FOUR US OLYMPIC STORIES: THE RISK OF DEATH BY SUCCESS?

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The US is the Olympic power par excellence. No one has been able to strategically capitalise on the hosting of various Olympic Games to project itself politically and obtain economic benefits as well as the North American colossus. The games have also been an opportunity to develop the infrastructure of the cities that host them and attract foreign investment and tourism. Thus, the summer games in Los Angeles (1932 and 1984) and Atlanta (1996) and the winter games in Salt Lake City (2002) provide an example of how a country can take advantage of these sporting events to promote its values and cities as symbols of national pride. But Atlanta and Salt Lake City, in particular, have also clearly shown the risks inherent in a model in which commercial and corporate considerations play an increasingly large role.

In general terms, the formula that determined the success of the games in Los Angeles, Atlanta and Salt Lake City is based on two specific factors. First, private funding of the games to support the cost of the organisation of these mega-events with minimum public expenditure. And second, the consideration of these sporting spectaculars as collective efforts in which the athletes embody US diversity, plurality and values and, as a consequence, are treated as national heroes hoisting aloft the flag of commitment, sacrifice and personal achievement.

The 1932 Los Angeles summer games ran the risk of being suspended because of the economic crisis of the Great Depression and were perceived as Hollywood extravaganza by many at that time. Through its staging, the United States showed the world that it was a country capable of overcoming its difficulties and organising an enormous event, anticipating its role as a leading international power. At the same time as being the country that won the most medals (103), the US helped participating nations who were also suffering from the rigours of the depression by paying part of their travel and accommodation expenses. With the construction of the Olympic Village, Los Angeles became a model for future games: from that time on, the athletes would live in a kind of Olympic camp for the 16 days the games lasted.

In 1984, Los Angeles hosted the games again. On this occasion, instead of the Great Depression, the Cold War formed the context that coloured the staging of the event. In fact, what might have been a failure due to the Soviet Union's boycott – reciprocation for the United States' refusal to attend the 1980 Moscow games in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – became an economic and political triumph for the country. The key to the success was the reuse of the structures built for the 1932 games and the sponsorship and commercialisation of the games by large private corporations. Such was the success of the private investment that these games passed into history as the first funded almost entirely by the private sector and the first to leave a surplus (around $232.5 million). From the US perspective, the success of the games was even more profitable politically within the Cold War narrative. And, for good measure, the United States was once again the country that won the most medals (174).

Now, if the 1984 games are remembered for their success in attracting private investment, the Atlanta 1996 games are seen as an example of overexploiting the corporate sponsorship strategy. Private profits were maximised, but the final social perception was negative as greater investment was expected in structural development and the promotion of Atlanta as a model of racial tolerance in the USA. The marginalisation of some parts of the city and the commercial over-exploitation presented the International Olympic Committee (IOC) with a need to regulate the participation of companies in the games.

But it was the winter games in Salt Lake City in 2002 that put the United States successful Olympic track record at risk along with the image of the Olympics themselves. The uncovering of the bribes made to IOC members by the Salt Lake City organising committee to ensure the success of its bid put in question the moral rectitude that the United States claimed to promote. The revelations that millions of dollars-worth of payments and gifts were made by members of the Salt Lake City Organizing Committee (SLOC) to relatives, friends and members of the Olympic International Committee brought corruption practices to light that were deeply rooted in the bidding and award processes and which, in the end, seriously eroded the virtuousness on which the Olympic movement purports to be based.

From the economic point of view, the Salt Lake City games were, once again, a successful case in terms of the profits obtained by private commercialisation of the games ($2 billion). Equally relevant was the games' symbolism, being held a few months after the September 11th terrorist attacks. The use of the ground zero flag in the opening ceremony and the medals won by Mexican, Cuban and African-American athletes, among others, were presented as a sign of the US capacity for recovery and the validity of the plural, open, melting-pot model at a time marked by the Bush Administration's "War on Terror". In this way, the symbolic and emotional components manage to eclipse – at least during the games – the corruption and bribery scandal.

These four examples illustrate how the USA has managed to forge a very beneficial relationship with the Olympic Games, but one that is not without risks. The private sector has played a key role in ensuring the success of the games held in the US: maximising profits, diminishing the load on the public coffers (always a controversial issue), and helping the promotion of national interests. Nevertheless, the cases of Atlanta and Salt Lake City expose the risks of large corporations having too large a role, and the balance that cities must achieve between the need not to succumb economically and meeting their local social targets without losing sight of the symbolic value for the nation and its international projection.