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# Dave Zirin: “FIFA’s World Cup is for the wealthy, not for the people”

## The author of "Brazil's Dance with the Devil" on the corruption fueling one of the world's biggest sporting events

[Michael Winship](#), BillMoyers.com

Here in polyglot New York, pop into any bar, restaurant or even dry cleaner and chances are there’s a TV set tuned to the World Cup. And Monday’s surprise United States victory over rival Ghana — the cheers when the US scored the winning goal rocked my neighborhood — has increased attention even more. The fever has taken hold in our city as it has around the planet, with hundreds of millions watching the soccer — football — action from Brazil, this year’s host country.

But the games have been controversial, as have the upcoming 2016 Summer Olympics, to be held in Rio de Janeiro. Just a year ago, there were [mass protests in Brazil](#) — on one day alone, more than a million demonstrators hit the streets — speaking out against the billions being spent on sports stadiums while education, housing, healthcare, public transport and other social services go begging.

When it comes to income inequality, Brazil is in the bottom ten percent, ranking 121st out of 133 countries, and the South American nation holds a similar low standing when it comes to corruption, wealth distribution and quality of infrastructure. So as the World Cup has begun, demonstrations and strikes have continued. Eyewitness to the events occurring right now is past [Moyers & Company guest Dave Zirin](#), sports editor of [The Nation](#) magazine, commentator and author whose latest book is [Brazil’s Dance with the Devil: The World Cup, the Olympics, and the Fight for Democracy](#). He spoke with us from Rio.

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**Michael Winship:** Dave, it seems to me that there were protests before the London Olympics two years ago, and lots of stories about cost overruns and improprieties. But once the games actually began, a lot of the anger seemed to dissipate, and the same thing seemed to happen in Sochi. What’s the mood like there?

**Dave Zirin:** Well, first of all, we should be clear that the demonstrations in Brazil, throughout Brazil, are far, far in advance of anything that we saw in London or anything certainly that we saw in Russia or Sochi. And, frankly, they’re in advance of anything we’ve seen before any mega event, arguably in history. I mean you have to go back to the 1968 Mexico City Olympics to find even the slightest parallel.

Every sector of Brazil’s economy has been on some form of strike. I’m in Rio right now. All of the museums are closed because all the cultural workers are on strike. Protests a year ago around the Confederations Cup, which is like a warm up to the World Cup, brought well over a million people into the streets, the largest demonstrations Brazil has seen since the dictatorship.

But your question really is about, now that the games have started, has all of that dissipated? And that's a terrific question, and it's something people are trying to get their heads around, because, first of all, the demonstrations are without question smaller. They tend to number in the hundreds or the low thousands, not in the hundreds of thousands or millions. But some of that has to do with the fact that there are also just more unions involved, who are using strike tactics as a response, not street demonstration tactics. And also, some of the social movements have taken to land occupation in this process, not going in the streets. There are two reasons for it. One is that people just feel unsafe going to these demonstrations, and the second reason is just the overwhelming show of force by the Brazilian military police. And then real fears that there will be either agitators inside the demonstrations, either Black Bloc anarchists or police posing as Black Bloc anarchists, who use provocation as a way to actually invite more repression, more tear gas, and as we saw yesterday, a police officer even firing live ammunition.

**Winship:** Yes, I saw that AP report this morning. What are the Black Blocs exactly?

**Zirin:** The Black Bloc — and they exist of course in the United States as well — they are anarchist protestors. They wear all black, they cover their faces, and they see property damage as a legitimate form of protest, particularly property damage that's targeted at banks and financial institutions. But I do have to say, based on the demonstration that I was at yesterday, it was very different than like the AP described. They described the Black Bloc as being the primary group at the demonstration and breaking windows in advance of the police firing in tear gas. I have to tell you, being there, that's just simply not what I saw. First of all, the Black Bloc represented a minority of demonstrators that were there, a small group. Of course, a small group can still do things like break windows, but I saw the tear gas was fired in advance of any broken window that I saw. And I didn't even see any broken windows at all, to be honest. But, that being said, I didn't see a lot because my eyes were kind of teary.

**Winship:** It sounds like a lot of the reporting that I saw compared to my own experiences during the Vietnam demonstrations.

**Zirin:** Yes. I can see why — except the tremendous irony, though, that people in Brazil are protesting a soccer tournament. [laughs] And it just says something about a) the degree to which people in Brazil...that group in Brazil do feel alienated from just all of the spending that's taken place for the World Cup, and the fact that FIFA, the organization that oversees international soccer, has just come in and run roughshod over the country in terms of their own tax breaks, the corporatization, the exclusion zones, the World Cup courts, so many things that, in a country that has only been out of dictatorship for several decades, less than 30 years — I mean these are strong echoes of a dictatorship that people thought was in their past.

**Winship:** I'm especially interested in these FIFA World Cup courts. I know they did this in South Africa as well.

**Zirin:** Yes. It's actually not that dissimilar from things that exist in the United States at certain sporting events. What it basically just means is fast track courts.

**Winship:** Sort of like the Republican convention here in 2004.

**Zirin:** Yes. Exactly. It's just fast tracking people through the courts so they can be warehoused, oftentimes just for the duration of the mega events themselves, but sometimes, as we saw in South Africa — and if there are examples of this in Brazil, I do not know of them, but in South Africa, there were examples of people getting decade-long sentences with trials that lasted hours.

**Winship:** Speaking of FIFA, I mean we're talking here about maybe as much as \$15 billion dollars for the World Cup, and another \$18 billion for the Olympics. Where's the money coming from?

**Zirin:** Well, some of the money is underwritten by corporations, but the problem is that in both FIFA and the IOC [International Olympic Committee] contracts, cost overruns are the responsibility of the state, not of FIFA and not corporations. And these events always cost more than the original estimates, particularly post-9/11, because the security interests are entirely the responsibility of the host country, and that's usually what sees a lot of the cost overrun. That, and in Brazil's case, stadium construction, delays, and the fact that the real estate industry in Brazil is so powerful that Brazil actually insisted on building more stadiums than even FIFA wanted.

**Winship:** Well you say in the book that the World Cup and the Olympics come at an especially bad time for Brazil.

**Zirin:** Yes.

**Winship:** Why do you say that?

**Zirin:** Well, because one of the reasons why Brazil took the near-unprecedented step of trying to host the World Cup and the Olympics back to back is because the economy was growing at a fabulous rate. I remember the cover of *The Economist* had Rio's famous Christ the Redeemer statue actually blasting off like a rocket ship, which really says it all.

**Winship:** I think we all thought the Brazilian economy was booming, and that has slowed to nothing, right?

**Zirin:** That's the real issue, because the economy was booming, largely on the basis of exports to China, the discovery of oil and real estate speculation. The economy was growing — I mean, even through the 2008 economic crisis, which [former Brazilian president] Lula dismissed as, "Oh, that's Bush's crisis. That's not our crisis. That's a US crisis." And they thought that the next logical step would be hosting these two mega events and really introducing Brazil to the world as a new economic superpower. The problem, of course, is, as you said, economies tend to slow down. Yet, FIFA and the IOC could not give a rat's ass if your economy has slowed down. They want their stadiums, they want their infrastructure, they want you to fulfill your security mandates that they've set forth for you. And so Brazil can't go to them hat in hand and say, "Yeah, the growth rates aren't what they were. Can we maybe work with the existing stadiums now?" You know, they're not going to hear that. Or they're going to threaten, like they're doing already for the 2016 Olympics — that they're not going to do it, but they're threatening to move the Olympics out of Rio if they try to pull any, "Oh, our economy's slow. We need help. We need more corporate funding, we need more aid, we need a better deal." They're not going to hear any of that.

And so this is the problem that Brazil finds itself in, especially because a lot of the very popular social programs that were initiated by Lula, and kept by the person who followed him, President Dilma Rousseff, these were largely funded, not by taxing the rich, but by the neo-liberal boom — you know, the commodities boom, the discovery of oil. And so the slowing down of that also means that the social programs slow down as well.

**Winship:** What do you mean by neo-liberal, Dave?

**Zirin:** By neo-liberalism I mean it's basically the market knows all. It's building a society that's in thrall to the market consensus, that says that privatization is good, inequality is a natural byproduct of neo-liberalism and privatization and it shouldn't be something that we fear, and that social safety nets are something that actually can hold back growth. And so you want to make the public sector as small as possible, you want to eliminate unions as much as you can and create as much of a kind of free market utopia that's open for business that you can.

Now, that being said, what's existed in Brazil under Lula and Dilma should not be described as totally like neo-liberal, like 'let the chips fall where they may.' It's described here as neo-liberalism with Brazilian characteristics, because under the Workers Party there are less workers in unions; that's a sign of neo-liberalism. They've paid back all their loans to the IMF [International Monetary Fund]; that's a part of neo-liberalism too. And yet, they've also, though, used some of the windfall to fund some of these social programs and try to fight inequality in the country. So they've tried to kind of construct a third way between neo-liberalism and a more kind of state Socialist enterprise, which I think many people here would support. But, that being said, once again, markets go up, markets go down, and if your neo-liberal boom goes down, then it's the social programs become the first to go and it looks more like the kind of austere neo-liberalism that people have been protesting for the last 10, 20 years throughout Latin America.

**Winship:** I was taken, in the book, by a quote that you have from Renato Constantino [member of World Cup and Olympics Popular Committee of Rio]. And he said, "At a time when Rio de Janeiro has a chance to show the world that it can overcome the social inequality that has marked its history, it is instead reinforcing that inequality."

**Zirin:** That's very true. The problem with inequality in Brazil, too, is that — I mean we're seeing this in the United States. You have Lloyd Blankfein, the head of Goldman Sachs, speaking out against inequality. He makes \$25 million a year. He says inequality is bad for our country because it's impossible to really get anything done if you have basically two different countries in one. Usually these mega events exist to try to bring a country together. It's like, "We're all Brazil," etc., etc. I'm in Rio right now as we're talking. I don't see many Brazilian flags out. I mean it is not this explosion of nationalism, and you have to ask yourself why? Especially in a country that frankly loves itself — for good reason. If you ever meet a Brazilian, you know that immediately, that they're proud to be from Brazil. But you're not seeing that many of the flags and the nationalism, precisely because it doesn't really feel like their World Cup. It feels like FIFA's World Cup, a World Cup for the wealthy, not for the people.

**Winship:** And there's also been this — you wrote about it at *The Nation* just in the last couple of days, this displacement of populations to build these stadiums and parking lots and everything else.

**Zirin:** It's just so ugly. I mean, to see this stuff up close is the sort of thing that makes you just — I mean it's harrowing. Literally a five-minute walk from the Maracana Stadium, which is the Sistine Chapel of international football, is a place called Favela do Metro. It was the home of 700 families; now it's home of zero families. No one lives there anymore. And people were removed for the purposes of a parking lot. And, to add insult to injury, a parking lot that never got built, so now it's just like rubble, rats, waste, everything like that. And these were once people's homes. And what I did my first day here a couple of days ago is — with Theresa Williamson from Catalytic Communities, which is an NGO that does amazing work with the favelas — we walked through the debris. And what you see when you walk through just the piles of garbage is that it's not really garbage, it's people's lives. I mean it's children's dolls that are broken apart, it's furniture with the springs pulled out. It's sinks and toilets that were left behind. And this was 700 families, 700 lives. And then you have to ask the question, well, what really happened to these families? I mean the first 100 were removed at gunpoint, within 24 hours of the

Olympics coming, and it was meant to shock everybody else to get their stuff together and get out. But the last 600 families, it actually steeled their resolve, and instead of just leaving in fear, what they did was they organized. They protested, they pooled their money, they got legal representation, they sued the city, and they ended up being displaced just a couple of miles away, and they were given rent vouchers to be able to get started in that process. It's not a happy ending, but they got a much better deal from the government than a lot of favelados have gotten, and certainly a much better deal than the first hundred families, their neighbors who were booted aside unceremoniously.

**Winship:** Because they took a stand.

**Zirin:** Because they protested, yes. What I've seen in Rio over the last couple of years, and throughout Brazil, is a lot of carrot and stick. And the stick is the first thing that the government uses to try to displace people, but when you fight back against bullies, you get some of the carrot and you get a better deal when you fight back. Partly because Brazil is concerned about its public image internationally, particularly when foreign journalists take an interest. That tends to be like a flashpoint for them. But the tragedy is that in very few cases do you get a favela actually surviving once Brazil wants you to go. That is an exception. So it's basically people fighting for their families and fighting for the best possible deal.

**Winship:** You also write about the stadium built in the middle of the rainforest.

**Zirin:** Yes, in Manaus. And this has recently gotten a great deal of publicity because I think it's just emblematic of a lot of the waste that we're talking about. I mean building a \$350 million dollar stadium in Manaus, which is a city in the rainforest, is terrible for more reasons than I can count for you. First reason, it has no use value really, after the World Cup is done. So what's a stadium going to do in Manaus? It's not a big soccer territory. So it's a tremendous waste of money, particularly in an area that needs investment in infrastructure, that wants investment in infrastructure, that doesn't get investment in infrastructure. So to see them get \$350 million dollars is absolutely disturbing to go to a stadium when there are so many other pressing needs.

But the second reason that makes it so ridiculous is that the materials to build the stadium had to travel down the Amazon River, which is not a short trip, just to get to Manaus. And the materials were, ironically, from Portugal. So it's once again, it's the Portuguese just absolutely exploiting the hell out of Brazil, which, trust me, people are just a tad sensitive to in Brazil. [laughs] I don't want to shock you, but people are a tad sensitive to Portuguese exploitation.

So there's that — but, remember, Brazil agreed to that. So it's like the Brazilian government agreeing to that. It's not like they were forced to work with Portugal. So that's the second reason that it's such a terrible idea.

And the third reason is — soccer is kind of tiring. So having a soccer event in one of the most humid areas of the world is not necessarily a recipe, first of all, for the health of the players, and, second of all, for good soccer.

So there's just no sense to any of it, or at least in any way that is logical, beyond just a profit gouging by the construction industry in Brazil. Which, from what I understand, the construction industry in Brazil is best understood as being their equivalent of the oil industry in the United States, like real powerful bastards who get what they want and want what they get.

**Winship:** Not to mention, the environmental impact of this.

**Zirin:** I write about it in the book. I mean, and this is also very complicated for a lot of folks to understand, and it's a complicated issue in Brazil, too, because Brazil has a long and powerful environmental movement. Chico Mendes might be a name that people are familiar with as a legendary Brazilian environmentalist. The indigenous people themselves have worked tirelessly to protect their homes and their communities in the Amazon. And as well, environmentalists made up a key part of the original coalition that created the Workers Party, which now governs the country. The environmentalists are now no longer part of the Workers Party, and there's a reason for that, because the Workers Party believes that the environment is really theirs to exploit. Remember I mentioned about the boom. A lot of that is the cattle industry. The commodities boom, it's the cattle industry. Brazil is now the largest exporter of cattle on the planet. And of course, it uses the razed land in the rainforest to do it. And the part about that that's particularly difficult to unwrap is that [former president] Lula was always very fond of making very nationalist speeches, which had real resonance, about like, "Who the hell is the United States and these people from Europe to tell us how we should use the rainforest when they've destroyed their own environments, and now they're telling us to stay in poverty to protect an environment that they couldn't protect their own."

And that, as you might understand, has real resonance with people. It's like, "Yeah, that makes sense. Screw the United States." But it ignores the fact that the World Cup, particularly in a country as large as Brazil, requires a ton of intra-country travel. So more airports have been built, planes are flying left and right. Brazil's larger than the continental United States, so people are flying all over the place to get to the different games. And nothing causes a carbon footprint quite like air travel, and it's intensified dramatically.

**Winship:** And I gather the promised rail projects haven't really come through, except for a few.

**Zirin:** Yes, just a few of the rail projects have come through... You know, the plus side for the people of Brazil is rail projects create jobs and that's something that people support. But the bad problem though is that the rail projects themselves are largely rail projects that are about connecting tourists from place to place. What you want are projects that have an actual use value once the confetti's been cleared away.

**Winship:** So what happens to all these stadiums? What happens to all this stuff after the Olympics?

**Zirin:** Well, in some places, the stadiums are in use for future events. The place in Manaus, it was suggested — thank goodness this was quickly shot down, but it was suggested they turn the stadium into an open-air prison processing center. Because they said that there were too few prisons in the Amazon and it could be used for that. Of course, using a stadium as a prison has a very ugly echo in Latin America. It's not something that anybody wants to hear. But that was actually — the fact that it was said publicly is just a big slap in the face.

**Winship:** Do you have any sense at all that there'll be any kind of evaluation after the World Cup is over, and going into the Olympics, that things will be reconsidered or thought about, or is that too much wishful thinking?

**Zirin:** Oh man, is that a lovely thought. I love the thought of that. It's hard to see it happening though. One reason why is that the Olympics, of course, are located entirely in Rio, while the World Cup is a national event. But that means of course the spending on the Olympics, everyone will be affected by that nationally, but the actual disruption, when you're talking about surveillance and construction and the kind of daily reminders of waste and graft, that's going to be very Rio-centric, and I just don't know how much of a movement is going to be able to be summoned up in Rio by itself. That'll be the \$64,000 question. Or in this case, the \$20 billion dollar question.

**Winship:** Dave, finally, in the subtitle of the book, you talk about the World Cup and the Olympics and the fight for democracy. Why ‘fight for democracy’?

**Zirin:** Those words were very, very carefully chosen by me, and not just because I’m very OCD about book titles, but because the fight for democracy is about the fact that Brazil is a very young democracy. It’s only been out of dictatorship for less than 30 years. And what FIFA and the IOC represents to a lot of people that I talk to is a re-imposition of a lot of the dictatorial norms of the past. And so democracy, if it’s about nothing else — I mean in the United States, we know that democracy is too often just a buzzword and a slogan. But if it’s about nothing else, it’s about self-governance, and the feeling that the coming of the World Cup and the Olympics, the influence of FIFA and the IOC, the creation of things called state of exception laws, which abrogate Brazil’s constitution — and this happens in every country that hosts these events — the imposition of a surveillance state, that this represents the abrogation of democracy, and therefore, the protest movement that exists in Brazil, the unions that are going on strike, the homeless workers that are occupying land, they’re actually fighting for something bigger than their immediate interests. They’re fighting for the democracy which was so newly won.

**Winship:** Thank you very much.

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