TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

CounterPunch

DEC. 16-31, 2011 ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR VOL. 18, NO. 22

Now It's Rio's Turn

Why the Olympic Games Are Always Wars on the Poor

By Michael Volpe

Let's start with the baneful consequences for poor people of *City of God*, a searing film set in Rio de Janeiro. The 2002 film was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Foreign Film and Best Cinematography. It depicted life in one of the most violent favelas in Rio, City of God. Now, nearly a decade later, the film has had grim, even if unintended consequences. Its portrayal of violence, poverty, and despair in the favela has led to a negative perception of life in those working-class neighborhoods and made it easier for the Brazilian government to move and evict residents in anticipation of the upcoming World Cup and Olympics held in 2014 and 2016 in Rio.

"It's just a movie," says Theresa Williamson, an activist with Catalytic Communities in Rio de Janeiro. That movie, Williamson says, has helped to foment negative stereotypes of life in favelas. That's because for millions of people around the world the only impression of favelas comes from that movie. While the movie derives from a true story, Williamson points out that it's based on a book from the Sixties. Williamson acknowledges that drug dealing exists in many favelas; she also points out they're mistakenly referred to as slums, full of dirt, crime, and hopelessness. The truth, she says, is far more complicated. For instance, unemployment in favelas normally hovers around 5 per cent, and more than half of favela residents are homeowners.

"Favelas are overwhelmingly occupied by hard-working, law-abiding citizens trying to improve their lives. The vast majority of homes are solidly built, with long-term materials (brick, concrete, rebar). Through solidarity and hard work,

VOLPE CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

From the Angle of Farm Workers and Farm Work

The Rise and Fall of Cesar Chavez and the UFW

By Bill Hatch

Frank Bardacke, *Trampling out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers.* Verso, 2011, 848 pp.

I left Yuma, AZ, one cool spring morning in 1993, after listening to a local newspaperwoman describe the scene surrounding *the Bruce Church Inc. v. United Farm Workers* trial during which Cesar Chavez died. On my way out I stopped by the town's great historical site, the Yuma Territorial Penitentiary, and did my penance to the history we all live on this harsh and painful border, standing before a mug shot of Ricardo Flores Magon, father of the Mexican Revolution and one-time inmate of the penitentiary.

Chavez had died in his sleep after two days of grilling on the stand by plaintiff attorneys out to make a huge noise to distract attention from the obvious problem, not ignored by the Arizona appellate court that reversed the lower court many months after Chavez died: even if Yuma is the headquarters of the plaintiff second largest lettuce company in the world, a Superior court in Yuma has no jurisdiction over a boycott in California.

To add salt to the wound of the Yuma trial, my local source told me, the ranch along the nearby Gila River, where Chavez had been born and which his father had lost, was owned by the plaintiff, Bruce Church Inc.

Standing outside the penitentiary ruins, looking south across a bend in the Colorado River, I remembered the story Arizona Farm Worker Union Director Lupe Sanchez had told about the "Yuma Wet Line" in 1974. It is an ugly story, completely at odds with the beatific image of the near saint, Cesar Chavez. The story of the wet line – armed union pickets stationed on the border to drive back illegal immigrants looking for work in nearby Yuma – is well told by Frank Bardacke in his monumental, gripping and beautifully written *Trampling out the Vintage*. After reading Bardacke's book, I have a far, far better idea of what it was I lived in California agriculture then and live now.

Bardacke writes the story of Chavez from the angle of farm work and farm workers. The effect is to give Chavez his full stature, weight and substance, brilliance and flaws, while avoiding hagiography or its opposite. The drama of the periodic waves of farm worker revolt in the 20th century have been rendered into religious icons by still photography, from Dorothea Lange's Okie mothers to Paul Fusco's Mexican mothers, all owing perhaps more than we are conscious of to the great muralists of the Mexican Revolution. Bardacke blasts through the

HATCH CONTINUED ON PAGE 3 COL. 3

VOLPE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

people have been able to accomplish quite a lot in a system and economy that did not support them. The movie *City of God* and related images imply that the exception is the rule and create strong general perceptions of these communities as violent and marginal, perceptions which are now making it easy for the City government to act in authoritarian and unparticipatory ways toward these communities, thus risking decades of their hard-won development," says Williamson in an interview with *CounterPunch*.

City of God isn't alone in perpetuating negative stereotypes of life in favelas. For instance, immediately after Rio was awarded the Olympics, the *New York Times* ran a story headlined "Violence in the Newest Olympic City Rattles Brazil." The story read in part, "The images of the downed police helicopter 'really shocked Brazilians, and now everyone is worried about what will happen with the Games,' said Nadine Matos, 21, who works at a hair salon a block from Copacabana Beach. 'We need to tell the world where we stand, so that people outside Brazil understand what measures we are taking and are not so worried when planning to come down here.'

"For years, the police essentially abandoned the shantytowns, or favelas, that ring the city's wealthier neighborhoods, following a policy that resembled containment more than enforcement. That allowed drug traffickers to create strongholds where violence is pervasive. And, as the downing of the helicopter illustrated, the police have not done enough to slow the flow of weapons into the favelas."

Another feature from *Al Jazeera* detailed the capture of one of Brazil's most violent drug dealers. This one was entitled, "Police capture the most-wanted drug trafficker as they prepare to occupy the Brazilian city's largest slum."

In Seoul, 720,000 people were forcibly evicted from their homes. In Barcelona, housing became so unaffordable as a result of the Olympic Games that low-income earners were forced to leave the city. In Atlanta, approximately 30,000 people were displaced and 1.25 million in Beijing.

In a media culture which values the notion "if it bleeds it leads," Williamson says that the real story often gets missed.

"The mainstream media for the most part don't look for depth and don't get deeply involved in a city like Rio. As a result, they go with the visible stories like violence or the canned press releases by the city. As a result, the story that's been told is one predominantly of these communities as violent and the city and state as innovative. In other words, the favelas are the problem.

"Yet what we find is the exact opposite. The favelas are the solution. They were the solution to the lack of affordable housing for over 100 years. Residents built solid homes, solid neighborhoods, solid communities with networks of solidarity and mutual support. They have provided their own public services, from daycare to sewerage, asphalt to health care. It is the public sector (including utilities, urbanization, education, security and other services) that has been missing and that is largely responsible for the problems associated with these communities."

Williamson says favelas have been erroneously been referred to as slums or shantytowns, but such terms are unfair and belie the true nature of life in these neighborhoods. Working-class neighborhoods, she says, are a much better description. "In a city with absolutely no history of affordable housing, the working class had to form their own neighborhoods. The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 recognizes this historic issue, which is why adverse possession [i.e., rights acquired by irregular residents], according to the Brazilian Constitution, kicks in after 5 years in Brazilian cities."

On the ground, Williamson says, a mass round of evictions of residents of favelas is in progress. Dozens of new sports facilities and housing complexes are being built, and the residents of these favelas become easy targets for evictions to make room for these facilities because of the negative portrayal of favelas.

Members of No Games Chicago, the group that fought Chicago's bid to host the games in 2016, aren't surprised by such stories. "In nearly every Olympics, we see displacement," Tom Tresser tells *CounterPunch*.

Tresser drew a distinction between the displacement plans in Chicago and what he sees in Rio. "In Chicago, no one ever talked about outright evictions," said Tresser, "instead, what we would have seen had we won the games was gentrification." Tresser explained that properties near all of the proposed stadium sites were already being gobbled up by well-connected real estate developers. That dynamic would have caused property values to balloon and force low- and moderate-income folks out of those neighborhoods.

Tresser and Bob Quellos both say that Olympics preparations always favor the wealthy while dismissing the needs of the poor. In Chicago, they cite the case of Michael Reese Hospital. That hospital was closed down in the 1990s. According to City planners, the hospital site would have been torn down and turned into the Olympic Village, to house the athletes. "You can bet it would have been sold to some connected developer and turned into condos," said Tresser. As he

CounterPunch

EDITORS
Alexander Cockburn
Jeffrey St. Clair

ASSISTANT EDITOR
Alevtina Rea

BUSINESS
Becky Grant
Deva Wheeler

DESIGN
Tiffany Wardle

COUNSELOR
Ben Sonnenberg
1937-2010

CounterPunch
P.O. Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558
1-800-840-3683
counterpunch@counterpunch.org
www.counterpunch.org

says, if the city had the money to build the Olympic Village, why couldn't the city spend that money to fix the hospital?

Tresser points out that what is happening in Rio and what would have happened in Chicago is not unique. He cited a study by the Center for Housing Rights and Evictions, called "Fair Play for Housing." That 2007 study looked at displacement effects of Olympic Games in Athens, Seoul, Atlanta, Vancouver, and others cities.

The conclusion was stark:

"In Seoul, 720,000 people were forcibly evicted from their homes in preparation for the Olympic Games in 1988. In Barcelona, housing became so unaffordable as a result of the Olympic Games that low-income earners were forced to leave the city. In Atlanta, 9,000 arrest citations were issued to homeless people (mostly African Americans) as part of an Olympics-inspired campaign to 'clean the streets, and approximately 30,000 people were displaced by Olympics-related gentrification and development.' In Athens, hundreds of Roma were displaced under the pretext of Olympics-related preparations. In the lead-up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, COHRE estimates that over 1.25 million people already have been displaced due to Olympics-related urban redevelopment, with at least another quarter of a million displacements expected in the year prior to the staging of the event. In London, housing for 1,000 people is already under threat of demolition, over five years before the Olympic Games are due to be held.

"COHRE research has established that the Olympic Games and other mega-events are often catalysts for redevelopment entailing massive displacements and reductions in low cost and social housing stock, all of which result in a significant decrease in housing affordability. In addition, specific legislation is often concurrently introduced, for example to allow for speedy expropriations of property or to criminalize homelessness. These factors all give rise to housing impacts, which disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and marginalized members of the community."

Tresser is not surprised by the results. "When you (the host city) get the games, your entire city is privatized." Tresser says the International Olympic Committee Contract, which every host city must sign, demands that the IOC have final say on all construction and city planning. Because the IOC is only concerned with having the Olympics go off without a hitch, issues like displacement become nearly irrelevant.

On the ground in Rio, says Williamson, that's exactly what's happening. In a presentation to activists in Chicago, Williamson showed video of government workers going door to door, gathering personal information about favela residents to be used for upcoming eviction notices. In one case, a family that had lived in the same home in a favela for nearly 30 years received an eviction notice.

Many are forced out of their homes and into condominiums, where they no longer own their unit. Her group, Catalytic Communities, produced a three-part report on some of these evictions. "Six months after 190 families from Guaratiba had their lives chaotically uprooted, we visited the public housing unit in Cosmos where they were sent. Their greatest complaint is that no one has yet been given title for their new apartments.

"'What do I even own? Do I have some kind of document?' one bewildered resident asks. Further, there are great doubts among residents about who exactly is going to pay for the apartment, and worse, how much is to be paid. 'We're not sure if we're going to have to pay for the apartment, or if City government is going to pay,' says another resident."

Williamson is facing an uphill battle. Thanks in part to the efforts of No Games Chicago, the residents of Chicago disapproved of hosting the Olympics by the time the IOC made its decision in 2009. In Rio, the approval rate was nearly 100 per cent. The city billed it as an opportunity to transform a city and country on the rise. Short of China, no economy has grown more than Brazil's. Hosting the World Cup and Olympics is all part of the continuing cosmopolitan transformation, say officials.

The residents of the favelas become collateral damage in this plan, called Plan for Accelerating Growth. According to a report by the Comitês Populares da Copa (the People's World Cup Committees), between 150,000 and 170,000 people will be evicted or otherwise displaced in preparation for these events. With perceptions cemented by their portrayal in *City of God* and newspapers like the *New York Times*, it's a tough job getting the world to notice the ramifications of preparations for these mega-events.

Williamson says the media has, in general, simply swallowed what the government has said on the matter; "Instead of looking for subtlety and diving into these communities to understand their true nature, the media have been relaying the traditional Rio governing class perspective for decades." She adds this hopeful note, "Now, these communities are beginning to express themselves and have their voices heard through alternative channels and social networks, so the story is starting to be told differently." **CP**

Michael Volpe is based out of Chicago. After spending more than a decade in finance, both in investments and in real estate, he has been a freelance journalist since 2010.

HATCH CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

frozen image of farm work brilliantly in his second chapter, called "The Work Itself," a testament to the velocity and skill required to make a living in the vegetable fields of Salinas, written by one who did it long enough to gain lifelong respect for it and has been able here to honor that work, as few writers or artists have ever done. Having done perhaps more farm work than the author has, I believe he has chosen the best approach – the real root and the route to the deepest themes in this history – and I believe he has fully realized the design such a radical approach requires.

Bardacke does not alienate farm work from the rest of the types of work necessary for him to describe, in order to tell the tale of Cesar Chavez and the UFW. Even more complete and detailed than his description of the work of a celery-harvest crew is his presentation of the work of community and labor organizing. Making clear distinctions between the two tasks is essential to the book's thesis, providing us with concrete reasons to explain why, after a brilliant beginning, the UFW made so many self-destructive decisions that it finally destroyed its place in the fields. That and its connected problem, the flood of undocumented Mexican workers across the border in the years immediately following the termination of the U.S.-Mexico guest-worker program (the Bracero Program), were