

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

MASTER'S DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
FINAL DISSERTATION IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

**Olympic Games: communication, lobbying and politics in  
international sport events**

*Successes and failures, the case of Rome 2020 and the perfectible bid*

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Academic Year 2012-2013

## **SUMMARY (10-15 pages)**

Olympic Games are now widely recognized as the greatest international event in sport. They are also one of the most profitable events in the world. They are able to catalyse billions of people in front of TVs and computers to follow the actions of their national teams' athletes. Sponsors fiercely fight to gain visibility during the Games, aware of the absolute power enshrined in sport as a commodity.

Nonetheless, from the point of view of the cities, there is widespread debate about the actual convenience of bidding for hosting such a gigantic event. The city entitled to host an edition of the Games has to go through a gigantic workload from up to ten or nine years before the event takes place, up to several years after it. A growing part of the public opinion is becoming more and more sceptical about the benefits originating from the Games, both in terms of economic costs and of future legacy they may (or may not) leave behind.

Therefore, this dissertation falls in the long standing debate about the convenience of hosting the Games. The purpose is to try and understand whether hosting the Olympic Games is still appealing to cities all over the world. This paper analyses the communicative and lobbying efforts of the latest Olympic bids in order to see if these could be classified as successful and, if so, whether this is a perception given by a very good lobbying effort catalysed by intense communication, or if they could be considered the best possible Games in "absolute terms".

To do so it is important to understand why cities may want to host an edition of the Games, and what are the main criticalities in doing it. The first chapter will focus on the main phases of the Olympic Games, from bidding all the way to the aftermath.

Following the opening detailed theoretical part, a series of chapters that aim at providing real examples of Olympic Games, in order to understand if the theory is matched in practice. In particular, chapter two and three will be dedicated to the latest editions of the Games, Beijing 2008 and London 2012. These will provide for detailed

exemplification from bidding to aftermath. Chapter four will present the challenges of an Olympic City in the making, focusing on Rio de Janeiro, the next in line in hosting the Games in 2016. Chapter five, instead, will focus on a failed bid for the most recently awarded Games, the 2020 edition, as Rome had started the bidding process, before unexpectedly dropping out. All the chapters entitled to bring forward examples will be articulated in a more narrative way, in order to facilitate usability. The analysis of Rome will provide for an in-depth “behind-the-scene” description of political and communicative equilibriums, leading to the formulation of an organic summary in chapter six. This final chapter will also include a reasoning about the findings, in order to understand if hosting a Games is still worth for cities, and if criticalities emerged during the course of the dissertation, how these should be addressed.

It has been decided to focus on the most recent Games because these best connect with the present reality of the world, and in the attempt to draw a future model of hosting it is important to focus on examples that are at least as close as possible to the present. Many positive example of hosting the Games can be found in the past. Los Angeles 1984, for example, whose budget was dealt with in an innovative way. Or Barcelona 1992, whose city’s regeneration makes it one of the most successful Games in terms of legacy. Nonetheless, both these editions faced a very different world environment. Globalization had not yet completely fulfilled, its strengths and weaknesses being still hidden from the majority. The Internet, one of the symbols of globalization, had not yet become what it is now in terms of quality of information and global circulation.

Furthermore, among the most recent editions, it was decided to focus on the Summer Olympic Games for the sake of conciseness. These have usually bigger budgets and, in general, lay out as bigger events.

Indeed, throughout the dissertation, the expression “Olympic Games” will not only mean the sixteen days of play *strictu sensu*, but it

will refer to the whole process involved in their making, from the bidding for hosting up to the aftermath. Moreover, for reasons of conciseness, most of the times it will be omitted to refer to the Paralympic Games as well, even though they are included in the more general expression “Olympic Games”.

## **Chapter 1 - Communication and lobbying for the Olympic Games: the general parameters**

Since the purpose of this dissertation is quite ambitious, it is important to start off from the general ideas of the analysis. This first chapter is split in two main parts: the former is dedicated to acknowledging what communication, lobbying and marketing are and their implementation in the field of the Olympic practice, while the latter will expand on the how these should, in theory, put into practice with the purpose of organizing the Olympic Games. The second part of the chapter will therefore include an in-depth analysis of the main phases of the Games – in their broader sense – and of the relative stakeholders.

In order to deeply understand the functionality of communication, marketing and lobbying in the Olympic world, a time-based approach was chosen: through a detailed analysis of all the stages of the Games, it will be possible to clearly underline what is needed to successfully bid and host the Games, while uncovering the best strategies of communication, marketing and lobbying each and every stakeholder should enact, virtually with the ultimate aim to frame a standard set of actions to put forward.

There are a fixed timeline and a number of stakeholders involved in the hosting of the Olympic Games. It is essential to have a grasp of both of them, and foremost to analyse what stakeholders should do and when in time.

The four main stages are: the bidding, the lead-up, the hosting and the aftermath. Each and every of these moments have very peculiar communication strategies that need to be carried out by specific people

or group of people. Before going into the details of each phase, here is a list of those who could (or rather should) be involved throughout these phases, we define them stakeholders, as “any group of individuals who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives”, and we group them in four categories: Institutional, sport, Citizenry, Commercial, Media & press, and non-governmental stakeholders.

## **Chapter 2 - The Beijing experience: the triumph of self-celebration**

This chapter will briefly go through the main phases of the 2008 Olympic Games, with particular focus on the aspects that have been analysed from a theoretical point of view in the previous extract of the dissertation, in order to highlight the significant positive and negative key-points, if any, of the Chinese Olympics.

One thing is to learn unequivocally from the Chinese Olympic experience: legacy must be assessed through different periods of time in the future.

Mainly, Beijing seems to have epitomized about what happens when a developing country wants to establish itself as a developed country through the legitimate message of the Olympic Games. There is a clash of time and space, of social and economic principles that must be addressed: the interesting tension between inclusivity and exclusivity before the Games generated an interesting aftermath curiosity for analysing the legacy from a social (quality of life so environment, social gap, exclusion, human rights in general, program of civilization), economic (sustainable growth, white elephants) and cultural point of view (the internationally unnecessary, if not for China itself, show off). Probably, the primary scope of the bid was to redefine Beijing (and China) as a member of the global community: open to global consumer capitalism while preserving some very peculiar Chinese socialism principles, to enjoy the long awaited economic and financial wealth without selling the philosophical history of modern China to the

Westerners. As said, the clash of ideologies had been so evident not even the greatest communication strategies could hide it definitively, but only time will tell if these Games were the first milestone to Chinese integration in the world community, or sad evidence of incompatibility.

Clearly, the most important tool for *ex-post* assessments like these is time.

### **Chapter 3 - The London experience: pure legacy all the way**

If Beijing 2008 was the result of a reiterated strategy to affirm China as a developed and global country, a clear example of authorities and institutions teaming up from embryo idea to delivery in typical socialist style, London 2012 is, quite frankly, the opposite. Nonetheless, the majesty and greatness of the Chinese Olympics may indeed have been surpassed by those who clearly were not even trying to. This chapter will explore the main features of London 2012 Olympic Games, the most recent Summer Olympics.

The most interesting aspect about London legacy comes from institutional awareness: many reports from different levels of the government, the GLA and of the Parliament have been issued in order to call for a heightened focus on the aftermath of the Olympics. The House of Lords even called for institutionalising a Minister of the Olympics in the Cabinet, due to the important and substantial work that must be done to oversee Olympic legacy in many directions.

One final major result was achieved by the 2012 Olympic Games, and certified: the overall cost of the Games was eventually £8.921 billion, at least £377 million less than finalised pre-Games budget (£9.298 billion).

In any case, London is considered to have hosted one of the best Olympic Games in modern history, and in a few years we should be able to know if we can finalize our judgement and also mark it as the very first 21<sup>st</sup> century success in leaving a tangible and intangible Olympic legacy, in terms of urban regeneration, social inclusion, economic boost

and environmental awareness. Will Rio de Janeiro be able to pick up where London left?

#### **Chapter 4 - The Rio projection: on their way to...**

Among the so called BRIC countries, Brazil is by far the closest to the Western idea of democracy. Just like China, the Brazilian government saw hosting a mega-event as a great chance of showcasing a blossoming country; and, just like London, it was imagined the mega-event would catalyse urban development. As a matter of fact, the men in Brasilia went for the full loot: they bade for the greatest global sport events, i.e. the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, and managed to get them both. The sport spotlight will be on Brazil and Rio de Janeiro at least until 2016. Let's see how this happened and what are the broader implications for such a peculiar country, with a special focus on the Olympic side of the bidding coin.

Considering the political, economic and social situation, Rio can be inscribed as halfway between London and Beijing: philosophically, it means ROCOG, the city and the government can choose to go either way, or go their own way. Eduardo Paes, Rio's rampant and recently re-elected Mayor, embodies this continued anxiety: a young and ambitious man who worked hard to bring the Olympics to South America - even putting aside its political rivalry with ally PT - who says he wants a city of the future, that cares about its citizens, but in reality puts forward a project completely centred on the richest areas of Rio de Janeiro, like Barra da Tijuca, and seems to forget the millions living in slums that will surely enjoy football matches in 2014 and an amazing show in 2016, but may end up more alienated than ever. A very strong communicator, Paes, who is incautiously willing to export his urban development model already, with no more than theory and philosophy in his hands, no concrete proof.

Paradoxically, security, a chief worry at inception, may prove not to be a real problem, as not only PanAm Games were free of infamous street violence, but even the 2013 Confederations Cup was able to

calmly go on amidst an atmosphere of recent protesting. It means most certainly the show of the first South American Olympics in 2016 will be amazing, and the world will remember them for the greatness of the show, while Cariocas and Brazilians will rest with a bittersweet taste in their mouths. As Martins de Melo put it: “we can be sure that the party will be great; however, the hangover could be even greater”. To see what the future holds for Brazil and its internationally “media-mediated” image, let’s tune in on August 5, 2016, when a practical definition of the “*Viva sua Paixão*” slogan will be presented to us in the Opening Ceremony of the Games of the XXXI Olympiad.

## **Chapter 5 - The Rome 2020 surrender: the failure of a (missed) chance**

The 2020 Olympic Games will be hosted in Tokyo, Japan. It was decided on September 7, 2013 in Buenos Aires, at the 125<sup>th</sup> IOC Session. There’s a city that initiated its bidding process for those Games, before abruptly dropping out, somehow unexpectedly: this city is Rome, Italy. The chapter will analyse the early stages of Rome application, all the way through its abandon: it will be a “from-the-inside” analysis, aiming at reasoning on what went wrong, what could be learnt in terms of communication and planning, in a sort of articulated introduction to the closing chapter of this dissertation.

Clearly, it would be quite an overstatement to say Mario Monti, a world known economist and former EU Commissioner, was being influenced by the media. The attitude of the media, instead, seem to confirm what Mr Albanese told about the “sick media” of Italy. More widely speaking, it may represent Italy’s attitude.

Having now analysed several Olympic Games, and even a failed bid, we will use the following, concluding chapter to draw some generalizing remarks on the importance of communication for the various phases of the Olympic Games, and its interlaced relationship with marketing and lobbying. As for wrapping up Rome 2020 failed



experience from a more Italian point of view, one last consideration must be laid out.

Even though Monti cautiously decided to renounce because of the dramatic situation of Italy's accounts, there is a different underlying message that was sent, especially to younger generations. The government was telling them they should not have hope. No hope on the economy, no hope for ameliorating the country both from an infrastructural and political and institutional leadership points of view, no hope for dreams: how is that for a communication strategy?

## **Chapter 6 - Connecting the rings: towards a generalized hosting model?**

Throughout chapter two, three, four and five we have tried to point out the main features of the latest Olympic Games (Beijing London), of one city towards hosting the Games (Rio de Janeiro) and one that failed during the bidding process (Rome). These gave us a great deal of information. It is now time to articulate our findings and try to define the idea of qualitative Games, in order to understand if there is room for a generalized hosting model that would favour quality.

Each chapter analysing the most recent bids and Games brought to our attention a few peculiar characteristics. These findings do confirm and reinforce the theoretical ground expressed in chapter one. They also help us underline many flows affecting different areas and stakeholders of the Olympic process. Let's see what this means.

As expressed in chapter one, the primary goal of hosting a mega-event like the Olympics is to generate a profit, which could be tangible or intangible. To do so, first the right to host the Games must be won. Subsequently, your Olympic Games must be organized well enough to be a success, both in the narrative that will endure in history, and in practice. Why in practice too? Because, in spite of communication strategies being a strong tool of what has been defined as "Imagineering", in such a globalized and interconnected world it is impossible to control any message or information. The best way to host

successful Games is to actually plan and provide for good Games, and at the same time be sure, through the best communication strategies, to make the world aware your Games are qualitative.

Moreover, there is a stakeholder that shall be particularly interested the Games are of qualitative value. This stakeholder is IOC. Every time a city has failed to live up to the promises it had made towards the Games, providing for low or not remarkable quality Games, other cities drift away from the idea of competing for hosting. Usually, the rhetoric is about the financial uncertainties. Furthermore, the recent economic crisis has dramatically contributed in deteriorating cities' trust in mega-events. The IOC shall be interested in addressing the issue in order to invert this tendency towards the absence of cities available for hosting. Such a perspective may be lethal for the IOC on the long run. The withdrawal of Rome from the 2020 Olympic run stands as a clear example of this tendency, as much as the reducing number of acceptable candidates in the 2020 race.

At this point, two main questions arise: how do we define an Olympic project to be of good value? And, how can the IOC make sure to have qualitative projects to become reality in order to preserve the Olympic Movement integrity?

### **1. Future directions**

The first question as an easy answer: a good project is one that aims at legacy. But what is legacy? In chapter one we tried to highlight the fact that this word works as a cauldron: many different sectors of a city's life may be subject to generating legacy if triggered somehow. In general, legacy is good if there was a problem in the city, and after a specific action, the problem is considered to be solved. If we apply this basic syllogism to the Olympic Games, it becomes evident that legacy is not only a multi-dimension construct, but a particularly customizable one too. Therefore, any project shall be personalised according to the city's needs. Many cities have long-term development or regeneration plans, other may not. An Olympic project shall follow these plans, not

dictate or modify them. Therefore, those cities that have one in place already, shall develop the Olympic project starting from there and using the Olympics to serve the city's development plan, not the other way around. Urban realities that are lacking a development plan, shall foster one before even considering to bid.

Moreover, when development plans are modified or revolutionized to make space for the Olympic Games, this is when the Games become economically unsustainable. At this point what has commonly happened is that stakeholders interested in promoting the bid try to underestimate the costs on purpose, either leaving out some of the costs, or categorizing some of the needed infrastructure as non-Olympic, therefore not accountable in the Olympic Games budget.

Therefore, we reach the second question. The IOC shall focus on renovating the bidding, the leading-up and the legacy assessment processes.

In spite of the fascinating backstage stories emerging from lobbying and strategic communication, the bidding process is still loosely regulated, allowing a stagnant bribery practice at large. Providing for clearer and transparent rules would give back dignity to lobbying practices that could lead to better decision making.

Evidently, these controls shall be entrusted in third-party authorities.

As an elitist committee, sitting IOC members will be reluctant to losing some of their power and influence. It is therefore unlikely they undergo this change autonomously. One solution could be for NOCs all over the world to push them into understanding this is a much needed evolution of the body that, by barring change, is spiralling in a risky path that could result in the most lethal consequences, for the IOC, for the Games, and for the Olympic Movement as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

While this dissertation comes to an end with many open sparks that shall deserve in-depth analysis that was not possible here for reasons of conciseness, it has yet been proven that to be awarded the

right to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games it may only be necessary an innovative narrative and great communication and lobbying efforts.

Nonetheless, in order to host quality Games it is inescapable to develop a qualitative Olympic project. As seen, it means to be able to provide for a good show and, most importantly, for a long lasting qualitative legacy. Unfortunately, a good legacy cannot be described as a univocal concept. Legacy will vary from city to city, from country to country.

Since “bad” Games have been influencing public opinion more and more about the opportunity to host the Games, it seems cities and politicians are becoming lesser and lesser enthusiastic about bid. In order for the IOC to preserve the possibility to put on the Olympic show, therefore preserving its own existence, there is a need for more qualitative Games in terms of projects. To do so, the IOC should open up to reforming its bidding regulations in order to make lobbying more transparent, and provide for more check up systems during the leading up and the aftermath of the Games. Moreover, a more credible and long-term legacy assessment method shall be developed with a double aim. First, help cities go through with the original qualitative project they had set up during the bid. Second, by assessing the legacy in a more scientific way the IOC can compile a more general list of parameters that can be then personalized by cities wanting to bid, in order to benefit more and more from previous experiences.

This way, the IOC will push cities for real, credible and sustainable legacies. It may take time, because legacy assessment needs to be performed over an extended timeframe, to catch the whole impact of the legacy plans.

At that point, bids will be asymptotically perfect, while lobbying and communication will still play a key role in securing the right to host an Olympic Games, but this time in a renewed challenge among top level bid projects.