

Distance athlete's æffect on urban rhythm
How do ultra-runners run in automatized cities?



Benjamin Juarez

Supervisor: Professor Michael Schillmeier

Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology

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College of Social Sciences and
International Studies

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Context and rationale

Millions run nowadays. Some endure, some do not. Some risk their lives with exercise-associated hyponatremia [EAH]. While running is seldom a high risk activity, ultra-running challenges people and poses the question of public, physical, and mental health. Ultra-running has several unfoldings:

- On health and society: against obesity and depression, as a lucrative activity, as an apparatus of organization of social worlds that host a variety of events, for instance.
- On personal experience: as meditation, to experience the vitality of the body, to gaze at the green landscape in the city.
- On land resource: The use of urban and wild spaces require that they be managed in an agile, free, and articulate way. This also detonates in an exploitation of natural and tourist sites that oscilates between environmental care and decay.

Running as a trend arises in the 1960's and is nowadays inserted in a world of shortages and excesses: *social worlds* (BECKER & PESSIN: 2006) in an economic system in which bodily passivity and mass consumption prevail. Today's flawed auto-mobility system (SHELLER & URRY, 2006) breaks runners' momentum (ETTEMA, 2015: 17). But runners seem to form an independent flow from the rest of the city's circulation. Today: how does the city –and ultra-runners— think, make and find non-occupied paths in such an overstretched system?

The individual and collective bodies may face the challenge of affecting, or not, their ability and desire to act. Ultra-runners learn about technical resources and make them their own from different sources: nutritional, mechanic, motivational. Yet, each person uses, develops, and tailors these resources to their own knowledge: they *singularize* them, they learn how to run in their own unique way. In this point, the experimentation of athletes becomes key. The body of the ultra-runner becomes a centrifugal force of bodily fluids, and a center of centripetal forces that seeks nourishment. In sum, *a social body as a machine of singularization* that goes beyond the standarized solutions provided to all. In a broader sense, the whole of the runners' world would also affect the urban rhythms, slowing them down and accelerating them, intervening in the physical city and the way spaces are used.

Objectives

- GENERAL OBJECTIVE

Researching into how ultra-runners learn to gain knowledge, manage resources and take risks that the majority ignores. Runners of ultra-marathon are not superhumans: they develop a know-how and find interest in the methods of running to an extreme extent.

- SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- Considering how ultra-runners gain access to and handle information to go ultra.
- Reviewing running styles, footwear (& barefoot), gear: impact on injuries.
- Considering motivation: mental and spiritual levels to run regardless of health.
- Seeking athletes' paths as an opposition to standardized massive urban rhythms, placing general (im)mobility as a limitation to the body and social development.
- Attending to how ultra-runners cope with the cities and spaces they go through. Runners and their surroundings are conditioned by the trends of massive behaviour, but athlete's behaviour reshape production as well.

Materials and methods

This is a proposal of qualitative research. Ultra-runners are the case study. The approach here is *exploratory*, seeking *sensitizing concepts* as guiding points for analysis and for collecting information. Fieldwork will be auto-ethnographic, through training which may be a potential source for bias, but which reveals the participant's interests, perspectives and preconceptions; contrastable with other references (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007: 163-4, 124). Another resource is observant participation at ultra-running events. Countless ultra-distance races are held yearly all over the world. Additionally, texts and videos will be used as secondary material.

On racing events from a qualitative approach, there is scarce material. When so, it is obtained from surveys or measurement based. An insider perspective gives minimal interference to gather data to be triangulated (HOLLOWAY et al, 2010: 75-6). The focus is on *collecting and constructing new variables* to build complex concepts: this adds nuance to the understanding of the phenomenon, and provides new questions to work on (BECKER, 2014: 13-14, 18).

Ultra-running involves different unfoldings for participants, both inwards and outwards:

- At an intimate-personal level, ultra-running entails a certain loneliness: being an outdoor activity, it involves many hours (days) amongst almost untouched nature.
- At a social-network-dependent level, ultra is an ultimately public activity: runners are exposed to permanent contact with other runners, non-runners, and non-humans.

Research question

This project searches for unique patterns of mobility and ways of participating in the environment. The proposed research explores how urban life as a network may unfold: each atom of this “life of associations”, to use a Tardean-Latoureaux-ANT idea, can just decay, or rather propagate. Two flows of transportation prevail: either favoring movement, or proning to collapse: rhythms and anti-rhythms. People and objects create a full working network, and the city as a whole becomes a living being. The intention here is to understand the influence the city is subjected to and how it creates effects upon *all its citizens*.

How do specific objects and conducts shape urban landscapes? Brighenti (2009) asks: Can cities be something else than a mere containment of controlled flows? Following his text he suggests the question: Can we consider roads, paths in general, and other “technological artifacts as enablers that shape human experience and social relationships” (Brighenti 2009: 64)? The question reformulated backwards can consider the ultra world:

How do human experiences and social relationships [among the ultra-runner's social world] shape pathways, views, resources and technologies?

Conceptual approach: Materiality, Body and Affect

An apprentice to ultra-running may not know how to move during several hours, what to drink and/or eat, when to endure, stretch, or rest and sleep. There is a continuous learning in how to feel our own body and even the city and its trails. Physical skills are developed but also an ability to perceive. Perceiving becomes an *actively sought passivity* (HENNION, 2007: 100-1). However, how to raise and direct awareness?

The case study of ultra-runners may highlight a number of variables that look to a different system of other horizons which are not based on consumption or production. This work is expected to find escape mechanisms from the inertia of the productive system of machinic uselessness. Cars and public transportation *circulate, overpopulate and congest*, controlling movement in favor of an economic and political order. Aside the critiques to the transportation system, there is a parallel consideration here of practices of slow mobility and de-growth. If one could summarize a cycle of interests, the ultra-running world is expected to go around the following topics:

(affect) -> desire -> effects -> (changes?)

Stagnation, when nothing changes nor thrives, is a problem highlighted by Deleuze & Guattari. These authors go further to stress that (2010: 527) monopoly, medical knowledge, the automobile engine, the gigantism of machines, do not correspond to any technological need, but rather to economic and political imperatives. Deleuze's writings on affect and affection, according to Parr (2010: 13), "enable a material, and therefore a political critique of capital and its operations".

Affect then, as a concept, points out not towards passivity but to the potentials and mechanisms that move a system. Affections and desire can produce societal outcomes, be them productive for liberation or, on the other hand, even for alienating, controlling and impeding liberation. Joy, expansion, and freedom are frequent claims in the running world: the positive potentials of affect. Desire in this sense, as a primary driving force, enables subsequent processes in human society. The overarching pursue is how people move, beyond a mere transportation function, and how urban spaces can be circulated, expanding their uses.

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