

A Bridge from 2007 to 2016: A Way to Make Adapted Sports More Visible in Brazil¹

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Abstract

In this paper, my aim is to think about one of the least analyzed sportive mega events which will be realized in Brazil in two years time: the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. A lot of papers are being written about these “sportive mega events”, expressing multiple points of view about the negative social, environmental and others impacts on people, principally poor people, of cities that host these events. Meanwhile, almost all of them depart from the “observers points of view”, while I intend to discuss this question from the point of view of the athletes and other people with disabilities. Studying this event “from these native points of view” doesn’t erase all the concerns about economic and political interests involved in the disputes to host World Cup (soccer) or the Olympic Games, but focuses primarily on understanding the effects of this event on a group traditionally ignored in the Brazilian society.

Keywords: Paralympic Games, Brazil, identity, media

1. Introduction

A lot of papers are being written about “sportive mega events”, not only in Brazil but in other countries, as well. These papers are expressing multiple points of view: economists, sociologists, urban planners, among others. They are all valid points of view and express, in almost all of them, concerns about the negative social, environmental and economic impacts on people, principally poor people, in cities that host these events. But, as Magnani (2002) said, following Lévi-Strauss (1975), they generally express only the point of view of the observer, while Anthropology tries to start with the native point of view.

To do this, the first step is to understand that there are multiple and, often times, contradictory points of view about events which affect a number of different social actors. So, in this paper, my aim is to think about one of these sportive mega events, perhaps the least analyzed among them, the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, which at the same time is the most important, not only for all paralympic athletes, but for a lot of people with disabilities too. Studying this event “from these native points of view” doesn’t erase all other concerns about economic and political interests involved in the disputes to host World Cup (soccer) or the Olympic Games, which are stressed by works like Mascarenhas et al (2011), but it is to highlight another dimension, which affects people traditionally ignored by both sides, as I intend to discuss here.

It’s exactly because my research begins with listening to them – in the strong sense of this term – that I need to make an aft back to the Parapanamerican Games of Rio de Janeiro, in 2007. Although almost all analyzes of Rio 2007 ignored that there were two sportive mega events (the Panamerican Games and the Parapanamerican Games), for those whom I have been working since March 2013, it was the latter that gave the most important legacy to the city and to the country.

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¹ I presented a first version of this paper on the panel “Sport and spectacle in Latin America” during the “Society for Latin American Studies” Annual Conference, in Manchester (UK), in April 2013. I would like to thank the participants for the commentaries I received there, principally from Mr. Thomas Carter (University of Brighton). I would also like to thank Sadakne Baroudi, my English teacher, not only for the classes which helped me with my difficulties in writing in this language, but for all our debates which contributed to refine my arguments.

If having hosted this continental competition hasn't changed accessibility in Rio de Janeiro (one of the promises from the local committee, at that time, which is present again as one of the potential legacies to the city), the visibility proportioned by that event has had a great impact on this group, as I'll analyze in the third part of this paper.

So, my intention here isn't to defend the realization of these sportive mega events in Rio 2016 – I have a lot of personal critiques about them – or to attack them – there are many social movements which are doing that with much more competence and through better ways than an academic paper. I think that my main contribution to this debate, as an anthropologist, is to elaborate an interpretation about how one group, which has been forgotten by both sides, has been working to construct its own legacy in face of the fact that the Olympic Games will be realized in Rio de Janeiro, in 2016. Doing it, neither as a spokesman, as the Brazilian paralympic movement and the Niteroian Association of People with Disabilities (ANDEF), where I'm doing my fieldwork, don't need it, having their own ways to express their demands, nor as a neutral intellectual, I think that I can express my own point of view about the political dimension of Anthropology, one that is indebted to one of many Geertz's metaphors:

“Looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in vats of theory, is what anthropology has been all about. At least, that is what it has been all about, as I, no nihilist, no subjectivist, and possessed, as you can see, of some strong views as to what is real and what is not, what is commendable and what is not, what is reasonable and what is not, understand it. We have, with no little success, sought to keep the world off balance: pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables, setting off firecrackers. It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle. Australopithicenes, Tricksters, Clicks, Megaliths – we hawk the anomalous, peddle the strange. Merchants of astonishment.” (1984:275).

2. Parapan American Games – Rio 2007

The Rio 2007 Parapan American Games marked the third time that this competition was recognized by the Paralympic International Committee (IPC), and the first time that, as has occurred with the Paralympic Games since 1992, both, the Panamerican Games and the Parapan American Games, were hosted by the same city. This needs to be understood as a consequence of the Brazilian desire to host the Olympic Games, which was expressed by the candidacies presented for the 2004 and 2012 Olympic Games – both eliminated in the first phase – and finally for the 2016 edition, when Rio obtained the right to host these competitions. This connection becomes still more evident when it is noted that the candidacy was officially launched a few days after the Parapan American Games closed. For some authors, all this effort has been related to the desire of the Brazilian Government for more world projection, which began with Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-2001) and was strengthened by Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (2002-2009), though I will not discuss those questions in this paper. What I will do is to point out that this effort was inconsistent with the poor results which Brazil had, at that time, in the international sportive scene (see charts 1 and 2). So, some initiatives were made trying to improve the conditions for athletes and sportive federations. The most important among them was the “Piva's Law”, promulgated in 2001, which reserved 2% of the federal lotteries to support the Brazilian Olympic Committee (with 85% of this budget) and the Brazilian Paralympic Committee (with 15%).

At the same time, the Brazilian media began to diversify its sportive coverage, which coincided with the improvement of cable TV in this country. So, if until 1988, the Brazilian public just followed those athletes or teams which had some possibility of winning a medal or the most important competitions, since 1992, with the first channel exclusively oriented to sports, it has become possible to follow the Olympic Games almost all the time². Compared with the current situation in the London 2012 Olympic Games, four media groups transmitted through nine cable channels and one network, some of them having opened just for this transmission, making it possible to choose among different sports to follow. Moreover, since 2004, one cable channel has transmitted the Paralympic Games and, since 2006, the Winter Olympic Games.

This change demanded better training for those who cover sports in media. A quote from Toledo, in which he related some passages from a course about sportive journalism that he frequented during his fieldwork, helps to illustrate the situation before that time:

²Until 2004 this channel interrupted Olympics transmission to show the matches of the Brazilian Soccer Championship and the principal programs that commented on these matches.

“Henrique Guimarães³ said that, a lot of times, speakers and commentators could not discern between a victory and a defeat in sports like judo, citing the gold medal won by Aurelio Miguel in the 1992 Olympic Games, which, for several seconds, astonished the speakers from some TV and radio channels, babbling phrases such as ‘Aurelio lost ... no, he won! No, excuse me, he lost ... no, no, he won! It’s a gold medal for Brazil!!!’, because they didn’t understand the dynamics of sports like that” (2002:176).

If that was the reality in the Olympic sports coverage, anyone can imagine the complete ignorance about rules, athletes and modalities disputed in the Paralympic Games at that same time. In the first cable TV transmissions, the difficulty reporters and telecasters had in finding what would be the “correct way” to transmit these events was visible and, nearly always, mixed up a confusion about the specificity of rules of adapted sports (for example, the number of classes in the same modality, organized through a functional classification⁴) with a “pity tone” in which competitors were presented much more as “people worthy of compassion⁵”, than “athletes worthy of support”.

After such investment, the situation changed a significantly, both in the media, as cited above, and at the medals table (see charts 3 and 4), creating a new dimension for paralympic sports in a movement that recalls Guedes:

“Brazilians can suddenly become tennis’ fans, and support Maria Ester Bueno or Gustavo Kuerten, who won important international championships, with a lot of emotion. To follow a winner, it is sufficient that he or she be a Brazilian (...) but failures are, almost always, completely ignored (...). It’s possible to say, then, that any sport has the potential to operate the Brazilianness dimension of social identities, but it occurs in ‘waves’, following the exits” (1998:41).

So, the current success of Brazilian paralympic athletes has produced, from the first years of this century, the first national idols like Clodoaldo da Silva⁶, Ádria Santos⁷, Antônio Tenório⁸ and, more recently, André Brasil⁹ and Daniel Dias¹⁰. This last one was, also, the only paralympic athlete to be invited to participate in an advertising campaign with a lot of Olympic athletes, publicized after the London Olympic Games ended, in which Brazilians were invited to support athletes who will be competing in the Rio de Janeiro Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2016. Moreover, it’s possible to observe a crescent comparison between Olympic and Paralympic athletes’ performance, generally benefiting the latter, as recently occurred with the Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, during event in which the government was launching a program for people with disabilities¹¹.

One consequence of this visibility is that a lot of people, principally children and youth, who until that time didn’t believe that they could practice sports, after having followed these athletes, reported that they felt stimulated to search for institutions which offered adapted sports. With it, not only can the Brazilian Paralympic Committee find new athletes but, much more importantly, some changes in social identity of these young men and women can be observed.

³ Henrique Guimarães is a judoka who won the Bronze medal in the Atlanta 1996 Olympic Games, and was twice world vice-champion.

⁴The functional classification is a medical and technical exam in which athletes are separated into classes (according to each modality) to prevent someone gaining advantage through a less severe disability.

⁵ To understand more about the hierarchical aspects of compassion and the moral values encompassed by this emotion, see Clark (1997).

⁶ He won thirteen paralympic medals in swimming, six of them being gold medals. He was elected as the best world paralympic athlete in 2005, and nominate to Laureus, which is considered the sport’s Oscar, in the same year.

⁷She is the greatest Brazilian paralympic female athlete, with twelve medals, being four gold, won between 1992 (Barcelona) and 2008 (Beijing).

⁸ Four-time Paralympic championship in judo (1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008) and bronze medalist in 2012.

⁹He won nine Paralympic medals in swimming, being six gold, in only two editions (2008 and 2012).

¹⁰ He is the greatest Brazilian paralympic athlete, with sixteen medals, ten of them gold, and twice elected the best paralympic athlete of the world.

¹¹ “I think that we have, with people with disabilities, a great example: it is the example of the young paralympic athletes. We are much more successful in the Paralympic Games than in the Olympic Games. It’s a thing that we need to say to our Olympic athletes: let us hold up the Paralympic athletes as a mirror and aim for a similar performance!” This was the challenge launched by the President: <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/esporte/1195935-dilma-usa-paraolimpicos-para-criticar-desempenho-do-brasil-na-olimpiada.shtml>, accessed at 04/12/2012.

3. Social Identity

Since Barth (1995), social identity has been understood as a construction that is contextually elaborated. From this formulation, Bourdieu (1980), emphasized the aspects of power relationships among different groups in social contact, whereby some of them have the capacity to impose their own definition of identity, while others haven't the symbolic capital to nominate themselves. So, as systematized by Simon (1979), the socially recognized identity is always a negotiation between a "self-identity" – as each group defines its own identity – and a "hetero-identity" – as each group is seen by other groups in the social context.

As a consequence, groups can always try to manipulate their identity in different contexts, depending on each specific power imbalance and the aims that these groups have in each situation. These considerations are important to surpass analyses that consider just macro contexts and, thus, freeze those groups in a powerful/powerless dichotomy. At the same time, it emphasizes that these games of identification can occur not only between two groups, but among different – and contextually changeable – subgroups in heterogeneous identities.

Ethnographies like Araújo (2011) show this multifaceted reality inside a group of paralympic Brazilian swimmers. There, the multiple positions where the group put her, was a way to identify how they interacted with a lot of other people and how these interactions changed over time and, much more importantly, with transformations in intimacy and confidence. So, along the sequence of her fieldwork, the categories used and the playing of identities changed substantially. At first, they talked to her in the same terms with which they interact with the media, using "politically correct" terms and sustaining a homogeneous "self-identity" structured in categories like overcoming. But, with her daily presence in the field, the group felt comfortable to insert her in an informal style of conversation, which is reserved for the "insiders":

"It's possible to say that there is a precept which informs how a person with a disability should be called. This precept is known by those acts in the paralympic sports, but it isn't used with frequency in daily contact among them. In this familiar environment, jokes are much more common in their speech. In this way, some intimacy is desirable for athletes to feel comfortable using this mockery. According a coach, 'when they decide that you will take part in their group, it is no longer a problem to be called lame or deficient. What is important is how they are really being treated and viewed'. So, there isn't a difference if a person has or hasn't a disability. The requirement of closeness, which can be developed in intimacy, affinity and friendship is valid, both for those who have a disability as for those who don't." (2011:142).

So, "politically correct speech" is a tool in specific situations where they understand that it is necessary to fight against negative hetero-identities. The conscious use of these strategies of identity, as well as the capacity of reframing some categories as observed above, on the other hand, highlight the changes that the sportive practices and the current stage of the Brazilian paralympic movement propitiated for these athletes, as can be observed in the statements of a swimmer described by Araújo:

"He told me that before competing he felt sad about anything that people would say about his body, but 'after you enter in these competitions, the people joke about you and they have the same deficiencies as me' (...). You have a gain because you enter in a group of athletes, which is seen in a different way. You now have a greater autonomy, a different respect from others, and you begin to see yourself in a different way too, and project it outside. So, these jokes are both an element of integration in the group and a sign of this new moment" (2011:143).

It's possible to observe in my fieldwork that these radical changes in the capacity of nomination (Bourdieu, 1980) of this group of great athletes has impacted, on different levels, the lives of other athletes, who don't reach these high performances and principally, those youth who are beginning in the practice of adapted sports. But even those areas furthest from the paralympic movement, the visibility and the publicity of the discussion about questions like accessibility, working conditions, and prejudice against people with disabilities, are showing the first steps in the direction of some transformation in this social identity, principally after the Parapan American Games of 2007, when Rio hosted, for the first time, a big event of this category. Consequently there are great expectations about the legacy from the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, and not only among athletes and the people directly involved with the event.

A lot of people, who live with some kind of disability, not only those present in the paralympic classes, and institutions which work with rehabilitation of these groups, has expressed a hope that this sportive mega event can help, in different ways, their lives.

4. Paralympic Games – Rio 2016

There is a current debate in a lot of NGO's about the Olympic Games in Rio, as I said in the introduction of this paper. This debate has involved a crescent number of academics from the principal universities, not only in Rio de Janeiro, but around the country and even around the world, dialoguing with past experiences with the organization of events like it.

In my opinion, this debate mixes two different points-of-view about sports. On one hand I observe those "intellectuals" who think about sports as an "opium for the masses", following an orthodox Marxist view. We have a lot of them who, for example, made the construction of the Anthropology of Sports in Brazil and South America very difficult, although, as says Alabarces (2011), they haven't more this capacity, and as such, a large discussion against this position are no longer useful.

Much more important are the problems involving the organization not only for the Olympic Games, but for the 2014 FIFA World Cup, expressed by a large group of colleagues who study this theme seriously. I take a recent book, organized by some of these authors (Mascarenhas, Bienenstein, and Sánchez, 2011), as example of the kind of critiques expressed by this group and to establish a dialogue from another perspective, one influenced by the movie, "Invictus" (Eastwood, 2009), which is about Mandela and the Rugby World Cup, in South Africa, 1995.

This movie centers on how the recently elected President Nelson Mandela used a sportive mega event as a tool to construct his "rainbow nation", even against a significant part of his own political group, for whom sports shouldn't have been seen as a priority in the process of the reconstruction of the nation and, even more so, that the association with the Springboks, the South Africa Rugby National Team and an icon of the Afrikaners wasn't correct. As a key to understanding Mandela's position about it, Morgan Freeman, the actor who played Mandela, said about this policy that, in a former encounter with him, Mandela had said that "to have gone to the Barcelona Olympic Games, in 1992, was a decisive experience for me"¹². So, events like this can produce not only concrete and immediate legacies, but a lot of others, in the realm of the symbolic dimension which affect not only people like Mandela, being therefore able to change some lives, too.

The perspective from which, Mascarenhas et al (2011), approach the Brazilian sportive mega events is very different and can be connected with a critical comprehension about new tendencies in urban planning, which can be identified by a predominance of geographers, architects, economists, and sociologists involved in the discussions about the role of sportive mega events in the territorial reorganization of contemporary cities.

The principal aim of this group seems to be to strengthen ties with what they called "collectives of resistance" which organized a lot of forums to connect diverse kinds of people hit by the process of transforming Rio into a city able to host the World Cup and the Olympic Games¹³ – which, in the perspective of the groups that occupy the political power in the city, involves not only a series of works in the sportive and urban infra-structure (stadiums, hotels, airports, transports and others), but removal of "undesirables" from the areas where the games will be concentrated.

"The essential interrogation is about the social return from public investments realized in urban spaces. This interrogation is particularly important in a city where internal organization is historically marked by sociospatial exclusion and which, until now, presents a lamentable scale of chronicle problems in habitation, sanitation, transports, and hospitable structure, among other areas. In short, it is necessary to investigate the territorial strategies of these sportive mega events, interests involved, places impacted and the impact of whole intervention over urban life" (2011:144).

All these interrogations are completely pertinent, but in my opinion they created an option to speak about these mega events in only one direction and the exclusion of all anthropologists from this book seems to not be casual. So here, I'm speaking about another dimension of the city.

¹² <http://cinema.uol.com.br/ultnot/2009/12/22/ult4332u1412.jhtm>, accessed at 27/01/2013.

¹³ It's noteworthy that, in all the three hundred pages of this book, there isn't one reference to the Paralympic Games or the Parapan American Games.

One that starts from what Magnani called “near and inside” observation, which is an adaption to urban contexts from the traditional anthropological method, which consists in constructing our analyses “from the native point of view”:

“It is evident that it is impossible to deny neither those problems pointed out in diagnoses sustained by uncountable and consistent studies and proven by the daily experience in large cities, nor those injunctions from the interests of huge transnational corporations and local elites in the decision-making systems about urban organization and their influence over life conditions of the population. But the question that hovers is: Is that all? Isn’t there anything more than this degraded scenery in the urban experience? Isn’t it possible to reach other conclusions, unveiling other plans, exchanging this *far and outside* focus of analysis for another one, like those from Anthropology, for example?” (2002:16).

It is from this theoretical reference and the understanding that each city is inhabited by different groups with multiple interests, which means that each mega event can be read in a variety of interpretative keys, that I’m proposing, with this paper, a specific glance from “near and inside” which departs from the point of view of those involved with people with disabilities and particularly with the paralympic movement.

This point of view presents a lot of concerns about the city, too. Not only those pointed out by Mascarenhas et al, but other more directly related to accessibility and to prejudice against people with disabilities. But at same time, this group is able to identify not only an immaterial legacy from the Parapan American Games, hosted by Rio in 2007, but has justified hopes that Rio 2016 Paralympic Games can be not only an arrival point on a bridge that began in 2007, in which adapted sports acquired much more visibility, but a starting point too, for a new bridge, in which this visibility can to help to transform the lives of not only these athletes but also contribute to the transformation of the capacity of self-determination for all people with disabilities.

So, a lot of institutions in Brazil are turning attention to a group that, according the Brazilian 2000 census¹⁴, is around twenty four million people. It’s true that the focus is primarily on paralympic athletes or in the development of future athletes, as the excerpt below shows, but should be observed that the technology developed for these wheelchairs can contribute to improving the conditions many of other users of this equipment.

“Developed by Industrial Designers from the Technological National Institute (INT), the specific wheelchairs for children from age seven to fourteen are inedited in the world and take into account dimensions and necessities of this group. Although the quad rugby can be practiced only after the age of sixteen, Maria Carolina emphasized that making this sport more popular, principally among children, is the first step in the formation of new athletes: ‘we have two girls with real chances of being paralympic athletes’”¹⁵.

This is just an example of how the realization of the Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, in 2016, and the consequent crescent visibility of adapted sports, has been pointed to, by athletes and other people involved with this movement, as a opportunity to improve the lives of people with disabilities. They know that this sportive mega event isn’t the magic solution for all problems of Brazilian sports or even only the Brazilian paralympic sports. However, almost all paralympic athletes with whom I’m talking in my fieldwork or that I’m reading in interviews around the country, are saying that it’s the moment to construct its own legacy and this is the best opportunity to consolidate a movement which began in 2007 but they fight to not end in 2016.

¹⁴ Portraits of the Deficiency in Brazil, Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2003.

¹⁵ http://www.faperj.br/boletim_interna.phtml?obj_id=8035, accessed at 30/01/2013.

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Charts:

Chart 1: Brazilian Participation in the Olympic Games (1992 - 2004)

Edition	Number of athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1992	197	2	1	0	3
1996	225	3	3	9	15
2000	205	0	6	6	12
2004	247	5	2	3	10

Source: Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB)

Chart 2: Brazilian Participation in the Paralympic Games (1992 - 2004)

Edition	Number of athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1992	43	3	0	4	7
1996	60	2	6	13	21
2000	64	6	10	6	22
2004	98	14	12	7	33

Source: Brazilian Paralympic Committee (CPB):

Chart 3: Brazilian Participation in the Olympic Games (2008 - 2012)

Edition	Number of athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
2008	277	3	4	8	15
2012	257	3	5	9	17

Source: Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB)

Chart 4: Brazilian Participation in the Paralympic Games (2008 - 2012)

Edition	Number of athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
2008	188	16	14	17	47
2012	182	21	14	8	43

Source: Brazilian Paralympic Committee (CPB):