

The London Marathon: A critical analysis of its popularity as a cultural practice

The months of training over I line up at Red Start with those who reckon to do 3 hours for the London Marathon 1985. In the ten minutes before the gun I practice alternate nostril breathing learnt in Yoga. Very calming. Though in a crowd of some ten thousand I feel alone. I know that I've done the work but must now face the examination that only the streets of London can set.

I ran that Marathon. My first paragraph is an example of the sort of internal monologue style in which a personal account of that Marathon might be written. It concentrates on the effort and experience of the individual and would conclude as the finish line with the runner well down the field but feeling like a winner as much as Ingrid Kristiansen or Steve Jones. Much of the literature of the Marathon is like that. They are eloquent on politics, economics and ideology in their absence.

The Los Angeles Olympics provided many examples of politics, economics and ideology in sport. The following advert for running shoes appeared in the USA at the time: "Why runners make lousy communists. In a word, individuality. Its the one characteristic all runners, as different as they are, seem to share..... Stick with it. Push yourself. Keep running. And you'll never lose that wonderful sense of individuality you now enjoy. Right, Comrade?(1)".

Many runners, myself included, do have a "wonderful sense of individuality". Most are probably not communists or socialists. Socialist or not, many runners dislike the cross commercialization of running yet deny the politics immanent in it. I shall look at politics, economics and ideology in the construction of Marathon running as a pleasurable event. This may appear to take us a little away from the subject but I hope thereby to shed a new light on it.

Running is natural, therefore to analyse it in terms other than star biography, physiology or straight reportage, as is common in the magazines covering ^{the field} is otiose. I disagree. To run is natural; animals do, children do. The Marathon ~~was~~ a human invention for the 1896 Olympics and therefore has political, economic and ideological ramifications.

History

The modern Marathon distance of 42195 metres or 26 miles 385 yards was first established in 1908. The planned 26 miles was extended to finish in front of the Royal Box at the White City. Both the 1912 (24 miles 1723 yards) and 1920 (26 miles 991 yards) Olympic Marathons departed from that before the distance was fixed in 1924 (2) The time of day, place and course are determined by commercial (TV and advertising), meteorological, national and local restrictions. To paraphrase Marx; I may run a Marathon but not in circumstances of my own choosing.

Running, like all human activity brings with it the accumulated weight of past practices. Those practices are being contested. In running there is a struggle between the old aristocratic ideals of amateurism, the growing pressure for a fully professional/commercial athletics and the more collective ideals of running for all.

In Marathon running (practice and organisation) Chris Brasher is an ideologue of commercialism against the 'ancien regime' of the Amateur Athletics Association (AAA). In Gramscian terms (3) he is an organic intellectual of the bourgeoisie seeking to expand its hegemony to an area where the traditional intellectuals of aristocratic amateurism hold sway. The mass Marathon is an important instrument in this project, welding the popular practice of running with the populism of commercial provision. Brasher takes up the real demands of non-elite runners for more and better races with less bureaucracy; re-presenting them in a commercial form which is often obscured by the rhetoric of self-improvement or charity. However, where

capitalism has begun the revolutionary process socialism can make advances. I therefore take the Greater London Council's involvement to be more than a necessarily organisational one.(4)

This has resonances with the patterns shown in other popular recreations and in the social formation as a whole. Foot racing or pedestrianism has a history pre-dating the formation of the AAA 105 years ago. It, like football or bear bating, was associated with gambling and disorder. As such it was patronised by the squirearchy or seen as a necessary outlet. The rising industrial bourgeoisie saw gambling as ⁱⁿimmicable to the work ethic and the streets as the paths of commerce not places of recreation. Such pastimes were either banned as cruel or forced off the streets and codified. Yet when the AAA was formed it was the aristocratic ideal of amateurism that was enshrined, possibly reflecting the incomplete character of Britains bourgeoisie revolutions"(5) This ideal has been subject to struggle by athletes and commerce ever since. Commerce appears set to triumph, bringing elite athletes into more normal capitalist relations. Workers not stars.

The personal as political

Taking my cue from feminist writers regarding the personal and the political I must admit not only to being a runner but a socialist. In his book Blowing the Whistle Garry Whannel (6) discusses the main socialist objections to sport. These are: that it is a distraction, promotes nationalism, is part of business, embodies and reproduces the bourgeois ideology of competitive individualism. I shall discuss each in relation to the Marathon in an attempt to unravel some of the contradictory pleasures of running the Marathon.

A distraction

That training for and running a Marathon takes a long time is true. "Borrowed Time"(7). I reckon to spend 10% of my waking time running or preparing for it. I might well spend more time in Trade Union or political activity if I did not run

but the fitness running gives me means I bring more energy to all the tasks I tackle. However, most runners are shy of political conversation, preferring conservative apoliticism. Conservative MPs are much more likely to be Marathon runners than Labour ones are.

Yet Marathon running does have some progressive possibilities. One pleasure of the Marathon is that it involves activity not passivity. At one time only a trained "hard man" could complete a Marathon now everyone knows that women and disabled people can too. Freda Horrocks(8) a blind woman ran the Marathon this year and the wheelchair athletes have become an integral part of the race.

Nationalism

Nationalism plays little part in representations of the London Marathon. Not that its presentation as open to all is not innocent of racial divisions. Thirty nine countries (9) were represented but anecdotal and observational evidence reveal very few Afro-Caribbean or Asian runners from here or overseas. The overwhelming proportion of runners are white middle class men, like me. I shall be looking at class and sex when discussing bourgeois ideology but examine race now.

It is an axiom of racist stereotyping that black people are fast but lazy. The ideal marathoner is all application over 2 hours. This racist ideology is so strong that many young blacks not only are pushed towards sprinting but opt for it. Many too would find the streets of our major cities uncongenial training with the ever present threat of police harassment. Whereas, I only feel at risk when training near Buckingham Palace at Changing the Guards. The police have frequently remonstrated with me to get back on to the tourist clogged pavements. An ironic pleasure for me in the Marathon was to be waved past the Palace by the same police.

Running Business

Running is a massive business. Mass marathons have been accompanied by an enormous expansion in consumerism and advertising which socialists are rightly critical of. ^{However,} They frequently employ an ideal of amateurism that aligns them with the outmoded aristocratic notions of leisure. Most surprising is that industrial capitalism should have taken so long to exploit so large a potential market. Especially since most of its practitioners are firmly lodged in capitalist relations of production and the homologies between training schedules and personal bests and "scientific management" and productivity. ^{Perhaps it bears witness} ~~A testament~~ to the struggles of working class amateurs within the limits of an aristocratic hegemony(10)

Bourgeois ideals of competitive individualism and femininity

The socialist attacks on sport as embedded in and reproducing bourgeois ideology, might be examined in the light of the imaginary relations between individuals and society, women and men and classes that ideology renders "natural". These can be set against the other possibilities to be seen in the relative autonomy, as a cultured practice, of Marathon running. These theories of individuality, ~~feminist~~ and class are inter-related but I shall look at each in turn.

My quotes from the US running shoe advert makes explicit the consensual connection between running and individuality(11) as does the seemingly natural fact that each runner does have to run the course without the assistance of others. This marginalizes the important contribution of other runners, training and living partners, the crowds, the volunteers at the feeding stations and the many anonymous Koreans who make the shoes.

All of these are set aside, unless journalists looking for a new angle introduce them as products in a human interest story. Otherwise the concentration is on dedication or natural ability. For dedication read work ethic. 'Natural ability'

naturalizes the concept of inequality upon which capitalism depends. However these are now being undercut by media attention to the capacity of fun runners to be 'winners' too. Elitism does not sell as many shoes as a mass Marathon movement. The passivity that suits some capitalists would not suit sports goods firms.

Marathon running offers a challenge to dominant constructions of femininity. In discussing sub-cultures Angela McRebbie(12) states that she has yet to see a girl "gobbing". Women marathon runners spit, vomit and lose control of their bowels as surely as men do.

Ingrid Kristiansen came 74th overall this year in a world best time which would have beaten Emil Zatopek into second place at the Helsinki Olympics 1952. Much emphasis has been placed upon the rate at which women are catching up with men (13) but this does ignore the fact that in sport male norms are applied. What women are good at is not generally recognised as sport. There are other means of measuring success than fastest highest or furthest. Kristiansens time for 10,000m is a world record yet still more than 2 minutes slower than Zatopeks best. This suggests that she has some improvement to make but more than that running a Marathon is both qualitatively and quantitatively different to shorter distances.

Evidence from long distance cycling and swimming suggest women can and do outperform men in ultra endurance events. Few people know that as Ron Hill prepares for his hundredth Marathon Leslie Watson has, in less time, run 118. Perhaps, the capacity to recover from effort should be recognised as a measure of excellence. Yet in reading about Kristiansen or Watson you are as likely to find out about their knitting or attractiveness as their training.

Running does offer women a chance to counter certain attitudes and when they form 50% of Marathon fields their times will improve still further but until child-care arrangements and the attitude of male partners are improved and the streets made safe for women the numbers (15%)(9) who entered the 1984 Marathon is not likely to ~~be~~ significantly ^{increase} improved (14).

Who runs Marathons?

By occupation the top two categories of entrant this year were Engineers (1495) and Teachers/Lecturers (970)(9) The readers of Running Magazine fall predominantly into the Registrar-Generals social classes ABC1(70%) and since 62% (15) have completed a Marathon this is strongly suggestive of a middle class bias. You need leisure and most likely a non-manual job to have the time and energy to train. Yet the unemployed (573) were less represented than a busy police force (735) which does suggest that getting away from work is a strong motivation for running. The leisure which middle-class men have to spend on running is often at the expense of working class men or housebound women. Scott and Bent describe time as borrowed from work and family.

Running is fun

Running is a physical pleasure which I hope has not been lost in the weight of even the brief analysis offered above. There are good physiological and psychological explanations for the pleasure of running which I do not deny but I have sought to extend my analysis beyond the portrayal of the London Marathon as sport or carnival, and therefore something to be enjoyed not analysed. Coverage in these terms can be found in the media and reproduced in the consciousness of runners.

I gained all the pleasure that the writing on Marathons led me to expect. It was hard work, it did require discipline and organisation-not solely capitalist traits -

as well as the help of others. I hope I have shown though that the pleasure is contradictory; but that it does have possibilities for re-uniting people with their bodies and people with each other. Running the Marathon was a product of my labour. I am not alienated from it, but need to contest attempts to incorporate my efforts within the dominant ideology of competitive individualism.

Meanwhile back at the course

Having maintained 6 minute 52 second miling for 24 miles I am now slowing as the dullness in my thighs that has been with me since the end of the docks (18 miles) begins to cause me to doubt the possibility of a sub 3 hour time. I nurse myself through to the end at a slower pace, crossing the line at 3 hours 1 minute 43 secs. The picture taken shows my time and pleasure. I remain high for several days. I reflect that I must have passed through 24 miles 1503 yards(2) quicker than Spyridon Louis, winner of the first modern Olympic Marathon in 1896, which was run over that distance. Yet 70 women, the spiritual descendants of Melpomene(16)(who unofficially entered and completed the 1896 Marathon), finished ahead of me. I still feel a winner.

Conclusion

That last paragraph might have concluded my ep^rsonal account of the London Marathon 1985 but I shall conclude by emphasising that the real foregrounded physical and emotional pleasures for runners and spectators can and should be seen by runners and non-runners alike as part of a more complex unity. The pleasure is not neutral or innocent. There are many reasons to take to the streets.

Foot (17) notes and Bibliography

1. Sports quotes of 1984. Guardian 24 December 1984.
2. The Guinness Book of Olympic Records. McWhirter and Greenberg (eds) Penguin
3. Selections from the Prison Note Books Gramsci Hoare and Norwell Smith (trans and ed) Lawrence and Wishart.
4. Brasher is said to have expressed his concern about the abolition of the GLC, Mark Perryman, The Running Boom, Marxism Today October 1986.
5. David McLellan in Marxism After Marx describing Perry Anderson's Origin of the Present Crisis NLR 64.
6. Blowing the Whistle: The politics of sport, Pluto Press. At Open University Summer School I had the opportunity to discuss socialism and running with Garry. Any mistakes though are mine and I hope I have not misrepresented him.
7. D Scott with C Bent Borrowed Time: A Social History of Running, Salford Harriers.
8. Helena Felix, her guide, describes their joy (in the plural) in finishing. Running Blind, Sports Woman July/August 1985.
9. Athletics Weekly 20 April 1985.
10. I look forward though to a running club founding a sports goods collective.
11. This is probably not the place to introduce Althusserian criticism of the ideological construction of the individual as Absolute Subject.
12. Angela McRobbie Settling Accounts with Sub Cultures: A feminist critique in Culture, Ideology and Social Process. Bennett, Martin, Mercer and Woolcott (eds).
13. K F Dyer, Catching Up the Men
14. Sloan and Kramer, Running: The Women's Handbook, is written from a feminist perspective.
15. Running September 1985.
16. Jennifer Hargreaves, Women and the Olympic phenomenon in Five Ring Circus: Money Power and Politics. Tomlinson and Whannel (eds).
17. No pun intended.