

Freedom Run

Anarchism, Trail Running, and Getting Lost in the Woods

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Returning from a four-day hike with a friend across mountains and lochs in Cairngorms National Park, Scotland, which incidentally also almost cured my heel injury (plantar fasciitis, the doctor had diagnosed it, and he suggested that I stretch more and run less), I felt mentally recharged and relieved, physically stronger, especially core strength, and closer to nature.

We hiked 78k (50 miles) and climbed a few +1,300m (+4,000 feet) peaks in four days, but I went out for an 11k run on my usual route from Canterbury to Chartham two days after I came back. I was still tired from the hike, but slugged through it. Worryingly, though, I also felt my injury coming back again, and, despite the comfort of repetition and familiarity of my well-trodden route, I also dreaded falling into a slump.

Running as Anti-Capitalism

To avoid this, on my next run, I ran to a forest outside of Canterbury, which took me about 19 minutes, and I thought I could probably do another 10 minutes before I had to head back. Instead, after about 35 minutes, I got lost in the woods, but felt utterly free! The freedom I felt made me think about running in relation to anarchism: running as a praxis of anti-hierarchical and individual freedom, as anti-capitalism, and as everyday experiments in freedom.

To begin with, I'm an academic, who works on anarchist history, and I spend hours in dusty archives, behind my desk, writing papers and books, and preparing for teaching. I usually run 10-15k, two-three times a week, and play badminton as well. I've been a runner for seventeen years, and even completed a few half marathons under 1h 40mins, but recently running has been a means of getting away from the desk and staying in shape, especially as I get older (I'm 40).

Last year, after reading Vybarr Cregan-Reid's *Footnotes* (2016), I tried barefoot running for the first time, and it did wonders for my body. Come autumn, I abandoned it, though, and focused on just getting out there, but the idea of running without shoes appealed to me. I'm a minimalist runner; I wear shorts and a t-shirt, and I often buy running shoes on sale. I don't have any gadgets; I don't listen to music or bring my phone, as I want to get away from these things, and I only run with a cheap £8 watch (and a note with my personal details in a pocket, in case of an emergency).

Running, to me, requires little else in terms of equipment. There is no need to spend huge amounts on equipment, gadgets, and the 'right' gear. Running, potentially, defies the capitalist commoditization of sport; in a sense, it undermines the exploitation of workers, especially in the Global South, who work under horrendous conditions to produce cheap sports clothing sold for huge profits in the Global North. Barefoot running even more so.

Trail Running and Getting Lost: Everyday Experiments in Freedom

More importantly, though, running is an everyday experiment in freedom; freedom from work life, from stress and demands, from hectic city life, from sedentary activity as a result of sitting down and poor diet, to name just a few things. Human beings are built to run, and most people can do it, although the freedom to do it is often a privilege. Indeed, as a white, heterosexual, able-bodied man, I am not subject to oppressive forms of discrimination that might limit my desire for freedom, my desire for running.

That said, to start off with, you don't have to go a gym to go for a run; it's free, and you can usually run from your home. It allows a certain kind of spontaneity, and you can do it whenever you want, if work allows, as you are not dependent on opening hours, rules, and regulations set by others, and you can stop whenever you want to. As it happens, I often stop and chat to dogs. Running, in this sense, breaks structures and hierarchies, and it almost becomes a form of play, without a fixed idea of rules and governance.

Of course, this comes with a caveat. We are often limited by streets and roads, planned and laid out by the state or a local government, demanding that we stay off private property. Rather than reclaiming the streets, I try to avoid streets and instead head for the woods to do trail running. After I got lost in the woods last week, and after running for 1h 10mins, I realised that this was, in fact, a form a freedom. Paths were laid out before me, but I could traverse these according to my own will, I was not running anywhere in particular, and I could even veer off road to explore beyond the immediately known terrain in front of me.

Trail running, getting lost, and avoiding pre-determined routes, also connects us – and our bodies – to nature. Physical endurance aside, you automatically slow down, charge up a hill, even stop a few times, become aware of your surroundings (I saw a fox in broad daylight), and use your entire body to navigate how your feet hit the ground. Rather than static, repetitive movements demanded by street running, trail running often requires spontaneity, quick decisions, and an awareness of your place within nature.

This combination of minimal equipment, defying capitalist commoditisation of sport, of getting away from everyday modes of governance, of spontaneity and play, of the freedom of getting lost on a run, brings trail running much closer to the notion of anarchism – the ultimate freedom run.

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