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Brazil

The Olympic Calamity

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When Brazil's interim president Michel Temer announced the opening of the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics, he was met with boos. Speaking as fast as a voiceover at the end of a pharmaceutical commercial, it was an awkward scene. The choreographers of the ceremony launched fireworks to mask the crowd's disdain, but discontent with the Olympics extends far beyond Maracanã Stadium. While smiley-faced Games-goers fill the Olympic suites, thousands of Brazilians are taking to the streets.

This was obvious as the [Olympic torch](#) made its way toward the ceremony. In Angra dos Reis, protesters even managed to extinguish the flame, forcing torchbearers to scurry to safer havens in a nearby van. In Duque de Caixas, just north of Rio, [demonstrators pelted torchbearers](#) with stones before cops responded with rubber bullets and pepper spray.

Once the torch arrived in Rio, protesters came out in droves. So did the police, who used tear gas and stun grenades to slice a route for it to pass. When the torch whisked past me at Praça Mauá, I could barely see it behind a wall of military police.

One torchbearer, Tarcisio Carlo Rodrigues Gomes, even used his moment in the spotlight [to protest](#). After finishing his shift, he yanked down his shorts, revealing leopard-print underwear and the words "Fora Temer" ("Temer Out") scrawled on his butt cheeks in bright white paint.

"Fora Temer" was the [rallying cry](#) of an enormous mobilization along Copacabana Beach on August 5, the morning of the opening ceremony. Brazil's president is extremely unpopular in Brazil, with one recent poll putting his approval rating at 11 percent.

As Glenn Greenwald and Eric Lau recently pointed out in the [Intercept](#), Temer is accused of a staggering array of bribery schemes — he couldn't run for president even if he wanted to, thanks to the recent ban he received for violating campaign finance laws.

Protesters along Copacabana highlighted all this and more. Unions, workers, students, pensioners, feminist organizations, housing activists, indigenous peoples, and anti-Olympics stalwarts joined forces to create a massive throng that pulsed with creativity. The protest, which drew fifteen thousand people, was [coordinated](#) by worker and leftist groups, including Brasil Popular, Esquerda Socialista, and Povo Sem Medo.

The mood was festive. A small orchestra played a version of "Carmina Burana" with uproarious "Fora Temer" lyrics. Activists from the Comitê Popular da Copa e das Olimpíadas (The Popular Committee of the World Cup and Olympics), who have long been protesting against the mega-event machine, carried a banner reading "#CalamidadeOlimpica" ("#OlympicCalamity"). The Corrente Socialista dos Trabalhadores, a socialist workers' group, wielded a sign that read, "Não é a Olimpíadas" ("No to the Olympics").

Many activists connected the Olympic dots between the wider political crisis and the Olympic Games. Some wore t-shirts bearing the Olympic rings filled in by the letters G-O-L-P-E (C-O-U-P). Numerous flags read "Fora Temer" with the Olympic rings standing in for the "o" on "Fora."

One man held a cardboard sign with the handwritten phrases "Rio2016 Coup / We're Not Happy / Fora Temer"

The Olympic Calamity

written on it. Another activist walked around with homemade Olympic rings connected with metal wiring featuring a photo of Temer and the moniker “golpista.” At one point protesters took over the site of the official Olympic rings on Copacabana Beach, snapping photographs with their “Fora Temer” signs in hand while Olympic tourists stood by in bewilderment.

Other activists seized the Olympic moment, writing signs in English for the global media to read. One said, “We don’t want a torch / We want out homes!”

The lack of housing in Rio, as well as the brass-knuckle evictions that the Games galvanized, were major themes. On the beach, protesters from Jogos da Exclusão (Exclusion Games) set up a shrine highlighting displacement, with messaging in both Portuguese and English.

Standing nearby, one demonstrator told me it was ironic that while the team of Olympic refugee athletes was being widely celebrated, the Rio Games had created numerous internal refugees, displaced in the name of five-ring profit-making.

Later, as the opening ceremony unfolded, Bloomberg journalist [Tariq Panja](#) put a fine point on it, tweeting: “Perhaps the former residents of Vila Autódromo will be invited to join the Olympic Refugee Team at Tokyo 2020.” Vila Autódromo is one favela community that found itself in front of the Olympic steamroller.

The afternoon brought another sizable mobilization, this one more focused on the Olympics under the banner Jogos da Exclusão. Around a thousand activists gathered at Praça Sáenz Peña, located close to the Maracanã. During the 2014 World Cup final, the same square was the site of brutal police repression of protesters who raised questions about hosting the world’s soccer jamboree on the public dime.

Urban geographer [Chris Gaffney](#) attended both mobilizations. Crystallizing a critique bubbling through the afternoon protest, he told me, “As Rio is glittering before the world, it has handed over the city to the International Olympic Committee [IOC] and private interests at the expense of taking care of the basic needs of the population.” He added, “The Exclusion Games protest was a clear note in a cacophonous symphony of destruction that has defined Rio’s mega-event preparations over the past decade.”

Whereas the police presence at the Fora Temer protest was relatively light, it was unmistakably intense in the afternoon event. Emerging from the metro station and into the praça, I was met with a wall of police decked out in riot gear. Periodically they would move about in lockstep formation, an arm latched to the shoulder of the cop in front of them. Other security officials encircled the square. Later, busloads of additional riot police arrived. At one point a police helicopter circled overhead.

When the protest transformed into a street march, cops created a tight envelope around the marchers, keeping a special eye on activists using black-bloc tactics, who at one point burned a flag bearing the Olympic rings. Halfway through the march, a squadron appeared on horses, channeling the flow of the protest march.

Police presence in Brazil is no trivial matter. [Amnesty International](#) recently reported that in the months leading up to the Games, Rio de Janeiro has seen a 103 percent increase in police killings. Since Rio was awarded the Games back in 2009, security officials in have killed more than 2,600 people. Ahead of the Games, activists [delivered a strong message](#) to Rio organizers, placing forty body bags on their front stoop, reflecting the number of people killed by police in May alone.

The Olympic Calamity

A majority of the victims of police violence are young cariocas of color. Amnesty International [found that](#) between 2010 and 2013, 79 percent of those killed by on-duty police officers in Rio were black and 75 percent were young, between fifteen and twenty-nine years old.

Activists taking to the streets during the opening ceremony were fully aware of this history. Numerous chants alluded to police violence. One massive banner read, "Abaixo o massacre olímpico!" and then in English, "No to the Olympic massacre!" Although some minor skirmishes emerged, and cops used pepper spray and tear gas on protesters at Praça Afonso Pena, the march went relatively smoothly.

At the protest Brazilian human rights lawyer Andrea Florence told me, "The Olympic Games promised to promote a peaceful society, social inclusion, and human dignity. What we have seen in Rio is the complete opposite . . . The protest highlights what happens when the Olympics come to town."

8 August 2016

[Jacobin](#)