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Sport Mega-Events and Global Political Economy

Sport

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Olympic Games have become the largest international diplomatic and corporate gatherings, write Susan Brownell and Niko Besnier.

In May 2015, American and Swiss authorities swooped into the annual congress of the Fédération internationale de football association (FIFA), took seven soccer officials into custody, and launched an ongoing investigation into corruption in international soccer. Russia and Qatar have been accused of buying the votes that awarded them the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups. Journalists and academics had criticized FIFA's corruption for years, but it was untouchable. Governments were afraid to take on the organization in countries where soccer was a national passion.

Although the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has avoided outright accusations of vote buying since reforms in 2000, its bidding process has drawn criticism for another reason. When Oslo, Norway, withdrew its bid for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games under pressure from local public opinion, the remaining contenders were Kazakhstan's Almaty and China's Beijing and Zhangjiakou. For the first time in the history of the modern Olympics, there was no Western contender. Beijing was selected in July 2015. [Western media](#) and [sportspeople](#) feared that in future only "dictatorships" would mount bids because they allegedly lacked the accountability to public opinion that hinders liberal democracies. They blamed the Sochi 2014 Winter Games and the Beijing 2008 Summer Games for scaring off bidders with their price tags of US\$51 billion and \$43 billion, respectively.

[FIFA is portrayed](#) as an organization in which endemic corruption had allowed dictatorships to buy influence and win World Cup bids. [The IOC is depicted](#) as a coterie of self-aggrandizing individuals whose greed has led to ever-larger Olympic Games, leaving bills that taxpayers, where they can express their opinion, find outrageous. Against the grain of the popular commentary, we would like to argue that FIFA's and the IOC's troubles are not the result of the actions of a few corrupt individuals, as FIFA's president [Sepp Blatter maintained](#) before his spectacular downfall. Rather, an anthropological approach views them as manifestations of a bigger phenomenon—globalization as a whole.

Photo courtesy The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (UK)

Global Sport's Political Economy

Global sport has become a vast network with tentacles reaching into the very pinnacles of power in the global political economy. International sport organizations are, technically speaking, non-governmental and non-profit—despite the fact that the IOC can require governments to set aside laws and FIFA controls a larger budget than many sovereign states. Only the US government seems big enough to take on FIFA. In the last two decades, rapid growth has been funded by alliances with multinational corporations and television broadcasters and new infusions of Asian, Russian, and Brazilian wealth. That has enabled corruption on an increasingly larger scale, exceeding the capacity of any national government to control it.

The mega-events that punctuate the sports calendar offer a unique methodological opportunity. In these spatially and temporally condensed hubs, one can conduct an ethnography of globalization by following the members of the networks who converge there. Susan Brownell has been utilizing mega-events as a way of writing the ethnography of China's emergence as a superpower. Niko Besnier and his ERC project team have been examining the sport migration that feeds much of the talent into the system, offering a path to mobility to (mostly) male athletes from developing countries and holding up these men as masculine celebrities. The anthropological perspective contributes a counterpoint to arguments about globalization that are too often based on abstract speculations not anchored in actual human experiences.

This work sheds light on the question of whether the West's domination of the global political economy is in decline, as is so often asserted. In the 118 years up to the 2014 Winter Games, 45 of 50 Games had rotated among Europe, North and Central America, and Australia. The five Winter and Summer Games held outside the cultural West were all in East Asia, most recently culminating in China's first Olympics in 2008. This August, South America will host its first Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Through 2022, the following Olympic hosts will be in East Asia (Pyeongchang, Tokyo, and Beijing-Zhangjiakou).

The FIFA Soccer World Cup has also exited the West. South Africa's 2010 World Cup was the first mega-event on the African continent. Brazil hosted in 2014, to be followed by Russia in 2018 and Qatar in 2022. The center of gravity has thus shifted away from the traditional Western stronghold with respect to the *hosting* of sport mega-events. But does this show that the Western preeminence in the world is in decline?

The authors with Mahmoud abd-el-Wahed at the Beijing Olympics women's soccer final. Photo courtesy Niko Besnier and Susan Brownell

Money and Hospitality

Now and for the foreseeable future, the West still dominates the Olympic economy, providing the greatest part of the skyrocketing revenues with television broadcasting rights fees and global sponsorships. From the [2006–2008 cycle](#) (Torino/Beijing) to the 2014–2016 cycle (Sochi/Rio), [television revenues](#) increased by 60 percent to US\$4.1 billion, and [global sponsorships](#) increased by 15 percent to \$1 billion—in the midst of a global financial crisis. Nine of eleven [global sponsors](#) for the Rio Olympics are Western (seven American, two European), and the remaining two are Asian (Korean and Japanese). Athletes also continue to migrate from the periphery to the wealthier economies, where citizenship may be fast-tracked in time for major international contests.

The public criticism of the huge costs of mega-events has deflected attention away from the more important question, “Under what conditions can such sums of money be pooled?” While cynics argue that the money would be better spent on alleviating poverty, it is clear that this is not going to happen. This is a chiefdom-like redistributive economy, not a market economy, reminiscent of the economic underpinnings of Trobriand cricket matches, for example. Sport mega-events serve as centers for this economy.

While around 100 heads of state attended the opening ceremonies of the two recent Olympics, the significance of this has not been analyzed. Olympic Games have become the largest diplomatic gatherings—exceeding any meeting of the United Nations, the G-20, and any international government mobilization other than for war. Of the 90,000 seats available in an Olympic stadium, some 30,000 are reserved for special guests. Thousands of these seats are occupied by government and corporate leaders and their entourages. Bill Gates receives a personal invitation from the IOC. More CEOs attended the [Beijing Olympic Games](#) than attend the Davos World Economic Forum, although exact numbers are unknown since, unlike politicians, they are not obligated to publicize their itineraries.

Furthermore, corporations organize massive hospitality programs—hosting as many as [300,000 guests](#)—during the World Cup and Olympic Games that bring in suppliers, distributors, and employees for wining, dining, and spectating. The [US Securities and Exchange Commission's](#) investigation of the program organized in

Beijing by the mining firm BHP Billiton revealed that it had spent over \$100 million on over 1,000 packages worth up to \$16,000 apiece. The SEC asserted that the programs amounted to the bribery of government officials in an effort to obtain mining access rights in Congo, Guinea, Burundi, the Philippines and other countries, and slapped it with a \$25 million penalty, the largest-ever civil penalty.

The growth of the Olympic Games and World Cup—and the corruption that has accompanied it—is an effect of the increasing integration of the global political economy. Asia, Russia, and Brazil are just joining a system that the West still dominates. The West is not easily giving up its domination; indeed, almost all of the criminal charges in the FIFA and BHP Billiton cases named people from outside the West.

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The international actions against corruption have emboldened non-Western governments to attack corruption domestically. In Brazil, there are currently investigations against politicians all the way up to the president Dilma Rousseff, allegations against corporations in charge of building infrastructure, and general outrage over human rights abuses in the treatment of displaced favela residents and the poor. In 2014 Brazil became the first place in which broad public protests and riots specifically targeted the World Cup and Olympics.

If we disregarded the huge numbers of people and money involved, then the entire phenomenon would be very familiar to anthropologists. We know that humans will go into deep debt to fund rituals in a way that seems to fly against financial reason, but they do so because such events are essential to maintaining social networks in a face-to-face society. Since Marcel Mauss, we have understood that the workings of the gift economy and the redistributive economy complement the market economy, with which they are frequently and surprisingly entangled.

Many theorists have argued that mega-events create a powerful fantasy of not only a national “imagined community,” but also of pan-human unity. But they have assumed that, unlike the ritual communities typically studied by anthropologists, the global community is not a face-to-face community. However, an analysis of *who* attends mega-events and *why* reveals that leaders of the global political and economic system *do* convene regularly in one place, so they are more of a face-to-face community than meets the eye.

The extraordinary growth of global sport events is probably empowering and enriching the transnational elite who patronize them—and that is something of which we should be deeply critical. At the same time, we should recognize that underpinning the emergence of this elite is a growing integration of the global political economy accompanied by the recognition by ever-greater numbers of people that they are members of a single, worldwide community of humans.

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