

Cohen of the Times on Rio Olympics: “I’m tired of reading about anger in the slums”

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In a cliché-ridden column published in the *New York Times* Tuesday, the newspaper’s international affairs columnist Roger Cohen affirms that the ongoing Rio 2016 Olympics “are good for Brazil and good for humanity, a needed tonic.” Watch them, he urged his readers, “and feel uplifted.”

Cohen may well be in need of a “tonic.” His columns have expressed increasing anger and dismay over world events, from the failure of the Obama administration to launch the escalation of US intervention in Syria that he has demanded to the debacle of the US-backed coup in Turkey that he supported.

In his embrace of the Rio Olympics as just the pick-me-up he needed, however, Cohen provides a revealing glimpse into the social attitudes of the privileged layer of which he is a part, wallowing in their wealth, indifferent to social inequality, despising the working class and embracing imperialist war as a necessary foundation of their affluent existence.

Reaching back into his memory from the days when he worked as a foreign correspondent in Brazil in the 1980s, he asserts that the country’s culture is “fashioned by heat, sensuality, samba and rule bending. Life can be cheap. You adapt or you perish.”

That “adapting or perishing” may mean one thing to a well-heeled columnist for the *Times* and quite another, and far more literal one, for an unemployed worker or an impoverished youth in Brazil barely occurs to him in laying out this hackneyed portrait of the country.

Inequity, he acknowledges, “was part of the story” when he resided in Rio in the 1980s. Yet, he recalls his happy encounters with the poor. “Tudo bem?” — “All good?” — I would ask when I ventured into the ubiquitous favelas, or slums. “Tudo bem!” was often the response, along with a smile, even when all was entirely awful. Penury in the sun is not penury in the

cold.” Thus, an entire population of 100 million Brazilians living in poverty is passed off as a bunch of happy natives.

Today, the situation in Brazil is even rosier, Cohen assures his readers: “The country has been transformed since the 1980s. Democracy and the currency have been stabilized. The middle class has grown exponentially even if it is under pressure now. Brazil has impeached one president, Fernando Collor de Mello, and is in the midst of an impeachment process against another, Dilma Rousseff, for charges of budgetary manipulation. The law can no longer be bought with facility.”

One would hardly know that Brazil is now gripped by its deepest economic crisis in a century, with the official unemployment rate now topping 11 percent and both poverty and social inequality on the rise. The millions who achieved some gains from economic growth and minimal social assistance programs over the past period—leading to their being defined by the media as “middle class”—face the threat of being hurled back into the abyss.

As for Brazilian democracy having been “stabilized” and the law no longer being “bought with facility” it is difficult to imagine anyone writing these lines with a straight face.

The elected president, Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party (PT), was ousted last May by a congressional leadership dominated by corrupt politicians who, like the PT itself, are up to their necks in the multibillion-dollar kickback scandal surrounding the state-run energy conglomerate Petrobras. The charges against her are entirely trumped up, designed to justify a change in regime demanded by both foreign and Brazilian finance capital as the first step in accelerating the implementation of sweeping attacks on working-class

living standards and social spending already begun under the PT.

That Cohen can embrace such a process as a sign of democratic health can only be explained by class interests. Just like the wealthy Brazilians he counts among his associates, he sincerely hopes that this assault on Brazilian workers will boost profitability and send share prices rising.

Cohen complains bitterly against any attempt to place the Olympic glitter in its grim social context: “I am tired, very tired, of reading negative stories about these Brazilian Olympics — the anger in the slums, the violence that continues (including the armed robbery of four American swimmers), the enduring gulf between rich and poor.... the Brazilian mosquito, money that could supposedly have been spent better than extending the Metro that now runs from the center to prosperous Barra da Tijuca (so, among other things, enabling the poor to get jobs out there).”

The *Times* columnist wants to be left alone to enjoy his Olympic “tonic” in peace, along with the millions he has made serving as a mouthpiece for the CIA.

Don’t tell him about the 60,000 poor people driven from their homes to make way for the World Cup and Olympic facilities or the “social cleansing” of homeless from the streets. Don’t bother him with reports on the 40 to 50 workers and youth gunned down every month by Rio’s militarized police force. And don’t spoil his memories of happy favelas by informing him of the all-out siege mounted against the Maré favela complex by an armed force led by Military Police Special Forces units in the midst of the Olympic games. And for that matter, the less said the better about the repression against protesters, both inside and outside the stadiums, that has recalled for many the methods employed under the US-backed dictatorship that ruled the country for 21 years.

That an estimated \$12 billion in public funds has been poured into the Olympics to give Cohen his uplift, under conditions in which teachers and public workers are going unpaid, healthcare, education and public transit are being slashed and poverty is deepening is also of no concern to the *Times* columnist.

Yes, the money is going to enrich television networks, corporate sponsors, sports bureaucrats and corrupt Brazilian businessmen and politicians off of no-bid contracts for Olympic facilities. It is further

facilitating “urban removal” programs to make way for luxury housing for the rich.

But that the new rail line to Barra da Tijuca is meant to further this process should not be criticized. After all, it will provide a better means for the maids to make their way from the favelas to the mansions. All is for the best in Cohen’s best of all possible worlds.

The *Times* columnist concludes with what he evidently sees as the undeniably uplifting story of the entire Olympic uplift, the gold medal in judo awarded to Rafaela Silva, a resident of the Cidade de Deus favela in Rio’s western suburbs.

This victory is presented as proof that anyone, no matter how poor, can make it. “Out in the *favelas* some kids are dreaming in a different way right now,” Cohen writes. “That, too, is a story.”

There are, no doubt, many things being dreamed of in the favelas that would be less to Cohen’s liking. Among them is unquestionably a settling of accounts with a financial aristocracy that sits on top of a system of unbearable oppression and inequality and with hacks like Cohen who serve as its apologists.



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