

Medaling With Paris

By Theodore Dalrymple

A straw poll of taxi drivers in Paris that I conducted in the run-up to the Olympics suggested less than enthusiasm for them. While such straw polls may not even be representative of taxi drivers, let alone of the population as a whole, this is a method employed by many journalists and is often as accurate as any other. Taxi drivers have sensitive antennae.



Far from salivating at the prospect of increased fares, most of those to whom I spoke wanted to abscond from the city for the duration of the Games: They had decided to take their annual holidays while they lasted. They were exasperated by the constant roadworks beforehand that added greatly to the difficulty and aggravation of getting round the city, all for an ephemeral festival in which they took no interest.

The Marquis de Custine, in his great book *Russia in 1839*,

remarked with regard to Tsarist Russian military parades that tyrannies go to great lengths to produce trifles, a remark subsequently borne out in all communist dictatorships. But when democracies hold the Olympic Games they are not far behind. Parisian life has been disrupted for months by the preparations for them, which will have cost far more than they returned. You can rely on almost any government to make bad investments.

It was claimed by enthusiasts for the Games that they would bring in extra tourists: But Paris, with 44 million visitors a year, hardly stands in need of yet more. On the contrary, there are often so many tourists that it appears on the sidewalks that there must be a crowd going to or being disgorged from a sporting stadium nearby. At St. Michel, I have had sometimes to queue as a pedestrian merely to cross the road at a crossing.

But the Olympics have had the reverse effect to the one intended. Air France reports a significant drop in the number of people wishing to come to the city. Hotels are less full than usual, and prices have fallen rather than risen, as was confidently, but mistakenly, expected. Only the price of a *Métro* ticket has doubled. Ordinary tourists want to avoid the city during the Games, and I think they are right to do so.

The Games have been a powerful stimulus to authoritarianism. The world situation being what it is, tight security measures against terrorism and internal disruption have to be great. A left-wing deputy to the *Assemblée nationale*, whose constituency is largely Muslim, has said that Israeli athletes were not welcome in the Olympics, hardly an attempt to cool the temperature.

Tens of thousands of policemen have been deployed for the thankless task of making the Games safe, which have had to be made proof against drone attack. It is said that 20,000

homeless illegal immigrants, some of them sheltering in shantytowns along the highways into the city, have been swept up and dispersed throughout the country. I am not a supporter of illegal immigration or its consequences, but this has been done not to solve the problem but to mislead visitors to the Games and make them feel more comfortable or less uncomfortable: the kind of thing that dictatorships do.

People whom I know will not be permitted to drive their cars during the Games and will have to carry passes to gain access to their own streets and homes. To avoid living under a kind of curfew, they are leaving the city for the country.

And all for what? The last thing the Games are about is international friendship: International rivalry is more like it. The most dreadful regimes have often tried to justify or legitimate themselves by the number of medals their athletes have won, often at great and inhuman cost to the athletes themselves, who have been drugged and all but tortured from an early age.

This nationalist rivalry is nothing new and is an inexpugible aspect of the Games. Recently, I read the account of the first modern Olympics, held in Athens in 1896, by Charles Maurras, later to be a supporter of Marshal Pétain. It is clear that a kind of febrile nationalism was present from the first, just waiting to be exploited by the worst of totalitarians, as if the performance of some athletic feat marginally better than anyone else redounded to the glory of the father- or motherland of the winning athlete and justified or excused the suppression of dissent, the murder of opponents, and the imprisonment in abominable conditions of untold thousands. Only one major country has consistently stood out in its resistance to the fatuous Olympian "ideal," so-called-India.

Most of the people to whom I have talked, both in Paris and elsewhere, regarded the Games beforehand with gloom and a sense of foreboding. They thought of them as the pet project

imposed on the population by a self-promoting, not to say megalomaniac, political class. The criterion of success of the Games, as far as they were concerned, was an end to them without a serious terrorist incident having taken place—not exactly indicative of an anticipation of joy. And they thought that the most likely legacy of the Games, barring a serious incident, would be a further mountain of debt.

The London Olympics of 2012 were deemed a great success because they seemed to go smoothly and nothing terrible happened during them. This was in a world situation considerably less fraught than the present one, but still they left the bitter aftertaste of debt with little to show for it except a hideous, contorted, and pointless steel tower designed by the sculptor Anish Kapoor that only broke even for a time during the Covid lockdown when no one was allowed to visit it.

Curiously enough, back in 2005, when it was announced that London and not Paris would host the 2012 Olympics, the French were very disappointed. It was the third time in twenty years that Paris had been rejected by the International Olympic Committee as the site of the Olympics. “The French,” wrote Jacques Julliard, the historian and journalist, “had the impression of a deep injustice, almost a conspiracy.... It was a day of great national humiliation.”

And now many think, “If only the International Olympic Committee had rejected Paris a fourth time!”

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