



## Theodore Dalrymple North Korea Lite

*Thoughts on the Olympics' opening ceremony*

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My mother saw Hitler in the stadium during the 1936 Berlin Olympics. It was the only fragment of memory of her childhood in Nazi Germany that she ever spoke of and, perhaps illogically, it did not predispose me favorably to the Olympic spectacle.

The opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics reminded me of an observation of the Marquis de Custine, the young aristocrat whose father and grandfather were guillotined during the French Revolution. De Custine went to Russia in 1839 in search of the virtues of hereditary autocracy and returned a convinced democrat. Tyrannies, he said, demand immense sacrifices of their people to produce trifles.

It does not follow, of course, that if tyrannies produce trifles, trifles—and the opening ceremony was undoubtedly one—are necessarily the product of tyrannies. But the ceremony, postmodern as it might have been in form—assuming, as it did, that the contemporary mind is like that of a child, in constant need of swiftly changing amusement—was not free of ideological content, even if that content was comparatively restrained and benign compared with that of, say, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. It was more akin to North Korea lite.

Of course it was impressive, as anything staged on a sufficiently large scale and well-organized is impressive. The fear of almost all Britons, amounting virtually to an expectation, that the games would at once descend into chaos was not fulfilled. On the contrary, the choreography was impeccable, and thousands participated without mishap, with the precision of a military parade. There were even moments of genuine wit, which distinguished the ceremony from the North Korean equivalent.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of happily dancing nursing staff from the National Health Service was precisely the kind of stunt that an ideological state would pull. Who would have guessed that only a few days before in the NHS, here presented as among the greatest of all British achievements, some doctors had gone on strike, not to improve conditions for their patients but to preserve their own generous pensions—of the kind that those unfortunate enough to work in the private sector can only dream about? Western Europeans must either have puzzled over or laughed at this: Britain is universally acknowledged in Europe to have the worst health care on the continent—health care that European residents flee except *in extremis*. And here were people dancing to celebrate it!

Still, the ceremony itself must be counted a great success in the eyes of the British public because it was not an outright disaster. Yet no thinking person to whom I've spoken (admittedly not a representative population sample) expresses anything other than deep unease about the whole Olympic enterprise. The army was engaged not only to provide security after a private company failed to perform as promised, but also to fill empty seats in the stadium and thus prevent the humiliation of showing too many empty spaces. Seats were initially allocated in true corporatist fashion, much of the public being

excluded (including relatives of participants) in favor of companies and organizations. When these failed to take up their allocations, it was too late. A specter now haunts the London Olympics: that of public indifference, bought at the cost of billions that future generations will struggle to repay.

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