# Destruction or construction? A (counter) branding analysis of sport mega-events in Rio de Janeiro

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of the dialectic construction of city representation in Rio de Janeiro during the phase of preparing for global sport mega-events, such as the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. In particular, it describes event-based city branding as dialectic representational dynamics that occur when attempting to broadcast a 'tailored' image to the world. Official and counter branding, observed in this study through an Internet-based qualitative content analysis, construct an arena for confrontation. The use of urban space and physical transformations, economic development visions, cultural heritage and citizen involvement are key categories entangled in both the institutional/strategic (i.e. the official brand) and counter-hegemonic (i.e. the counter brand) city representations. The analysis showed the dialectic relationship between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives. The analysis suggests not just the destruction of the 'Olympic City' master narrative by means of counter-hegemonic representation, but a (re)construction of a global narrative of 'the city hosting mega-events', enriched by local meanings and symbols. Future research perspectives and open inquiries are proposed in the final section of the paper.

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## 1. Introduction: cities and sport mega-events

The future of contemporary society will be increasingly 'urban'. Cities are the main ground where 'the match' of social and economic development is being disputed (Maiello, 2012). Bidding for and hosting events have become part of this match due, in part, to a *festivalization* and *eventification* of place penetrating urban and economic development (Jacob, 2013). Given the intensity of investments, mega-events have been drawing particular attention among scholars and practitioners. They have been defined as 'short-term' occurrences 'with long-term consequences for the cities that stage them' since they involve building infrastructures and facilities that require long-term investments (Roche, 2006). Proponents of sport mega-events have argued that such events result in direct benefits, such as attraction of capitals, flows of tourists and development of urban infrastructures (Hall, 2006); indirect benefits (Zimbalist, 2010), such as territorial promotion and increase in exportations (Rose & Spiegel, 2011); and civic pride, local identity and empowerment (OECD, 2010).

Sporting events, especially the Olympics, hold a special political–ideological symbolic power (Roche, 2006; Roche, Delanty, & Kumar, 2006). They convey universal and transcultural principles and mobilize a common interest. They transcend social stratifications and evoke both cosmopolitism and universal values, such as peace, justice and mutual respect (Black, 2007). However, recent occurrences show that the appeal of hosting a sport mega-event seems to be decreasing. Four European cities recently dropped off the bid for the 2022 Winter Games: Oslo, Stockholm, Lviv and Krakow. Before they withdrew, popular referendums in Germany and Switzerland rejected the proposal to take part in the bidding process. A common concern for opportunity cost, which entails not only financial, but also social and environmental costs, seems to underpin these decisions to withdraw or abstain from the bidding process. The positive impacts of mega-events have no longer been taken for granted. In addition to their 'economic burdens' (Zimbalist, 2010), mega-events bring considerable social costs (Rolnik, 2009; Santos Junior & Santos, 2013; Vainer, 2011). Eviction and gentrification are considered to be direct effects of mega-events, and recent experience shows that mega-events can exacerbate existing inequalities (Costa, 2013; Grix & Lee, 2013; Schausteck de Almeida, Bolsmann, Marchi Júnior, & de Souza, 2013).

Aimed at contributing to the debate on sport mega-events from an urban studies perspective, this paper focuses on the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and on a specific aspect connected to the 'soft' dimension of development (Pasquinelli & Bellini, 2014), which is here conceptualized as city branding. Sport mega-events are argued to be a powerful city branding strategy as they foster multi-scalar effects of image-building (Allen, Knott, & Swart, 2013). Other researchers, however, have reported limited effects in terms of city image improvement reported during post-event assessment (Zhang & Zhao, 2009). This paper presents an analysis of the dialectic construction of the representation of Rio during the phase of preparing and approaching the sport mega-events hosted by the city. Such a representation results from the impact of the tensions and opposition concerning the envisioning of the urban path of development. In particular, narratives and symbolisms will be framed as on-going processes of official and counter branding of the urban sport mega-events.

The case of Rio was selected since, starting with the 2007 Pan-American Games until the 2016 Olympics, the 'marvellous city' has turned into a hub for world mega-events. This, in turn, has created special conditions for urban transformation, including, for instance, the 'event-related sense of urgency' (Sanchez & Broudehoux, 2013, p. 133). This paper describes the city representation throughout the preparatory stages of sport events as 'a political, conflicting, symbolic field' (Bourdieu, 1991). Findings show that instead of being just about the production of positive and 'cleaned-up' images of the city for global middle-class consumers, the process of event-based city branding consists of a set of dialectic representational dynamics that occur when attempting to broadcast a 'tailored' image of the city to the world.

The article is organized as follows: the first two sections are dedicated to the theoretical background and the presentation of key concepts underpinning the research; the third section presents the case study, explaining the reasons for its selection; the fourth section describes the research methodology and the fifth and sixth sections are respectively intended to report and discuss the results.

## 2. Symbolism and representation of urban transformation

Cities are dynamic places, defined not only by physical boundaries, but also by relational moments (Amin & Graham, 1997; Maiello, Christovão, de Paiva, Britto, & Frey, 2012). They are the result of spatial modifications made of the relational interactions of social, economic and political actors. From a *bourdieusian* perspective, we may conceptualize the urban space as a 'field' disputed by different and competing forces. Each of these forces holds a different perspective on the city's future, and will defend its own project of city transformation. The right to the city is not only the civic right to be part of a public space and its institutional system; it is also the collective right to take an active part in its transformation (Lefebvre, 2003). More than that, it is the right to imagine the city transformation and to see this ideal project become a reality (Harvey, 2013). Disorder is the effect of multiple interactions occurring between different actors and different views. Differences and plurality represent fundamental ingredients which make cities the creative places they are (Bianchini & Schwengel, 1991; Florida, 2002; Harvey, 2013). To play an active role in this complex political arena, actors ought to develop their own idea or vision for their city and ought to be able to represent and communicate it. As Lefebvre suggested, 'an image or representation of the city can perpetuate itself, survive its conditions, inspiring an ideology and urban projects' (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 57).

Bourdieu used the concept of *symbolic power*, i.e. the power 'of creating things with words' (Bourdieu, 1990). This power is in the hands of those who are able to represent social groups and lead their mobilization (Bourdieu, 1991). Bourdieu's symbolic power depends on the following two factors: the representative's *symbolic capital*, which entails the social recognition, reliance and legitimation of a leader in representing social interests; and the capacity of symbolism to represent a real situation.

Symbolism is certainly conveyed through branding that is developed strategically for mega-events. The devised brand may stand for a designed trajectory of urban transformation, yet it can also be manipulated to convey symbols representing alternative trajectories opposing the official trajectory. In this sense, the city representation becomes a 'field' disputed by competing forces. The example of Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics (Black (2007) is instructive here. The *Inuit*[2] stone sculpture, which was supposed to be found in the Canadian arctic region (Fig. 1), was heavily criticized since actually there are no Inuit people in British Columbia. Local movements reinterpreted the cosmopolitan rhetoric used to produce the official branding ('Vancouver as a multicultural and global city') through the use of a different symbolism. They built their discourse using the same rhetorical language chosen by official boosters (the 'global city'), but inserting a different semiotic composed of 'counter-symbols' (Fig. 2). The power of 'counter-symbols' derives from their opposite: in this case, their 'symbolic capital' is built upon the lack of representativeness of the official brand. This example, which echoes culture-jamming techniques of social activists opposing consumerism and mass media messages, shows why the symbolic repertoire is dialectic.

The history of social movements is full of counter-discursive experience. Lee (1998) identifies social actors gathered around an alternative critical discourse as 'subaltern counter-public' or 'parallel discursive arenas', where alternative projects and related representations 'circulate'. According to Lee, the common denominator of effective movements is the disruptive power directed toward the established symbolic order. This form of 'symbolic disobedience' (Lee, 1998) offers citizens a different perspective on ordinary reality and the chance to question hegemonic, top-down projects.

On the other hand, an effective counter-hegemonic project *á la* Gramsci ought to address the fragmentation of multiple subcultures toward a shared, emancipatory, alternative project (Carroll, 2009). Drawing upon Gramsci's perspective, postmodern authors warn about two main forms of cultural fragmentation in post-industrial society (Carroll, 2009): the *ideological diversification* and the *semiotic implosion* (Jameson, 1991; Tetzlaff, 1991). The *ideological diversification* refers to the risk of incommunicability among different social groups, since each is concerned with its own subculture and individual project. On the other hand, the *semiotic implosion* is related to the risk of losing the sense of reality and turning the very meaning of a counter-movement into a sterile criticism that does not lead to an alternative transformative project (Carroll, 2009).

## 3. Official and counter branding: framing the plural character of city representation

Brands and branding have entered the geographical debate as a consequence of the increasingly common mantra of competition among cities and regions, suggesting the role of images, reputation and identities as assets for local and regional development (Pasquinelli, 2014). From a city branding perspective, mega-events represent a strategy to foster multi-scalar effects of image-building (Allen et al., 2013). They are thought to provide an opportunity to reposition global capital cities as 'modern cities' (Zhang & Zhao, 2009). They also give rise to opportunities for

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[2] Inuit is a group of indigenous peoples inhabiting the Arctic regions of Greenland, Canada, and Alaska.