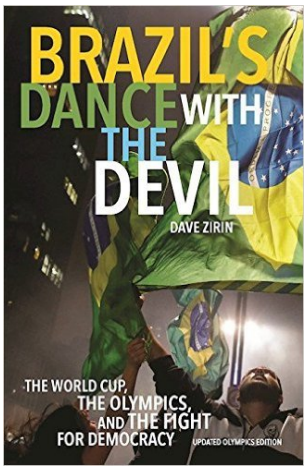
The Toxic Games

written by David Finkel | August 5, 2016



Brazil's Dance with the Devil: The World Cup, the Olympics, and the Fight for Democracy. By Dave Zirin. Updated Olympics edition. Haymarket Books, 2016. 238pp. + notes and index. $17.95 paperback.

I celebrated with great relief back on October 2, 2009, when my hometown Chicago was the first city eliminated by the International Olympic Committee from consideration for hosting the 2016 games. The scale of the pillage, cronyism and social cleansing that "Mayor One Percent" Rahm Emanuel would have inflicted in the name of preparing for the party was horrible to contemplate. And I wasn't wrong, as reporter David Haugh has shown in his piece of bidder's remorse, "In retrospect, losing 2016 Olympics to Rio a big victory for Chicago" (http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/columnists/ct-haugh-olympics-spt-0803-20160802-column.html).

Haugh rightly calls it "the day the IOC saved Chicago from itself." Alas, the bullet that Chicago dodged slammed into Brazil, with double force – in the form of the 2014 FIFA (soccer) World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, which are just opening as these lines are written.

As usual, most of the corporate media are fixated on the challenges to the Great Show. There have been some reports on how Rio's *favelas* are walled off from the Olympic glitter, but the main well-established pattern of coverage goes way back. Panic over Athens 2004: *Would the stadiums be ready?* Beijing 2008: *Would the smog choke the Games?* London 2012: *Would Olympic athletes and tourists be paralyzed in traffic gridlock?* Brazil 2016: *What about the raw sewage in the bay, the Zika virus, Brazil's political crisis and the Russian doping scandal?*

The multiple challenges in 2016 are admittedly larger than normal, but the pattern persists: The Opening Ceremony washes away the doubts, the torch is lit, the games begin and the show unfolds to great praise and the monopoly sale of official products and merchandise, cleansed of unauthorized popular vendors and their wares.

Forgotten then are the grim back stories of the death toll of construction workers in the rush to completion (Athens), the mothballed giant stadium and human rights disaster (China), and all the massive cost overruns and truly Olympian financial deficits that have caused more and more cities around the world to decide, rightly, that the games are a poisoned chalice rather than a prize to win.

Dave Zirin's timely gem of a book navigates the cesspool that the Olympics as well as the FIFA World Cup have become. A veteran sportswriter and political critic, Zirin weaves together the themes converging on Brazil in 2014 and the present: the evolution of the Workers Party (PT) from militant social movement to popular government to agent of neoliberalism; Brazil's blood-soaked history of colonial genocide, slavery, distorted development and social struggle; the emergence of soccer (*futebol*) as the "beautiful game" of the masses, and its current travails as "(n)eoliberalism is making Brazilian soccer as static as the European game from which it once joyfully emancipated itself." (133)

The brief account of what soccer did for Brazil's masses and their national identity is reminiscent of C.L.R. James' classic writing on how the people of the West Indies made cricket their own. All the more agonizing, then, is the symbolism of what Brazil has done to itself – more accurately, what its ruling class, the wannabee elites of the PT, and the governing bodies of global sport have inflicted on the society – in the fate of the iconic Maracana stadium, built for the 1950 World Cup.

"At the 1950 finals, Brazil lost to Uruguay 2 to 1 in front of an estimated 220,000 spectators, one-tenth of Rio's entire population at the time." It was a national trauma undimmed by the passage of decades.

In preparation for the World Cup and Olympics, the place has been gutted so that now "it seats only 75,000 and includes a shopping center. In an eerily symbolic construction move that mirrors the erasure of the favelas, the upper deck, once the famed low-cost open seating for ordinary fans, is now ringed by luxury boxes [which] will, in true US fashion, be sold off to private business interests after the 2016 Games." (36-37)

That's not all. For the 2014 World Cup, at the insistence of FIFA – one of the few institutions whose corruption matches that of the IOC – stadiums were constructed around the country in places where no local professional clubs exist, most notoriously including Manaus in the rain forest, an environmentally ruinous $300 million white elephant whose proposed post-Olympic use is to become an open-air prison. (45-46)

As Zirin points out, the 2014 World Cup was organized under the auspices of the PT federal government, while the 2016 Olympics are the bailiwick of the Rio de Janeiro government of the centrist PMDB, which has important political implications.

"And here is how the Olympics could lead to a judicial coup in Brazil: if [PT president) Dilma (Rousseff)'s government falls and the Games go smoothly, it could contribute to the utterly undeserved image that Rio mayor Eduardo Paes is trying to cultivate as a competent, pro-business manager who makes the trains run on time. This narrative ignores how the Olympics have been organized on the backs of the poor. It ignores the brutal debt, displacement, and militarization that have surrounded the Games." (xvii)

This is not what you'll learn from the television coverage, even from the critical reporting at the margins. Barring a security disaster, god forbid, or athletes becoming violently ill from swimming and sailing in shit, the celebratory vibe will become overwhelming. *Brazil's Dance with the Devil* helps explain how the euphoria of the spectacle is fleeting while the social damage is so long-lasting, and how this fits perfectly with the operations of capital today.

By the way, if you don't already know that the iconic rituals of the Olympics – the torch relay, the march of the athletes, the extreme nationalist display – originated with Adolf Hitler's 1936 Olympics, now is a good time to learn. (154-157)

To return to a subjective note, 2016 could be the year when the Chicago Cubs might actually go to the World Series which they last contested in 1945, and maybe even win it for the first time since the ancient Biblical period (1908 – seven years before my father was born). If Chicago had been cursed with the 2016 Olympics, it's quite likely that the Cubs' schedule would have been hugely distorted by lengthy disruptive road trips, messing up their chances for this possible dream season.

It's one more small reason to celebrate the city's escape, and to praise the coalition of Chicago's community and social activists, No Games Chicago, who organized against the bid. May others learn from and follow their brave example. It's just so sad that Chicago's good fortune contributed to such a disaster for the people of Rio and Brazil. Get your hands on Zirin's book, and you'll have a deeper understanding of why.

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