

House Organ for *Capitalism Nature Socialism*
“The Olympics, Sustainability, and Greenwashing: The Rio 2016 Summer Games”
by Jules Boykoff and Gilmar Mascarenhas

In September 2015, Pope Francis traveled to United States for a historic visit where he rolled out his vision on climate change, poverty, and inequality. The Pope, who had famously referred to the ravages of capitalism as the “dung of the devil,” dominated the US mediascape (Yardley and Binyamin Appelbaum 2015). In the shadow of the Pope’s high-profile trip, the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Thomas Bach, slipped into New York where he appeared at the United Nations to deliver remarks at the UN Sustainable Development Summit. Amidst President Bach’s predictable boilerplate about the IOC’s fuzzy desire “to make the world a better place through sport,” he stated that the IOC, a Permanent Observer at the UN, “wholeheartedly supports the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” He added, “Olympic Agenda 2020 addresses progress with regards to sustainability, credibility and youth in the context of the Olympic Movement. Therefore, with this Olympic Agenda 2020 the IOC is absolutely in line with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (Bach 2015). The IOC was hitching its green wagon to the United Nations sustainability agenda. But was this new? What did all this eco-speak really mean?

Olympic Agenda 2020 is a slate of forty recommendations (20+20) that the IOC passed unanimously in December 2014. We should remember that the IOC put forth Agenda 2020 as *recommendations*, not fully-formed policies. These recommendations were a response to dwindling interest in hosting the Olympics and to the full-throttle fiscal debacle known as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, where Games organizers spent \$51 billion—more than all previous Winter Olympics combined—with some \$30 billion siphoned off through corruption (Boykoff 2013a). Agenda 2020 focused on the need to reduce spending, improve transparency, and “include sustainability in all aspects of the Olympic Games”—incorporating a green ethos into the organization’s daily operations (IOC 2014). The IOC has started to implement some of the Agenda 2020 recommendations—notably by jumpstarting an Olympic TV Channel, not exactly something critics were demanding—although the group has been slow to convert sustainability principles into meaningful policies that benefit everyday people in the Olympic host city.

To many observers of Olympic sustainability practices, this comes as no surprise. As sport scholar Christine O’Bonsawin (2014), a University of Victoria Indigenous studies professor from the Abenaki Nation at Odanak, notes, all too often Olympic honchos proffer a “sustainability smokescreen” rather than meaningful environmental and social sustainability programs. In other words, IOC luminaries have veered historically toward ‘greenwashing’—the duplicitous practice of voicing concern for the environment and claiming credit for providing solutions while doing the bare minimum, if anything at all. David Harvey (2014, 263) writes, “All ecological and environmental projects are socio-economic projects (and vice versa).” He describes greenwashing as “disguising a profit-driven project as a project to enhance human welfare.” By tapping into environmentalism’s positive cultural cache, the IOC and its local organizing committee counterparts have capitalized on the sustainability zeitgeist without actually embracing significant environmental principles. This amounts to buying the eco-label through

aggressive public-relations campaigns rather than forging meaningful environmental policies with positive material ramifications. In short, symbolism swallows substance.

Rio de Janeiro has rich history of supporting environmental action, having hosted the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, where it was known more popularly as the “Earth Summit,” and in 2012, where it was dubbed “Rio+20.” With this history on its side, the question was whether the Rio 2016 Olympics—which will take place from 5 through 21 August—could chart a different course, syncing up lofty rhetoric with ecological progress. The answer, it turned out, has been a resounding ‘no.’

A Brief History of Sustainability and the Olympic Games

Back in June 1992, when the UN “Earth Summit” convened in Rio, the possibility of change permeated the air. The *New York Times* declared that the gathering pointed up “the new-found prominence of the environment as an international issue, bidding to rank with economics and national security” (Stevens 1992, A11). The nearly two-week meeting that included representatives from 178 countries revealed the frictions and factions that would make concerted environmental action challenging. Still, the conference-goers agreed with the principle that “environmental protection” was “an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it.” The UN issued the “Rio Declaration on Environment and Development,” a blueprint for future action that included the ‘precautionary principle’ stating, “Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation” (United Nations General Assembly 1992).

The International Olympic Committee was keen to tighten the incipient bonds it had established with the UN. A mere six weeks after the “Earth Summit” concluded, the IOC signed a symbolic “Earth Pledge” that cautiously charged Olympic honchos with “making the Earth a safe place” (IOC 2012, 9). The language was fluffy and the commitment tenuous at best. Still, then-IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch editorialized in the *Olympic Review* that he wanted to put “the Olympic Games at the service of the quest for excellence, solidarity and respect of the environment.” Foreshadowing what would become standard-issue rhetoric for Olympic luminaries, he concluded, “United by and for sport, the Olympic Movement can and must mobilize itself to make its contribution to the protection of the planet Earth and the wellbeing of mankind” (Samaranch 1995, 3). Yet the IOC hardly aligned its sentiments and its actions; the Albertville Winter Olympics in 1992 were an ecological debacle, causing widespread environmental degradation by carving out Nordic ski runs, a bobsled track, and other Olympic venues (Cantelon and Letters 2000).

To be sure, sustainability is a notoriously slippery term. As cultural theorist Leerom Medovoi (2010) has pointed out, “Sustainability, emerging as it did out of the ‘sustainable growth’ and ‘sustainable development’ movements, has always referred quite directly to regimes of capital accumulation.” This coheres with Olympic scholar Helen Jefferson Lenskyj’s (1998) dichotomous differentiation between “light green” and “dark green” sustainability practices. Lenskyj asserts that Olympic plenipotentiaries have long adopted a “light green” approach that views the environment as an economic resource to be tapped both materially and discursively.

This is quite compatible with capitalism and trendy ‘corporate social responsibility.’ The IOC has not espoused a “dark green” brand of sustainability that contemplates—and sometimes even privileges—nature’s intrinsic value and champions the notion that ecological preservation can and should trump economic development.

In the wake of the 1992 “Earth Summit” the UN unveiled “Agenda 21,” its plan for undertaking environmentally sustainable development. The IOC followed suit. At its 1994 Olympic Congress the group proclaimed the environment to be “an essential component of Olympism” (IOC 1994). The following year, the IOC amended the *Olympic Charter* so that Rule 2 demanding that “the Olympic Games are held in conditions which demonstrate a responsible concern for environmental issues” (IOC 1995, 13). To facilitate this, the IOC launched a Sport and Environment Commission that would convene annually. In October 1999, the IOC mimicked the UN and established its own “Agenda 21.” Deploying the most general of language, the IOC aimed “to integrate sustainable development into their policies and activities” and “encourage all individuals...to behave in such a way as to ensure that their sporting activities and their lifestyles play a part in sustainable development” (“Agenda 21 of the Olympic Movement” 1999, 42-43). Through this calculated process, the IOC (2005, 43) has enmeshed sustainability into its rhetoric, even dubbing it “the third pillar of Olympism,” along with sport and culture. However, attorney Marc Zemel (2011, 220, 182) has noted that although in theory the IOC “has the power to impose legally binding environmental requirements,” in practice, the group “has not used its power to impose specific binding requirements or regulations to achieve its objectives.” This lack of accountability has paved a path for greenwashing.

The IOC’s brand of sustainability lingo made its debut at the Sydney Summer Olympics in 2000. According to the Sydney Games Official Report (2001, 353), “The environment record of the Sydney 2000 organisations was one of the shining achievements of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. From the earliest days, commitment to the highest standards of environmental achievement were a hallmark of Sydney’s Games.” To be sure, the Games inspired the improvement of local waterways, a spate of tree planting, and the symbolic use of solar power in the Olympic Village. Yet, to the chagrin of environmental activists, Sydney organizers also staged the beach volleyball competition at Bondi Beach, an ecologically sensitive area. In this instance, Olympic honchos let corporate profits trump environmental principles: the idyllic location helped television firms capitalize off the visual scenery along the Pacific Ocean. NBC had spent \$600 million on TV rights for the Games (Boykoff 2016). Nevertheless, the Sydney Olympics inaugurated a new tradition whereby Olympic organizers claim their event “the greenest Games to date.”

The 2008 Beijing Olympics were notable for both their big green promises—one bid slogan was “Green Olympics, High-tech Olympics, the People’s Olympics”—and their mixed record in regards to follow-through. To its credit, the Chinese government built numerous wastewater treatment plants, constructed new public transportation lines, ramped up vehicle emission standards, and instituted water conservation measures. Chinese officials also relocated around 200 polluting industries before the Games commenced (Mol and Zhang 2012, 134-136). It undertook drastic measures to improve air quality the month before the Olympics began, shuttering factories, forcing power plants to employ alternative fuels, placing cars on an every-other-day schedule, and banning heavy-polluting vehicles from Beijing. Yet, these measures

were rescinded in the wake of the Games, with some pollutant levels (e.g. NO²) rising to their previous levels, giving critics grist for claims of ecological Potemkinism (Witte et al 2009).

The 2010 Vancouver Olympics, five-ring enthusiasts proclaimed the event to be “the greenest Games ever.” And although Vancouver made some positive green strides, greenhouse gas emissions spiked during the Games and an expansion of the Sea-to-Sky highway linking Vancouver to venues in Whistler laid siege to animal life, including endangered species like the red-legged frog (Boykoff 2013b, 76-79). Yet, some scholars argued that the Games’ purported sustainability values was a “social leveraging” opportunity that helped Vancouver with its subsequent “Greenest City” branding initiative, which was “an effort to capitalize on the Olympic moment” (VanWynsberghe, Derom, and Maurer 2012, 198). In a paroxysm of PR pabulum, rebranding begets green-branding.

This dynamic was evident in Technicolor at the London 2012 Summer Games where Olympic organizers created a new category of corporate sponsor: “sustainability partners.” Six such sponsors—BP, BMW, BT, Cisco, EDF Energy, and GE—debuted as “sustainability partners” even though BP was responsible for the ghastly act of hemorrhaging oil into the US Gulf Coast in 2010.¹ An independent watchdog group called the Commission for a Sustainable London 2012 (2011) revealed that the sponsorship program was simply a pay-to-play charade. There were not environmental standards that needed to be met in order to become a green corporate partner.

Olympic-style environmentalism has continued apace, and the IOC-UN partnership has remained strong. At the outset of the 2014 Winter Olympics, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (2014) commented that the UN and IOC were “a team” that was “joining forces for our shared ideals. Sustainability. Universality. Solidarity. Non-discrimination. The fundamental equality of all people.” The assembled sports mavens and politicians nodded along in agreement to this difficult-to-disagree-with feel-goodism.

The 2016 Rio Summer Olympics

Every Olympics in the modern era is now obliged to articulate an ambitious list of “legacy” projects that will remain in the Games’ wake, programs and infrastructure that will ostensibly benefit the host city for years to come. In the twenty-first century, many Olympic “legacy” projects have a decidedly green hue. The Rio 2016 Olympics is no exception. To rally public support, organizers proffered a slate of more than twenty-five legacies, and around half of them either directly spoke to environmental issues (e.g. environmental remediation projects such as cleaning up Guanabara Bay) or indirectly pointed to environmental benefits (e.g. creation of public transportation networks like the Bus Rapid Transit [BRT] system) (Castro et al 2015, 16-17).

These priorities chimed with the emphasis that the original Rio 2016 candidature placed on environmentalism. The Rio Olympic bid stated, “The 2016 Games will accelerate several important environmental projects bringing direct benefits to local communities including regeneration of urban areas, air quality improvement and reduced consumption of non-renewable natural resources” (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 1, 37). The Rio candidature file added, “The

¹ BP was selected as “sustainability partner” before the Gulf Coast ecological catastrophe.

sustainability and feasibility plans...are underpinned by a diverse range of developments” (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 3, 166). Urban geographer Christopher Gaffney’s (2013: 3932) critical discourse analysis of the Rio 2016 bid books found that “environment” (and derivatives like “environmental”) was the second most frequently deployed term, trailing only “security.” The word “sustainability” was also foregrounded, appearing in the bid three times as often as “education” and eleven times more than “citizen.”

However, a monstrous abyss emerged between Rio 2016’s bold environmental promises and on-the-ground reality. This is especially poignant in light of the fact that Rio de Janeiro suffers from the intense inequitable distribution of environmental basics such as clean water and sewage. The Olympics were supposed to spark ecological justice (Britto 2015). Moreover, *Cariocas* had heard many these promises before: in winning the right to stage the 2007 Pan-American Games, bidders promised water cleanup and revamped housing, but the waterways remained polluted and the athlete village was built on ecologically sensitive peat land (Curi, Knijnik, and Mascarenhas 2011).

The 2016 Olympic bid promised to finally clean up Guanabara Bay, which would be home to the sailing competition as well as the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, which would host rowing, canoeing, and some kayaking. Bid jockeys vowed that two sanitation programs—at Barra-Jacarepaguá in western Rio and at Guanabara Bay along the eastern coast—would “result in more than 80% of overall sewage collected and treated by 2016” (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 1, 97). But as the Games approached, it was obvious these remediation projects were not on pace. The evidence was gruesome. Nearly 40 tons of dead fish mysteriously turned up at Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas in April 2015. This came on the heels of a similar catastrophe in February 2015 when a fish die-off occurred in Guanabara Bay (Wade 2015). One Brazilian sailor reported encountering human corpses four times in the Bay. Another stated, “It can get really disgusting, with dog carcasses in some places and the water turning brown from sewage contamination” (Romero and Clarey 2014, A1).

Approximately a year before the Olympics were to commence, *Associated Press* published a blockbuster investigative report revealing every single Olympic water venue to be unsafe. The waterways gurgled with human sewage that conveyed “dangerously high levels of viruses and bacteria.” This was not only a health threat for Olympic athletes, but for everyday Rio residents. Whoever swam in the water was at risk to “explosive diarrhea, violent vomiting, respiratory trouble and other illnesses.” Ingesting only three teaspoons of the polluted water afforded a 99 percent chance of infection by virus (though that did not mean that individual would automatically fall ill). Even contracting Hepatitis A was possible (Brooks and Barchfield 2015). Mario Moscatelli, Brazilian biologist and professor at the Central University of the City of Rio de Janeiro, recommended that Olympic water athletes get vaccinated for Hepatitis A before heading to Rio to compete. He said, “Guanabara Bay does not offer the boating safety conditions, nor water quality to [host] the events of the Olympics” (Bauer 2015a). Even with the health of the athletes at stake, the IOC argued that instead of viral testing, bacterial testing would suffice. Rio 2016 officials adopted the same line. Meanwhile, Rio Governor Luiz Fernando Pezão pushed back the timeline for Guanabara Bay’s cleanup from 2016 to 2035 (Barchfield 2015a).

Rio's broken promises did not end with water. In order to offset carbon emissions, Rio 2016 had vowed to plant 24 million trees by 2016 (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 1, 33). Carlos Minc, the State of Rio de Janeiro's Secretary for the Environment, went even further, promising 34 million trees by Games-time (Konchinski 2015). However, the "Rio 2016 Sustainability Report" that was issued in 2014 conspicuously ignored mentioning the tree-planting initiative. Rio organizers instead focused on the launch of its "Embrace Sustainability" program, with Dow—the "official chemistry company of the Olympic Games"—the program's inaugural member (Rio 2016 Organizing Committee 2014). By May 2015, environmental officials revealed that only 5.5 million saplings had been planted. Rio 2016 was on track to plant 8.1 million trees by the time of the Games, less than a quarter of Minc's promise and a third of the 24 million delineated in the Rio 2016 bid (Konchinski 2015).

Then there's the brand new golf course in Rio, built specifically for the Rio 2016 Olympics. The return of golf to the Olympic program, after an absence of more than a century (the last time golf was an Olympic sport was the Saint Louis Games in 1904), was controversial. Yet, it was widely welcomed by Rio 2016 project managers, considering that the city has, for more than twenty years, been governed by urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey 2011, 1996; Vainer 2000; Mascarenhas 2011; Bienestein et al. 2012; Compans 2004). This urban management model is characterized by, among other aspects, "market-friendly" attitudes and by concomitant public policies that aggressively attempt to attract and encourage private investment. In Brazil, public-private partnerships are a vital part of this zeitgeist. The construction of the Olympic golf course in Rio is an archetypal instance of such public-private partnerships, as it is configured in concert with real-estate interests and tailored to those actors' desires. Further, golf, as a sport, implies a certain social status that gels with these class interests. Conveniently, golf also demands large swathes of quiet green space, which adds significant value to real-estate projects that incorporate such spaces (Bale 1993).

Rio de Janeiro already has two elite golf courses that have staged major tournaments—Gávea Golf Club and Itanhangá Golf Club. Rio's original Olympic bid touted this very fact (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 2, 165). One might think that one of the extant courses could have been renovated to comply with Olympic standards. Yet Rio's Olympic Delivery Authority asserted that Gávea Golf Club didn't have the requisite space to expand and Itanhangá Golf Club lacked proper drainage and irrigation resources. Revamping the latter would have been just as expensive as building a new course, Olympic officials contended (Autoridade Pública Olímpica 2015).

Multiple possibilities existed for the golf course's location. It could have been built inside the Deodoro Olympic area situated inside an ample, working-class suburb of Rio, where the predominantly medium- and low-income population had scarce access to leisure or sports facilities. Construction there would have been relatively low cost. Instead, the new golf course was built in Barra da Tijuca, a wealthy western suburb and high-value real-estate zone. Clearly the goal was to maximize profits. Yet, to do this, Rio Mayor Rio Eduardo Paes had to carry out audacious political maneuvers that were abetted by the state of exception brought on by the sports mega-event. In 2012, claiming savings for the public purse, Mayor Paes facilitated an enormous real-estate project that includes private developers covering the costs of the golf course's construction. The tradeoff was that the developer would also get to construct 140 luxury apartments around the course and recoup all the profits from their sale.

Moreover, the course's placement was deeply problematic in that it was plopped inside Marapendi Nature Reserve, home to numerous threatened species. Once again, environmental issues were not taken seriously. The Marapendi Reserve is an ecologically sensitive area protected by law since 1959. To build the golf course, vegetation and natural habitat was devastated. This galvanized intense collective resistance from activist groups like "Golfe Para Quem?" ("Golf For Whom?") and "Ocupa Golfe" ("Occupy Golf"), which brought together biologists and environmental lawyers to rally for public support and to squelch the construction. The movement was severely repressed by the government, which pressed ahead with the project. The entire episode clashes mightily with Rio 2016's proclaimed environmental ethos. Let alone the specific ecological promises it elucidated in the original Olympic bid.

After all this resistance and repression, Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes openly admitted that the golf course has dubious value as an Olympic legacy. In November 2015 he said, "There are some things that you need to do when you deliver the Olympics, and some sports that are not popular in your country, but you need to build the venues." He added, "I hope we can get the most of it. I don't think there is much legacy for a golf course, I've always said that, but course will be used by players, and the Brazilian Golf Federation has an obligation to bring kids here and make social projects here" (Bauer 2015b). The construction of the golf course was a blatant example of Olympics-induced urban entrepreneurialism that sustains and reconstitutes class power.

Conclusion

It has become de rigueur for Olympic host cities to exude the public image of a vigorous, investment-friendly city primed to entice private enterprise (Mascarenhas 2011, 37). Being viewed as a 'green city' has become a vital part of marketing the metropolis. The United Nations' recent ecological masterplan (2015, 10)—"Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"—states that "Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development." But as we have seen, Olympic sport has thus far more capably enabled greenwashing. And the Rio 2016 Summer Olympics highlight this trend of privileging branding over material change.

A growing chorus of academics and activists have risen up to challenge this big green pantomime. Janice Forsyth, the former Director of the International Centre for Olympic Studies at the Western University in Canada, has argued that the Agenda 21 "Sport for Sustainable Development" plan merely reconstitutes power relations, reshuffling the socio-political cards in ways that only prolong historical power inequalities. A member of the Fisher River Cree First Nation, Forsyth (2011) asserted, "Agenda 21 thus far appears like a watered-down statement of environmental concern that shifts the focus of attention to special interest groups without actually requiring the industry to do something meaningfully concrete." In a way, sustaining the environment is beside the point. Capitalist relations still reign supreme.

The academic consensus is coalescing around the two-pronged notion that: (1) sports mega-events like the Olympics are in themselves incongruent with sustainability, and (2) hosting the Games does not pave a probable path for deepening environmentally-minded policies in the wake of the event. Sociologists Graeme Hayes and John Horne (2011, 761) assert that the

Olympics are “a fundamentally unsustainable event.” After surveying the history of IOC-style environmentalism, John Karamichas (2013, 203) arrived at the conclusion that, “no causality was identified between Olympic Games hosting and improvements in the EM [ecological modernization] capacity of the host nation.” In other words, when it comes to the Olympics, a significant gap exists between sustainability rhetoric and reality.

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