



Let's Be Brazil



By Marty Kaplan

I have outrage envy.

For nearly two weeks, more than a million citizens across Brazil have taken to the streets to protest political corruption, economic injustice, poor health care, inadequate schools, lousy mass transit, a crumbling infrastructure and — yes, in the land of Pelé — billions blown on sports.

“Brazil, wake up, any good teacher is worth more than Neymar!” That’s what the crowds have been shouting. Neymar da Silva Santos, Jr. is the 21-year-old Brazilian star who’s getting nearly \$90 million to play for Futbol Club Barcelona. “When your son is ill, take him to the stadium,” read one protester’s sign, razzing the \$13.3 billion Brazil is spending to host the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the \$18 billion it will cost the country to host the 2016 Summer Olympics. Even this soccer-mad nation is saying there’s something out of whack with public priorities, and it’s time to set things right.

The massive demonstrations have stunned Brazilians themselves, for their size, their spontaneity and their civic fury. “If you’re not outraged,” an American bumper sticker goes, “you’re not paying attention.” Brazilians are paying attention to their problems, and they’re mad as hell. So why aren’t we?

The Brazilian protests were sparked by a bus fare increase in São Paulo. It’s grimly comical to see American news media explain why a 9-cent hike is such a big deal by resorting to the usual trope for covering social unrest in the developing world, like when the price of wheat goes up a few pennies. To help us understand why this matters so much, our press relates the cost of bread or buses to the minimum wage in distant lands and points out the dependency of their diets on staples and of their jobs on public transportation. Even though millions of Americans below the poverty line can’t make a living wage, and millions more are barely hanging on by their fingernails, the infotainment narrative of life in America is so divorced from the pervasive reality of struggling to survive that journalists assume we’d be bewildered that bus fares could start such a fire.

There are, of course, plenty of dissimilarities between the U.S. and Brazil, a developing nation ruled by military dictatorship until 1985, but there are also plenty of all-too-close analogies between what's pissing off Brazilians and what ought to piss off Americans.

- **Income inequality.** Brazil is in the world's bottom 10 percent on [income inequality](#), ranking 121st out of 133 countries. But the U.S. ranks 80th, just below Sri Lanka, Mauritania and Nicaragua.
- **Wealth distribution.** There are only six countries in the world whose [wealth distribution](#) — accumulated holdings, not annual funds earned — is more unequal than Brazil. But the U.S. is one of those six.
- **Education.** The annual rate of [growth in student achievement](#) in math, reading and science in Brazil is 4 percent of a standard deviation. But U.S. educational achievement is growing at less than half that rate: 1.6 percent, just below Iran.
- **Corruption.** Brazil ranks 121 in [public trust in the ethical standards of politicians](#), out of 144 countries. But the U.S. comes in only at 54, just above Gabon.
- **Infrastructure.** The quality of Brazil's infrastructure puts it at a dismal 107, out of 144 countries. But the [U.S. ranks 25th](#) — below most other advanced industrial countries and even behind some developing nations, like Oman and Barbados.
- **Health care.** Brazil's health care system ranks 125th out of 190 countries. But the U.S., jingoistic rhetoric notwithstanding, is only 38th. Among our peer nations — wealthy democracies — [we're dead last](#), and it's only gotten worse over the past several decades.

So why aren't Americans at the barricades?

Our spirits have been sickened by the toxins baked into our political system, which legalizes graft and is held hostage by special interests and a gerrymandered minority. As a result, we are legislatively incapable of dealing with big problems like joblessness, climate change, gun safety, infrastructure, hunger or — based on recent House Republican chaos — immigration. The public investments we're not making — in schools, teachers, roads, bridges, clean energy — are killing us. Our tax code is the least progressive in the industrial world. The most massive transfer of wealth in history, plus a cult of fiscal austerity, is destroying our middle class. Tuition is increasingly unaffordable, and retirement is increasingly unavailable. The banks that stole trillions of dollars of Americans' worth have not only gone unpunished; they're still at it.

For a moment, it looked like the Occupy movement might change some of that. It's striking how closely the complaints within Brazil about their protesters are already tracking the criticism of Occupy made in the U.S.: The only thing keeping them going is the police's overreaction. They have too many demands. Their demands are incoherent. Their demands lack focus. They're leaderless. They're young and naïve. They're drunk. They're violent. They're vandals, delinquents, drunks, druggies, terrorists.

Here at home, those charges, and the advent of cold weather, proved fatal. So oligarchs rock, plutocrats roll and Occupy rolled over. Today, with both political parties hooked on special interest money, with demagogues given veto power and media power, hope feels naïve. You'd have to have just fallen off the

turnip truck to look at our corrupt and dysfunctional government and believe that we are the change we've been waiting for.

That learned helplessness is what democracy's vampires drink. Wouldn't it be sweet if Brazil's protest movement turned out to be the garlic we've been waiting for?

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.

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