Conditional Freedom as Alternative Reality

Art lives from constraints and dies from freedom.
Leonardo Da Vinci, c. 1480

Nominally, a capitalist society is a free society. But the mere declaration of freedom is quite different from the thing itself. As Perry Anderson writes, capitalism frees the individual from "fixed social status and rigid role-hierarchy of the pre-capitalist past" (Anderson, 1984, p. 98). But this sort of macroscopic, ideological freedom is not the kind of freedom that matters to individuals. What matters is *perceived* freedom—whether people *feel* free. By the 1960s, a capitalist system had successfully raised the average American standard of living to new heights of material comfort, with all the freedom of choice offered by a free market economy. However, it also chained a person's quality of life to their quantity of labor and effectively mandated a factory-job, wife-and-kids, peas-and-lasagna routine (or, as Plan C puts it, a "work-consume-die cycle"). On the whole, Americans were freer than ever before, but for individuals, this did not feel much like freedom at all. There was a desperate need to make contact with a more palatable vision of reality.

Disco was the early sketch of that vision; it was a deeply experimental, controlled environment that gave form to an abstract idea. Disco spaces rejected the day's social stratifications, rejected norms of decency—rejected all the most visibly oppressive societal limitations in service of creating a momentary sensation of freeness. But in its rejection of structure, disco generated a kernel of potent irony in itself. A thing created from the negation of another thing will always reflect the original—a negation, after all, is defined in contrast to what already exists. Disco, with all its very particular parameters, had created a set of constraints in opposition to the limitations it wanted to protest. It was not some mystical gateway to ever-elusive freedom; it was a regulatory framework whose offering was access to a simulated, relative freedom. In this paper, I describe the economic constraints that sculpted the specific dimensions of disco, and explain what caused disco to take the form it did, and why it could only envision this alternative reality by imposing constraints of its own.

The moment of disco coincided with an intermediary stage in the American economy—urban areas were unplugging from wartime manufacture, and the financial industry had not yet fully consumed New York City (Lawrence and Gilbert, 2021). In spite of these shifts, the economic policies of the period emphasized stability—Americans could expect "full-time jobs for life, guaranteed welfare," and "mass consumerism" (Plan C, p. 2). Stale corporate jobs offered people relative financial comfort and day-to-day consistency, but only because the jobs themselves were irredeemably stale. Plan C succinctly describes this: "Job security and welfare provision reduced anxiety and misery, but jobs were boring, made up of simple, repetitive tasks. Mid-century capitalism gave everything needed for survival, but no opportunities

for life; it was a system based on force-feeding survival to saturation point" (Plan C, p. 2). In a peculiar moment of reckoning, the pervasive boredom that plagued the nation revealed that stability was not liberating but suffocating.

Political engagement became a means by which 60s' and 70s' Americans sought a taste of freedom. The period saw the antiwar movement, the rise of Black revolutionary politics, and new heights to the women's and gay rights movements. In a way, the political activism that punctuated the period was a generation's collective decision on what kind of choices they didn't want. To make a somewhat anachronistic use of Plan C's statement on capitalism, activism was a way of saying, as a group: "We do not want a world in which the guarantee that we will not die of starvation is bought by accepting the risk of dying of boredom" (Plan C).

Against a backdrop of growing collective action movements, individuals sought a micro-level of freedom. In their nine-to-five office cubicle routine, people had surrendered their control, and by extension, their freedom. In many ways disco offered them a way to take back that control. Disco's combination of meticulously chosen lighting, sound, and decor served to offer a highly cultivated kind of sensory overload, a sort of physical overabundance that denied all conventional aesthetics (Nicky Siano, 2005). For disco's reputation of anti-establishment all-out fun, its operations contained a surprising rigidity that asked its participants to surrender, not take, control.

Disco's deeply disciplined tradition could be seen even in its music—many disco hits contained metronomically precise beats so tight they gave the songs a mechanical feeling. Underground disco hits like "Autobahn" and "Trans Europe Express" were described as "so stiff, they were funky" (Shapiro, 2005, p. 84). Shapiro notes that the German group Kraftwerk "were approximating not just the machine pulse, but its very logic (if such a thing is possible) – the ultimate trance of perfect repetition" (Shapiro, 2005, p. 84). Disco, then, was "a ravishing surrender to the clockwork throb" (Shapiro, 2005, p. 85). Disco offset the monotonous lack of sensation of everyday life with gratuitous sensory stimulation; the combination of drugs, uninhibited dance, and body-pounding beats generated a much-needed perceptual shift. Disco was all-immersive, and in controlling almost every aspect of human sensory experience, it generated a kind of overwhelming, cathartic freedom. Here, freedom was processed not on a cognitive level, but on a perceptual, sensory level.

Many of the particular attributes of disco were context-dependent; it is perhaps fair to say that the fact of disco's existence probably would've come about no matter what, but exact conditions of that moment in time cultivated its specific dimensions. As we've seen, the 70s were a time of transition; as the overarching economic structure worked to find some sort of new equilibrium, technology and people's means of livelihood were changing. One of the critical origin points of disco was notably in the

technology that made it happen. Disco, disc-o, used recorded music rather than live musicians, which enabled DJs to retain some level of control while surrendering the rest—these were technologies of liberation.

The freedom that disco offered seemed to stand in contrast with the constraints imposed by everyday life. It is apt to explain this relationship through a Marxist lens: the overwhelming force that dictated not only people's means but also their social lives was capitalism. But disco was not an escape from capitalism, nor could it be—disco itself was a capitalistic structure: a limited commodity and itself a form of work, and manufacture. Tim Lawrence describes disco as "...an alternative mode of work [that] continued within nightworld, where the increasingly mechanical nature of dance music added to the impression that the dancers were being propelled forward like obedient machines. The factory, argued Karl Marx, turns human beings into mere appendages of flesh attached to machinery. Now, however, the only visible product at the end of a ten-hour shift was a sweating boy and a smiling face. This was nonreproductive, pleasurable work" (Lawrence, p. 182-183). In other words, while disco was perhaps an inevitable reaction to capitalist structures, disco did not by itself *do* anything about capitalism. Certainly, disco envisioned a reality in sharp contrast to capitalist dominance, but its existence operated in complement to an existing structure. Lawrence succinctly sums this up: "Work hard, play hard' was about to become the new mantra of consumer capitalism, and disco in many respects complemented this new lifestyle" (Lawrence, p. 183).

Perhaps to view disco as a small reaction to capitalism within its mammoth presence makes it easier to see the patterns in its downfall. Karl Marx writes of capitalism not as a materially productive process, as we might be inclined to think of it, but as a way of eternal creation of arbitrary value. "Capital does not consist in the fact that accumulated labour serves living labour as a means for new production. It consists in the fact that living labour serves accumulated labour as the means for preserving and multiplying its exchange value" (Marx, p. 14). To that end, the end of disco saw an abandonment of its original product: "a sweating boy and a smiling face" (Lawrence, p. 183). By 1978, there were an estimated fifteen to twenty thousand discotheques operating in the United States (Lawrence, 2003, p. 315), very few of which actually had any desire to create anything but wealth for their owners. At the same time, the tides of technological change had also begun to exercise their grip on social life. Whereas early disco had rested on a precarious balance between DJs retaining and surrendering control to their devices, eventually, "disco too became "no-experience-necessary profession" (Aletti, ??, p. 185). "God knows all those people out there at their double turntables are not cruising the same heights of creativity but, until now, they haven't been reduced to playlist automatons" (Aletti, 1975, p. 22).

In a moment of reflection on the present day, one might observe many of the same oppressive structures that created disco, but we fail to find anything that mirrors disco's fervent desire to create an

alternative reality. Disco-like spaces simply do not exist in 2021. This is perhaps because the moment of the 1970s has passed, which held the precise conditions that lent itself to social experimentation: the economic conditions created an abundance of empty warehouses, physical laboratories of creation; the musical technology of the time held just the right balance of human control and mechanical rigidity; the public sentiment was riding the wave of the sixties' social movements, and there was a genuine hope for social change (Lawrence and Gilbert, 2021). To try to follow these roots into the modern day would reveal prohibitive costs of living, technologies so advanced they begin to exercise control on their users, and a pervasive hopelessness—"reflexive impotence"—among the age group typically deemed changemakers (Fisher, p. 21).

It is perhaps a tad disheartening to view the vanishing of the hope for freedom that disco once represented, but it is simultaneously encouraging to realize what it was that disco actually did: disco simply created a sharp alternative to what existed, and in realizing that freedom was a perceptual question based on contrast, it constructed itself as a not-to-scale dollhouse that did not mirror true reality, but modeled an exaggerated alternative. Disco itself was fleeting, as it had to have been as a structure within that of capitalism, but created a model for envisioning something different from what exists, and that remains an enduring legacy.

Sources

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