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**Econote No. 105 The Tokyo Olympics  
Some thoughts on the political economy of the Games**

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**Introduction and summary**

As an economist and a native Greek I feel modestly and moderately qualified to share these thoughts. The Tokyo Olympics, more than ever, focused attention to the total degradation of the original ideas behind these events (on which see a lot more below). There was also the unacceptable hubris of the Japanese government to run the show at exorbitant costs, without spectators and with the risk to the Tokyo population of a super spreader event in order to prove what? That Japan can do it? Or rather that Japan did it because it could, and nothing else. The commercialization of the Games (here a huge gaping loss to the sponsors and Suga's government which will need to recompense them) is hardly an issue as the Games, in parallel with global professional sports, is a commercial event put up by willing amateurs who don't get paid. There were pathetic attempts to convince us that the Games brought us all together in our lockdown status and showed, once again, that the world comes together under the pure spirit of honest competition where winning does not matter but participation does.

Seriously?

Tell that to the US and Chinese governments and to their huge subsidized athletic sectors which have now China taking the place of the USSR versus the US as to who wins more gold. Mind you, it might be better to have Chinese and American athletes thrashing it all out in beach volleyball (with or without bikinis... for the girls as well!) instead of going toe-to-toe in the South China Sea, but that is also irrelevant. See below.

So what are we left with? A sham, expensive hypocritical event taking place in the middle of a huge global health crisis and, almost sadistically, followed by one day from its closing ceremony, on 9 August, by the UN report on climate change telling us that very soon the Summer and Winter Olympics will be taking place, respectively, in the Antarctic and the Sahara.

So many more things to bring humanity together, Covid 19 and Climate Change, than an expensive sop to Japanese macho home politics.

**Thought No. 1: Peace and friendship among all people**

The Ancient Greek Games had as a precondition the cessation of warfare during the games among the Greek city-state and, apparently, this was reluctantly observed. In the monumentally and disgracefully misnamed "Post War" period, meaning post WWII, there were altogether 28 winters and summer Olympic games held from 1952 to 2021. That is 28 individual "Olympic" years over a 69-year period. During this period members of humanity were actively butchering each other in a

huge variety of local and not so local wars. I make no excuses in listing the major conflicts, although leaving aside nearly all-colonial liberation wars as well as border conflicts and some civil wars, mostly in Africa, as the notion of “Post War” is insulting to intelligence and to the millions of dead involved. Take a deep breath, in chronological order:

Korea 1950-54, Vietnam 1954-1975, India-Pakistan 1965, Six Days War 1967, Biafra civil war 1967-70, Cambodian civil war and attendant genocide 1970-79, India-Pakistan 1971, Yom Kippur 1973, Iran-Iraq war 1980-88, Falklands 1982, Gulf War I 1990-91, Ruanda civil war and attendant genocide 1994, Afghan war 2001 to date, Gulf War II 2003, Syrian civil war 2011 to date. Nearly forgot. The Munich Olympics in 1972 were marked by terrorist attacks ensuring that fighting took place inside the Games themselves and not at some God-forgotten mountain range or desert.

I am not for one moment suggesting that the Olympic Games would have stopped or averted any of these wars, anymore than the revival of the Games in Athens in 1896 would have prevented WWI and WWII! But at some stage this hypocrisy should be paraded, not that it will make any difference whatsoever to the willing belligerent participants

### **Thought No. 2 To him that has more shall be given**

Calculating the absolute and comparative cost of Olympic Games is a nightmare of complexity as it involves (a) infrastructure costs where new stadiums, Olympic villages etc are to be built as well as extra and new public transport, airport etc facilities (b) the administrative and other costs of running the Games (c) the netting out of revenues from ticket sales and sponsorships as to show the net costs to taxpayers. So the following figures are shown with a big caveat. The Tokyo Games will go down as the most expensive ever in absolute terms at USD 20.0 bl, followed by the 2012 London Olympics at USD 14.6 bl. Brazil stumped up USD 11.6 bl in 2016 and Athens, ah well Athens is a very special case. Proudly presenting the Games in 2004, it spent USD 9.9bl of other people’s money which made a crucial contribution to Greece’s fiscal decrepitude and chicanery leading from 2009 to 2018 to a crippling recession and the subjugation, rightly, of Greece’s economic and fiscal sovereignty to the EU, ECB and IMF while debts were restructured or paid. Enough said. Mercifully Brazil and Greece are the only two, sort-of, “developing” nations in the postwar period, which were foolish enough to be sucked in. China does not count because of the absolute terms of its economic size. Studies have shown that the costs of Olympic games could be crippling to cities and offered no real returns to taxpayers. But nationalistic pride has, clearly, no cost.

And so, the presentation of Olympic games will remain the wealthy nations’ privilege, adding to their divisive irrelevance

### **Thought No. 3. Ancient but still pure as driven snow**

Scandals, bribery and broken rules were an integral part of the Ancient Games. There is plenty of contemporary evidence of bribery or pressure on the judges to award prizes. The Games were only open to men, spectators and participants, with severe penalties for the illegal presence of women. For the winners there were ample additional prizes to the laurel leaf crown, especially from their grateful city-states. Some of them, as an act honor, demolished part of their defensive walls, as these were not needed with valiant citizens such as the Olympic winners being there to defend. After crown prince Constantine of Greece won a gold medal in sailing in the Rome Olympics of 1960, the Greek Army, reportedly, lifted a section of the minefields facing communist Bulgaria in his honor. Yes, seriously.

Countries do get boycotted for various reasons out of the Olympics, as the USSR was by several countries including US, in 1980 over its invasion of Afghanistan, (Yes, you read that right, it was USSR this time taking its turn). Then the USSR did likewise in revenge, in the LA 1984 Games. Also in the 2021 Tokyo Games, Russia had been banned from participating from previous consistent and state-sponsored doping offences. Its 335 athletes competed though, not officially from Russia, but under the flag of ROC: Russian Olympic Committee.

Yes, seriously.

**Passing shot:** It is time that countries gave serious consideration to Olympic Games and/or spend their money on a truly noble and global pursuit such as Climate Control and Global Vaccination.