focus on a given aspect, such as economic impact or urban development, or tracking a certain definition of legacy or sustainability (Chalkley & Essex, 1999; Fett, 2020; Leonardsen, 2007; Leopkey & Parent, 2012; Müller et al., 2021). This book is similar: we begin in the general domain of mega-event politics, investigating how hosting shapes individuals and societies through notions of unity and greatness, but also unpacking local developments underneath the Potemkin surface of the global spectacle (Broudehoux, 2015; Wolfe, 2023). The book aspires to present the best of both worlds: in-depth case studies built on local expertise, but framed in global comparative perspective in order to bring larger patterns and new conclusions to light.

The notion of mega-event politics is broad and diverse. A political framing has been engaged to study the governance of sporting institutions, the marriage of sport and ideology, how sport influences notions of ethnicity and statehood, and the intersections of global sport and modernity (Bairner et al., 2017; Black, 2007; Boykoff, 2016; Roche, 2002). Another common usage of the political is to explore the mechanisms and rationales that underpin hosting mega-events, and the implications that follow on a variety of publics. In this context, work can be divided roughly into domestic and international strands.

Domestically, work tends to focus on the politics of hosting coalitions, the local articulations of urban planning, the repercussions of surveillance and securitization processes, and popular resistance (Dart & Wagg, 2016; Giulianotti & Klauser, 2011; Hiller, 2000; Lauermaann, 2014; Lauermaann & Vogelpohl, 2017; Pauschinger, 2023). Internationally, work centers on the so-called global stage, framing mega-events as a tool of statecraft, international relations, or sports diplomacy (Grix, 2015; Nygård & Gates, 2013; Pamment, 2019; Postlethwaite et al., 2023). This can also be understood as mega-event geopolitics (Koch, 2017).

This geopolitics of mega-events is often conceptualized as part of a nation's soft power toolbox (Nye, 1990, 2005, 2008), where soft power is the ability of states to achieve goals not through military or economic force, but by the politics of attraction and cooptation. It is about "getting others to want what you want" (Nye, 1990, p. 167). In the context of mega-events, soft power is understood either to introduce a new understanding of the host nation to the global stage or to launder the national image through sport (Boykoff, 2022; Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Jeong,

2021). More specifically, soft power has been used to explain the hosting aspirations for the new generation of mega-event nations outside of the Global North. In this reading, hosting mega-events is a way for “new” or “developing” nations to claim a place alongside major states, to leverage image politics on the global stage, and to open up to international flows of attention, tourists, and capital (Black & Westhuizen, 2004; Cornelissen, 2010; Grix et al., 2019).

Not every nation can secure hosting rights for the Olympics or the men’s Football World Cup, however, so the supposed soft power benefits of the world’s most prestigious mega-events remain out of reach. For these, there exist a range of second- and third-tier options that nevertheless have the potential to engender similar—although smaller-scale—effects. These aspirational events remain understudied in comparison to their larger and more famous cousins. Addressing this oversight, some authors collected in this volume bring them into conversation with better-known mega-events. For instance, see Whigham on the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow; Holleran, Minner, and Abbott on Expo ‘88 in Brisbane; Zumbraegel and Sons on COP18 in Qatar; and Kazakov and Andrejevs on middle-tier mega-events in Central and Eastern Europe. The potential of soft power gains for various audiences plays a key role in all of these events.

In general, the literature on mega-event soft power tends to show a bias toward global scales, reflecting the concept’s origins in political science and international relations. A major problem, however, is that this view overlooks the host population. Thus, another rationale for this book is that any instrumentalization of soft power that neglects the domestic is incomplete. To be sure, there exists a separate body of good work that explores the domestic implications of mega-event hosting, generally framing developments through nation-building, identity formation, and symbolic politics (e.g., Alekseyeva, 2014; Kazakov, 2019; Koch, 2013; Militz, 2019; Whigham, 2022). I submit that this domestically focused literature could gain by considering the conceptual vocabulary of soft power. Including domestic populations as a target audience for soft power brings new light to the relationships between state actors, mega-event coalitions, and host populations. This helps us read mega-events within the broader story of a city and nation’s unique trajectory.

I explored domestic soft power previously (e.g., Wolfe, 2016, 2021), but for the purposes of this book, the theoretical approach in Wolfe (2020b) is most relevant. There, I theorized soft power along several

dimensions. In my reading, soft power is not just a tool of official statecraft, but can be created or coopted by multiple agents simultaneously. This perspective acknowledges that different actors with potentially conflicting goals can attempt to harness mega-events for their own designs. Further, institutional actors themselves are not monolithic, and can contain multitudes of differing aspirations. This end of the soft power equation, then, is more complex than traditionally recognized, comprising a heterogeneous assemblage of organizers, local and national authorities, event franchise owners, and domestic and international business concerns, each with their own internal divisions and external postures. This complexity has implications on how soft power is conceived of, formed, engaged, and directed.

It gets more complicated: it is not just soft power creators that are multiple, but also soft power targets. In much of the literature, the audience for soft power projects is assumed to be both international and singular. This is dangerously reductionist. There is an unstated assumption in much of Nye's foundational work—and subsequently much of the work he inspired—that the North American experience and perspective is the default. This perspective misses the breadth and diversity of the global population, and behaves as though the only potential audience for a nation's soft power aspirations must be the United States (or more charitably the Global North or "The West"). In truth, when nations outside of Western Europe and North America host mega-events, they direct significant energies toward a multitude of other audiences, especially in the so-called Global South, as detailed in this volume by Zumbraegel and Sons with Qatar; by Gurol regarding Beijing; and by Kazakov and Andrejevs in reference to the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Soft power is messy and multiple.

Moreover, soft power exists in dynamic interplay with hard power, where hard power is understood as the coercion of economic or military force. In later work, Nye attempted to balance these supposed opposites, working with what he called *smart power* (Nye, 2011). In Nye's reading, a state's successful smart power strategy integrates all available resources to achieve policy goals. In contrast, the work collected here demonstrates how hard power realities act as both context and constraint for soft power projects. As much as authorities may wish to leverage mega-events to present a friendly and welcoming image to the wider world, these aspirations are always undergirded by a lurking undercurrent of violence and the relentless pursuit of profit. This is the hard edge of soft power.

Finally, there is another factor that is commonly overlooked: the issue of time. As soft power is not singular, neither is it stable. Instead, it shifts over time due to a variety of factors, including the vagaries of political-economic context and the demands of hard power. A nation that bids for and wins mega-event hosting rights is, in many ways, different from the nation that actually hosts. The shifting constellations of power and personal relationships have implications for how soft power is both understood and articulated. Soft power is fluid, complex, multiple, subjective, operates differently at different scales, intermingles with hard power, and changes over time.

It is important to note that this book's engagement with soft power is not an attempt to nail down this famously fluid and ambiguous concept (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2023; Feklyunina, 2016). Nor is it relevant here to consider the nuanced overlaps and divergences between soft power, nation branding, public diplomacy, or sports diplomacy (Rookwood, 2019). In point of fact, an argument could be made that the notion of soft power obscures more than it reveals, and probably has outlived its conceptual utility. Still, the term continues to be used by scholars and practitioners alike, so we employ it here too, particularly as it continues to have relevance outside of the academy. Rather than a concern with soft power itself, however, the point here is to focus on soft power's hard edge, and to use this as an entry point to explore the mega-event Potemkin dynamic between spectacular promises and damaging outcomes. This book is concerned with the interplay between soft and hard powers, and in the mega-event gap between rhetoric and reality.

Potemkinism is predicated on the relationship between a beautiful but superficial surface that hides a less palatable reality underneath (Broudehoux, 2015, 2017; Wolfe, 2023). There are overlaps between mega-event Potemkinism and Debord's work on spectacle (see Tomlinson, 2002), but the concepts are distinct. Grounded in Marxian thought, Debord's spectacle refers to alienation, the loss of authenticity through commodification, the colonization of everyday life, and the suppression of critical thought. In contrast, Potemkinism—predating Marx by several decades—stems from the voyage of Empress Catherine II to the conquered territories of Novorossiya and Crimea, and the apocryphal story of Prince Grigory Potemkin tricking her with fake village façades along the river banks (Panchenko, 1999). The concept is less about commodification and capital accumulation than it is about managed artifice for an event, especially regarding the concealment of poverty, damage, and decay. Engaging the concept of Potemkinism is useful for disrupting the typical

chronology of the mega-event story, puncturing the power of the feel-good factor, and bringing to light damages that normally only become visible during the hang-over phase of realization and regret. It is also a way to render visible those host city residents who lost something when the Games came to town, and whose problems are too often drowned out by the glare of the spectacle. This is the tactic engaged by Musikavanhu in her chapter on South Africa 2010, diving under the Potemkin surface to focus on overlooked residents.

A final example of Potemkinism stems from the sale of broadcasting rights—the source of most mega-event profits. This requires a manicured presentation of the host city that is palatable for global business, yet the situation for residents often differs wildly from the sanitized view beamed around the globe. The mega-event city looks fabulous, and indeed is a marvelous party for some, but in actuality the true costs and impacts are concealed.

Beyond soft power and Potemkinism, there are a few more themes at play in this book. Notably, mega-events have expanded beyond the traditional hosts in the Global North, leading to investigations of the overlaps between mega-events and authoritarianism. This was expressed memorably in 2013 by Jérôme Valcke, then FIFA Secretary General, when he said:

I will say something crazy, but less democracy is sometimes better for organizing a World Cup. When you have a very strong head of state who can decide, as maybe Putin can do in 2018, that is easier for us organizers than a country such as Germany. (quoted in Reuters, 2013)

With refreshing candor, Valcke explains why organizers appreciate authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning countries, and reveals some of the fundamental contradictions and hypocrisies involved in the current model of hosting mega-events. In the final analysis, and regardless of politics or sport or emotion, this is a multi-billion-dollar business. Valcke's logic is coherent: FIFA is not in the business of democracy or sustainability or positive legacies or the other platitudes commonly used by organizers and boosters. FIFA is in the business of making money from a sport that is so colossally popular that it has been called the world's religion. If an authoritarian politics helps ensure the security of the business, then that can only be an advantage. The logic of the profit motive does not necessarily agree with authentic democratic processes (though see Fett, 2019 for an economic analysis of the benefits of more democratic hosts).

There are serious problems with classifying nations whole cloth as authoritarian or not, however. Here, we focus not on authoritarian *states*, but authoritarian *practices* (Glasius, 2018a, 2018b). This perspective eschews the notion that nations are discrete containers ready for labeling, and rather allows for the discovery and analysis of authoritarian actions—including in host countries that might otherwise be classified as democratic. This opens a new dimension in the mega-events literature, particularly when brought into conversation with the conceptual vocabulary of domestic soft power. Here, the risk is that the spectacular emotional and affective power of hosting a mega-event can introduce or entrench political practices and technologies that are detrimental to democratic politics and human rights, as detailed here by Cardoso and Pauschinger in Brazil, Kazakov and Andrejevs in Russia, and Boykoff and McFeely in the United States. Mega-event soft power can be directed toward domestic audiences to generate great nation populist narratives that are later shaped for nefarious (geo)political purposes.

Further, focusing on practices helps avoid the orientalization or outright racism that can occur when discussing mega-event hosts outside of the Global North. This is not an argument to avoid criticism, but rather a move against essentialism, and to an understanding that non-democratic practices and deleterious outcomes can occur everywhere. These are global problems that manifest in local contexts, shaped by local conditions, but they are not unique to a particular area of the globe.

On this conceptual foundation, this book presents chapters on mega-events in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, North America, South America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Australia. Though the chapters engage with all the foundational concepts to various degrees, they are ordered here around their primary themes. Chapters 2 (Whigham: United Kingdom), 3 (Musikavanhu: South Africa), and 4 (Holleran, Minner, and Abbott: Australia), all center on the Potemkin dynamic. Chapter 5 (Zumbraegel and Sons: Qatar) also explores Potemkinism but continues into authoritarian functioning. Chapters 6 (Gurol: China) and 7 (Cardoso and Pauschinger: Brazil) focus largely on authoritarian practices. Chapter 8 (Kazakov and Andrejevs: Central and Eastern Europe) continues the authoritarian discussion but moves into hard power, and Chap. 9 (Boykoff and McFeely: United States) finishes on the interplay between power soft and hard. Finally, in Chap. 10, I identify patterns between the chapters, draw conclusions, and suggest some potential directions for future research.

Bringing diverse global cases into conversation, the book encompasses and transcends the international and domestic dimensions of mega-events, allowing space for regional specificities while remembering developments at larger scales. We bring past events back to the spotlight, exploring the forgotten spaces between Potemkin rhetoric and lived reality, and unpacking the aftereffects of what actually happens to cities and societies when mega-events come to town.

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