



Theodore Dalrymple

An Orgy of Self-Congratulation

Good riddance to the London Olympics

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If there were a gold medal for vulgarity and kitsch, the closing ceremony of the London Olympics would have won it hands down. And if proof were required that modern British culture is cheap, tawdry, and relentlessly, ideologically demotic and frivolous, the ceremony certainly provided it. At least it had the merit, in its flashy and garish worthlessness, of being truly representative of the nation in which it took place, of its dreams and aspirations if not its everyday reality. Observing it for as long as was bearable, one could not help but think of the title of the late Neil Postman's most famous book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

When the Olympics were finally over, Britain went in for an orgy of self-congratulation. Dissenting voices were almost as few as in a totalitarian dictatorship. It seemed to escape the notice of nearly all commentators that the ceremony combined aesthetic cheapness with the utmost financial extravagance. The only aspect of the proceeding that drew widespread unfavorable comment was that George Michael, one of the aging pop singers who are now, in the view of the ceremony's organizers, the country's chief glory—we are, after all, approaching the era of the geriatric adolescent, or adolescent geriatric—used the opportunity to plug his new song. You would have thought from the outcry that the Olympics had previously been commercially virginal.

The games' chief organizer, former Olympic runner and now Conservative politician Sebastian Coe, said in his closing speech that Britain had “got it right,” a curious mixture of boastfulness and anxious astonishment that anything organized in these islands could be made to work without disastrous mishap brought about by terminal incompetence.

The British were also proud of the performance of their athletes. Adjusted for population, they won far more medals than either the Americans or the Chinese. How much national pride this should be the occasion for depends upon how highly you value sporting achievement; personally, I put it far below cookery.

In any case, two full-page advertisements in the *Guardian* on successive days after the Olympics had concluded conveyed a truth about Britain's place in the international division of labor. The first showed pictures of various British medalists under the words ALL THANKS TO YOU. The ad was placed by the National Lottery, which devoted hundreds of millions of dollars to the training of British athletes. The second, on the following day, was placed by BMW. It too showed pictures of successful athletes, under the slogan CONGRATULATIONS TO THE BMW LONDON 2012 PERFORMANCE TEAM. In small print, BMW extended its congratulations to “the 155 British athletes it's been our pleasure to support. . . . It's been our privilege to have helped you along the road to your ultimate performance.”

So as the Germans fund trivia through the profits of their industry, the British do so through a tax on stupidity, as Doctor Johnson called all lotteries (perhaps with less human understanding than was

usual with him). The Germans make cars to get rich; the British buy lottery tickets.

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