The allure of global games for ‘semi-peripheral’ polities and spaces: a research agenda

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ABSTRACT Exploring the increasing propensity of ‘semi-peripheral’ polities and spaces to host major games as a pivotal strategic response to the exigencies of globalisation, it is contended that pursuing such events is intimately connected to the perceived expansion of ‘marketing power’ on the one hand, and to the legitimisation and celebration of conceptions of national identity and political orders, on the other. Given that various contingencies bear upon these sought-after outcomes, this analytical framework underscores the significance of questions about global inequality, power and identity to explain the apparent allure of global games. Hence, to determine whether major games deliver the kind of benefits proclaimed by proponents, requires asking questions about (1) identity building and signalling; (2) development and (3) political liberalisation and human rights.

Sports personalities—especially football players—are more important than politicians because people look up to them. (Nelson Mandela to South African stars, Mark Fish and Lucas Redebe)\(^1\)

Major international sporting events have an extraordinary capacity to generate powerfully emotional shared experiences. We are all familiar with the images of high drama, unadulterated joy and sorrow, unbridled patriotism, and a powerful sense of history in the making to which events like the Olympics, the Soccer World Cup and other major sporting events give licence. Their role as sociocultural touchstones, and their capacity to cause otherwise sober people to suspend their critical faculties on a mass basis, point to both the appeal and elusiveness of sport as a political force. In the age of global television, moreover, their capacity to shape and project images of the host, both domestically and globally, make them a highly attractive instrument for political and economic elites.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the pursuit and sponsorship of major games has become an increasingly popular strategy of governments, corporations and other ‘boosters’ world-wide, who habitually argue that major developmental, political, and sociocultural benefits will flow from them, easily justifying the costs and risks involved. These arguments may have particular resonance in
‘semi-peripheral’ jurisdictions—urban, regional, and national—seeking heightened visibility and prestige in the context of globalisation. We are using ‘semi-peripheral’ in a broad sense, and thus invoke the terms ‘polities’ and ‘spaces’ to eschew any essentialist pretentions, but rather to refer both to political economies in the middle range of global development, and more developed but socially marginal countries and cities struggling for visibility and advantage in the context of competitive market liberalisation. We argue that entities with a ‘semi-peripheral sensibility’ can range from states, regions, and cities to even include particular sporting codes located within core economies (e.g., football in Japan—see Horne in this issue). Such a sensibility is distinguished by feelings of vulnerability, a quest for enhanced status and a simultaneous fear of marginalisation. It has become more prevalent, we contend, in the context of globalisation, transcending traditional divisions of North and South, ‘Developed’ and ‘Developing’. Certainly, the appeal of major games bids to this category of jurisdictions has been highlighted by the reactions to the recent awarding of the 2010 Commonwealth Games to New Delhi and, even more spectacularly, the 2010 World Cup of Football to South Africa.

The putative benefits of hosting such events are strongly reinforced by influential International Sports Organisations (ISOs)—most famously the International Olympic Committee (IOC)—that are themselves deeply politicised and often highly elitist. On the other hand, various dissenters and critical social forces are increasingly seizing upon these events to advance their causes, emphasising their opportunity costs and seeking to bring attention to issues of injustice, inequality and the environment through the platforms they provide.2

What is surprising is that, with a handful of exceptions,3 international sport in general and major games in particular have been widely neglected by scholars of International Studies and International Political Economy. A first purpose of this paper, therefore, is to address this neglect theoretically, by arguing that international sport generally and major games in particular intersect pivotally with core themes in International Studies of identity, inequality and, above all, power. Second, and more empirically, we seek to explore the increasing propensity of ‘semi-peripheral’ polities to pursue such events as a pivotal strategic response to the exigencies of globalisation. We ask: why do such governments and their supporters compete so ferociously for the right to host major international sporting events? What are the trade-offs and opportunity costs of doing so? And finally, do such events ultimately deliver the benefits, developmental and otherwise, that their proponents loudly proclaim? In short, we argue that the pursuit of major sporting events has become a politico-economic strategy of increasing, almost irresistible appeal for such polities under conditions of globalisation. It is also, however, a high-risk strategy in which benefits are frequently exaggerated and costs and risks obfuscated.

Identity, inequality and power: the promises and pitfalls of hosting global games

As everyone knows, priceless things have their price.4 Nothing demonstrates the ubiquity of global consumerism so much as the
The allure of global games

Growing dominance of brands and the money companies are prepared to lavish upon their promotion. In 1998 global advertising spending was estimated at $435 billion—outpacing the growth of the world economy by one-third, according to the UN Human Development Report. In the USA alone, total advertising expenditure has skyrocketed over the past 20 years from $50 billion in 1979 to $130 billion in 1990 and a staggering $200 billion in 1998. And with online ad spending in 2004 expected to top $32 billion, the Internet will draw 10% of all US advertising spending away from print and broadcasting media.

As the motor of capitalism consumption has heightened the need for branding not only among the marketing directors of the corporate world but among both state and various non-state actors. Take the Catholic Church. Given that only 3% of active Catholics spend as much time per month on church activities as the average American, both Catholic and non-Catholic, spends watching television per week, tours and appearances of Pope John Paul II are increasingly tied to merchandising. For example, the Vatican recently authorised the production of merchandise drawing upon the Vatican Library’s more than one million books, prints and drawings. Licensing revenue is estimated at $5 million a year for the first five years, rising to $10–20 million a year for the following 15 years.

Where disputes arise as to whether a celebrity has consented to the use of their name—as was the case, for example, with Hilton Hotels using a picture of Nelson Mandela—it is essentially a case of trademark infringement. And using Mandela is expensive: a 2002 survey found him to be the world’s second-most recognised ‘brand’ after Coca-Cola. Moreover, Coca-Cola, Microsoft, McDonald’s and Bayer ranked higher in public trust (at around 55%) than the top NGOs (around 40%) according to a 2002 opinion study by Edelman PR, the world’s largest independent public relations agency. Yet NGO ‘brands’ such as Greenpeace, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Amnesty International rate nearly twice as highly as the four top rated corporate brands.

However, given that, according to the survey, conducted before the spate of audit scandals following Enron, a vast majority of Americans cited honesty with the public and ethical business practices as highly important, NGOs may well eclipse companies in terms of brand trust. Even social movements have realised the need to strategically market their cause, with the Zapatistas, the Dalai Lama and Latin American indigenous activists like Rigoberta Menchu from Guatemala, generating far greater media coverage than many others.

In this context, one of the most pervasive and novel consequences of globalisation and the rise of consumerism is the extent to which state (as well as region/province and city) identities are being cast as brands. Indeed, states and brands are much more closely linked than we often realise. Tommy Hilfiger advertisements, for example, never fail to flaunt the American flag behind the Nantucket beachscape. In 1999 British Airways decided to discard its ‘ethnic’ tailfins and return to its tried and trusted Union flag. BMW’s and Mercedes’ appeal remains anchored to the German reputation for quality and engineering efficiency, while IKEA reflects clean and practical Swedish design, along with Swedish colours.

Brands are no longer the exclusive preserve of companies. Today states aggressively compete with one another to host a Soccer World Cup, global...
conference or other high-profile event not simply to enhance their ‘prestige’. Much more is presumed to be at stake: establishing a country’s status as a brand is trumpeted as a means to attract foreign students to its universities, tourists to its hotels, investors to its economy and media moguls to project images of its cities, people, architecture, culture, and food on screens across the globe. For example, it is estimated that the equivalent worth of marketing exposure to that gained by New Zealand from the production and distribution of *Lord of the Rings* would total US$41 million.

Accordingly governments are developing both institutional mechanisms and campaigns to expand their marketing repertoire. Australia promotes the notion of the ‘lucky country’, Britain sought to market itself via the concept of ‘Cool Britannia’ versus the staid ‘Rule Britannia’, and the South African government recently created an International Marketing Council, enlisting the country’s top advertising executives to help sell ‘the Rainbow Nation’ abroad. From the many ways in which states draw on their artistic, musical, cinematic and other popular cultural endeavours to promote a distinctive ‘emotional resonance’ and identity among the proliferating ensemble of the world’s geographical and political associations, the political economy of major sporting events emerges as both the most salient and complex strategy to help a country shine abroad.

It may be particularly so, we argue, for the elites of semi-peripheral polities, which lack the structural advantages of global cities and great powers. The widespread and almost irresistible compulsion by state elites to sell a country via high profile international sports events begs much closer and deeper analysis, however—not only because we lack such analyses, but also because we need to explain politicians’ and other social elites’ interest in this process of place promotion, and the intricacies by which public support gets mobilised. For this particular process of place promotion remains fraught with questions about power, identity and inequality—themes increasingly central to international political economy yet largely unacknowledged or, at best, vaguely recognised in relation to issues of popular culture and International Relations.

*Identity*

Admittedly, of popular culture’s various genres, the politics of sport has probably become, from the perspective of mainstream IR, the most ‘respectable’ avenue through which issues of identity, inequality and power are being explored. Of these themes, the issue of identity was probably the first to be readily acknowledged. Sport has been employed as a means to enhance nation building, not only among the newly independent states of Africa and Asia, but also as an important marker of distinction among the satellite states of the former Soviet Empire in the development of a kind of socialist nationalism. Transnationally, it has served as a valued basis for continued cultural links between the ‘white’, predominantly Anglo Saxon members of the Commonwealth (Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) and the former colonies of the global ‘South’, through the Commonwealth Games. The Francophonie has sought to emulate this example, while various regional games have been conceived in part as a means of promoting intra-regional identities and amity.
Our interest in the political economy of hallmark sports events (or mega events) in semi-peripheral polities and spaces therefore builds on the well established theme of national identity and sport, with the added emphasis on the heightened significance of issues of national identity in the face of global pressures to conform to the model of the so-called ‘competition state’. Indeed, we contend that hosting high profile events does not necessarily push the state towards the competition state model, with the attendant loss of its *gemeinschaftlich* qualities, as Cerny asserts. Rather, hosting such events may be a novel response by state elites to counteract the perceived loss of the state’s social responsibility role, by using sports events for momentary symbolic celebrations of nationhood. In fact, there is an interesting parallel here between the competition state drawing upon what we call its ‘marketing power’ to make the most of globalisation’s socially disruptive consequences and, in the opposite direction, the adoption of social causes by companies as ways of projecting their brand identity. Through so-called Cause Related Marketing (CRM), brand loyalty is advanced through explicit associations and support in the form of events sponsorships, charitable trusts, or corporate responsibility programmes.

Sport mega-events also bear upon gender identities. Partly reflecting traditional realist concerns, during the 19th century sport was seen as a means of rejuvenating masculine identities and as a means to mobilise the (male) youth of Europe in the aftermath of the Napoleonic and Franco-Prussian wars. Even the modern Olympic Games were, at least until the early 1920s, the exclusive preserve of middle and upper class men, with women thought to be ‘better suited to be spectators, admirers, or as ornamental participants in Olympic ceremonies’. At one stage, a separate Women’s Olympics was founded after the International Olympic Committee refused female entry to athletics or track and field events at the 1920 Games in Antwerp.

Similarly, in as much as sport has become a means to both reinscribe and challenge dominant social relations relating not only to gender but also to sexual orientation, the political economy of hosting say, the Gay Games, first held in San Francisco in 1982, remains surprisingly marginal to the field. In view of the allure of hosting world-class sporting events, their neglect remains somewhat puzzling given the exponential growth of athlete participation. Between the 1994 Gay Games in New York and the 1998 Games in Amsterdam, ‘the numbers of participating athletes has exceeded the Olympic Games, with almost 11 000 in 1994 and 15 000 in 1998, whilst the 2002 gay Games in Sydney is estimated to have generated R3 billion’. Under the circumstances, it is hard not to see the relative neglect of this event as an important way in which sports organisations, the sport media and corporate sponsors effectively collude in the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and the continued marginalisation of minority sexual orientations. Indeed, the ubiquity of male sports celebrities in advertising campaigns may mean that ‘Beckham’s experiments with sarongs and hip-hop inspired accessories, not to mention his myriad experiments with peacock hairstyles, means legions of ordinary men have had to re-examine their notions of what it is to be a straight British bloke’.

Besides considerations of identity in terms of nationhood and gender, hallmark sports events also involve questions of human rights, and have the capacity
to mark states off as ‘legitimate’ or alternatively isolated ‘pariahs’ within international society. For example, the sport boycott against apartheid South Africa remains one of the most exemplary cases of international norms having been invoked to justify South Africa’s isolation.19 Remarkably, amid mounting calls to similarly excise Zimbabwe as a co-host of the 2003 Cricket World Cup, both South African sporting officials and cabinet ministers justified ‘constructive engagement’ with President Mugabe on the basis of a racially mixed Zimbabwean team, unlike the old, racially homogeneous, apartheid sports teams.

The opportunity to host a high profile international event in authoritarian or weak democratic regimes promises a double reward: both a chance to showcase the country and an opportunity to demonstrate its ‘acceptability’ to the international community. Because of the political significance of the latter, hosting a major event provides a tangible expression of being ‘like-us’, thus adding to the strategic value of both place promotion and identity construction. For example, Iran’s attempt to qualify for the 1998 Soccer World Cup reflected an aspiration to re-enter the society of nations, and to open the debate about cultural openness and the position of women in Iranian society.20 However, while such a sporting event may generate societal pressures towards greater democratisation, the sustainability of such temporal societal openings remains debatable, as discussed below.

**Inequality**

Beyond some analyses on the international politics of sport from the Marxist tradition, our second theme—inequality—reflects the limited attention this condition has received in International Relations generally.21 That global inequalities also impinge on states’ capacity to host world-class events would seem self-explanatory. Yet increasingly it is because of the perceived benefits of staging a mega-event that a growing number of states in the semi-periphery are being drawn into bidding contests. To their respective domestic constituencies as well as to the international sporting organisations and media, support is often mobilised on the basis of the anticipated developmental benefits flowing from a major event. Beside the difficulty of determining whether such benefits are ultimately obtained, anecdotal evidence suggests that such forecasts are often inflated or over-valued. Yet the severe constraints on small countries, particularly in the developing world, obtaining the kind of global exposure available to those in the advanced industrialised world go a long way towards explaining state elites’ attraction to bids for such games. After all, in a world crowded by the ubiquity of mass consumerism, image and emotional packaging, the need for differentiation has become all the more important. And without recourse to the full repertoire of public diplomacy available to wealthier nations (eg a British Council, US Information Agency, or Goethe Institute) hosting major sports events is one of the few relatively accessible means through which developing nations may seek to enhance their global appeal.

Whereas very few small, developing countries have successfully found a positive reputational niche, as, say, Cuba once projected as a ‘world medical power’,22 sport provides a moment, however fleeting, for global television
screens to be adorned by the emotional soccer victories of a Cameroon, Argentina or Brazil. Nevertheless, given global inequalities, the capacity for developing societies without such superstar teams to project themselves into the world’s sporting arena is further constrained by the rapacious recruitment of promising sportsmen and women to lucrative contracts with European or North American clubs. In the case of football, for example, it is estimated that 1000 players from Africa now play for European clubs, while nearly 5000 Brazilians are playing professionally outside the country according to the Brazilian Football Confederation.23

Moreover, because the global broadcasting industry is overwhelmingly a European/North American-based and biased industry, both teams and types of sport from these parts of the world naturally enjoy greater media coverage than, say, a Chilean rowing or Ukrainian snooker ace could expect. Thus, a successful bid to host a sporting festival, be it global, continental or ‘merely’ regional, in a small, otherwise lesser-known developing country, holds the promise of overcoming many of these challenges resulting from global inequalities.

Whether this promise is fulfilled, or sustained, is far from certain, however. To grasp these dynamics, a far more nuanced mode of analysis is required than is offered by IR perspectives that tend to reify the state. As many cases in this issue demonstrate, for example, analysis requires apportioning greater salience to the media as agency to capture and assess the extent to which the outcomes sought by proponents of games are actually achieved. Similarly, the repercussions of such events for internal inequalities within the host society need to be given much greater attention. Finally, the ability of a relatively small ‘upper tier’ of traditionally developing countries to bid successfully for sport mega-events must be considered in terms of its implications for exacerbating inequalities within the global ‘South’.

Power

Whereas national identity has featured prominently in the literature on the international relations of sport, as well as occasional ‘flings’ with issues of human rights, gender and aspects of global inequality, it is the idea of power, the very bedrock of IR theorising that remains, ironically, cast in a discourse which robs the discipline of the capacity to think of it in more creative and nuanced terms. The political economy of hallmark sports events provides a particularly apt illustration of this conceptual poverty. Note how sport was initially held to be an ‘autonomous’ sphere of human interaction, unencumbered by the interference of politics. Partly a consequence of liberal–pluralist conceptions of the state’s role in sport,24 Allison and Monnington argue that in Britain during the late 19th century ‘defeat in sport of our supposedly national teams engendered only limited serious national concern’.25 It was only with the restoration of the modern Olympic Games that issues of prestige prompted the need for state intervention in sports promotion. Even so, the degree to which Britain’s sporting defeats at the hands of lesser powers were seen as a loss of prestige was limited. As the 1960 Wolfenden Report, commissioned by the Central Council of Physical Recreation noted:
To talk, as some do, as if sport could properly be used as a major instrument of international diplomacy, or as if a nation’s authority and influence in world affairs at large are to be measured by its success or failures in the Olympic Games, seems to us to reveal a serious lack of a sense of proportion.26

Hence, whereas the international value of sport was initially pitched at the promotion of nothing more than ‘goodwill’ among nations, it had gradually ascended a priority notch towards the expansion of a nation’s prestige by the beginning of the 20th century. For the most part, this is where neo-realist International Relations scholarship has left sport as a form of power. Spurred by the phenomenal growth of global television and communications technologies and the rapid emergence of sports events as means to secure advertising, broadcasting and related revenues, the compulsion to host such events can no longer be interpreted merely in terms of concerns about prestige, nor simply commercial motivations. Rather, the need for place promotion as a form of marketing suggests a much more complex and multidimensional response by state elites to the exigencies of globalisation.

To illustrate the significant power differentials implicated by the contest to host major sporting events, IR needs to reach beyond the restrictive conventions of both neo-realist and neo-Marxist discourse, with their materialist emphases on resources as indices of power on the one hand and structuralist restrictions on the other. These conceptions of power are restrictive because of their failure to acknowledge outcomes as being highly socially context-dependent. That is, outcomes are not simply determined by resources but by the value systems through which human beings relate to one another.27 This position has been well articulated by Steffano Guzzini, who faults neo-institutionalism for its reliance upon rational choice rather than power analysis to predict outcomes. For Guzzini, quoting Ashley, the problem with neo-realism is that:

there is no concept of social power behind or constitutive of states and their interests. Rather power is generally regarded in terms of capabilities that are said to be distributed, possessed, and potentially used among states-as-actors...Such understandings of power are rooted in a utilitarian understanding of international society: an understanding in which a) there exists no form of sociality, no intersubjective consensual basis, prior to or constitutive of individual actors or their private ends, and hence b) the essential determinants of actors’ relative effects on one another will be found in the capabilities they respectively control...Yet such a position strictly rules out a competence model of social action. According to a competence model, the power of an actor, and even its status as an agent competent to act, is not in any sense attributable to the inherent qualities or possessions of a given entity. Rather, the power and status of an actor depends on and is limited by the condition of its recognition within a community as a whole.28

Likewise, the central causal explanatory capacity of power is weakened in structural power analyses when benefits are conflated with power, yet the beneficiary nevertheless remains at the mercy of a systemic arrangement. To account for power resulting from consent arising not from obligation or threat, but from the internalisation of values and ideas, Bourdieu’s field theory suggests a less materialist basis for thinking about power than either neo-institutionalist or neo-Marxist analyses accommodate. Bourdieu amplifies neo-institutionalism,
but not on the highly individualist, materialist basis of rational choice; rather, he
emphasises sociological institutionalism, with its attention to the social con-
struction of institutions involving:

world-views, cognitive maps, discourses, symbols and mental frames…As opposed
to materialist approaches, sociological institutionalism stresses that behaviour,
identities and interests are emergent through shared understandings of social reality
and are not mere epi-phenomena of some underlying material reality.29

Bourdieu’s concept of capital, which he sees as being akin to power, explicitly
expands the simple notion of economic capital into broader non-economic
dimensions, incorporating both cultural and social capital. For Bourdieu:

It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social
world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form
recognized by economic theory. Economic theory has allowed to be foisted upon it
a definition of the economy of practices which is the historical invention of
capitalism; and by reducing the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange,
which is objectively and subjectively oriented toward the maximization of profit, ie
(economically) self-interested, it has implicitly defined the other forms of exchange
as noneconomic, and therefore disinterested.30

Cultural capital can be found in three forms: an embodied state (dispositions of
the mind and body); an objectified state in the form of cultural goods (pictures,
books); and an institutionalised state—a form of objectification which sets apart,
such as educational qualifications. Social capital, in turn, refers to social
obligations and useful relationships (‘connections’) that bestow a form of
credit.31 Whereas economic capital is immediately and directly convertible into
money, the convertibility of both cultural and social capital is highly context-de-
pendent. Conversion of the different types of capital is the basis of attempts to
reproduce capital by the least costly means of conversion and the inherent risk
of loss that accompanies social and cultural capital.32

For the purposes of this project, we want to draw on Bourdieu’s multidimen-
sional conception of capital, or power, as a heuristic device to understand how
the complexities of identity, inequality and power become interrelated in the
quest to host high profile sporting festivals. Specifically, thinking about power
in this way reveals a fundamental motivation for the need to host hallmark
events: namely, the expectation that the social capital gained in terms of
exposure and place promotion (‘putting our country on the world map’) is
convertible to economic capital over the short term (the immediate economic
benefits of the event), as well as to social and economic capital over the long
term. We refer to these initiatives as the pursuit of ‘marketing power’ to denote
the extent to which international projection constitutes a form of power for small
and/or developing countries seeking to participate in the ‘global beauty contest’
in reaction to the ‘ideology of competitiveness’.33

Students in business schools are much more comfortable thinking about
marketing as a form of power than students of International Relations. Even in
Political Science proper, the notion of marketing is virtually exclusively under-
stood as a concern within electoral campaigns.34 Yet Stephen Lukes’ three
dimensional view of power as getting ‘another or others to have the desires you
want them to have’ would not be out of place in a marketing textbook. However, if marketing in itself is hardly recognised as a form of power in IR, Marketing as a field of study fails to pay attention to the political bargaining elicited, precipitated, or pursued within a particular marketing strategy. More fundamentally, that marketing is a form of power, and is therefore political, is hardly ever (explicitly) recognised. In fact, the process of marketing cities, provinces and even nations has paid scant attention to the very political nature of that marketing process.

While marketing may tend to pay too much attention to the ‘how to’ dimension of the process, IR tends to discount it. Our concept, ‘marketing power’, attempts to bridge this divide by denoting the various ways in which state elites seek name recognition as a form of power, or non-economic capital. Hallmark events, sports and cultural industries are perceived as useful means for semi-peripheral societies to attract a ‘CNN presence’ and, concomitantly, tourism, capital, students and similar multiplier effects. Whether these anticipated benefits are fulfilled or not is a key, but frequently overlooked, question.

Drawing on the confluence of power, inequality and identity as noted above, marketing power also reveals the two level games in which states are engaged. Internally, marketing power relates to attempts by state elites to shore up political legitimacy, reinforce a sense of national identity and placate those constituencies adversely affected by the growing internationalisation of domestic issue-areas. Marketing power also serves an external political purpose, as proponents of sporting and cultural festivals in the developing world justify the huge costs of hosting an event or subsidising the local film or music industry by framing the debate in developmental terms. Thus, given the interrelation between power, inequality and identity, marketing power is not expanded without difficulty or even contradiction. For example, successful deployment of marketing power often relies on a well developed sense of national identity or alternatively demonstrated national commitment to a sporting bid.

Ironically, in the semi-periphery, marked by ethnically diverse societies, marketing power is often sought by state elites in societies marked by a profound lack of cohesive national identity. As these elites seek to enhance their legitimacy by prevailing on the state’s sources of marketing power, these efforts can often exacerbate or expose their very lack of legitimacy and/or inefficiency (as some of the articles to follow demonstrate). And with the hard-earned media attention proffered by such events, embarrassments are concealed with greater difficulty. The net effect is that the generation of marketing power—like other forms of power—entails significant risks. In Bourdieu’s analysis, the risk of loss is determined not only by the inability to convert social capital to material capital, but also by the fact that political embarrassments may actually diminish rather than boost a state’s cultural and social capital.

Although our analytical approach echoes most of the very recent work on brands and branding, we regret the extent to which the inequalities in international relations are reproduced in International Relations by the absence of examples and case studies from the developing world in these novel works. As this project seeks to demonstrate, ‘branding’ is not the exclusive preserve of the ‘postmodern states’ of the advanced industrialised world but equally (if not
more intensely) sought after in the semi-periphery, despite the greater complexity that this process entails. Conceptually, we prefer the term ‘marketing’ over the more restricted meaning attached to ‘branding’ as we do not see the process of place promotion as limited to the creation of a brand but rather linked to various other strategies pursued by states in their attempts to adapt to the consequences of globalisation. Moreover, branding as it is understood in the marketing literature assumes a degree of control regarding consistent product quality and delivery\(^40\) which, as we suggest herein, is a much more complex and difficult process when states seek to ‘brand’ themselves.

Making the case? interrogating the arguments of games proponents

Three sets of arguments are typically deployed by supporters of bids for major sporting events, and debated within the academic literature on them. Each holds considerable theoretical and empirical interest for contemporary International Studies. They are: (1) identity building and signalling; (2) development; and (3) promoting political liberalisation and human rights.

Identity building and signalling

As discussed above, major international sporting events constitute striking moments of intense ‘we feeling’ among a community of supporters, whether defined by city, region, ethnic group or nationality. They are, in short, moments of intensive identity formation and projection. Politicians and other elites therefore frequently pursue the hosting of major games as opportunities to build and project common political identities. This process holds particular salience for many emerging polities and/or countries in the global South, marked by heterogeneous and/or unsettled sociocultural foundations. The identities elites seek to project are usually national, though not necessarily state-based (eg Catalonia, Scotland). They may also be sub-national or regional (eg Atlanta, Manchester, Calgary). A comparatively recent development in this regard is the emergence of joint bids and hosting arrangements for major events (most importantly, the Japan–Korea World Cup),\(^41\) which may seek to transcend historic identities and relationships grounded in enmity, or build on historical commonalities.

Many of us have experienced the intense patriotism associated with these events, effectively transcending entrenched social cleavages. For example, the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa brought the post-apartheid ‘rainbow nation’ together in an entirely unprecedented way. Yet, as this same case illustrates, the ‘feel-good effect’ of such events is often ephemeral, and does not easily translate into long-term social or political change.\(^42\) Alan Bairner’s distinction between ‘sportive’ and ‘political’ nationalism is instructive: positively connecting the former to the latter is alluring but elusive.\(^43\) When does sportive nationalism support political nation building and identity formation in an effective and durable way, and when is its impact fleeting or even counterproductive?

Similarly, we know that identities are multiple, and that identity formation
occurs in relation to ‘others’ in a manner that is often (though not always) polarising and marginalising.\textsuperscript{44} When sport is invoked or employed for identity building, who is incorporated and who is marginalised (a question which may be particularly salient in terms of gender relations as well as class)? What values are celebrated, projected and, conversely, obfuscated in the context of major sporting events?

Closely related to this identity-building role is the desire to signal key developments or changes, both at home and abroad. Hosting major sporting events represents an extraordinary opportunity to engage in the increasingly prevalent pursuit of public diplomacy.\textsuperscript{45} For example, a succession of World War II Axis powers (Rome 1960; Tokyo 1964; Munich 1972) sought the Olympic Games in part to signal their rehabilitation within the international community. Developing/postcolonial countries have self-consciously pursued major Games to signal their ‘graduation’ to the status of newly industrialising nation (NIC) (eg the Malaysia Commonwealth Games, 1998),\textsuperscript{46} or ‘advanced state’ (eg South Korea, 1988; Mexico, 1968; China, 2008; India, 2010).\textsuperscript{47} Finally, major sporting events provide opportunities to signal successful processes of deep social change. For example, in addition to the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa noted above, France’s victory at home during the 1998 World Cup was widely interpreted as showcasing the reality and benefits of a multicultural France, versus the conservative, anti-immigrant appeal of the National Front and its sympathisers.\textsuperscript{48}

Once again, however, difficult questions arise. How do we measure the success of these events in signalling identities and changes? How durable are their effects in this regard? Moreover, there are instances in which these attempts have produced perverse and/or unintended consequences: ‘The Olympic Games [for example] are…so potent a political symbol that the host government [may be] unable to maintain control over their impact’.\textsuperscript{49} How frequently, and under what circumstances, are host governments likely to lose control of the images they seek to project—and with what costs?

\textit{Developmental motivations}

Developmental motivations can be divided analytically into sport development \textit{per se} and broader processes of economic and social development. The benefits of hosting major sporting events for sport development might seem self-evident. Such events leave a legacy of world-class facilities for training and competition, and often ‘legacy funds’ that support high level coaching and athletes, paving the way for improved performances in future competitions. However, several important questions are often overlooked in this equation. First, to what extent is the stimulus these events provide to high performance sport of benefit to the country or community as a whole? Should high performance success be seen as an important policy goal, or does this emphasis on elite sport tend to compromise support for mass sport, with its more diffuse health and social benefits?

Second, as Whitson and Macintosh put it, ‘the apparently obvious benefit of having spectacular new facilities glosses over questions about who actually uses them afterward’.\textsuperscript{50} There is considerable evidence that the sports edifices built...
with public support in the context of major Games become a long-term drain on public funds through the subsidies required to operate them subsequently and that, in some contexts at least, they become in effect huge public subsidies to privately owned professional sports franchises which become their primary tenants after the event. The opportunity costs that these sorts of findings point towards should logically be taken particularly seriously in contexts of relative scarcity, such as those prevailing in many semi-peripheral or developing countries. \(^{51}\) Frequently, however, they are trumped by the larger political and developmental aspirations of ambitious regimes (eg Malaysia), \(^{52}\) highlighting the need for critical research and analysis.

Beyond these sport development questions and concerns, what are the wider developmental repercussions of such events? One of the challenges of researching this question is the strong tendency towards the emergence of a "common sense" that global events and the developments they bring with them are good for the community in a larger sense. \(^{53}\) Leaving aside claims regarding the direct revenue-generating potential of major Games (which are habitually overstated and very difficult to verify), \(^{54}\) it is frequently argued that major Games and other "hallmark" or "mega-events" have the potential to unlock vast public and private investments for physical and social infrastructure, including transportation, environmental rehabilitation, new housing and hotels, new parks and other forms of beautification, and the like. Certainly, the occasion of major sporting events invariably prompts governments to invest heavily in urban renewal and causes a surge in local construction activity. Yet the classic question remains: who benefits from these investments? To what extent can this activity be designed to maximise benefits to the community as a whole, and particularly disadvantaged groups and areas within it? Conversely, to what extent and in what ways does this surge of activity reinforce social polarisation and redound to the direct benefit of the privileged and powerful, thereby reinforcing domestic as well as transnational inequalities? In other words, and put crudely, is the development activity generated in the context of major sporting events primarily "top down" or "bottom up"?

Typically, the former seems to have been the case. A classic instance is the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, in which $1.5 billion in public money was ‘unlocked’ and invested in security, infrastructure, etc—much of it to the direct material benefit of a few wealthy resort owners and investors. \(^{55}\) Nevertheless, there are some signs of an emerging trend towards Games bids being carefully planned with the professed intent of diffusing benefits and promoting ‘human development’ on the basis of extensive consultations and ‘social impact’ assessments. \(^{56}\) What configuration of forces might help to encourage this fragile but positive trend?

As discussed above, an increasingly salient element of the developmental motivation for Games bids is their potential as vehicles for national ‘branding’ and ‘marketing power’. \(^{57}\) The importance attached to this motivation has been significantly enhanced by the exigencies of globalisation, which have compelled virtually all states to adapt to growing competitive pressures through market-orientated and governance reforms. The rise of the ‘competition state’ \(^{58}\) has varied in form across regions, but has invariably compelled states ‘voluntarily’ to
relinquish a number of traditional instruments of state intervention in support of economic development. As these options are increasingly constrained or foreclosed, and as ‘new economy’ industries in the service sector (notably tourism) rise in significance, governments and business leaders are increasingly drawn towards the strategy of pursuing hallmark events such as major Games. Indeed, it can be argued that elite sport in particular constitutes a uniquely apt metaphor for processes of globalisation, with its celebration of excellence, specialisation, technology and above all competition. It may therefore be a particularly appealing frame through which local and national ‘power elites’ can attempt to foster processes of political–economic reform and adaptation, while effectively masking their impact in terms of widening inequalities with discourses of ‘fair play’ and ‘level playing fields’.59

Sport mega-events provide unparalleled opportunities for (hopefully positive) publicity, not least through the globally televised spectacle of opening and closing ceremonies. They enable the host to project a distinctive culture, in highly stylised and commodified form. And they enable it to highlight its technical and managerial sophistication, as well as its growing modernity and quality of life, in ways that the host hopes will attract tourists and investors.60 Simultaneously, as discussed above, such events are seen as important ways of enabling the host to reinscribe and reinvigorate positive feelings of national identity and accomplishment among its own citizens. This becomes particularly pertinent in the context of globalisation because of the widespread anxiety that national state–society complexes are being steadily eroded by pressures of transnational economic competition and reorganisation, and by the threat of cultural homogenisation.61

In theory, then, major Games (and even major Games bids) may enable governments and their socioeconomic allies to ‘kill two (or more) birds with one stone’, providing them with a key tool of economic self-promotion and development, both direct and indirect, and enabling them to reinscribe a sense of collective identity and pride in their own communities. Once again, however, these assumptions are more frequently articles of faith than carefully researched findings. Moreover, they tend to gloss over the costs and risks of pursuing such events. As competition for ‘first order’ events—in particular the Olympics and the Soccer World Cup—grows, the chances of success diminish and the costs of a credible bid increase. These costs are likely to be even greater for developing or semi-peripheral countries, since they must overcome entrenched anxieties concerning their capacity to mount a ‘world class’ event.62 Their chances of hosting ‘second order’ events, such as the Commonwealth Games or major regional games, and the World Cups of Cricket and Rugby, are still considerably greater, but the presumed developmental benefits of such events are even more likely to be exaggerated. As Whitson and Macintosh note, for example, ‘the Canadian experience with hosting the smaller games…suggests that unless a city has an established tourist trade…it is a mirage to think that a substantial tourist economy can be constructed on the back of such events alone’.63

In addition, along with the potential developmental benefits of major Games one must also consider the risks of failure, both in the bid process and in the
event itself. This highlights the salience of what has been termed the ‘competency test’. In short, the quest for positive publicity and marketing power associated with major games may backfire if what is highlighted by the international media (over which organisers have minimal control) is the ‘competency deficit’ of the organising city and country. Given the high stakes of such events, the incentive for semi-peripheral countries in particular to spare no expense to secure ‘an unqualified success’ in the eyes of the world is equally high. It can be readily discerned in the monumental efforts of organisers in Seoul and Kuala Lumpur to ensure success in the 1988 Summer Olympics and 2002 World Cup, and the 1998 Commonwealth Games, respectively; it is already apparent in the approach taken by the organisers of the 2008 Beijing Games.

Similarly, while hosts may wish to project images of modernity and unity, what the northern (North American and European) sporting media may in fact project to their audiences are tales of instability, poverty and ‘backwardness’, effectively reinscribing postcolonial images of global difference. The controversy surrounding Zimbabwe’s hosting of several Cricket World Cup matches, and previous coverage of the Cricket World Cup in South Asia, are illustrative.

Given the apparent paucity of viable developmental alternatives, it is likely that the strategic appeal of global Games will remain strong in the ‘semi-periphery.’ Nevertheless, there is clearly a need for more critical scrutiny of the evidence concerning the benefits, costs and risks of such a strategy.

Political liberalisation and human rights

Proponents of major Games bids frequently argue that they are positively associated with processes of political liberalisation, democratisation, and human rights amelioration—in short, with enhancing the prospects for, and quality of, democratic life. In part, such claims rest on the ideological character of sport in general, and the Olympic Movement in particular, with the Olympic Charter’s explicit commitment to promote ‘respect for universal fundamental ethical principles’ and the ‘preservation of human dignity’ and the Movement’s assumed status as ‘a redemptive and inspirational internationalism’. On the other hand, it is also argued by some human rights advocates that, given the high-minded values associated with sport, only governments with strong rights records should be allowed to host the Games. Withholding the right to host them is thus seen as both a sanction for unacceptable behaviour, and an incentive to improve. This debate was prominent during Beijing’s successful campaign to host the 2008 Summer Games (as well as its unsuccessful bid for the 2000 Games), and will persist as these Games approach.

There are at least two ways in which the hosting of major sports events can be argued to enhance rights and democracy. The first is by enhancing civil society and building ‘social capital’ through the extensive volunteerism associated with such events. The second, more ambitious assumption is that such events create a set of powerful incentives towards liberalisation of the political system as a whole.

Regarding the former, the extensive volunteerism associated with the manage-
ment and operation of any major sporting event is widely assumed to generate a range of beneficial effects within that community (however defined). The impressive social mobilisation associated with the Sydney Summer Olympics in 2000 is but one striking example of this phenomenon. People are said to feel empowered by the successful staging of such monumental events and by succeeding in the eyes of the world. They are argued to develop a sense of common purpose with their fellow citizens and to feel a greater sense of ownership of both the event itself, and the community of which they are a part. These benefits could be expected to contribute, in turn, to the development of an informed and empowered citizenry, with a greater ability to assert itself and hold governments accountable.

That positive feelings of empowerment and civic pride are often associated with the staging of major Games is beyond doubt. Three sets of questions are pertinent, however. First, how long do these effects last, and how (if at all) does this sense of empowerment translate into political empowerment beyond the magic moments of the event and its immediate surroundings? Second, who is included among the cadres of volunteers, and thus empowered? How, and from where, are volunteers recruited, and what formal and informal exclusions are prevalent? We know, for example, that the Atlanta Games effort, featuring extensive volunteerism, effectively marginalised poor neighbourhoods and community groups representing them; what has the experience been elsewhere? Does the ‘social capital’ generated through the hosting of major games accrue disproportionately to those who already have a good deal of it? And third, how may these effects differ in the context of relative scarcity and/or authoritarian political regimes? For example, did Mexicans experience a comparably broad-based sense of engagement and empowerment from hosting the Olympics of 1968 and the World Cup of 1986 to, for example, Calgarians as hosts of the 1988 Winter Olympics? Indeed, in cases such as Cuba or China, how can this question be reliably researched?

Even more controversial are claims that major Games support democratisation by contributing, through international penetration and exposure, to pressures for systemic political liberalisation and human rights amelioration. The question, as it was framed in the context of Beijing, was: did awarding the Games to the Chinese capital in effect legitimise and give licence to a systematic rights violator, or will it contribute to unprecedented pressures for improvements—or perhaps both?

The historical record is, on the whole, relatively unpromising: there are more cases where ISOs and the ‘international community’ effectively overlooked the repressive behaviour of hosts (eg Berlin, Mexico City, Kuala Lumpur) than there are of situations where major Games have been linked to vigorous, let alone successful, pressure for political reforms. Several factors militate against serious engagement with the rights records of host countries, not least the traditionally uncritical disposition of much of the sports media. Similarly, most ISOs are more interested in maximising participation (‘keeping politics out of sport’) than applying human rights standards and many, including the IOC, still tend to be deeply conservative organisations, notwithstanding recent pressures to reform. Moreover, bid organisations and organising committees are often private–public
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‘partnerships’ that are shielded from normal processes of democratic accountability, compromising in their essence democratic processes.73

On the other side of the ledger, however, is the example of the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Human rights considerations played no role in the awarding of the Games, since South Korea was then governed by a highly repressive military regime that had been responsible for the massacre of hundreds of civilian protestors in Kwanju only months before the awarding of the Games. Mounting domestic mobilisation and protests in the run-up to the Games, however, combined with unprecedented international media scrutiny, conspired to place Korea’s ability to hold the Games into question. Faced with the spectre of such a monumental national failure and loss of face, the regime effectively conceded to all the opposition’s major demands in June 1987, thereby ushering in the most extensive democratizing reforms in the country’s history.74

More generally, the context for major sporting (and other hallmark) events has changed significantly from that which prevailed when, for example, the Mexican government was able to massacre protesting students in the run-up to the 1968 Games with little immediate negative fallout. Norms of human rights and democracy have spread significantly in the interim. The global mass media have become more critical and intrusive, notably concerning the Olympic Movement, and hosts are unable to shield uncomfortable facts from external scrutiny and publicity. Transnational advocacy networks, notably mobilised around human rights issues, have become more extensive and effective, providing vital support to opposition and human rights groups within authoritarian systems.75 In short, the range of pressures that can be brought to bear on repressive regimes has expanded considerably, and major Games can provide a key opportunity to ‘shame’ hosts and forcefully lobby for commitments to reform. A key question, therefore, is whether the process of bidding for and hosting major Games will become more closely and reliably associated with liberalising political reforms. This possibility will be put to the test as the Beijing Games approach.76

Conclusion

The neglect of sport by the fields of International Relations and International Political Economy (IPE) has become increasingly untenable. As this paper has sought to demonstrate, international sport is closely implicated in core theoretical themes in IR—notably identity, inequality and, above all, a more nuanced and persuasive conception of power. Empirically, the pursuit of major games has become a favoured strategic response of state and economic elites to the challenges and opportunities of globalisation, while social movement activists have seized upon the possibilities for publicity and mobilisation they provide to advance broader campaigns for social, political, and environmental change. The salience of these events is particularly striking in the global ‘semi-periphery’, where the costs and risks of their pursuit are particularly high yet their popularity continues unabated. In short, there is a need for a good deal more critical scrutiny and systematic research of the significance and presumed benefits of these global games.
Towards this end, the project of which this paper is a part asks participants to prepare a series of historically and theoretically significant case studies. For optimal comparability, the choice of cases has been informed by considerations of: regional differentiation; first order (Olympics, World Cup) versus second order (Commonwealth Games, Cricket World Cup, European Football Championships) events; recent versus earlier events; and failed versus successful bids. By bringing an international group of IR/IPE scholars together with leading Sports Studies scholars, influenced in turn by Cultural Studies, Sociology and History, we hope to contribute to a more informed and interdisciplinary engagement with sport as a global political phenomenon.

Notes

9 Though the latter is an important and under-appreciated motive—see Allison & Monington, ‘Sport, prestige and international relations’.
12 Houlihan, Sport and International Politics, p 19.

For a discussion of this lacuna, and a substantial step towards correcting it, see the special issue of *International Studies Review*, 4 (1), 2002 on ‘International Relations and the new inequality’.


Allison & Monington, ‘Sport, prestige and international relations’, p 119.

Cf ibid.

See S Guzzini, ‘A reconstruction of constructivism in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 6(2), 2001, pp 147–182, p 172. Drawing on Baldwin’s example illustrates the point in relation to a suicide candidate threatened with a gun to choose between money or his life. Given this relation, the gun-bearer has no power over him.


Social capital is defined as, ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or, in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word’. *Ibid*, p 248.


Ibid.


See Van der Westhuizen in this issue.


See Cerny, ‘Paradoxes of the competition state’.

We are indebted to Claire Turenne Sjolander for flagging this point. See J Hoberman, ‘Sportive nationalism and globalization’, in Bale & Christensen, Post-Olympism?

See Silk, ‘Together we’re one?’.


We thank Rob Holland for this phrase and the point behind it.

Muda, ‘The significance of the Commonwealth Games in Malaysia’s foreign policy’, p 221.


