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The Rio Olympics: Let the Games Begin - “Behind the shimmering Olympic scrim sits brass-knuckle class conflict”

Sunday 31 July 2016, by [BOYKOFF Jules](#) (Date first published: 16 July 2016).

The Rio Olympics are taking to the extreme the overblown promises and neoliberal development now typical of the games.

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The 2016 Rio Olympics start next month, and the lead-up is getting downright gruesome. A couple weeks ago, mutilated body parts washed up on Copacabana Beach, just meters away from the Olympic beach volleyball court [1]. Before that, a Brazilian military official slayed Juma — a captive jaguar trotted out to drum up excitement for the games — during the Olympic torch relay [2].

These ghastly quirks seem to set these games apart. But Rio 2016 just extends practices that have become common in twenty-first-century Olympiads.

In fact, the killing of Juma may well be an apt — if grim — metaphor for working people stuck in today's Olympic cities: sentient beings restrained in the service of a militarized spectacle that's rigged to benefit the rich. The Olympics are a bonanza for the ruling class, and Rio shows us this in an extreme form.

Can't Knock the Hustle

Since at least the 1980s, the Olympics have been big business. Corporate sponsors flock to the games to bask in the five-ring glow.

NBC forked over \$4.4 billion to broadcast the Olympics from 2014 through 2020, and recently paid another \$7.65 billion to extend their contract through 2032 [3]. Already the network has raked in a record-setting \$1 billion in ad revenues for this summer's games [4].

But well-connected local developers make out like bandits too. The Olympics are all about real estate — not the jobs, tourists, or tantalizing “legacies” that Olympic boosters use to sell the games. The public pays for expensive development schemes that fill private entities' bank accounts. As urban geographer Christopher Gaffney puts it, “The flaccid Olympic mantras, superstar pedestal climbers, stadiums, and legacy promises are mere distractions from the realpolitik of urban development.” [5]

The Olympics create a state of exception — a sort of “jock doctrine” [6] — where elites can commandeer the city with uncommon speed and ease. As Rio mayor Eduardo Paes put it back in 2012 [7] — supposedly as a joke — “The Olympics pretext is awesome; I need to use it as an excuse for everything.” He added, “Some things could be really related to the games, others have nothing to do with them.”

Take Rio’s Olympic golf course [8], a brazen transfer of public resources into private pockets. Mayor Paes helped site the project in the wealthy western suburb Barra da Tijuca where billionaire developer Pasquale Mauro could make a killing. During the Christmas holiday in 2012, Paes called an emergency session to pass a law allowing Mauro to build the course inside Marapendi Nature Reserve — home to a number of threatened species — and to ring it with 140 luxury condominiums. As long as Mauro footed the \$20–30 million bill for the golf course, he could sell each condo at \$2 million or more.

You don’t need a calculator to figure the monster profits. And thanks to Paes, pesky environmental impact reports and public hearings didn’t slow down the project. It was full steam ahead for the mayor and his cronies.

Welcome to Hell

Real estate redistribution also brutally displaces the working poor. Ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics some 1.5 million people lost their residences [9]. Since Rio won the Olympics back in 2009 [10], more than seventy-seven thousand people have been moved to make way for the games [11].

Between August and December 2015, I often visited Vila Autódromo [12], a favela that had the misfortune to be located adjacent to the planned Olympic Park site. The community was scheduled for demolition.

Anti-Olympics graffiti covered every surface. Along the white wall that separated the favela from the construction site someone scrawled “OLIM(PIADA)” — the Portuguese word for joke (*piada*) conjoined with “Olympics.”

Despite a spirited fightback, the favela was finally cleared. Of the six hundred families who lived there, only around twenty will be allowed to stay in rebuilt dwellings [13].

The separation wall has disappeared, but the graffiti remains: “Apartheid” spray-painted next to anti-Olympics stickers calling Rio 2016 the “Exclusion Games.”

Even neighborhoods that survive the development boom will confront a side effect of all post-9/11 games: the intensified militarization of the public sphere. Cities ramp up their Kevlar-per-capita quotient to protect the Olympic spectacle.

Justified by the threat of terrorism, they can use the arsenal to quash dissent. Around the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, Gord Hill — an indigenous activist from the Kwakwaka’wakw Nation — described it as “police extortion from the ruling class.”

Eighty-five thousand security officials [14] — double the number present at London’s Summer Olympics — will flood Rio’s streets and favelas. And in Brazil this is especially alarming. Since the city officially became the host seven years ago, Rio police have killed more than 2,500 people [15]. Amnesty International recently found that Brazilian security officials are responsible for one in five

homicides.

An overwhelming number of these victims — nearly 80 percent — are people of color [16]. Rio police perform racial profiling with the dedication of Olympic athletes.

And — thanks to sharp budget cuts — officers are in a foul mood. Last week a contingent of disgruntled cops greeted arrivals at the airport with a sign that read: “Welcome to Hell: Police and Firefighters Don’t Get Paid, Whoever Comes to Rio de Janeiro Will Not Be Safe.” [17]

Greenwashed

A final Olympic pattern taken to the extreme in Rio is the host cities’ tendency to make fantastic environmental promises in their bids that turn out to be fantasies.

In Rio, Exhibit A has to be the pledge to clean up the waterways. Guanabara Bay — host to sailing and windsurfing events — is percolating with pathogens. All five water venues contain dangerous levels of untreated human sewage.

Rio Olympic organizers have failed to achieve a single major environmental legacy promise ahead of the games [18] — not clean waterways, not significantly enhanced public transportation for workers to ease pollution, and certainly not favela improvements.

The athletes at Rio 2016 — the first Olympics in South America — are sure to dazzle. But we shouldn’t fall prey to sportswashing. Behind the shimmering Olympic scrim sits brass-knuckle class conflict. Let those games begin.

Jules Boykoff

P.S.

* “Let the Games Begin”. Jacobin. 7.16.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/rio-olympics-brazil-police-favela-games/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/29/rio-de-janeiro-mutilated-body-beach-olympics-volleyball>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/jun/21/jaguar-olympic-torch-ceremony-shot-dead-escape>

[3] <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2014/05/12/Olympics/OlyNBC.aspx>

- [4] <http://www.businessinsider.com/nbcs-olympic-ad-strategy-heralds-new-industry-trends-2016-4?IR=T>
- [5] <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/global-parties-galactic-hangovers-brazils-mega-event-dystopia/>
- [6] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/the-jock-doctrine/>
- [7] <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/opinion/sunday/brazils-olympic-catastrophe.html>
- [8] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2015/03/21/2016-athletes-village-set-to-become-luxury-housing/25132223/>
- [9] http://www.crin.org/en/docs/One_World_Whose_Dream_July08%5B1%5D.pdf
- [10] <http://www.rioonwatch.org/?p=25747>
- [11] <http://frombrazil.blogfolha.uol.com.br/2016/02/04/six-months-out-from-olympics-rich-not-poor-are-the-big-winners/>
- [12] <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/apr/26/rio-de-janeiro-favela-change-vila-autodromo-favela-olympics>
- [13] <http://www.rioonwatch.org/?p=28110>
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- [16] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr19/2068/2015/en/>
- [17] <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/jun/28/rio-olympics-safety-security-budgets-cut>
- [18] <http://olimpiadas.uol.com.br/noticias/2016/03/17/rio-rescinde-contrato-e-abandona-ultimo-legado-ambiental-da-olimpiada.htm>