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City Fathers Win Medal for Style But Last Place in Social Events

The Olympics brought cash and kudos to Barcelona but not everyone enjoyed the bonanza, reports Beatriz García

2002 will be remembered for many things in Britain, not least of which will be Manchester's triumph in staging the Commonwealth Games, an event that, along with the globalisation of Manchester United, has helped to put the city firmly on the world's sporting map.

To all intents and purposes, the great event as a phenomenon is here to stay. Be it the Sydney Olympics or the more controversial millennium celebrations, events should no longer be considered a frivolous enterprise. They can and should, as in Manchester's case, be used as an opportunity to redefine what a city is about. For this reason, a strong, multidisciplinary research tradition is being established to analyse large-scale events. The potential benefits of such research include the development of tourism opportunities and the social regeneration of areas where events are held, which may extend to a whole country.

For years there has been resistance to this field of study, particularly from the humanities and traditional disciplines in the social sciences. Common claims have been that major events are trivial, populist and irrelevant to the problems of the real world. However, the situation may be changing. With the growth in global communications, great events - characterised by the large number of participant countries and the variety of audiences they attract - have become key catalysts to promote cities and regions through the media. They are therefore moving up the political agenda.

The Olympic Games, World Cup football and Universal Expos are all examples of events that have put cities on the world map (Barcelona), transformed a country's image (South Korea) or accelerated local regeneration (Lisbon). Unfortunately, a large proportion of current event studies and publications focus only on their economic impact rather than on their social effect - the narratives they convey through the media, their ability to accelerate or counteract nationalist movements or, more broadly, their role as platforms for social and cultural exchange. This is where disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and communication and cultural studies could play a role.

Barcelona is a perfect example of the importance of pursuing social and cultural analyses of great events. It can be defined as an 'event-led' city and has become one of the most fashionable destinations in Europe. Its modern development has been marked by the staging of a Universal and International Exhibition in 1888 and 1929 respectively and, most remarkably, by the 1992 Olympic Games. The first two events were vital for the urban development of the city, while thanks to global media communications, the 1992 Olympics, acted as well as a vehicle for the world-wide promotion of the region's distinctive Catalan identity.

Ten years after the games were staged, the Barcelona authorities continue to pay tribute to the legacy of 1992 and on July 25 celebrated their anniversary, with the return of the Olympic mascots and the re-lighting of the Olympic cauldron. The celebrations were used to boost municipal and Catalan national pride and to usher in the city's next 'great event' - the Universal Forum for Cultures in 2004. However, this is an event that is having difficulty winning popular support. Critics say the city's dependence on big events has led to an emphasis on style over substance, which hides an inability to tackle the day-to-day challenges of urban life.

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Opposing these views, Forum 2004 has been presented as a new type of event, an alternative to the Expo model and its traditional focus on industrial and technological showcases. The Barcelona Forum claims to be more responsive to social issues and has put at the core of its programme and mission statement the celebration of culture and education. As the name suggests, the event intends to become a place for debate about cultures and ideas. Furthermore, the main themes proposed are defined as 'transcultural' and of global relevance: world peace, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability.

The role of academic institutions is particularly important in this respect, and the Forum's organisation committee has made strong links with academics throughout the world in order to raise its credibility. But a careful look at the event programming proposals reveals a tension between this intellectual thrust and expectations that it will take the form of a big party, a spectacular show aimed at attracting media attention. The latter is an indication that the event also has an important economic goal. This is the regeneration of yet another area of the city and the build-up of new conference centres, five-star hotels, shopping conglomerates and a first-class residential zone to a space now considered mainly derelict, although it is partially inhabited by marginal communities.

While a section of the official Catalan and Spanish media is in favour of the initiative, and international audiences continue to applaud the inventiveness of Barcelona, the noted tension has raised criticism at a local level from minority groups. These include community representatives, non-governmental associations and various academics and intellectuals who question whether great events can truly benefit the local community. In this line, critics refer to the 1992 Olympics. These Games are generally remembered as a great achievement, but the accelerated urban development caused by the event brought with it draconian measures to control (or hide) street begging, and shifted a low-income community with historical roots in the area from what has now become an acclaimed and lucrative beach front.

Three key tensions have emerged from these discussions and could be applied to the analysis of any great event:

- What is the aim of the event and at whose expense will it be achieved?
- What form should it take?
- Who benefits and for how long?

The first question suggests that there may be a contradiction between combining urban regeneration with community representation and between aiming to accelerate inward investment while boosting local ownership and pride. Priorities need to be established and justified before the event is given a green light, if only to avoid disappointment.

The second indicates that event managers should question the conventional format that events take and seek alternatives so as to guarantee that priorities are effectively reached.

The third should make organisers look at the long-term impact of the event. Will the local community benefit or will an anonymous corporate investor clean up? Will the legacy involve some sort of physical change or landmark or just take the form of personal memory? Will the event survive the hype of the moment and have an enduring impact?

Academics' contributions to formulating a great event's mission statement and to proposals for symbolic components such as ceremonies, parades and cultural programming are critical in ensuring that a representative and sustainable view of local cultures is presented. The over-emphasis on marketing and international communication strategies, and the trend towards commissioning 'event experts' from foreign

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countries to stylise the cultural discourse of a place all combine to weaken the credibility of what is presented. While in the short-term they may make for a spectacular media show, in the long-term they are likely to diminish local feelings of ownership and weaken the chances of the event having a lasting impact, in economic as well as social and cultural terms.

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