

*Miquel de Moragas and Miquel Botella, Editors*

# **The Keys to Success**

*The social, sporting, economic  
and communications impact of  
Barcelona'92*

*Centre d'Estudis Olímpics i de l'Esport  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
Olympic Museum Lausanne  
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and Communication Impact  
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## BARCELONA '92: THE PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

JOHN MACALOON<sup>1</sup>

As with any great public work of art, it is impossible to anticipate the social and political consequences of the Barcelona Olympiad so soon after its conclusion. These effects will take years to know for the various sectors of Barcelonan, Catalan, and Spanish society, not to speak of social actors around the world. From the perspective of international anthropology, there was no one Barcelona Olympics, but rather thousands of them, as many as there were cultural communities interpreting the Games. Reduction of these multiple discourses to some «bottom-line» statements can be nothing more than an imperialist appropriation of the world to one or another parochial point of view.

At the same time, an irresistible demand for such statements is created by an alliance of powerful forces: the host community's need to justify its enormous investment; the Olympic Movement's claims of universalism; the illusions of modern cosmopolitanism and modern science; contemporary talk of globalization with its mistaken assumption that forms of transnational interconnection like mass media, big business, sports, security operations, mass spectacles, art connoisseurship, and tourism lead inevitably to standardized meanings. The logic of the contemporary «world system» is in fact quite different. Interconnection and diversification are not opposing processes, but rather two sides of the same intercultural coin.

Some social and political significances associated with the Barcelona Olympics are already recognizable and will be implicated in institutional appropriations of these Olympics anywhere. But like stones thrown in the pond of world affairs, there can be no predicting what the wave patterns will look like as they reach and rebound from various and distant shores. I will comment on two such representations: the city

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itself with its cult of modernist urbanism, and the nation-state form in global perspective. These two themes are related, but dialectically and multiply so. They array social diversities of history, conception, and experience around themselves, including important diversities within Europe and «the West». Indeed, expression of these themes in Barcelona offered an important temporal disruption, a transgressive explosion of the intended celebration of linear social progress at the end of the twentieth century. While themes like post-communism, the end of the cold war and apartheid, and European unification pointed toward the potential political novelty of the future, the ideological and performative representations of nation-state and city in Barcelona revealed how profoundly nineteenth-century our logics of social life remain.

A preliminary review of Olympic media coverage, especially outside of Western continental Europe, shows striking agreement that the city of Barcelona itself was the star of the Games. Naturally, at all Olympics, attention is focused on the character of the host city and its culture, but 1992 was something quite unusual. Foreign journalists, no less than foreign sport fans, sport workers, academics, and general tourists, seemed to be talking more about the city than about any particular Olympic controversy, ceremony, or sports event. In a sense, Barcelona upstaged the Olympics, though in another sense the Olympics created this «Barcelona».

The features of the city singled out in these commentaries vary, of course, with the cultures and conditions of the speakers. Middle-class visitors from disorganized urban sprawls like São Paulo, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Athens, and Bombay marvelled at the compactness and ease of getting around in Barcelona. Foreigners from whom vast street crowds at home are unusual, worrisome, or even frightening repeatedly commented on the scores of thousands of ordinary citizens who turned up nightly on Montjuïc for no other reason than to be among everyone else. The nightly flows of people on the Ramblas, and the fact that the sociability of evening extended so quickly and deeply in to the wee morning hours, attracted participation and special social rapport from persons in whose home environments pleasures are taken indoors and «the streets are rolled up» at midnight.

For many visitors, this code of seeing and being seen brought the people and the material city of Barcelona into a common expression of spectacle logic. The aesthetic beauties of Barcelona's great vistas and her intimate alleys, the cleanliness of even poorer neighborhoods (to the extent that

any Olympic visitors saw them), and the general sense of a city that evidently cares for how it looks through the apparent competence of social services: such themes repeat themselves in foreign commentary, often in the end crowding out the shock and suffering of foreigners and locals alike because of extraordinary prices and price-gouging. Even where it bordered on narcissistic parochialism, the extreme self-consciousness of Barcelonans and Catalans about their built environment was another factor singled out for positive notice by foreign commentators.

In the early days of the Games, some international officials and Olympic *aficionados* complained of it seeming more like «the Barcelona and Catalonia Expo» than the Olympic Games. The victories of Spanish athletes helped change all that, drawing local populations who had appeared not to care about sport at all into the stadiums and in front of television sets, in full view of foreigners moving in the opposite direction, having come for the Games and being drawn into the city. This public meeting of guest and host populations, *while both were so fully in passage*, was unprecedented in my experience of summer Olympic Games. I believe it is what will be remembered about Barcelona for those who were there, long after the outcomes of this or that competition or the grandiose entertainments of the opening ceremonies have been forgotten.

Domestic and foreign talk often seemed to constitute Barcelona as a free and autonomous entity in the world, thereby revealing the endurance of a feature of eighteenth and nineteenth-century utopianism, when the great city had not yet been so thoroughly brought to heel by the encompassing nation-state. Today, however, such civic attainments are thoroughly dependent upon political identities, parties, and formations irrevocably tied to nationalist discourse. Just so, the old panhumanisms of European modernism —whether socialist, liberal, or romantic— which lie at the core of Olympism, established transnational entities like the IOC and the UN, and emergent forms like the EC cannot make any appearance without direct reference to the world of nation-states. The new alliance between the global and the local cannot yet detach itself from the national, and available models of nation-ness remain firmly embedded in the past.

These facts were symbolized repeatedly in Barcelona in the «battles of the flags». In the streets, shop windows, bars, restaurants, stadiums, government and COOB offices, international installations, and lobbies of official hotels, the flags of the IOC, EC, Spain, Catalonia, Barcelona and the COOB



(joined in some context by the banners of Catalan independence) were forced to dance with each other. Sometimes the dance was a happy sardana, sometimes a wary modernist ballet, and sometimes a violently postmodern slam-dance. No expression of identity and ownership, however joyful, went uncontested or unmediated by the others. It is under the all-surveying eye that sociopolitical identities feel the greatest fear of exclusion.

At the end of the Games, IOC President Samaranch remarked «that the world now knew that Spain was not the culture of siestas and mañana». But who was «the world» supposedly benighted by such stereotypes? I for one have never met Koreans, Indians, Indonesians, or Kenyans who shared them. North Americans? If so, then not Spain but the far more relevant Hispanic cultures of Mexico, Central and South America are those to be defended. To the extent that Spain itself has remained on the popular cultural map of North Americans, the stereotypes to worry about are probably not those of indolence but of the «black lie» in both its early modern and mid-20th century versions. Though he has reason to be only too aware of these, Samaranch did not mention them. Therefore, one cannot help arriving at the conclusion that «the world» Samaranch declared newly enlightened was really that of Northern Europe. For their parts, other Catalans declared that Samaranch should have said «Catalonia» not «Spain», consonant with the extensive campaign on the part of several Barcelonan elites—including some Olympic ceremonies designers and certainly the Generalitat—to reassert Catalonia's claim to be the most European part of Spain.

Though of rather different political formation than Samaranch, Barcelona Mayor Pasqual Maragall's marked declarations of civic autonomy turned out upon inspection to be similarly directed. Sounding for all the world like a big city Mayor from the country in which he studied to become the technocrat he was before politics claimed him, Maragall declared on the eve of the Olympics that he wanted Barcelona to be remembered above all as «the city that functioned». After the Games, when this desire had been granted in spades, he felt freer to specify his real audience. Having proved itself to be a great European city, Maragall declared that Barcelona should now become «*the great European city*». Maragall's double status as Mayor and Olympics chief, his positions in the EC organization of municipalities, his outreach to the Mayors of war-torn Yugoslavia, and his citation during the opening ceremonies of personal requests to him by the

UN all indicate the new relations between local and transnational entities which depend upon nation-state meditation even as they try to circumvent them. Jordi Pujol tried to take advantage of these mediations through the Generalitat's press campaign seeking to have Catalonia recognized as «a country in Europe» in major international newspapers. Post-Olympic claims that people around the world now know that Catalonia is not the same as Spain are probably accurate. But much of the local discourse remained perplexing if not somewhat irritating to many foreigners. Non-European contingents at the Barcelona Olympics were sometimes made to feel as if they were intruding upon or being used as pawns in an intra-European conversation. The effect was deepened by the disinterest (relative to past Olympic Games) shown by COOB, Olympic art organizers, local journalists, and academic elites toward foreign cultures represented in their midst, in particular the non-European and especially the non-Western ones. The important political entailments directed at the EC by representations of a Mediterranean identity were accompanied for many South Americans, North Americans, Scandinavians, and British by shock at certain «Mediterranean» practices with respect to race and gender, at least as these appeared in mainstream newspapers. Perhaps more surprising that the «black Sambo» cartoons, «black/other» medal counts, and surreptitious photographs of women athletes undressing in their Olympic Village rooms was Catalan and Spanish disinterest in or inability to grasp why things might be offensive to citizens of more determinedly creole and pluralist states. Of course, every Olympic Games results in such cultural imbroglios and political boundary-definitions among host and guest societies. What showed here on a world-historical scale was the continuing incommunicability among the different classical models of nationalism: the creole nationalism of South America, the continental European ideal of one state/one ethnicity/one language, the Anglo-Saxon model of many cultures/one state, and the hierarchical-wholistic nationalisms of East and South Asia.

Deep connections between rival models of the nation-state and the theme of utopian urbanism may compose the distinctive sociopolitical contribution of Barcelona '92. Without the Olympics, the economic capital could not have been generated so quickly, or maybe at all, to open Barcelona to the sea, refurbish the beaches and the parks, renew the districts of Vall d'Hebron and Poble Nou, build the ring road, the communications towers, the sports pavillions, the train sta-



tions, and the airport terminals, or finish any of the other urban infrastructural projects that in the planners' understanding have not so much transformed as «completed» the city. (In the discourse of Barcelonan urbanism, it is as if Sert and the Eixample had been patiently awaiting all these years for their wider setting to be realized). The Barcelonan modernism of art and architecture differs in important ways from other European and international modernisms, but in the utopian centralization of its visions, its ethos of making one integrated urban environment, it just as surely references the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The ideology is clear even in its official treatment of the peripheral, collar communities, within the bounds of the mountains and the sea, yet built for and occupied by working class immigrants from elsewhere in Spain. As HOLSA and city guides like to put it (on marvelous tours which foreign visitors showed little interest in taking), the ring road and its overlying parks have had progressive effects, for «central city-dwelling bourgeois now actually see these communities». (Notwithstanding subway rides in and out of Barcelona for basketball, few foreign visitors discovered them).

But as in Seoul (the other major Olympic urban transformation, conducted on an even greater scale than Barcelona), Olympic economic capital could not have been generated without the accompanying political capital provided by the various nationalisms. In South Korea, the process was driven by central national state bureaucracies appealing on the one hand to national emergence into world consciousness from under the screen of that Western Orientalism which suppresses all differences with China and Japan, and, on the other hand, to literally paving the way for reunification with North Korea. In Barcelona, by contrast, the political capital was generated by a whole series of energizing oppositions: between Catalonia and the Spanish state, between the Generalitat and the Ajuntament, between the Catalan bourgeoisie and the immigrant populations, and between the socialists, the center-right, and the radicals. Far from being the consequence of an ancient city and modern technocracy set free from all distracting nationalist and anti-nationalist discourse, the triumphant *urbanismo* of Barcelona now being celebrated around the world is the product of these very struggles over national identity. Modernism is itself so cultivated in Barcelona because it is identified with opposition to dictatorship at the national center and with extramural claims on European status and identity. Thus the dreams of the rationalizing modernists of Barcelona, past and present, remain



tied to a certain model of nation-ness which in turn appeals for legitimation to certain transnational cultural formations and (with the EC) political institutions. Here is a paradigm revealed for us in the Barcelona experience. Brasilia, the rational utopian capital of a proudly creole state was now soliciting the millennial Olympic Games in hope of overcoming the North/South divide. It's rivals included Manchester and Beijing. Manchester sought to renew itself as an international multicultural city on the ruins of the industrial ratioanlities which gave it birth. Beijing wished to transform itself as Seoul did, but in the logic of the exemplary center of hierarchical nationalism in special reference to the agencies of Orientalism and the cold war. In the end, the «new» city of Sydney won the prize. While related, indeed *because they are related*, these logics are *extremely different from another*. The paradigm not only makes interconnection possible, it commands differentiation and diversity. How but on the ground of difference can the IOC decide? This is an IOC itself, it must be added, that in its politically opportune but riskily precedent-setting decisions in Barcelona about who is allowed to be represented as a nation, showed itself to be desperately in need of greater self-consciousness about the «world system» of which it is a part.

With recognition of the true paradigm of intercultural relations in the world system today, is not the next step to discover whether and how partisans of one model can remain committed to it while nevertheless coming to more serious recognition and consideration of the other models constructed to similar ends by the peoples of the world? The significance of Barcelona for the future was to make this challenge abundantly clear as well.