Conditional Freedom as Alternative Reality
Lilia Qian

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

Capitalism has long proclaimed freedom its offering. A free market, capitalism says, 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 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: basic, repetitive, and altogether boring. Plan C describes this: "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). Many Americans had successfully found a comfortable route to long-term survival, only to realize that they wanted more than to survive, they wanted to live. And these were not the same thing. In this peculiar moment of reckoning, the pervasive boredom revealed that stability was not freeing but suffocating. But the obvious solution was not to simply abandon stable income in search of some form of sensation; people needed to work to live. The paradox: work was inescapable, but could not be a source of meaning and purpose—people needed to look elsewhere for that. Political engagement became one vehicle for finding meaning. The sixties saw the antiwar movement, the rise of Black revolutionary politics, and new heights to the women's and gay rights movements. It also saw the visible rise of a political left, which brought back into the limelight strong anti-capitalist voices and cries for anti-racism and demilitarization. In a way, the political activism that punctuated the time 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, disco entered the picture. Though not as explicitly political as other forms of activism, disco acted by giving voice to the disenfranchised and providing a venue to experience freedom from oppressive external structures. The Loft was described as "the first self-consciously utopian party in New York City," breaking many societal barriers along lines of race, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation to incorporate traditionally marginalized groups into the mix (Lawrence and Gilbert, 2021). The freedom that disco offered stood in contrast with the constraints imposed by everyday life. It is apt to explain this relationship through a Marxist lens: Marx argues that capitalism is the overwhelming force that dictates not only economic behavior but also how the entire organization of American society. Who we talk to, where we live, what we *do* all day—these are all subsidiary operations under a parent capitalism. With this in mind, one might attribute many of the pressures on daily social life—boredom, meaninglessness, misery—to capitalist systems. But by the same line of logic, disco too, with all its blatant rejections of what social forces capitalism had already created, must have a role in capitalism. And it does—disco was not an escape from capitalism; it couldn't be.

Disco itself was a capitalistic structure: a limited commodity and itself a form of manufacture. Tim Lawrence describes the "work" of disco in *Love Saves the Day*:

> "[Disco was] 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 understanding how disco came about as a byproduct of the natural stresses of capitalism, we must also understand how exactly disco operated within the system. Disco envisioned a reality in sharp contrast to capitalist dominance, but its existence operated in complement to an existing structure. As Lawrence writes, "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).

Disco not only existed and operated within the larger framework, it adopted its own highly-defined aesthetic, a structure within a structure. Disco's combination of meticulously chosen lighting, sound, and decor offered 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 was rooted in its technology. In a way, disco's origins were simple—the word disco is derived from the French word discotheque, which literally means record library (Brewster and Broughton, "Night Train," 59), a nod to the technological move from live to recorded music in dance spaces. The use of recorded rather than live music allowed DJs to retain some level of control while surrendering the rest to machines. 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). In particular, the German group Kraftwerk were said to be "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 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. People reacted to the music intuitively—it was made to induce dance. Tom Moulton described this reaction: "...you watch people, and they come in, they don't know if they want to dance or whatever, and all of a sudden they'll hear a record, they get up on the floor, and they totally come out of it" (Moulton, 1976). 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—some prominent cultural rejection of social pressures—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, its participants worked to find their places within that equilibrium. This was a moment in which ordinary individuals believed, truly believed, that they could assemble and enact real change against dominant capitalist structures (Lawrence and Gilbert, 2021).

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). The end of disco saw an abandonment of its original product: "a sweating boy and a smiling face" (Lawrence, p. 183). By 1978, of the twenty-some thousand discotheques operating in the United States (Lawrence, 2003, p. 315), very few actually had any desire to create anything but wealth for their owners. What had at first been a commodity-focused production spread itself too thin and devolved too into a wealth multiplier. 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 technology, eventually, disco too became "no-experience-necessary profession" (Aletti, 1975, p. 185). Aletti later lamented this reduction of creative agency: "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). One might point out how this thread of destructive automation foreshadowed the state of modern creative industries.

In a moment of reflection on today's America, 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 was really just a not-to-scale dollhouse; disco did not try to mirror true reality, but modeled an exaggerated alternative, highlighting the elements of life it found most desirable. 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.

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