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Brazil: Budget Failures, Displacement, Zika—Welcome to Rio’s \$11.9B Summer Olympics

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The disaster in Brazil is an extreme version of what happens when the International Olympic Committee comes to town.

There’s an old expression in Brazil: “it is for the English to see.” This means the country’s elites will construct, when necessary, a veneer for Global North outsiders. This veneer displays a more attractive version of Brazilian society than what actually exists. Northern tourists and investors have long been happy to enjoy the fantasy on display as long as they could extract their pleasures or profits, and the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro could have been another chapter in this long history of facades for foreign consumption

But with a dramatic set of crises breaking out across the country, the multibillion-dollar Olympic mirage that has been erected “for the English to see” is at risk of complete collapse. As we go to press, the acting governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Francisco Dornelles, has declared “a state of public calamity” over budget shortfalls that could cause a “total collapse in public security, health, education, transport, and environmental management.” Dornelles warned that without immediate aid, the ability simply to execute the Olympics will be in jeopardy. This is not something that can be brushed under the carpet, no matter how embroidered the rug may be with parrots and tropical colors.

It’s easy to rattle off bullet points about the problems besetting Rio: the 77,000 people displaced and counting; the 85,000 members of the security forces patrolling the streets (double the number for the 2012 London Olympics); the estimated \$11.9 billion being spent while the Brazilian economy is in a state of violent contraction, which has led to crippling budget cuts in education, health care, and community services. It is also easy to list the political conflicts: There’s the May impeachment—what many are calling a coup—of President Dilma Rousseff of the left-leaning Workers’ Party (her presidency has been suspended while the trial proceeds in the Senate). And there’s the shocking level of graft, with a Congress in which 318 of 594 members are under investigation or facing corruption charges.

And then we have what seems to be the No. 1 global concern, what sportswriter Kostya Kennedy calls “the mosquito in the room”: the Zika virus. Zika infection numbers in the state of Rio are the highest in the country, with infection rates at 157 per 100,000 inhabitants. Couple this with an economic crisis that has seen the state of Rio’s public-health office reduce its budget by 30 percent since the beginning of 2015, and the athletic and tourist communities are in a state of panic. Star athletes like golfers Jason Day and Dustin Johnson and tennis players Milos Raonic and Simona Halep are saying they will not compete in the Olympics because of Zika fears. More than 150 doctors and professors signed a letter saying the games should be postponed or moved out of Rio to prevent

the Olympics from transforming Zika into a global pandemic.

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Identifying the myriad problems is easy. More difficult—and more important—is to resist seeing them as “general chaos.” We need to avoid the facile explanation provided to me by Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes: “These things happen when you host an Olympics in the developing world.” Instead, we need to understand that Rio’s “state of public calamity” is an extreme version of what happens when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) comes a-calling. We have seen this corruption in city after city that has hosted the games, particularly since 9/11, as spiraling security costs and out-of-control budgets have become central to the games themselves. The names of recent Olympic host cities—Athens, Beijing, London, Sochi—are more likely to conjure images of heavily armed troops; abandoned, rotted-out Olympic stadiums; and multibillion-dollar price tags than anything that happened on the field of play.

For Brazil’s elites, the Olympics are a neoliberal Trojan horse.

But for this year’s Rio Olympics, the corruption is also a function of how Brazil’s elites have always done business, and the crisis has little to do with general problems in the “developing world.” Instead, it is closely connected to the fact that Brazil is an incredibly unequal society, with oligarchical elites who disdain the poor, mourn for a lost military dictatorship, and don’t particularly care for democracy (all attractive traits to the IOC when looking for an Olympic host city). For these elites, the Olympics are a neoliberal Trojan horse allowing powerful construction and real-estate industries to build wasteful projects and displace the poor from coveted land. But now, as the controversies mushroom, they are also fighting a PR battle, arguing that hosting the Olympics is for the common good. Just as with the mass fumigation of Zika-carrying mosquitoes, Brazil’s Olympic planners are hard at work attempting to extinguish any counternarrative about an impending Olympic disaster before it goes viral.

There is one point, however, where I am in full agreement with the Rio 2016 organizers: Olympic Park, which is adjacent to an entire community of destroyed homes, is emblazoned with a sign above the entrance that reads: *A Olimpíada Traz Mais Do Que Só A Olimpíada* (“The Olympics Bring So Much More Than Just the Olympics”). That could not be more correct.

Yet what the Olympics are actually bringing is subject to fierce and constant debate. I experienced this firsthand when interviewing Mayor Paes. Many observers believe he will one day be the country’s president. He is certainly poised to be the political face of these Olympic Games. His fellow party member, acting president Michel Temer, who took office in May upon Rousseff’s impeachment, is so unpopular that there were rumors that he may not even attend the games for fear of the public reception. (In addition to pushing draconian cuts to social services and anointing the first all-white, all-male cabinet in the nation’s democratic history, three of Temer’s ministers have resigned due to corruption scandals in his first two months in office.) Instead the Olympics will be welcomed by Paes, the comfortably bilingual wheeler-dealer who counts former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg as a close friend and who will be spending next year teaching at Columbia University.

When I sat with Paes, he hit me with a 35-minute charm offensive. An ashtray filled with cigarette butts in the nonsmoking government building belied his cool exterior. His aide said to me, “The mayor is the only one allowed to smoke... it’s been a long day.”

His stress is understandable. These games, if pulled off successfully, could provide an ambitious politician with a halo at a time when all politicians in Brazil are distrusted and despised. I asked

Paes if he believed that Rio is ready for the Olympics and whether it will be a more livable city for workers and the poor afterward. He said, with Truman-esque confidence, “The Olympics are on time, on schedule, and we’re very excited about it.” As for Rio being a livable city? “I have no doubt about it. It’s [already] a much better city.” Reality is posing a challenge to his bluster. Everywhere there is evidence that the Olympics are being used to make the city more unaffordable and more unlivable for the poor.

In May, I visited one of the central “Olympic Legacy” projects: the redevelopment surrounding Rio’s port, with a price tag of 8 billion reals. The aim is to create another tourist center for luxury hotels and condos. Several buildings, to be emblazoned with the word “Trump,” are already under construction. It looks very flashy, very much “for the English to see.” This urban investment has taken an ethnically mixed, cobblestone-paved neighborhood and turned it into what is being called “Little Manhattan.” It brings to mind the friendship between Bloomberg and Paes, as well as Bloomberg’s much-criticized contention that living in a modern city should be akin to having possession of a “luxury product.”

“Little Manhattan” will be anchored by an architecturally breathtaking tourist attraction called the Museum of Tomorrow, which is rich in symbolism of the morbid variety: The port-redevelopment project is being built on Brazil’s most trafficked 19th-century slave harbor, which is adjacent to a mass unmarked grave for Africans who died during the Middle Passage. Business and political leaders have basically built a Museum of Tomorrow on top of a burial ground of enslaved Africans. This is architecture as historical erasure. A small, privately funded nearby museum is all that marks this history of the enslavement that built Brazil’s economy, with parts of the museum’s floor covered in glass so you can see the bones of those buried in the grave.

The residents’ struggle to stay in Vila Autódromo has threatened to blow the lid off the story line Mayor Paes is selling.

The Museum of Tomorrow is also dedicated in part to a future built on sound environmental principles, and yet it overlooks the Guanabara Bay, a body of water so polluted that the odor offends the nose. Olympic events such as sailing and open-water swimming are due to take place in this putrid slush. It became an international scandal this spring when the Associated Press analyzed its contents and found waterborne virus levels “up to 1.7 million times the level of what would be considered hazardous on a Southern California beach.”

Austrian sailors who practiced briefly in Rio’s waters experienced vomiting, fever, and diarrhea, and had to have IVs—and they were on boats. Imagine the health repercussions for those athletes foolhardy enough to compete in “marathon swimming,” a 10-kilometer open-water race.

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Eduardo Paes and Brazil’s elites truly believe that if they make enough cosmetic changes, they can win the foreign press over to a narrative that insists that Rio can still host a successful Olympics, even if the country is experiencing some troubles. But there’s at least one fly in the ointment, one ace in this house of cards, that can expose the fiction. That is a community of 24 families sitting just yards from the Olympic Park, where most of the events will take place: a community called Vila Autódromo.

I’ve been traveling back and forth to Vila Autódromo for four years and have seen it transformed rapidly from a thriving, tightly knit community to a ghost town of Olympics-driven displacement. There were 900 families living here when I first arrived in 2012. Elderly couples sat together in the shade. Stray dogs and cats were cared for collectively with small bowls of food and water. People

invited us into their homes, showing off with pride what they had done through their own labors, eager to assert that they did not live in a “slum” and wanted to stay. Now there are only 24 families left, and the entire area looks like a rubble-strewn war zone, with dogs and cats chased out by possum-sized rats. Anti-Paes graffiti, not surprisingly, is everywhere.

Towering over the heads of these remaining residents is a stainless-steel skyscraper that looks like one of those monstrosities recently erected in Miami Beach. The Olympic media center will be located on one of the top floors. The media, then, will be literally right on top of this story. Will they deign to look down and notice?

Vila Autódromo is a critical issue not just because it’s a galling example of displacement, but because its residents’ struggle to stay has threatened to blow the lid off the Olympic story line that Paes is selling: that the games are good for the working people of Rio. I ask Paes about Vila Autódromo, and he says bluntly that “it’s a lie” to write that anyone was forced out.

He pauses our interview for five minutes to find a binder filled with petitions signed by people he claimed were Vila residents asking to have their homes demolished so they could be moved to government housing. He says, “I must show you these petitions. It’s even fun. Six hundred families [from Vila Autódromo] came here and said, ‘We want to go to the [government] apartments. We think it’s better.’ So they made this petition saying ‘International NGOs do not represent us, BBC of London does not represent us. We want to leave.’” Paes then told me that the people fighting for Vila Autódromo “live in [wealthy] places like Ipanema”—that a middle-class left and foreign media have imagined the displacement, and that the overwhelming majority of families are only too happy take a payout and depart for newly built government housing.

“I’ve seen a person rob another person. But I’ve never seen a country rob someone.” —A resident of Vila Autódromo

As I prepare to leave, Paes reminds me again to tell the world about his “binders of signatures” rebuking “BBC of London” for reporting a “fiction.” His need to reinforce the idea that the former residents of Vila Autódromo were not displaced, but in fact won a golden ticket to government housing, was palpable. Critical to his narrative about the benefits of the Olympics is that the removal be seen not as an injustice but as a civic good. It’s a fight against any evidence that threatens to expose how Olympic projects have actually made the city more unequal and more inhospitable to the poor.

While we say our goodbyes, Paes offers to go with me to speak with the displaced residents to see that they were in fact satisfied with their new life in government housing. I say that was my plan for tomorrow and would love to have his company. His scheduler immediately intervenes and says he is busy. This is probably for the best.

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The following day, I go to a recently developed public-housing project called Colônia Juliano Moreira. The land upon which it was built was once a slave plantation, then a mental institution. The people I speak to are furtive, concerned about who might overhear their complaints, but they are clear about what they’d lost in the move from Vila Autódromo. One resident says, “Some months, light and water cost 900 reals total. When you are done paying, what are you going to eat? I’d rather live in worse conditions, without pressures. I’ve seen a person rob another person. But I’ve never seen a country rob someone.” Beyond the financial aspect, the residents talk about losing their sense of community.

We hear more about that lost community when we meet with Jane Nascimento. Formerly a community leader in Vila Autódromo, Nascimento was also relocated to Juliano Moreira after her home was bulldozed last year. The last time I'd seen her was in Vila Autódromo during the 2014 World Cup. At that time, the community had suffered a substantial number of evictions but was still mostly intact, having recently won several legal victories against the city. Residents felt they would be able to stay, and hopes were high. Those residents are now scattered to the wind, and Nascimento doesn't know where most of them had been relocated.

Nascimento doesn't think that she now has a home to truly call her own in Juliano Moreira. In fact, she insists on not using her apartment for our interview. During the fight to save the community, she became such a high-profile opponent of city government that she now worries about who might be listening in on her conversations. She doesn't feel safe, and since losing her home and relocating, she has also struggled with depression. "I don't trust the city because of what happened," she says. "And because the city runs the housing development, I don't really trust anyone here."

Nascimento only speaks at greater length when we get in a cab en route to what remains of Vila Autódromo. As we drive, she tells me more of her story: that the city offered 200,000 reals (about \$61,000) if she would move out of her house. "That's not enough to buy a decent flat anywhere near Vila Autódromo," she says. She then entered a months-long negotiation with the city for a better settlement, but the process required legal representation, which she had to pay for out of pocket. As a result, she racked up thousands of dollars in legal debt. The final settlement was unfavorable, and she ended up with an apartment in Juliano Moreira. Others saw how hard this community leader had fought and figured that if Nascimento couldn't get a decent settlement, they couldn't either. "It's really revolting," she says. "So much money was spent by the government getting people to leave the community."

Later we meet some of the holdouts in Vila Autódromo, the 24 families fierce in their desire not to give the local government the satisfaction of leaving, no matter how sweet the carrot, no matter how brutal the stick. I speak to Sandra, who says she is staying because "it's important to have a place for working people to live in Rio." She then pauses and says, "They should give out Olympic medals for taking people from their homes."

May 2016 saw a 135 percent increase in killings by police compared with May 2015.

We also meet Dalva, an elderly woman who stands straight, one hand on her hip, with a government pamphlet in her other hand about the warning signs for Zika infection. Dalva says to me, "They don't know how to govern for the people. They govern for the benefit of capitalism. It's not that we don't want the Olympics, but they need to respect us. When the famous athletes arrive, they should know the history of where they are going to be. As long as the 20 families stay, the history of Vila Autódromo will live. We fought with our blood."

Then Dalva pauses and says, "I wish the Olympics had never come." I ask her if she had ever been able to say that to Paes. She says, "I've already told him.... I also told him that I detest him."

These are the voices of the poorest, least empowered people in the city. They are not from the "BBC of London" or Ipanema, but they have the power to overturn the \$11.9 billion apple cart by exposing as a lie the idea that the Olympics are a social good.

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Vila Autódromo's story of displacement punctures the official Olympic narrative, but it's not the only story that accomplishes this. As difficult as it is to inhabit a favela being bulldozed all around you, it can be deadly to live in one under police occupation. This is common for cities hosting the Olympic

Games: Militarized police make a staggering show of force in the poorest communities to send the message that the poor had better know their place when the foreigners come to party. In Rio, as budget cuts cripple community patrols, police violence in the favelas is on the rise. According to Amnesty International, “In the city of Rio alone, at least 307 people were killed by the police last year, accounting for one in every five homicides in the city”—a spike of 26 percent over the previous year. And May of this year saw a 135 percent increase in killings by police compared to May of 2015.

This is a dramatic uptick even for communities that are besieged in the most placid of times. The recent spate of killings also undermines one of the central “for the English to see” projects: the “pacification” of the favelas, and efforts by the city to transform them into tourist attractions where Global Northerner can go on “poverty tours” of the unique, largely self-sustaining, but dangerous communities that have developed in Rio over the last century. The message has been “Look at our favelas—they’re so cute and peaceful, you can even bring tourists here!” But it was only a matter of time before policing regressed to the usual ruthless and bloody methods, especially amid budget cuts. The Olympics are just more gasoline on this fire.

I speak with 17-year-old Brenda Paixão at an antiracist demonstration that I happen upon in front of the city-government building. Paixão attends public high school and lives in Realengo, near the Deodoro Olympic complex. She has seen the increased police forces already, along with the abandonment of any pretense at community policing. She says she is anxious about the Summer Games because “they will want to show everyone who is here from abroad for the Olympics: ‘Look, we have security.’ But this is a lie. They want to show that Brazil can protect them—but for us, the population, there will be more violence, more deaths.”

One thing is certain: The efforts by Brazil’s elites to turn the Olympics into a nationalist celebration amid so much injustice won’t go unanswered. I speak with Mario Campagni, an activist with the group Comitê Popular da Copa e das Olimpíadas, which has been organizing for five years against the damages wrought by hosting the World Cup and Olympics. Campagni says, “Definitely, definitely, we will have protests.... We are definitely going to the streets. The truth is, it is a battle for the narrative. What is the narrative for the financiers, for the IOC, for Paes, and then what is the narrative for the people of Rio?”

That narrative will have real repercussions for the future of Rio. As City Councilman Jefferson Moura, who is crusading against Olympic corruption, tells me: “Rio is a divided city. The greatest achievement the Olympics could have brought would be if it had made the city less unequal. But, unfortunately, that has not happened. The Olympics have left Rio more divided, more unequal.”

So what will the English see this August in Rio? Today, the Brazilian elite and politicians are in a state of chaos, trying to put a lid on the scandals that are exposing their astounding corruption, while attempting to deal a deathblow to the one national political party—the Workers’ Party—that, however flawed, might still represent some form of popular power. They want to use the Olympics to show the world that all is right (in both senses of that word) in Brazil—nothing to see here but a big party. They can’t deny the crisis, but they hope “the English” will be more on the lookout for mosquitoes (not to mention outstanding athletic feats) than displaced homes. And while articles about Zika, sewage, and government dysfunction flood the sports pages, the infamously corrupt International Olympic Committee will slink off, count its billions, and lick its chops waiting for the next games and the next round of debt, displacement, and despair.

Dave Zirin

P.S.

* THE NATION. JULY 26, 2016:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/budget-failures-displacement-zika-welcome-to-rios-11-9b-summer-olympics/>

* Dave Zirin is the sports editor of The Nation. For more from Dave Zirin on Brazil, read his most recent book, *Brazil's Dance with the Devil: The World Cup, The Olympics, and the Fight for Democracy*.