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The implementation of a cultural mega-event and the process of legitimization

Marseille-Provence 2013 European Capital of Culture & Expo Milano 2015:
a Mediterranean comparative analysis

Charlène Arnaud

CERGAM Research center, Université Aix-Marseille III

Laura Forti

ASK Research Center, Università Bocconi

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Cultural mega-events and territorial strategy

The Mediterranean space can be conceived as "*a single matrix [...] with convergence points which contribute to create a cultural field apparently quite distinct compared to the adjacent areas of the Mediterranean, that is to say Europe, Africa and Asia.*" (Solinas in Braudel 1977: 81-82). But in the contemporary reality, the cultural issue is more complex, considering that, as for the European Union, culture is in the same time the main key and one of the most important stakes in the process of territorial construction. Indeed, culture consists of "*patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action*" (Kluckhohn and Kroeber 1952: 357¹). The "partition" between the two meanings of culture is not sealed. On the contrary, there is interaction: "*the anthropological culture models and heavily influenced the cultivated and legitimized culture; as the sociologists say, the culture shapes the culture*" (Moulinier 1995: 23).

To be both visible and different, places use culture as a strategic tool. They can focus on heritage and infrastructures, as well as on an event strategy. Getz (2005) proposed a classification of the events considering four cases: the mega-event, the hallmark event, the regional event and the local one. Each of them has specificities in relation to the form, management, impacts and assigned objectives. The mega-event is described as a short-term and large-scale event in terms of economic and touristic impacts (Hiller 2000: 439). But more than a simple territorial marketing tool, the mega-event is the artifact of an ideology, expressing a political approach (Gursoy & Kendall 2006: 603). Indeed, the organization of such an event requires a considerable investment in human, financial and material resources of host communities, even though success is uncertain (Haxton 1999), both in the competition and valuation steps (Marais & Arnaud 2010). Therefore, many countries use it to increase their legitimacy and prestige, but also to build or strengthen a territorial identity². Not only mega-events represent an opportunity to enhance the local cultural heritage and activities and to present them to tourists: they can also improve the quality of the relationships among the existing cultural institutions and, therefore, the interaction of the cultural system with the local community. Yet, the balance between cultural institutions and event organizers is often problematic, as permanent institutions perceive that energies and resources are distracted in favor of ephemeral efforts and event organizers struggle to generate the necessary consensus.

¹ In 1952, Kluckhohn and Kroeber list all the definitions of culture from Tylor's one to synthesize them.

² "*Mega events are a major tool with which to encourage urban redevelopment and reimagining*" (Hall 1998 p.9).

The research question

Behind the scene of some very successful events, there have been failures, successes, crises or victories (Spilling 1996). Working on cultural and public management, our aim is to understand which are the conditions to become a success story. Now, one of the major stakes in the implementation of a cultural event resides in the governance system and the management of the different stakeholders (Daigle & Rouleau 2010). “*Governance refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private sectors have become blurred*” (Stoker 1998:17). “*The governance concept points to the creation of a structure or an order which cannot be externally imposed but is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of governing and each other influencing actors*” (Kooiman & Van Vliet 1993:64). The stakeholder theory thus stresses the interactions of power, legitimacy and urgency in creating overall salience (Mitchell, Agle & Wood 1997). Legitimacy is then conceived as “*a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions*” (Suchman 1995: 574). So, the legitimization refers to the concepts of project appropriation, equity, interdependence (internally), but also the legitimacy the territory can obtained outside (visibility and attractiveness). It also refers to the significance of the political dimension. The event “*functions like a monument, supporting and reinforcing the image of established power*” (Bonnemaison 1990). This process is both internal (local actors) and external (urban, regional, national or international scenes). It requires and involves the handling of time and space (Gravari-Barbas & Jacquot 2007: 5).

Because the implementation of a cultural mega-event needs the creation of a new entity (an *ad hoc* structure), the managerial practices and conditions of success are specific. The difficulty lies in the nature of these structures, “*characterized by the fleeting existence of projects and deadlines established. This temporary organizations weighs on their functioning in the process of cooperation and collaboration [...] in the contractual agreements and the sharing of responsibilities in the division of labor [...] in the distribution of salaries and fees*” (Benghozi 2006 p.3). Therefore, as it has been underlined by Getz & Andersson, the process of legitimization has a particular relevance: “*a high degree of legitimacy enabled the festival to stress consensus building and stability, whereas one-time event projects must work hard to establish legitimacy in the eyes of their key stakeholders*” (2008: 9).

Our paper is thus organized around one main research question:

How do organizations for the realization and management of cultural mega-events get legitimized? In which way does this process of legitimization influence the development of the event?

A two-case studies methodology: a comparison between two Mediterranean countries

The research focus is on two mega-events: Marseille-Provence 2013 European Capital of Culture and Expo Milano 2015, a wide event on the issues of sustainable development that we considered in its cultural dimension, analyzing the projects and the networks related to the local cultural system. To reveal the emerging managerial and governance practices in the legitimization process of the

organizers of these two events, qualitative data were used: primary ones (interviews) and secondary ones (internal documents from the organizations, official and public ones...). A representative sample of 20 stakeholders of both the Expo and the ECOC (selected on the basis of the typology, the mission and the dimension of the institutions) were interviewed in the initial phase of the event organization to gather specific insights on the perceived role of the organizing institutions and the individual institutions agenda from a cultural viewpoint. The aim was to understand how the relationship with the dedicated structures (Expo 2015 S.p.a. and Association Marseille-Provence 2013) affects, on the one hand, the institutions' capability to plan and coordinate cultural initiatives; on the other, the expectations towards the changes that the event is able to produce in terms of visibility, tourism, infrastructures, relations with the citizenship.

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