



Conclusion: After the Spotlight

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Abstract This conclusion briefly revisits the preceding chapters, drawing out common themes and proposing some questions for future research. Each chapter used mega-events to explore the internal dynamics of host societies after the global spotlight, investigating the implications of hosting on a variety of publics. Brought into comparative perspective, the chapters reveal a global community of host cities and societies, each suffering from similar broken promises and squandered potential. Regarding future research, the conclusion underscores the importance of local context, attention to difference, and the role of time, restating the book's overall dedication to exploring beneath the glittering Potemkin surface of these perpetually popular but perniciously problematic mega-events.

Keywords Soft power • Potemkinism • Geopolitics • Time • Mega-events

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Mega-events are still something of a common currency in our increasingly fractured and fragile world. They come with seasonal regularity and are almost universally recognizable, providing opportunities for celebration, relaxation, and potential communion with neighbors from down the street or the other side of the globe. But this presentation is incomplete. As demonstrated in these chapters, the lofty goals and sanitized imaginaries presented by organizers and boosters do not fully reflect local realities. Too often with mega-events, the spectacle and glamor eclipse all else, rendering invisible the actual impacts on host cities and societies. Combined with the fact that most scholarly and media attention disappears after the closing ceremonies, this means that the Potemkin presentation can pass into history as the full story.

This book works against these tendencies and strives for a more complete retelling of the aftereffects of hosting. These chapters return past mega-events to the spotlight, exploring underneath the superficial surface to reveal a more complicated picture of how authorities and governments attempt to direct mega-event soft power toward a variety of audiences, how these attempts are imbricated with hard power realities, and what effects they engender on host cities and societies.

Despite important regional variations, the cases collected here share much in common. Reading the book as a whole reveals something like a global community of former host societies, all of whom shared in the decidedly mixed bag of bringing the world to their front yard. What happens in the back yard during that process is both unique to each case and recognizable across former host cities worldwide.

As these are global events, the book features cases from each major global region. Clearly there are problems and exclusions with this approach (Why China and not Japan or South Korea? Why the United Kingdom instead of France or Germany?). At the same time, the goal was not to be comprehensive—how could we be?—but rather to provide a more-or-less global overview that attempts to strike a healthy balance between depth and breadth. Each author in this global team is expert in their region, thus providing the depth. The breadth comes when they are brought into comparative perspective with sister cases from around the world. Future work should attempt to fill the gaps overlooked here, both empirically and theoretically. Might there be cases in an unmentioned country—perhaps with a middle-tier mega-event—where the theoretical purchase of Potemkinism falls flat, or where the soft power potential is actualized without a hard edge?

Taken together, these chapters reveal the local articulations of global processes that follow recognizable patterns, and with remarkably similar effects. For instance, hosts in developing regions tend to try leveraging mega-events for international recognition, while those in more established economies typically strive for refreshed political relevance combined with some degree of urban revitalization or renewal. In both cases, though, these internationally focused aspirations too often result in deleterious outcomes for host populations. There are many such patterns on display in this book.

Though the chapters differ in their choice of scope and focus, just as the authors themselves belong to different disciplinary traditions, I find the work complementary rather than contradictory—providing corroborating evidence, filling in the gaps, or suggesting alternative approaches to certain aspects of other chapters. Consider the broken promises for the Cape Town residents relayed by Musikavanhu in parallel with Cardoso and Pauschinger’s work on Rio de Janeiro. Despite the fact that they do not focus on Brazilian resident experience—instead drawing links between mega-events and the militarization of security practices—the theme of broken promises runs like an undercurrent through this chapter. Every investment into the new security centers is an investment not made into meaningful social or material advancements for the host population.

Going further, take the real estate speculation underlying the hosting experiences in Brisbane as detailed by Holleran, Minner, and Abbott, demonstrating how local power constellations use mega-events to legitimize or force through controversial plans at the municipal level. This work encourages thinking about similar processes in other host cities, regardless of the fact that the other authors do not explicitly engage this specific aspect. Nevertheless, a cursory look at other literature reveals that real estate speculation plays a central role in the broader mega-event story and reminds that these disparate processes are all of a piece. Similarly, Whigham’s exploration of internal and external (geo)political dynamics in the United Kingdom highlights dysfunctional constitutional arrangements that are both brought to light and papered over by hosting. This Potemkin presentation of UK unity parallels Gurol’s analysis of the Chinese party-state’s image projection in Beijing 2008 and 2022, and suggests that—regardless of political-economic context—hosting mega-events can enable authoritarian practices and run counter to domestic realities and authentic democratic processes.

Consider further how the mega-event presentation of unity affected the muscular posture of the United States after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, elaborated by Boykoff and McFeely. Kazakov and Andrejevs detail striking connections here with the Central and Eastern European mega-event experience, including the mega-event decade in Russia. Despite the disastrous aftereffects—the ultimate consolidation of authoritarian power and the war against Ukraine—the initial motivations for hosting aimed to introduce better relations between Russia and the wider world. These national attempts to participate in the global “big leagues” dovetail with mega-events in Qatar, explored by Zumbraegel and Sons. That chapter highlights the importance of key individuals in the articulation of the mega-event, which resonates with developments in Brazil and beyond. Similarly, as mega-events will be hosted more often in the Gulf region, it is important to remember the particular risks of entrenched authoritarian functioning elaborated in other chapters.

There are so many intricate webs of connection between the cases. Consider the Command-and-Control System established in Brazil and compare with the new systems of surveillance and control established in Sochi and then Russia as a whole. These resonate in uncomfortable ways with the securitization and militarization processes seen in Salt Lake City 2002 and London 2012, and remind that contexts nominally considered democratic and free are not immune from the spread of authoritarian practices.

None of this is to say that these mega-event stories are commensurate, particularly in regard to resident experience. Further, we should not be tempted into a competitive analysis and attempt to rank these stories in a kind of Olympics of Suffering. Rather, the point with the comparative perspective is to appreciate how these chapters harmonize with one another, suggesting new avenues for investigation of shared or contrasted experience.

To conclude this collection, I want to explore some connections, questions, and overarching themes revealed by reading the chapters as a collective work. First, difference matters. To start, the uniqueness of each host city and country affects profoundly the articulation of the mega-event. This seems self-evident but it is worth unpacking the implications. Mega-events always involve significant opportunity costs no matter where in the world they are, but the impacts tend to hit harder in developing economies—as detailed, for example, in Musikavanhu’s chapter on South Africa. To be sure, no country’s elites are immune to the temptation of leveraging

mega-event soft power on the world stage, but it is important to remember that the deleterious impacts tend to be felt more severely in some economies over others.

More broadly, the base conditions (political functioning, economic structure, cultural specificities) of different host societies bring to light different potentials within the mega-event experience. For instance, there seems to be a strange proclivity for authoritarianism within mega-event planning. If the host society also leans toward authoritarian practices, then these tendencies can complement and augment one another. Cardoso and Pauschinger demonstrate this in their chapter on the authoritarian legacy in Brazil, as do Zumbraegel and Sons in their investigation of power players in Qatar. Similarly, if the host society is undergoing a shift to more neoliberal functioning, this can resonate with parallel affinities in the mega-event and shape planning priorities to match. Holleran, Minner, and Abbott explore this in the real estate speculation and tourism-focused reorientation of Brisbane, just as Whigham does on the neoliberal political orthodoxy underlying mega-events in the United Kingdom. The larger conclusion is that mega-events should not be studied without appropriate attention to the already existing conditions of their hosts. They do not, after all, take place in a vacuum. This is especially important now that mega-event reforms—under the laudable but potentially Potemkin goal of sustainability—have refashioned hosting requirements to work in concert with a city’s existing plans.

Each of these chapters tackles a particular aspect of difference, for instance focusing on different actors involved in the mega-event story. By nature, mega-events are elite projects, and elite actors in any host nation commonly attempt to leverage them for their own aims, whether longstanding or new. Insofar as these aims overlap with the public good, then mega-events can be said to be beneficial. At the same time, it is clear that mega-events cause harm, and that this harm disproportionately affects the poorest and most vulnerable. In between these categories is a broad swath of host city residents who are not involved formally in the event, nor who are particularly damaged by it. It is here that the feel-good effect is most powerful. Outside of the host city, this can also affect global audiences who tune in, including assemblages of international business, media, and political figures, to say nothing of the academics and other commentators who also make their living in the wider ecosystem of this traveling circus. This international audience is the basis for what is understood as mega-event soft power. One of the core contentions of this book is that soft

power can be directed at different audiences, both international and domestic. The larger point is that a sensitivity to the differences between and within these multiple audiences is key to understanding why the meaning of mega-events can vary so widely.

There is another dimension of difference that plays a crucial role: that of time. The *when* of the question is understudied and too often unexamined. This does not only apply to the host country, which—given the time frames involved in mega-event planning—is substantially a different place than the country that won the bid. Time also applies to the study of mega-events, where most can be divided roughly into *before* or *after* the Games, with a minority concentrating on *during*. Time can also refer both to the specific period under investigation and to when the piece itself was written, as both have implications for results. For instance, a piece written during the early phases of the preparatory period, when hosting seems full of promise, can differ wildly from a piece written during the later phases, as organizers scramble to complete projects on time, and the city roils under the scramble of last-minute preparations. Similarly, a post-event analysis taken six months after the closing might reveal an array of unused venues, but several years later these might be fully occupied and playing important roles in the city. Another question to consider is how long the feel-good effect lasts, and how this might change common understandings of the value of hosting. The point is that a sensitivity to the differences engendered by time is vital for a more complete understanding of what mega-events do to cities and societies. For this reason, the authors here work broadly on the aftereffects period, or more bluntly, within the hangover phase of the mega-event story. This is not only due to the relative lack of studies written after the peak of global attention, but also to provide a counterweight to the power of the feel-good effect.

In sum, mega-event scholarship relies on abstraction in order to explore mega-event phenomena—whether regarding the synecdoche of nations or cities, the homogenization of actor groups, or the nature of time. In so doing we risk mistaking the abstraction for reality and thereby miss the complexity of actually existing relationships. In this light it is crucial to remember that nothing—no group and indeed not even an individual—is homogenous, and that thinking in categories is a useful analytical shortcut but not all there is. In a variety of different ways, the authors collected here strive to defy categorical thinking and unsettle the research on mega-events. The chapters—organized according to emphasis on Potemkinism, engagement with authoritarian practices, and relationship to hard

power—could easily have been sorted in different ways to emphasize other aspects of the work. In all cases, however, the authors use mega-events to explore the internal dynamics of host societies after the spotlight, unpacking elite planning priorities and investigating the implications of hosting on a variety of publics.

Within this frame, the authors explore multiple dimensions of mega-event soft power. Here it is important to differentiate between soft power *targets* (whether international or domestic) and soft power *byproduct effects*. In other words, aside from their putative goals, soft power projects can engender a variety of unintended effects on different populations. Reading these chapters as a whole, a new feature of Potemkinism occurs to me: perhaps Potemkinism is the domestic byproduct from internationally targeted soft power. In any case, the chapters each reveal different interpretation of this relationship, whether focusing on the display of national significance for the international stage while masking problematic domestic affairs (Gurol; Whigham; Holleran, Minner, and Abbott), the hard power aspirations hiding under the façade of sporting unity (Kazakov and Andrejevs; Boykoff and McFeely), the spectacular celebrations that conceal the growth and entrenchment of authoritarian practices (Zumbraegel and Sons; Cardoso and Pauschinger), or the efforts to introduce a more palatable national image while deemphasizing authentic domestic improvements (Musikavanhu; Kazakov and Andrejevs).

These are complicated questions that have worldwide relevance. They also suggest numerous potential avenues for future research. Can hosting mega-events in more closed or repressive societies help inculcate more humane politics? Or does hosting simply offer a smokescreen for political consolidation and greed, while granting already powerful figures a global stage on which to project superficial images of the nation? Is there ever any place for marginalized populations in mega-events, and where is the line between inclusion and tokenism? Can mega-events ever be divorced from their destructive tendencies, or are the ideas of reform merely cover for the continuation of business as usual, albeit in more disguised and diffuse forms? I do not suggest that there are clear answers to these questions. Rather, as demonstrated by the chapters collected here, the point is to penetrate the mega-event spectacle and investigate what hides underneath the glittering Potemkin surface.

This book reveals that certain aspects of the mega-event story remain consistent, regardless of local conditions. These are major investments for host societies, and they should be taken seriously as political and economic

projects with high risks. Insofar as possible, discourse should be removed from the intoxication of glamor and prestige, and we—researchers and residents alike—should remain wary of hyperbolic and utopian promises. This can be a real challenge in the whirlwind euphoria of the feel-good effect.

Soft power is no joke. There is profound potential to move societies via the emotional and affective dimensions of hosting, which is not to be dismissed lightly. Domestically, soft power can be coopted into nationalism and aggression, but it can equally contribute to life-changing feelings of togetherness, belonging, and a greater purpose. Internationally, it can alter the trajectory of entire nations, opening or closing states to wider circuits of commerce, tourism, and social and cultural interchange. But, too often, these projects generate nasty byproduct side-effects, or this potential for better and more meaningful relations is squandered. Instead of opener societies, better international and domestic connections, higher standards of living, and a global party for the benefit of all, we see the same sad results of the same tired mega-event story. In the end, the logic of the profit motive tends to dominate other considerations and possibilities. Under the pressure of presenting prestige in the glare of the international gaze, mega-event preparations too often are accomplished for the checkmark, rather than substantially improving conditions for host cities and societies. In too many cases, we see that hosting mega-events lands on the backs of those least able to afford them. It is an open question as to why local organizers and authorities regularly mortgage the future of their most vulnerable citizens.

In hopes of steering toward better outcomes, this book explores mega-events after the spotlight to unpack what they have done to cities and societies worldwide. How they use sport to restructure internal political dynamics, and how they use passion and prestige to hide terrible consequences. How they reveal dynamics unique to each host context, and how they ignore local voices in every city around the globe. How they play into geopolitical aspiration, and how they play out to the disadvantage of the poor and vulnerable. How they are perennially popular, yet how they mask their problems under a Potemkin surface of superlatives, spectacle, and success. Together, these chapters present an international and transdisciplinary understanding of the local and global (geo)political implications of hosting mega-events, ultimately revealing the hard edge hiding within the allure of soft power.

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