

Blame it on Rio

The World Cup is over, but the 2016 Olympics are already rolling into Rio. Journalist Dave Zirin talks about the consequences of "celebration capitalism"

BY HART HORNER
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Millions of Americans witnessed Brazil's \$11 billion World Cup party on television. But few will see the hangover.

In his new book, "Brazil's Dance with the Devil: The World Cup, the Olympics, and the Fight for Democracy," sports journalist Dave Zirin reveals the country outside the ESPN camera frame — its growing wealth disparity, neighborhoods turned into parking lots and \$900 million worth of military surveillance centers.

In a recent conversation with Zirin, the writer talks about the rise of Brazil's financial status in sports entertainment even as its citizens fall further into economic despair.

Hart Horner: I know you've reported on mega sporting events in Athens, London, Vancouver, South Africa. Why did you decide to write a whole book about Brazil?

Dave Zirin: The fact that Brazil was going to host both the World Cup and the Olympics is very rare, and it's the first time this has happened since 9/11, when the security issues (became) so crazy and paramount to hosting these events... That plus the fact that at the time I decided to write the book, Brazil had this amazing economic growth boom, the fifth largest economy in the world.... I was curious about how it would be able to host these mega events.

H.H.: I know soccer is a big deal in Brazil. Why?

D.Z.: When we say soccer is big in Brazil, take it with a grain of salt. There's a lot of diversity regionally in terms of how much people love it. But certainly it is not only a national obsession, but also a cultural marker of how people in the country define themselves. Brazilian soccer has become this international standard. Instead of saying "beautiful soccer" or "poetical soccer," you say "Brazilian soccer." Brazil has won the World Cup more than any other country... After Brazil ended what was then the largest slave operation in the Western Hemisphere in the 19th century, soccer came to the



country, and it became a way Brazil started to imagine itself as a post-slavery nation... Even though the early decades of the sport were segregated, it was still seen as a place where people could come together and share in this thing that Brazil did better than any other country in the world.

H.H.: When you talk about the Brazilian way of playing soccer, what do you mean?

D.Z.: The Brazilian way of playing soccer, which frankly one could argue the current Brazilian team does not play, has to do with a lot of passing, a lot of feints and fakes when dribbling the ball, a lot of use of the hips and a huge effort to basically dance through raindrops... The roots of it have to do with the influence of capoeira, the martial arts dance of the slaves, which was very prevalent on the plantations before former slaves came into the city. The roots of it were also very strong in the fact that when players of African descent started playing the sport, because of the legacy of white supremacy, there was an effort to not touch the Englishmen they were often playing against and who first brought the sport to the country. The effort to actually avoid contact with whites sort of morphed into its own style.

H.H.: Is there a link between Brazilian soccer and politics?

D.Z.: There is an almighty link and there has always been a link between Brazilian soccer and Brazilian politics. Not the least of which, you look at the names of politicians in Brazil and they all have nicknames, the way the great soccer players have nicknames. They are Lula and Dilma, and before them there was FHC, and that comes from soccer. But that's very superficial. Also, what team you root for in Brazil is a political marker. And the fact that the dictatorship used soccer was very political.

H.H.: How did the dictatorship use soccer?

D.Z.: The dictatorship used soccer as a form of legitimization, not to mention they used the power of the greatest player of them all, Pelé. If they were supporting soccer, it was a way to make them look like they had the best interest of Brazil at heart. The Brazilian dictatorship put a ton of money into soccer... The day of the moon landing, July 20, 1969, that was also the day Pelé scored his 1,000th goal. And the Brazilian press, which was very dominated by the interest of the dictatorship, put those two headlines on equal footing on the cover of the newspaper. I think that kind of says it all: landing on the moon, Pelé's thousandth goal. Same difference.

H.H.: In your book it seems like you're critical of Pelé. Why?

D.Z.: I'm critical of Pelé because his place in Brazilian sports was unparalleled and instead of trying to use that to do something about poverty, about dictatorship, he chose

instead to cozy up with dictatorship and say things like, "Poverty is just God's will." There's so much more that Pelé could've done and this was particularly proven in 1982 when the Brazilian World Cup team, led by a player named Socrates, was openly anti-dictatorship, even wearing slogans around his head and on his uniform, but the dictatorship couldn't do anything because the power of soccer was more powerful than the power of the dictatorship. That to me is just a window into what Pelé could've done but chose not to do.

H.H.: You talk about Brazilians in the past learning to play soccer in the streets with soccer balls made of sacks. How does Brazilian soccer today compare?

D.Z.: One of the main differences between now and years past is the elimination of public space because real estate has become a fetish in much of Brazil, particularly in the cities. It's not that different from what's been happening in other cities around the world, like around the United States. I mean, my God, I'm talking to someone from Seattle. Of course, you know what I'm talking about. Like when a city becomes too expensive for people who work there to actually live there.

H.H.: One of your big themes is Naomi Klein's idea of "disaster capitalism." You apply it to the World Cup and call it "celebration capitalism." It seems like the basic idea of disaster capitalism is that people in power benefit from disasters. Who's benefiting from the World Cup?

the people who actually live (in Brazil) mistreat the people who actually live in favelas... I've got to tell you, going back to the favelas for the research I did for the book was actually kind of harrowing, because homes I sat in are now piles of rubble.

H.H.: Where did those people go?

D.Z.: That's the big question. We don't know in every case. What we do know for sure is that the organizing and the resistance of the favelas has made a difference. People who are (evicted) either get (significantly higher) cash payouts than they would've gotten otherwise or they get moved to government housing. The government housing is much more tiny and sterile, but that's better than being kicked out on the streets.

H.H.: In your book, you mention some success in fighting the evictions. Do you have any updates on this?

D.Z.: Fighting the evictions has proven to be very difficult. I think in the book I take pains to try to make it open-ended so no one thinks anyone is (claiming) victory. As a writer I'm relieved that I made that choice because that was a tough question. It looked like this one favela I visited was on the brink of victory but a lot of people told me, "Don't be too triumphalist about it, because it could be snatched away from us at any time." And it looks like it's being snatched away from them. So, I think one thing we're seeing with the favelas is a redefinition of the term victory... The fight is for better public housing. And the fight is for a fairer cash payout to leave.

They're uprooting the trees; they're not collecting people's trash. They're trying to make it as uninhabitable for people as possible, so what are you supposed to do? They can't legally kick them out without compensation, because of Brazil's squatter's rights laws, but they can make the favelas as awful as they can to force them out.

H.H.: So how are people fighting this?

D.Z.: They are fighting it in a lot of very interesting ways. There are standard demonstrations, rallies, confrontations with the military, all of which you might expect. But they've also raised money to get planners to draw alternative plans they can present about how favelas can stay (during) the World Cup and the Olympics. They've also pooled their money to hire lawyers to sue the city. They've done art projects. They've done media projects. They've done a lot of cutting-edge activism. A huge percentage of the favela (residents) are online. So people have been using online resources. They've also taught themselves how to make films online and do media. Very inspiring.

H.H.: Can you tell the story of the guy who placed the photos on the sides of the houses?

D.Z.: Yes. Amazing. A professional photographer (known as JR) just blew up these huge photos of the faces of the people who were going to be evicted, and the favelas are just a very public part of Rio, so you're confronted with seeing them, you have to willingly unsee them. And frankly, that's what a lot of the middle class and the wealthy in Brazil consciously do: They choose not to see them. And by putting up the faces of all (the evicted) families and children...he forced people to confront the social cost (of the World Cup).

H.H.: What do you hope American readers gain from your book?

D.Z.: Two things. I hope they get a sense of what's happening in Brazil. I think Brazil is an incredibly important country for

people to understand, and I think Americans largely, in my experience, don't really know anything about it. You're lucky if you know they speak Portuguese in Brazil, and I don't think I'm exaggerating. The other thing in the story of Brazil is the story of the United States. Think about the public funding of the stadiums for the Seahawks, the Mariners, the snatching away of the Sonics, the fact that the Sonics are only gone because (NBA Commissioner) David Stern insisted on the socialization of debt and the

privatization of profit...The book is really about the resistance of Brazil and why people are protesting soccer. I try to explain that to the U.S. audience and I think people should know that because the resistance is historic,

the resistance is an example to us all, and the resistance is something we should take very close to heart.

H.H.: Seems like you end your book pretty optimistically. There are all these walkouts and occupations and protests and now that the games have finished, has anything challenged that optimism?

D.Z.: No. Not at all. A lot of people have pointed out that the protests are much smaller now than they were right before the Cup, when you had 20,000 people in the streets or a year ago when you had hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people in the streets. That's why I was so glad I was there for the couple of weeks I was there just recently because I saw with my own eyes that people are still mad. There's still graffiti everywhere that shows their dissatisfaction and anger. There are still stickers everywhere, and there are still protests almost every day.

H.H.: Have the protests had any big, enduring impact or is business back to usual?

D.Z.: The Brazilian government has been forced to actually give in on a lot of stuff and make promises about things like the fulfillment of public housing. So, all of that matters. There are going to be improvements to people's lives because they chose to protest the World Cup. There have been promises to develop the big (plot of land) next to the Corinthian stadium into public housing in return for homeless and landless workers and peasants not marching on the opening day of the World Cup. That's a big deal.

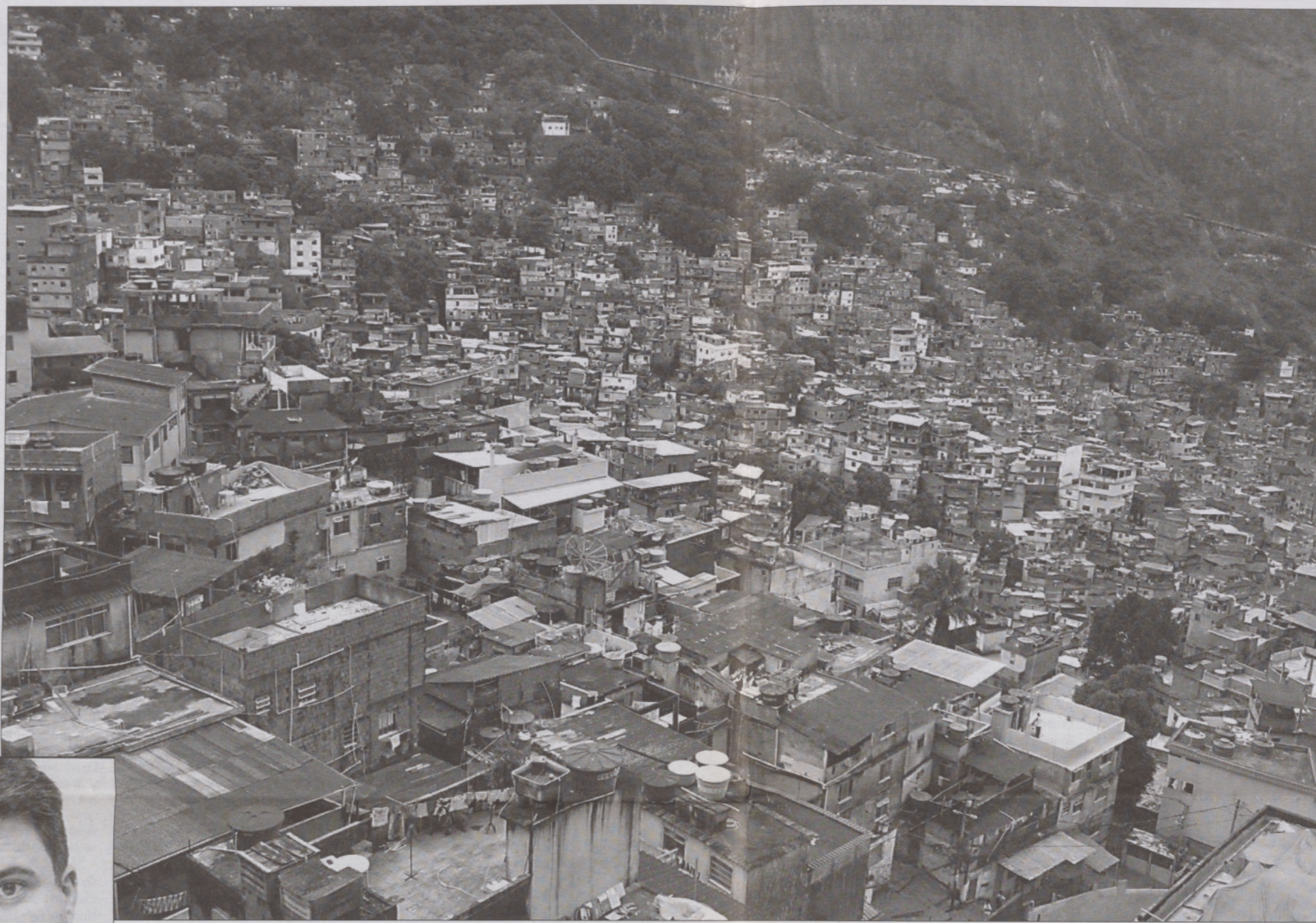
H.H.: Have you felt guilty for watching the World Cup?

D.Z.: Not at all. Soccer is a beautiful thing. Why should any of us let them take it away from us just because the people who run it try to exploit its beauty for their own nefarious ends? So, absolutely, I watch the World Cup. And the most important thing: There's no organization inside of Brazil that's called for an international boycott of the World Cup. It's very important that when we consider boycotts we don't act on conditions of guilt but on conditions of political solidarity.

H.H.: You mentioned there are a lot of parallels between what went on in Brazil and Seattle. What are some other parallels between Brazil and the United States?

D.Z.: There's a lot of creeping surveillance culture, the idea of using sports as a mechanism of corporate and social welfare, the gentrification of our cities, the suburbanization of poverty; the similarities are all over the place. One of the things you're seeing in Brazil — a very diverse, huge country — came together in an act of national resistance and one hopes we can do something similar in the United States against a very similar agenda.

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Above, one of the largest favelas in Brazil outside of Rio de Janeiro. Thousands of residents were relocated from their homes in favelas like this one to develop space for the 2014 World Cup. At left, sports journalist Dave Zirin. His new book addresses what happened in Brazil and the "hangover of celebration capitalism" in the form of international debt, economic stagnation and police surveillance.

PHOTO BY LAURA MOULTON

estate, not just in Rio but across the country. These are things that mega events introduce. And one of the most nefarious parts of it all is debt. We saw this in Greece very clearly. You build these debts and what happens when these debts have to be paid for?

H.H.: What's going to be the full hangover for Brazil?

D.Z.: A debt, a creeping surveillance state and probably a quarter of a million fewer people living in the favelas. But we're not going to know for sure until the 2016 Olympics. Then we can really make a full assessment.

H.H.: Twenty-two percent of the people in Rio live in favelas. What's happening to these people?

D.Z.: Some of them are getting directly kicked out of their homes. They are getting moved clear across the city, and for those who don't have access to transportation, it's disastrous for their jobs. A lot of people choose to move to favelas because they're close to work. A lot of work is in expensive areas and the favelas are these pockets of poverty in very expensive areas. It's a national disgrace. And we're seeing at the same time that the favela culture is being used, expropriated and exported. The treatment of the favelas reminds me a lot of what (author and activist) bell hooks once said — I believe it was bell hooks: America loves black culture but hates black people. You see the way in which Brazil uses the favelas as a way to brand its country. It's like: Look at all the happy poor people. Yet