



Approaching paradox: Loving and hating mega-events



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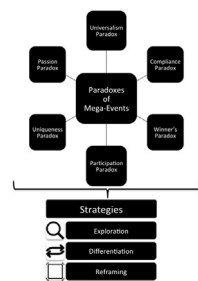
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HIGHLIGHTS

- Tourism is predicated on paradoxes.
- Six key paradoxes constitute mega-events as expressions of modernity.
- There are 3 strategies to approach paradoxes: exploration, differentiation, reframing.
- Paradoxes should not be resolved, but harnessed for their creative potential.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of paradoxes in research and proposes strategies of engaging with them. For this purpose, it analyses the ways in which six paradoxes are constitutive of sports mega-events such as the Olympic Games: the universalism paradox, the compliance paradox, the winner's paradox, the participation paradox, the uniqueness paradox and the passion paradox. It then develops three strategies of how researchers and practitioners can approach paradox. The first, exploration, examines the consequences and effects of the ambiguity of paradoxes. The second, differentiation, enquires into the spatio-temporal and social make-up of paradoxes. The third, reframing, recasts paradoxes by shifting theoretical perspectives. Instead of pressing to resolve paradoxes, researchers and practitioners alike should make productive use of their ambiguity.

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1. Introduction

Mega-events are, in many ways, mirrors of late modern life. The Olympic Games, the Football World Cup and other large public spectacles reflect the janus-faced nature of the late modern world: the ethos of individualisation and competition, the primacy of the

mediatised spectacle, the consumption of symbolic goods, the global mobility of capital, people and information, the extension of economic relations into ever more spheres of life (Horne & Whannel, 2016; Roche, 2000; Spracklen & Lamond, 2016).

Like no other human endeavour, 'the biggest show on television' (Billings, 2008, p. 1) relies on modern mass media to captivate a worldwide audience in the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1967), earning billions of dollars with the attention of their viewers. Mega-events embody the turn to the symbolic economy (Lash & Urry, 1994), with the primacy of consumption over production

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and the importance of symbolic narrative and imagery. They intervene in the rituals and rhythms of everyday lives (Roche, 2003). Work is something to be fitted around World Cup games; conversations on the next day invariably turn to the match; iconic moments remain forever burnt into collective memory. The mobility of globalised life is a *sine qua non* of mega-events, with their multiple flows of people, capital, knowledge, policies and images across the globe (Bauman, 2006; Castells, 1996). Mega-events are key motors and expressions of nationalism, which is once again on the rise around the world (Smith, 1998). Finally, mega-event hosting often goes in lockstep with the entrepreneurial policies of global competition for capital and attention between cities and nations that characterise neoliberal urbanism (Hall, 2006).

Creatures and reflections of modernity, mega-events also share another key feature with late modern life: their paradoxical nature. 'To be modern', philosopher Marshall Berman (1988, p. 13) wrote, 'is to live a life of paradox and contradiction'. The Olympic Games celebrate universal humankind, yet nowhere is a division of the world into nations starker. Organising a mega-event looks to future legacies, yet nowhere do we see such an extreme focus on the here and now. Sport is rule-bound, yet rule-bending and corner-cutting are a core practice of Olympic achievement. Mega-events can be inclusive and communal, but rarely do we find such a high degree of exclusion and exclusivity. It is with good reason that mega-events have been called, paradoxically again, forces of creative destruction (Gotham, 2016): they destroy – neighbourhoods, communities, old infrastructure – but they create at the same time – new stadia, new communities, new images. Like tourism (Minca & Oakes, 2006b), mega-events are characterised by contradictory statements, sentiments, and tendencies that are not easily resolved.

This paper discusses ways in which to approach the various paradoxes that confront scholars in tourism and event research. It does so by using the paradoxical constitution of mega-events, focusing on sports mega-events among the different types of events (Getz & Page, 2016b, pp. 594; 596). Six paradoxes mark mega-events at various levels: in the performance of sport, in the consumption of the event and in its planning and staging. But rather than trying to resolve these paradoxes or ignoring them, the paper suggests three strategies for dealing with them in a creative fashion so as to create new avenues of thinking: the first strategy, *exploration*, encourages researchers to probe into the ambiguities of paradoxes and the kinds of social action they afford. The second strategy is *differentiation* and advocates an analytical parsing of the component parts of paradoxes, whereas the last strategy, *reframing*, examines paradoxes from a new conceptual angle that accommodates the opposing terms.

2. Paradoxes: engines and brakes of research

Paradoxes are at the heart of scientific inquiry and represent the very enigmas research grapples with. Philosophers have long used paradoxes as a cornerstone of their inquiry; as a way of disciplined speculation and (dis-)proving hypotheses by contradiction. As such, paradoxes can be regarded as 'the atoms of philosophy' (Sorensen, 2003, p. xi) – the basic elements from which philosophical insight springs. The chicken-and-egg problem – did the egg come first or the chicken? – is the first recorded paradox and, with its underlying question about the origin of things, has vexed humans ever since antiquity (Sorensen, 2003). In the natural sciences, physics, for example, thrives on paradoxes and while many have been resolved, others have remained key riddles defining the discipline for decades (Al-Khalili, 2012). The grandfather paradox, which revolves around the impossibility of time travel and parallel universes, continues to divide physicists and Schrödinger's cat remains

a central, yet unresolvable thought experiment on undecidability in quantum mechanics.

Paradoxes are also at the heart of the social sciences. Their unresolved contradictions make them popular objects of research. For Berman, quoted in the introduction, there is one key paradox at the heart of modernity: that humankind's greatest inventions, meant to grant it freedom, have become its most oppressive forces. He is referring, among other things, to rationalisation, standardisation and marketization – developments speeding up the rhythms of everyday life and driving a cycle of relentless creative destruction, as Schumpeter (1942) would have it. For Bauman (1999), the simultaneous increase of individual freedom and collective impotence is the defining paradox of modernity. As individuals have achieved ever more freedom to act, so has the power of collective action declined.

Berman's and Bauman's paradoxes of modernity are just two of many paradoxes in the social sciences. The paradox of belonging refers to how humans become integral members of a group while at the same time retaining their individuality (Lewis, 2000). The Allais paradox describes that people avoid risks, even if they receive a chance for higher expected payoffs (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The diamond-water paradox asks why diamonds command a higher price than water, although water is more useful (Stephenson, 1972). The meat paradox grapples with the apparent contradiction that people love animals but at the same time do not mind slaughtering them and eating them for lunch (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010).

Although literature sometimes uses the two concepts interchangeably, 'contradiction' and 'paradox' have different meanings. A contradiction describes two opposing statements that cannot both be true; only one can prevail. A paradox, by contrast, accommodates two opposing statements; both can prevail. A contradiction therefore operates on an exclusive either/or logic, whereas a paradox operates on an inclusive both/and logic. A contradiction presses for resolution; a paradox is suspended in a state of undecidability where 'what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect' (Massumi, 1995, p. 91). Although often based on binaries, paradoxes can also arise from two non-binary but opposing statements. Consider the example of the concept of 'landscape', a central paradoxical concept in tourism. 'Landscape' both refers to an object and its representation, as Minca (2007, p. 433) notes, to material world and visual image. These are not binary views of landscape, because they do not operate according to the binary principle of a/not a; but they constitute a paradox nevertheless.

The social paradoxes at the heart of the social sciences show an important difference from the so-called logical paradoxes. Logical paradoxes are abstract, often intractable and tend to be the domain of philosophers and logicians. Consider the classical liar's paradox: 'This sentence is a lie.' If this sentence is true, then the sentence is false; but if it is false, then it is not a lie and therefore has to be true again, and so on. Social paradoxes, by contrast, are grounded in space, time and social relations. Unlike logical paradoxes, they do not lead to a standstill or self-referential loop. In fact, social paradoxes are often 'de-paradoxified' in practice (Luhmann, 1993). They do not have so much a logical resolution as a practical workaround. The paradox persists, but social action continues, not so much *despite*, but *because* of the paradox. Minca (2007) demonstrates how tourists deal with the unresolvable tension between landscape as object – as inhabited space – and landscape as meaningful representation, used in glossy brochures and travel films to stoke desires. Unable to resolve the landscape paradox, which is central to the formation of the travelling subject in the first place, tourists seek to negotiate the tension between landscape as object and representation through embodied practices in place.

But their role as central puzzles and engines of scientific inquiry

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