

Brazil's Olympics and World Cup: Mega-Events and the Threat to Public Welfare

Olympic Capitalism: Bread and Circuses Without the Bread

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The author of Brazil's Dance With the Devil, Dave Zirin, must love sports, as I do, as billions of us do, or he wouldn't keep writing about where sports have gone wrong. But, wow, have they gone wrong!

Brazil is set to host the World Cup this year and the Olympics in 2016. In preparation Brazil is evicting 200,000 people from their homes, eliminating poor neighborhoods, defunding public services, investing in a militarized police and surveillance state, using slave and prison labor to build outrageous stadiums unlikely to be filled more than once, and “improving” a famous old stadium (the world’s largest for 50 years) by removing over half the capacity in favor of luxury seats. Meanwhile, popular protests and graffiti carry the message: “We want ‘FIFA standard’ hospitals and schools!”

Brazil is just the latest in a string of nations that have chosen the glory of hosting mega sports events like the Olympics and World Cup despite the drawbacks. And Zirin makes a case that nations’ governments don’t see the drawbacks as drawbacks at all, that in fact they are the actual motivation. “Countries don’t want these mega-events in spite of the threats to public welfare, addled construction projects, and repression they bring, but because of them.” Just as a storm or a war can be used as an excuse to strip away rights and concentrate wealth, so can the storm of sporting events that, coincidentally or not, have their origins in the preparation of nations for warmaking.

Zirin notes that the modern Olympics were launched by a group of European aristocrats and generals who favored nationalism and war — led by Pierre de Coubertin who believed sport was “an indirect preparation for war.” “In sports,” he said, “all the same qualities flourish which serve for warfare: indifference toward one’s well being, courage, readiness for the unforeseen.” The trappings of the Olympic celebration as we know it, however — the opening ceremonies, marching athletes, Olympic torch run, etc., — were created by the Nazis’ propaganda office for the 1936 games. The World Cup, on the other hand, began in 1934 in Mussolini’s Italy with a tournament rigged to guarantee an Italian win.

More worrisome than what sports prepare athletes for is what they may prepare fans for. There are great similarities between rooting for a sports team, especially a national sports team, and rooting for a national military. “As soon as the question of prestige arises,” wrote George Orwell, whom Zirin quotes, “as soon as you feel that you and some larger unit will be disgraced if you lose, the most savage combative instincts are aroused.” And there is prestige not just in “your” team winning, but in “your” nation hosting the grand event. Zirin

spoke with people in Brazil who were of mixed minds, opposing the injustices the Olympics bring but still glad the Olympics was coming to Brazil. Zirin also quotes Brazilian politicians who seem to share the goal of national prestige.

At some point the prestige and the profits and the corruption and the commercialism seem to take over the athletics. “[T]he Olympics aren’t about sport any more than the Iraq war was about democracy,” Zirin writes. “The Olympics are not about athletes. And they’re definitely not about bringing together the ‘community of nations.’ They are a neoliberal Trojan horse aimed at bringing in business and rolling back the most basic civil liberties.”

And yet ... And yet ... the damn thing still is about sports, no matter what else it’s about, no matter what alternative venues for sports are possible or imaginable. The fact remains that there are great athletes engaged in great sporting activities in the Olympics and the World Cup. The attraction of the circus is still real, even when we know it’s at the expense of bread, rather than accompanying bread. And dangerous as the circus may be for the patriotic and militarist minded — just as a sip of beer might be dangerous to an alcoholic — one has the darndest time trying to find anything wrong with one’s own appreciation for sports; at least I do.

The Olympics are also decidedly less militaristic — or at least overtly militaristic — than U.S. sports like football, baseball, and basketball, with their endless glorification of the U.S. military. “Thank you to our service men and women watching in 175 countries and keeping us safe.” The Olympics is also one of the few times that people in the U.S. see people from other countries on their televisions without wars being involved.

Zirin’s portrait of Brazil leaves me with similarly mixed sentiments. His research is impressive. He describes a rich and complex history. Despite all the corruption and cruelty, I can’t help being attracted to a nation that won its independence without a war, abolished slavery without a war, reduces poverty by giving poor people money, denounces U.S. drone murders at the U.N., joins with Turkey to propose an agreement between the United States and Iran, joins with Russia, India, and China to resist U.S. imperialism; and on the same day this year that the U.S. Federal Communications Commission proposed ending the open internet, Brazil created the world’s first internet bill of rights. For a deeply flawed place, there’s a lot to like.

It’s also hard to resist a group of people that pushes back against the outrages being imposed on it. When a bunch of houses in a poor Brazilian neighborhood were slated for demolition, an artist took photos of the residents, blew them up, and pasted them on the walls of the houses, finally shaming the government into letting the houses stand. That approach to injustice, much like the Pakistani artists’ recent placement of an enormous photo of a drone victim in a field for U.S. drone pilots to see, has huge potential.

Now, the question is how to display the Olympics’ victims to enough Olympics fans around the world so that no new nation will be able to accept this monster on the terms it has been imposing.

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