

Capitalizing Hope: Dream-worlds of Development and the Production and Management of Emotions in Mega-Events Bidding

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The geographical reach of mega-events has spread as mega-events attract the attention and financial resources of more and more cities and countries. An increasing number of local and national governments have engaged in bidding for mega-events such as the Summer and Winter Olympic Games (and other sports competitions recognized by the International Olympic Committee like the Asian and Youth Olympic Games), FIFA World Cup, UEFA club competitions, universal or international expositions, and European Capital of Culture competitions.

The European Capital of Culture programme is a costly enterprise with recent ECoC programmes (not including infrastructure, renovations, museums or other buildings) ranging from €20 million to over €80 million (European Commission, 2014). While most cities spend in average €40-60 million just for the cultural programme (Dodd et al., 2011) and €105 million for infrastructure projects, the European Commission offers to the winners only €1.5 million and this payment of the Melina Mercouri prize is conditional. Since EU support represents less than 2% of the total funding generated for ECoC (Palmer, 2014), local actors need to find other sources of budget from national, regional and municipal governments, from the private sector and also to attempt to access EU structural funds and cultural funds.

Moreover, bidding for the ECoC title is increasingly a costly undertaking with €1.5 million considered by most cities as a minimum amount required for bidding in 2011 (Dodd et al., 2011). In the competition process for the ECoC title, local actors are spending vast amounts of resources (money, energy, personnel, etc.) in order to potentially acquire a title that comes with a meager prize offered by the European Commission and with ambiguous, unsustainable benefits. As Horne and Manzenreiter argue, "forecasts of the

benefits (of mega-events) are nearly always wrong" (2006:7). In addition, mega-events and other mega-projectors seem to inhabit a "fantasy world of underestimated costs, overestimated revenues, underestimated environmental impacts and over-valued economic development effects" (Flyvbjerg 2005:1). Even though there are controversies and disagreements regarding the social and economic benefits of bidding and hosting mega-events, the appeal of bidding and hosting mega-events does not seem to diminish. The economics of bidding seems paradoxical and puzzling, irrational even. Is there any rationale behind these seemingly irrational practices? Why is so much energy and capital spent in order to get a small monetary prize and a title with ambiguous benefits? What is the logic of the whole system of bidding?

Furthermore, bidding is often made with large sums of taxpayer's money that are spent in a non-transparent manner. Even though „large sums of public money are spent to secure uncertain rights to host events" (Pomfret et al., 2009:3) and even though there is a lack of accountability and transparency around bidding, resistance movements and groups are either inexistent or small and unsuccessful. When they do exist, contestation, resistance and protests mostly seem to be futile and ineffectual to stop bidding or to change its direction in a significant manner. Why are resistance and contestation of mega-events so unsuccessful? Why is the critique of bidding and mega-events so ineffective? Alternatively, why is bidding for mega-events so seductive? How and why did mega-events become hegemonic?

In order to understand the appeal of bidding and the ineffectiveness of resistance to bidding and mega-events, a political economy analysis of urban politics and a focus on the vested (political and economic) interests of elites are not sufficient. Firstly, in critical urban studies "elites" are narrowly categorized as political and economic elites (and interests are narrowly categorized as political and corporate/capitalist/economic/business interests) and experts, consultants and knowledge-workers are mostly ignored. Secondly, even though critical urban studies assume and some prove that mega-events benefit mainly the vested interests of elites and powerful groups and that their main effects can be seen in the advancement of the interests of the elites (for example through the tourist industry, construction industry and real estate), this does not fully explain the wide enthusiastic support which mega-events enjoy not just among the elites but also beyond the confines of the elites among "street level bureaucrats", public servants/city hall workers and among the broader population. Thirdly, focusing only on the vested interests of capitalists, politicians or elites does not explain how elites came to embrace mega-events as a strategy of urban and regional (re)development nor how they gained and gain support from the population while silencing any contestation and opposition.

In order to achieve a better understanding of the rationale of competitive bidding, it is important to explore the socio-cultural and emotional dynamics related to bidding, the “worlds” (Shore, Wright and Pero 2011) of the policy actors involved in the competition, their values and beliefs, their practices and meaning-making practices, and how they conceptualize their “worlds”. For both elites and knowledge-workers (and for citizens), mega-events appear as tools for the symbolic construction of the community and their value and meaning lie in their promissory nature, in their potentiality rather than in their actual use/utility. As a “symbol”, mega-events allow citizens, “street level bureaucrats” and other knowledge workers (local artists and cultural operators) to participate in a community they find desirable and to consent to the production of dream-worlds and fantasies inherent in bidding for mega-events, although their participation happens in a highly circumscribed manner. The emotions and desire, the consent and collective action of these urban actors and of citizens can be mobilized by elites around the improved image and representation of the urban. The support for the competition for mega-events and other entrepreneurial strategies of urban redevelopment is premised on hope and civic pride and manufactures solidarities and belonging through the production of dream-worlds and fantasy around an urban place.

Experts and consultants created and were part of a solid informational infrastructure around the European Capital of Culture programme since its emergence in 1985. This informational infrastructure (reports, models, statistics, experts, consultants, etc.) enabled the circulation of the policy both inside and outside the EU and created and sustained a powerful seductive discourse for actors and institutions in search of urban strategies of redevelopment but also for the broader population. A coalition was formed between the European Commission and policy experts and practitioners claiming that the event is beneficial for cities and their economies. These self-sustaining network of laws, governmental institutions, experts, international consultancies and technologies, impact analysis reports, cost-benefits reports, statistics and conferences posited that the ECoC programme is valuable for the socio-economic development of cities, that experts are beneficial in preparing the competition and hosting of ECoC, and that the European Commission should be given more responsibility in handling the management of the policy. The following aspects are significant: the evolution of systems of expertise and knowledge around the European Capital of Culture policy, and the interrelation between interests and knowledge in the trajectory of the policy. By analyzing the legislative changes around the policy and the main hegemonic texts – the Myerscough report (1994), the Palmer report (2004) and the Impacts08 and the ATLAS reports –, the construction of the „benefits” of mega-events, the

appeal of bidding and hosting mega-events and the relation between knowledge, expertise and interests will be interrogated.

An important part of the informational infrastructure around the ECoC policy is the creation and circulation of models, references and “best cities”. These references, model cities and desires are mobile, translocal and transnational, and they have a dreamlike quality. Mega-events bidding function through systems of comparison, learning and networks building among urban actors and policy-makers. Moreover, “best cities” have an important role in the construction of other cities and in the construction of “mobile urbanism” (McCann) but that happens in an unorganized, disjointed manner. Urban policy actors do not reference and do not use models, “best cities” and studies in a systematic, consistent manner but rather inconsistently and disjointed. Like in a dream (good dream or nightmare), references are assembled almost randomly, haphazardly with a “flexible causality” and flexible transitions and without an over-arching goal/“logic” and without a consistency between the different models used. Also, urban policy actors put together this assemblage without a deep knowledge of the city or case being referenced; they often make mistakes and oversights in talking about the various models which are sometimes confused with each other and almost considered interchangeable. “Model” cities and their antonyms are only recalled and used as a tagline, a visual and for the emotions and feelings they evoke; similarly, studies and reports are remembered and used just as a justification, legitimation tool and for their assumptions (or for conforming the assumptions of the urban policy makers about the benefits of mega-events and urban strategies of redevelopment). For example, before Guggenheim, Bilbao is imagined as a 19th century city experiencing the brunt and then decay of the industrial revolution, full of chimneys and smoke. After, the fairy tale and fantasy of a clean shiny metropolis. This way of imagining and using “model” cities are affecting and having clear repercussions on urban planning and urban politics.

For both the policy actors and citizens, the ECoC appears as a tool for the symbolic construction of the community and its value and meaning lie in their promissory nature, in its potentiality rather than in its actual use/utility. As a “symbol”, ECoC allows citizens, “street level bureaucrats” and other knowledge workers (local artists and cultural operators) to participate in a community they find desirable and to consent to the production of dream-worlds and fantasies inherent in bidding for mega-events, although their participation happens in a highly circumscribed manner. Politicians, experts and other policy actors are legitimizing mega-events as acts of hoping and dreaming, while building up particular hopes and spending vast budgets along the way. Although emotions vs. expertise and emotions vs. development are seen as opposing entities, the

production, maintenance and (mis)management of emotions are part and parcel of mega-events planning and more generally in entrepreneurial urbanism. The presentation analyzes what strategies politicians, mobile experts, public servants, local experts and consultants are using in order to maximize their authority and legitimacy. The emotions and desire, the consent and collective action of these urban actors and of citizens can be mobilized by elites around the improved image and representation of the urban. The support for the competition for mega-events and other entrepreneurial strategies of urban redevelopment is premised on hope and civic pride and manufactures solidarities and belonging through the production of dream-worlds and fantasy around an urban place. By documenting the central role emotions play in the production, maintenance and contestation of mega-events competitions, the presentation analyzes the unequal, complex and mobile geographies of expertise and emotions that crosscut and unite the urban and the competing cities.

My research uses the case study of the Spanish competition for the ECoC 2016 title in which 16 cities participated and attempts to answer these questions regarding the logic of competitive bidding and the rationale of seemingly irrational actions. Given the nature of this inquiry, the most frequently used strategy was that of the in-depth semi-structured interview combined with follow-up interviews. I carried out 110 semi-structured interviews with (key) personnel involved in the bidding process (politicians, city hall staff/local public servants – técnicos, external consultants, European experts, EU technocrats, and jury panel members), and in order to cross-check and to gain alternative perspectives, I also held interviews with local activists, journalists, national civil servants and volunteers. Other methods and techniques used were a content analysis of the local and national press and a critical analysis of official documentation and data produced by the teams working in the bidding cities, by experts and by the European Commission (e.g.: the bidding documents of the 16 cities, master plans, strategic plans on culture, the archive of the Directorate General on Culture from the European Commission, transcripts of the meetings of the Network of Cultural Capitals and Cultural Months of Europe, statistics on budgets, salaries, etc.).