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Race, Class and the World Cup in Brazil

by MIKE LaSUSA

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At 5pm local time on June 12, the national soccer teams of Brazil and Croatia will kick off the 2014 World Cup at the São Paulo Arena in Brazil's largest city. The players will compete before a live crowd of tens of thousands and a televised audience of millions more.

At a total cost of roughly \$11 billion - and at least eight workers' lives - Brazil will host the most expensive World Cup in history. Though this is not to understate the scandalous unfolding atrocity in Qatar). Brazilians overwhelmingly supported bringing the event to their country when FIFA awarded them the honor in 2007 (no other nation in the Americas volunteered), but a recent poll from DataFolha indicates that a majority of citizens now oppose it.

Widespread anti-Cup protests have been roiling Brazil's cities and social media networks for months. The demonstrators' grievances range from public transportation fare hikes to inadequate wages, housing, education, security and healthcare, among other things. But as evidenced by their use of the slogan "Não vai ter Copa!" ("There will be no Cup!"), it is clear that they intend to use the lavish international spectacle both as a symbol of their concerns and a spotlight to shine on them.

On June 3, a group of anti-Cup activists inflated giant soccer balls in the capital city Brasilia. Protest organizer Antonio Carlos Costa told Agence France Presse, "We want the Brazilian

government to ask the nation's forgiveness because it promised something it never delivered. It invested a fortune of public money in things that weren't necessary." A recent Pew poll found that 61% of respondents believed hosting the World Cup is a "bad thing" "because it takes money away from public services."

Not all of the protests have been peaceful. AFP interviewed one of a growing number of so-called "Black Bloc" activists, who went by the pseudonym Elizabeth:

Black Bloc is not a formal group, she says, but "a tactic for action that anyone can join."

During the past year's protests its adherents have destroyed banks, trashed public property, thrown petrol bombs and attacked police with stones and clubs.

But Elizabeth says that is merely "a reaction to violence by the police, who always hit first."

The government response to the outpouring of protests, strikes, and strike threats over recent months and weeks by various segments of society – from airline employees, teachers and homeless workers to police and even the main federal employee's union - has consisted largely of either ignorant denialism or harsh intimidation and repression. Amidst this unrest, the administration of President Dilma Rousseff has made repeated assurances to the international community that – despite still-unfinished stadia, like the one that will host the opening match in São Paulo, and numerous incomplete infrastructure projects - the Cup will go off as planned.

A particularly representative series of events unfolded on June 5, one week before kickoff. While Dilma and FIFA president Joseph Blatter expressed their confidence in Brazil's ability to put on the "Cup of all Cups," thousands of homeless workers marched peacefully on the São Paulo Arena as police clashed with striking subway workers nearby. One of the strikers reportedly told a police officer, "Put the gun down. There are only workers here. We're workers just like you."

That same day at a concert in the city, the audience cursed out Dilma over her handling of the World Cup preparations and popular rapper Marcelo Falcão told the crowd the following:

"The legacy that comes with this Cup is a very vile one...[W]e love soccer, but for the first time we have to be honest...In all reality [society] doesn't have the necessary health, education and all it needs in terms of security and transportation, amongst other things...I am standing by the entire country who wanted something good...If it's not good, I'm not going to [applaud]."

This level of discontentment is remarkable given the complex and deeply-rooted cultural and political history of soccer in Brazil, especially with regard to race and class. As former Brazilian President Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva said without hyperbole when his country was chosen as the future host of the world's most-watched sporting event in 2007, "Soccer is more than a sport for us, it's a national passion."

O Jogo Bonito

In 1888, around the same time that soccer was introduced to Brazil by upper-class British expatriates, it became the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. After importing approximately 40% of the African people who were kidnapped and shipped to the Americas during that era, the post-abolition government subsidized a racial miscegenation program known as “*branqueamento*” (“whitening”) that brought an influx of working-class immigrants from various European countries to Brazil during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These white European laborers introduced to Brazil’s black and brown working class what soccer demi-god Pelé would later call “*o jogo bonito*” (“the beautiful game”).

It should be mentioned that unlike the post-abolition United States, Brazil did not enforce a system of legal segregation or discrimination after it did away with slavery. Race in Brazil has been defined socially, by appearance, not legally or officially, by heritage. As Thomas Skidmore wrote in his 1992 essay “Fact and Myth: Discovering a Racial Problem in Brazil,”

The result was a system of social stratification that differed sharply from the rigid color bifurcation in the U.S. (both before and after slavery) and in Europe’s African colonies. There was and is a color...spectrum on which clear lines were often not drawn. Between a “pure” black and a very light mulatto there are numerous gradations, as reflected in the scores of racial labels (many pejorative) in common Brazilian usage.

Echoing Roberto Damatta’s 1991 discourse on Brazilian society’s classist and racist “authoritarian rituals,” Joaquim Barbosa, the first black judge to sit on the country’s Supreme Federal Court, put it more simply, but still poignantly, for *The Guardian* in 2012; “Racism in Brazil is well hidden, subtle and unspoken...It is nevertheless extremely violent.”

For years, soccer in Brazil had been enjoyed almost exclusively by wealthy, mostly British elites, but the sport’s simplicity made it an accessible activity for poor laborers with very little disposable income. The formation of recreational clubs and leagues in the first decades of the 20th century was actually encouraged and sometimes financially supported by employers who were happy to have their workers playing and watching soccer rather than organizing with the radical socialist and anarchist groups that were emerging around that time.

With the active encouragement of the capital-owning class and without any other sports to compete with it, soccer rapidly became the country’s national pastime. In 1923, more than two decades before Jackie Robinson broke the color line in American baseball, the Vasco de Gama soccer club in Rio de Janeiro fielded a team consisting primarily of black and mixed-race athletes. The squad went on to win the city championship that year, breaking the color line in Brazilian soccer with emphasis.

As Joseph A. Page writes in his 1996 ethnography *The Brazilians*, the sport was inherently “suited to the Brazilian temperament...[of] individual and collective self-expression...Soccer seemed to merge sport and samba,” a traditional style of Afro-Brazilian music and dance. For Page, “the improvisational style of Brazilian soccer” derived from “the Brazilian way of

overcoming poverty” – a communal effort rooted in mutual reciprocity – a sort of metaphor for the model “Brazilian” political society.

Futebol & Democracia Racial

In 1930, Uruguay hosted and won the inaugural World Cup, in which Brazil fielded a mixed-race team. They failed to progress past the first round. One of the black players, Fausto dos Santos, “*A Maravilha Negra*” (“The Black Wonder”), was widely considered the best Brazilian midfielder of his time, but he nonetheless faced racism at home as well as during his brief stint in European leagues in following years.

Just months after Brazil was eliminated from the 1930 Cup, a bloodless military coup brought the authoritarian corporatist Getúlio Vargas to power as president of Brazil. The Vargas regime dissolved congress became a dictatorship in 1937, forcibly crushing out the leftist opposition, including various Afro-Brazilian movements. Still, the 1934 and 1938 World Cup teams (both of which failed to make the finals) fielded black and mulatto players, including Brazil’s biggest star until Pelé, the legendary striker Leônidas da Silva, known as “*O Diamante Negro*” (“The Black Diamond”), as well as the man who would later “discover” Pelé, Waldemar de Brito.

World War II put international soccer competitions on hold, but brought economic development to Brazil, in large part due to its deepening ties with the United States. As the war wound down, Vargas seemed unable to reconcile being the only South American country to send troops to fight against the Axis dictatorships with the authoritarian nature of his own regime. Beginning around 1943, he attempted to tack to the democratic populist left, but was overthrown by coup in 1945.

Nevertheless, Vargas won election to the Senate in 1946 and the candidate he endorsed, Marshal Eurico Gaspar Dutra, won the presidency. Vargas was elected Dutra’s successor in 1950, espousing an economic policy that consisted essentially of “capitalism with a human face” while un-ironically attacking Dutra’s economic policies for having favored the rich.

1950 was also the year that Brazil hosted the World Cup – the first since the tournament was suspended due to the war and the last to take place in Brazil until this year. Political, economic and athletic hopes were high. In front of some 200,000 fans at the Estádio de Maracanã in Rio de Janeiro – then the largest soccer arena on Earth – the Brazilian national team faced off against Uruguay in the championship match.

Brazil lost, 2 to 1.

As Page describes it, the 1950 World Cup loss was “a catastrophe the extent of which is difficult for outsiders to grasp.” Citizens dubbed it the *Maracanazo*, using the same disaster-signifying suffix as the *Bogotazo* - the 1948 assassination of the Colombian populist Liberal politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and the ensuing riots which decimated the capital city and killed thousands, ultimately leading to decades of bloody internal conflict. As Page writes:

This tragic loss brought to the surface not only the self-doubt Brazilians have always harbored, but also the racism that lurked beneath their inferiority complex. Both Barbarosa [the goalkeeper] and Bigode [a defender], the principal scapegoats, were dark-skinned, and many Brazilians were willing to believe that their country would never win the World Cup with a racially-mixed society.

At the same time, many Brazilians thought of their country as a “*democracia racial*” (“racial democracy”) – a society that does not discriminate based on skin color or ethnicity. This ideology essentially dismissed the very notion of racism in Brazil, arguing instead that European miscegenation had “whitened” Brazilian society to its benefit and that societal inequalities were the result of circumstance, not race.

Dilma showed how entrenched this ideology remains in Brazil in December 2012. Moments before protests broke out against excessive police violence and the upcoming Confederations Cup – the “dry run” for the World Cup – Dilma told a global television audience that Brazil was a country “with no prejudice or exclusion and where there is a respect for human rights.” As discussed further below, the president’s statement was demonstrably untrue, but it reveals Brazil’s ongoing struggle to come to terms with the historical influence of race and class on its modern society.

Ordem e Progresso

A period of economic and political instability followed the demoralizing 1950 loss, culminating in the suicide of President Vargas in August 1954, just a few weeks after Brazil had been eliminated from that year’s World Cup quarter-finals. Brazil was left to be ruled by tenuous caretaker governments until the administration of President Juscelino Kubitschek, who took office in 1956.

With the motto, “50 years of progress in five,” Kubitschek further opened his country to foreign capital and promoted ambitious development projects. One of his most grandiose plans was the construction of the a brand new capital city, Brasilia, completely from scratch in just four years.

Kubitschek’s policies helped grow and industrialize the economy, although issues like homelessness, poverty and inequality persisted. As Page put it, Brazilians felt at the time that their economy’s nascent modernization “had not required slavish imitation of foreign models. [They] could win in their own way.” Brazil won the 1958 World Cup in Sweden – the country’s first international title. Two years after the official inauguration of their new capital city, Brazil picked up their second at the very next tournament in Chile in 1962.

However, the “miracle” began to dawn in 1964 when a United States-backed military coup deposed leftist president and former Vargas Labor Minister, João Goulart. Goulart was succeeded by one of the military officers who had led his ouster, Marshal Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco. The Branco government proceeded to institute drastic neoliberal economic reforms that resulted in massive unemployment and civil unrest, while carrying out an often violent purging of leftists reminiscent of the Vargas government.

At the 1966 World Cup in England, the Brazilian national team was humiliatingly eliminated in the initial stage, suffering 3-1 losses first to Hungary and then to its former colonial master, Portugal. In 1968, Brazil's military government dissolved congress and began resorting to assassinations, forced disappearances and torture (with help from the US and the UK) to suppress dissent.

Brazil won the World Cup for a third time in 1970, but as Page put it, "the glory soon faded." Despite relatively strong economic growth under military rule, human rights abuses, inequality, unemployment, poverty and illiteracy continued throughout the dictatorship's political "*abertura*" ("opening") of 1974 and beyond.

O Rei de Futebol

Brazilian soccer legend Edson Arantes do Nascimento, known worldwide as Pelé, plays a particularly allegorical role in the political history of soccer in Brazil. "*O Rei do Futebol*" ("The King of Soccer") was born in 1940 in Três Corações, Minas Gerais. He began his professional career at the age of 16 and at 17 he made his debut with Brazil's first championship-winning squad at the 1958 World Cup.

The youngest athlete to ever play in a Cup match, Pelé scored three of the goals that led Brazil to a crushing 5-2 victory in the final game against host country Sweden. Pelé also played on the 1962 championship team and in 1970 he set a record he still holds by becoming the only person to have played on three Cup-winning squads.

Pelé, "*A Pérola Negra*" ("The Black Pearl"), is an officially-designated national treasure. He the first black man on the cover of *Life* magazine and Brazil's first black minister. In 1967, the combatants in Nigerian civil war called a ceasefire so they could watch Pelé play.

But the dark-skinned Brazilian from a working-class family has been remarkably apolitical as an international soccer superstar, rarely voicing a strong opinion on social or political issues and never openly condemning the atrocities of the Brazilian military dictatorship.

In this regard, Pelé stands in sharp contrast to former national team striker Romário de Souza Faria, who played on the World Cup-winning 1994 and 2002 teams. The dark-skinned soccer star-turned-congressman has been a fierce critic of social inequalities and a strong supporter of the the ongoing protests.

In June 2013, the infamously apolitical Pelé called on Brazilians to "forget" the anti-Cup protests occurring at that time and to support the national soccer team. Many Brazilians were outraged. Romário said at the time, "Pelé has no fucking awareness of what's going on in this country." Even Pelé's more recent condemnations of the government's World Cup preparations failed to recognize both the sources and the scope of the country's many problems.

In 2011, it was revealed that Pelé had been investigated by Brazilian authorities in 1970 for suspected leftist ties. Despite no evidence of Pelé being involved in any political movements or actions himself, he had allegedly received a manifesto from a government employee seeking

amnesty for political prisoners. Whether because of lack of conviction or government intimidation, Pelé kept quiet.

On July 18, 1971 Pelé played his last international match for Brazil against Yugoslavia, a game that ended in a 2-2 draw. Many Brazilians began to view Pelé as a sell-out when he left Brazil (with some help from Henry Kissinger) for the US in 1974, where he earned millions of dollars lending his talent and international prestige, not to a local team his own country, but to the North American Soccer League as a player for the New York Cosmos.

Retorno à Democracia

Mirroring the quarter-century of political and economic asphyxiation Brazil underwent during the years of the dictatorship, the country would not win another World Cup until 1994 – a full five years after Fernando Alfonso Collor de Mello became the first directly-elected president since the 1960s.

Janet Lever described the 1994 World Cup victory in her book “Soccer Madness:”

“The country literally stopped for the final matches - Congress adjourned, schools closed, and businesses shut down...After the victory people poured into the streets creating a noisy carnival of dancing and fireworks. There were no riots. Casualties included those in car accidents caused by inebriated drivers and people with high blood pressure who got sick from excitement.”

The symbolism of winning Brazil’s first post-Pelé Cup – its fourth altogether, another record – on American soil by beating a European country was powerful. Still, the Washington Consensus-style neoliberalization forced upon Brazil by the IMF had already exposed many elements of its economy to the pressures of globalized capitalism, including its beloved national pastime. Only half of the players on the 1994 roster (and only 3 of the starting 11) played professionally for Brazilian club teams. The rest played in European leagues, which paid much higher wages.

At the time, professional soccer was also becoming less accessible to average Brazilians. Workers’ wages were stagnating as the price of admission to local matches rose, and many players were forced to work second jobs to supplement their insufficient salaries. As Lever wrote, “This is a vicious cycle: the more players leave, the worse the quality of regular league competition becomes, and consequently, fewer fans are willing to pay to see their teams.” On the 2014 squad, only four of the 23 athletes play for Brazilian club teams. The rest all play in the European, Russian or Canadian leagues.

Cardoso e Lula

In 1994, the year they once again made soccer history, Brazilians elected the neoliberal former Finance Minister Fernando Henrique Cardoso as president. Cardoso, the son of wealthy Portuguese immigrants, continued privatizing state enterprises and dismantling social programs like education and healthcare. Growth slowed, corruption abounded, crime was on the rise and many of the socially-oriented reforms promised by his administration had been only partially fulfilled or slow to materialize.

After yet another decade of unfulfilled "free market" promises, the Brazilian people were ready to forge a different path. In June 2002, Brazil broke their own record by winning a fifth World Cup. In October, they chose their fourth directly-elected president since the end of the dictatorship; Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, better known simply as "Lula."

However, the scope of the change promised by Lula and his "socialist" Worker's Party (PT) was mitigated by the influence of Brazil's integration into the global capitalist system – including the \$41 billion IMF "aid" package the country had accepted under Cardoso in 1998. By early 2002, capital markets were threatening to pull the plug on the country's economy if it did not redouble its commitment to neoliberal reform.

Worried that his election as a self-proclaimed socialist could spark a financial attack on the country, Lula and the PT's campaign rhetoric started to become much more market-friendly. Lula wrote and published an open letter to the Brazilian people during the final days of the 2002 World Cup, expressing his desire to avert a fate similar to that of their soccer arch-rival Argentina (which had been eliminated in the tournament's first round):

"What is important is that this crisis must be avoided, because it would cause irreparable suffering for the majority of the population. To avoid this crisis it is necessary to understand the margin for maneuver in the short run is small."

Lula was elected later that year and whatever "crisis" was averted was replaced by an IMF-dictated economic policy that helped spawn a regressive social spending system. Nevertheless, when Lula handed off the presidency in 2011 to his former chief of staff Dilma Rousseff, he had an 83 percent approval rating – the highest of any president since the dictatorship.

As Favelas

Nearly four years into the Rousseff administration, more than half of Brazilians view her as having a bad influence on the country. Economic growth has slowed. The poverty rate has barely budged after falling from 35% during Lula's first term to around 20% by the time he left office. Similarly, unemployment has hovered around 5% after being halved from 12% to 6% during the Lula years. Brazil, along with many of its Latin American neighbors, still ranks among the worst countries in the world for income inequality.

According to recent studies the vast majority of Brazilians believe racism exists in their society, but only a tiny percentage consider themselves to be racist. While few people still refer to Brazil as a "racial democracy", the essence of the ideology still survives despite a decade-long crawl toward racial affirmative action policies in public education and employment.

In 2011, the year Dilma took office, government census data showed that people who identify as "white" are a minority in Brazil for the first time since the 19th century. Government studies have shown that people who identify as black or brown make incomes that are less than half those of their white counterparts and they are much more likely to lack access to basic services like security, education, healthcare and sanitation.

One particularly illustrative example of this race-class conflation can be found in the illegal settlements, known as “favelas,” that exist in most major Brazilian cities. Migrants from rural Brazil, many of them of black or indigenous ancestry, flooded into rapidly-industrializing urban areas during the early 20th century. Combined with the government-sponsored importation of European labor under the “whitening” program, this created an urban housing crisis that Brazil has never truly solved. According to government statistics, 1.8 million of Brazil’s roughly 200 million people are homeless. More than 1 million are estimated to live in favelas.

Many favela residents have no legal title to the land or structures they occupy, which has enabled the government to carry out forcible evictions of entire neighborhoods to make way for “development” projects in recent decades. In 2011, the Special Rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Council on the right to adequate housing, Raquel Rolnik (a native Brazilian), expressed concern with “a pattern of lack of transparency, consultation, dialogue, fair negotiation, and participation of the affected communities in processes concerning evictions undertaken or planned in connection with the World Cup and Olympics.”

Reports of police torturing, assassinating and “disappearing” the poor, mostly black and brown residents of Brazil’s criminalized urban communities are neither new nor uncommon. The killing of a young favela resident in April 2014 sparked protests in Rio as well as the Twitter hashtag “*Eu Não Mereço Morrer Assassinado*” (“I don’t deserve to be murdered”). Earlier that month, violent protests had erupted over the death of an elderly woman who was caught in the crossfire of a gang versus police shootout. A recent Pew poll found that nearly two-thirds of Brazilians think the police have a negative impact on the country.

Copa 2014

Although the term is frequently employed above, “anti-Cup” is perhaps not the best description of most recent protest actions. Most citizens are not opposed to the World Cup *per se*. Of course Brazilians will root for their team during the tournament. Even Dilma cheered for the championship 1970 team from the jail where she was imprisoned and tortured by the contemporary military government.

Antagonizing the World Cup has a deep cultural significance, but also a more obvious motivation. The state has razed people’s houses to build soccer stadium parking lots. The police have chased the poor away from the beaches and hotels and shopping districts back to the slums, only to invade and occupy their neighborhoods in order to “pacify” them. The government has spent nearly \$1 billion on World Cup security alone while many favelas still lack basic utilities.

Brazil is not, as Dilma put it, a country “with no prejudice or exclusion and where there is a respect for human rights,” but it is striving to become one, as it has been for a long time. In his famous essay “Do You Know Who You’re Talking To?!” Brazilian sociologist Roberto DaMatta attempts to define what he calls the “Distinction between Individual and Person in Brazil.”

“In my opinion, the same basic process of constructing the individual or the person [in Brazil] takes place during great public festivals like Carnival, when persons become individuals and submit to the general rules of the revelry – of the reign of the clown king Momus – and accept their status as anonymous human beings. By the same token of *inversion*, anonymous individuals cease to be merely members of the labor force and marginal workers and become persons: noblemen, singers, dancers, and characters of a national drama. The same thing happens in *futebol* (soccer), where by identifying with their teams (and clubs), fans transform themselves into persons entitled to certain rights in victory and defeat. The prize here, as in Carnival, is highly significant: it is the right to hierarchize the position of equals or to change the position of superiors, the drama always having as motif the relationships between equality and hierarchy.”

DaMatta goes on to describe Brazilian society as “midway between equality and hierarchy”, “satisfied with its modern set of universal laws but framed in a markedly hierarchical skeleton...[wherein] the codes of personal relationships are the structural components of the social structure, not mere ‘survivals’ from the past that will soon be swept away by the introduction of modern political and economic institutions.”

Many favela residents volunteer their limited spare time to help their neighbors build, repair, and upgrade their homes in a practice known as a “*mutirão*“. Participatory budgeting projects begun under the Lula administration showed the benefits of democratic community participation in spending decisions. Giant state projects rife with injustice, corruption and mismanagement like the World Cup debacle only serve to remind Brazilians that in many key moments of the country’s history, the government has been an impediment to true progress.

At the individual level, the protests may be about evictions, security, wages or any number of other things. In totality they express a deep desire for the government to rectify the injustices of the past, rather than forever pursuing future greatness while blinding itself to a centuries-long legacy of political and economic exclusion based on race and class. An anonymous Black Bloc protester described his interpretation of the zeitgeist to GlobalPost:

“The crisis is worldwide. People are seeing that representative democracy doesn’t represent anyone — here in Brazil, in London, in Greece or anywhere. When people go on the street and create pressure they become political actors....The new generation is very radical...Those inside the stadium will be under siege.”

Radical leftist politics is nothing new in Latin America, but the swelling wave of activism in Brazil has a deeper and wider significance beyond being simply “anti-neoliberal” or “anti-capitalist.” The country has had its hopes inflated and dashed by the World Cup once before. In 1950, Brazil’s working class were mere bystanders and spectators. This time around, they have been training as hard as the players, dedicating themselves to action and organization for years and not letting their support for their country’s team drown out their sociopolitical critiques – or vice versa.

The socialist Worker’s Party has won every presidential election in the 20th century Brazil and has achieved many commendable accomplishments while in power and although Dilma has been losing popularity, her closest challenger for October’s presidential race is the centrist social

democrat Aécio Neves, who garners about half as much support as the incumbent. Despite significant gains in recent years against poverty and unemployment, a vast majority of Brazilians disapprove of the current economic situation.

On June 7, Dilma claimed that the protests were part of a “systemic campaign” not necessarily against the World Cup but against some nebulous “us.” *Pace* Dilma, Brazilians’ discontent stems largely not from what the government has done, but from what it has not. Brazil is ready to move forward with socialism, not to retreat from it. These protests are an exhortation to the government to finally prioritize “equality,” one of the bedrock principles of socialism, over the capitalistic values of “growth” and “power” for the first time in Brazil’s history.

As the multibillion-dollar capitalist bonanza of the World Cup plays out – Laurel Wentz at AdAge described it “like having the Super Bowl every day for an entire month” – leftists and radicals should lend their solidarity to the movements opposed to what the World Cup symbolizes for so many Brazilians; capitalistic exploitation, enduring racism and ongoing criminalization of the poor, as well as the symbiotic nature of those systems of oppression.