

4 ‘Work that Body’

Disco, Counterculture and the Promise of the Transformation of Work

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Introduction

Growing out of New York’s subterranean DJ-led dance scene of the early 1970s, disco emerged in 1974 and went on to become one of the best-selling genres of the decade. Disco’s popularisation can be most straightforwardly traced to the opening of the headline-grabbing midtown discotheque Studio 54 in the spring of 1977, the release of the movie *Saturday Night Fever* at the end of 1977, and the success of artists including the Bee Gees, Chic and Donna Summer. To the shock of the music industry, disco outsold rock during 1978, only for the overproduction of the genre to coincide with a downturn in the economy during the opening months of 1979. The genre’s rise and fall therefore spanned the 1970s, a transitional decade that witnessed the decline of industrial capitalism and the rise of post-industrial capitalism as well as the weakening of the traditional white working class and the strengthening of a rainbow coalition of workers aligned with the civil rights, feminist and gay liberation movements. Bubbling under the surface for much of the decade, these economic and social developments burst into explosive view during the summer of 1979 when a rock-led backlash against disco expressed its hostility in terms that were homophobic, racist and sexist.

For the next 20 years or so, disco was widely understood to have revolved around the hedonistic excesses of midtown disco culture, the bad taste of suburban disco culture, the studio-driven artificiality and superficiality of its most popular acts and the commercialism of the companies that sought to profit from the sound. A series of revisionist histories (Echols, 2010; Lawrence, 2004; Shapiro, 2005) subsequently challenged the pigeonholing of disco, foregrounding the democratic impetus of its cross-cultural roots and the significance of its musical contribution. However, the impression that disco contributed to the popularisation of a newly hedonistic, narcissistic and apolitical lifestyle that came to define the 1970s has survived. Disco promoted a ‘restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire’ and an ‘indefinite hedonism’ that was symptomatic of a decade defined by its escalating narcissism, replacing ‘the production of goods with the production of illusions’

in the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, argues Peter Shapiro (2005: 190–191). Although ‘disco may have begun with an inclusive impulse, it drifted toward the exclusive and the aristocratic, and was plagued with a nagging sense of whether poppers, beats, sex and coke could amount to a social vision’, adds Jefferson Cowie (2010: 320) in his celebrated history of the US working class during the 1970s. Disco therefore lured a dislocated working-class constituency into its midst with the promise of a ‘redemption that wasn’t spiritual, political or material but corporeal’ (Cowie, 2010: 320), a promise that also left it ‘trapped in the headlights of the oncoming cultural paradigm shift’ (Shapiro, 2005: 248) that culminated with the rollout of neoliberalism.

Countering the idea that disco was ultimately defined by narcissism, hedonism, individualism and acquiescence, this chapter will argue that disco contributed to the shaping of a new form of post-Fordist labour that recalibrated work through the prism of the declining post-war industrial economy and the rise of the countercultural movement. First, it will explore the links between Herbert Marcuse, the countercultural movement and the emergence of DJ-led dance floor culture. Second, it will outline how the spread of DJ-led partying and the rise of disco produced new forms of post-Fordist work and employment opportunities for minorities. Third, it will analyse how the disco/dance scene recalibrated factory and office structures and relations as well as the meaning of work. Finally, it will argue that disco’s reshaping of work didn’t make it complicit with neoliberalism, with the culture instead paralleling *Autonomia*, the Italian anti-work movement of the 1970s that is often cited as the most notable example of anti-capitalist, post-Fordist work.

Herbert Marcuse, Counterculture and the Rise of DJ-led Party Culture

Disco’s contribution to the recalibration of work can be traced back to the writings of Frankfurt School critic Herbert Marcuse and in particular *Eros and Civilisation* (1998), first published in 1955. Marcuse critiques Freud’s proposition that civilisation is based on the subjugation of human instincts, in particular gratification, to the discipline of full-time work, monogamous reproduction and the system of law and order. Marcuse (1998: 4, 40, 85) argues that ‘intensified progress seems to be bound up with intensified unfreedom’ and that the pleasure principle is opposed because it threatens a form of civilisation that perpetuates ‘domination and toil’, with labour ‘alienating and painful’. Challenging Freud’s theory that a non-repressive civilisation is impossible because of scarcity, Marcuse (1998: 36) maintains that Freud ‘applies to the brute fact of scarcity what actually is the consequence of a specific organisation of scarcity’. He goes on to place the relationship between cultural radicalism and political liberation at the centre of his utopian philosophy, developing his new perspectives on liberation

and utopia because, as Douglas Kellner (2004: xviii) notes, ‘history and the Marxian scenario for revolution no longer seemed to guarantee revolutionary possibility’.

By the end of the 1960s Marcuse’s ideas had become a key reference point for the countercultural movement and the new left (Crowfield, 1970; Rothman, 2017; Kellner, 2004: 2). Theodore Roszak (1968) provided the first definition of counterculture, outlining the movement’s efforts to challenge the inauthenticity, poverty and oppressiveness of everyday life – a life defined by hierarchical power, paternalism and authoritarianism, – by discovering ‘new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual mores, new kinds of livelihood, new aesthetic forms, new personal identities on the far side of power politics, the bourgeois home, and the Protestant work ethic’ (Roszak, 1968: n.p.). Rooted in the demands and aesthetics of the civil rights, gay liberation, feminist and anti-war movements, as well as a ‘stormy Romantic sensibility, obsessed from first to last with paradox and madness, ecstasy and spiritual striving’ (Roszak, 1995: 91), counterculture also demonstrated how ‘work can become play’ and the disciplined body a ‘thing to be enjoyed’ (Roszak, 1995: 109) as cybernetics offers ways for society to be reorganised according to a libidinal rationality. The movement also called for increased autonomy and self-management as well as the liberation of creativity (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018). More than ‘dropping out’, the two essential operations of the countercultural movement were ‘the refusal of the disciplinary regime and the experimentation with new forms of productivity’, add Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001: 274). Roszak concludes:

Out of that dissent grew the most ambitious agenda for the reappraisal of cultural values that any society has ever produced. Everything was called into question: family, work, education, success, child rearing, male-female relations, sexuality, urbanism, science, technology, progress. The meaning of wealth, the meaning of love, the meaning of life – all became issues in need of examination.

(1995: xxvi)

The countercultural movement went into retreat at the end of the 1960s as the state clamped down on the anti-war movement, the Black Panthers, LSD and other forms of dissent. Internal contradictions also began to surface, perhaps inevitably. Held on December 6, 1969, the free Altamont rock concert provided a grim denouement to the decade, leaving four dead, scores of others injured and the Rolling Stones accused of staging the show to ‘make a sort of *Woodstock West* movie’ (Bangs et al., 1970), *Gimme Shelter*, scheming to make money from a supposedly giving gesture. On January 1, 1970, 27-year-old rock critic Ellen Willis (1970) published a withering account of the countercultural movement in the *New York Review of Books*

that referenced her generation's newfound sense of anguish. 'What went wrong?', she asked. 'We blew it – how?' Roszak (1995: xxxii) recalls being asked 'whatever became of the counter culture' that same year. Contributing to the shifting tide, moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre published a book-length repudiation of Marcuse in which he argued that 'almost all of [his] key positions are false' (1970: 2). MacIntyre asked what humans will do and how new forms of domination will be avoided in Marcuse's sexually liberated state. 'On this Marcuse is silent, and perhaps he is silent because his account is in fact empty', concluded MacIntyre (1970: 50).

Damaged but not destroyed, countercultural protagonists regrouped, often in relatively safe clandestine spaces, and, as part of the shift, dance floors in New York City became a focal point for a new form of socialisation that embodied countercultural priorities. Beginning in early 1970, two venues – the Loft, a private party hosted by David Mancuso in his warehouse space on 647 Broadway, and the Sanctuary, a public discotheque located at the Hell's Kitchen end of West 43rd Street that became the first to welcome GLBTQ dancers – ushered in a radically new articulation of DJ-led party culture that bore little relation to what had preceded it. Whereas 1960s discotheques featured predominantly white crowds dancing in straight couples to the selections of self-styled puppeteer DJs who regularly interrupted the flow of the music to compel people to buy drinks, the Loft and the Sanctuary attracted definitively mixed dance crowds that introduced a transformative, liberatory energy onto the floor. Sanctuary DJ Francis Grasso and Mancuso responded by entering into elongated call-and-response exchanges with their dancers, giving birth to the practices of beat-mixing and the extended set respectively (Lawrence, 2004). The result manifested Marcuse's call for polymorphic sexual liberation, the cultivation of an aesthetic ethos and the valuing of participation, expression, play and pleasure.

New Sounds, Professions and Employment Opportunities

As DJ-led partying went viral during the first half of the 1970s, DJs, party hosts and discotheque owners innovated new techniques, reshaped sound systems, developed lighting effects and modified spaces to enhance the dance experience. The private party network that grew out of the Loft forged a particularly progressive ritual as organisers refrained from selling alcohol in order to bypass New York City's cabaret licensing law and stay open all night. Meanwhile the public discotheque scene helped popularise the culture as entrepreneurs adopted the Sanctuary's polysexual example. With workers responding to the worsening economic climate by seeking out a cheap form of entertainment that offered cathartic release, the dance floor ritual became polymorphous, communal, democratic, improvisatory and immersive, with new forms of sociality, creativity and physical expression coming

to the fore. Rather than embodying a new form of narcissism, nascent disco culture encouraged participants to partially dismantle, reconstruct and re-programme the self through the generation of collective bliss.

The first genre of music to grow directly and explicitly out of the dance floor, disco emerged as an outline genre in the autumn of 1973 when Vince Aletti (1973) identified a set of recurring aesthetic elements that could be heard in New York's dance spaces, with popular tracks often foregrounding percussion, chanted vocals and the rhythm section along with strings, breaks and crescendos. A Loft regular, Aletti identified Manu Dibango's 'Soul Makossa', a hugely popular record with Mancuso and his peers, as 'one of the most spectacular discotheque records of recent months' as well as 'a perfect example of the genre' (Aletti, 1973: 60). Rising up the *Billboard* charts before it received radio play, 'Soul Makossa' demonstrated the power of party DJs to sell records. Disco subsequently evolved into a more explicitly R&B and soul-influenced genre when the Hues Corporation and George McCrae notched up successive number one singles the following summer, after which independent companies intensified their production of the sound during 1975 and 1976.

Disco was designed to enhance the dance floor experience both physically and spiritually. The prominent four-on-the-floor bass beat, which first became prominent on the recordings of Gamble and Huff along with Norman Whitfield, provided dancers with a simple foundational structure upon which counterpoint rhythms, usually syncopated and funk-oriented, could be layered. Breaks and crescendos punctuated elongated records, providing them with narrative drama. Often chanted or belted out, vocals revolved around the themes of desire, love, showing emotional strength in adversity and the pleasures of the dance floor. Evolving directly out of the widespread preference for long records, the 12-inch single, first released commercially in 1976, became a notable source of radical sonic experimentation and innovation, with remixers able to initially edit and subsequently re-organise the multitrack tapes of any recording, adding or subtracting material to enhance their dance floor appeal. As the decade progressed lyrics that instructed dancers to dance, work their bodies and give themselves up to the music became more prominent, supporting the impression that a new form of music-dance labour was coming into being.

Disco's marginalised protagonists generated new forms of post-Fordist labour, earning money for doing what they did rather than doing what they did in order to earn money. DJs occupied the avant-garde, engaging in verbal and musical conversations with party hosts, dancers and record companies as well as pioneering remix culture from 1973 onwards. Most pioneering DJs were gay, working class and Italian American; working class and straight, Grasso was an exception. A second generation of African American, gay, working-class DJs rose to prominence soon after, with Black, straight working-class DJs coming to the fore in parallel party scenes in the Bronx and Brooklyn. The demographic make-up of the nascent profession made

sense, with DJ back stories and sensibilities aligned with the crowds that were thronging to New York's effervescent dance floors. Beginning with the Tenth Floor, the rise of dedicated all-male private party spaces embedded the prominence of gay DJs within the wider scene. Although women were to a large extent marginalised within the profession, in part because the private party scene along with the influential end of the public discotheque scene was exponentially more popular with gay men than lesbian women, the Sahara opened as Manhattan's first all-female discotheque in 1976 and employed the Black lesbian DJ Sharon White as one of its residents.

The musicians who recorded music for the dance floor also came from the margins of US society. A significant proportion of the records that fuelled the emergent party scene were recorded in Detroit and Philadelphia, with Black musicians occupying the cutting edge in the recording studio. James Brown along with the rhythm section of Ron Baker, Norman Harris and Early Young hogged the credits on the records that progressive DJs turned to time and time again. The recordings of numerous southern hemisphere musicians, among them Manu Dibango and Fela Kuti, also came to the fore through dance floor culture. If instrumental players and producers were mainly male, disco's lyrics were usually delivered by women, most of them African American. Walter Hughes (1994) observes that the LGBTQ dance community's identification with resilient, expressive figures who overcome emotional hardships underpinned its affinity with Black divas, among them Gloria Gaynor, Grace Jones, Chaka Khan, Diana Ross and Donna Summer. The first out-gay recording, Valentino's 'I Was Born this Way', was a disco record, and Sylvester became music's first out superstar. In the recording studio Tom Moulton and Walter Gibbons, both of them gay, pioneered the practice of remixing records and shaped the rise of the 12' single, a format that defined disco's pioneering expression. Immersed in San Francisco's male gay disco scene, Patrick Cowley became as one of the most innovative synthesiser players of the era.

The revitalised private party and public discotheque scene offered additional employment openings to minority workers. The Loft and its numerous offshoots, including the Paradise Garage, which began to hold construction parties in January 1977, were all owned and managed by gay men. Even the straight guys who ran a significant proportion of the city's public discotheque network tended to mix their entrepreneurialism with bohemianism, while the most famous discotheque of all, Studio 54, which opened in April 1977, was co-owned by Steve Rubell, an entrepreneur who came out via the New York dance floor. Meanwhile, the people who populated New York's party venues were variously of colour, female, LGBTQ and working class, with all who sided with the principles of equality, democracy, tolerance and freedom welcome to join in. Together they placed importance on the exploration of new forms of being and sociality, including those that broke with mainstream heteronormative conventions, racial divisions and class exploitation.

Record company owners and their staff also became increasingly mixed. Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler (Atlantic), Berry Gordy (Motown), Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff (Philadelphia International), Florence Greenberg (Scepter), Henry Stone (TK) and Ken Cayre (Salsoul) worked tirelessly for the promotion of Black music. They helped maintain disco's diversity by hiring the likes of Denise Chatman (Salsoul) plus gay men Ray Caviano (TK) and Mel Cheren (Scepter) to work as promoters. Although the majors were slow to react to disco, David Todd, African American and gay, landed a promotions job at RCA. The authors of the most influential disco columns – Vince Aletti and Tom Moulton – also identified as gay men. Record store owners started to hire store assistants who reflected and were immersed in the culture, including Manny Lehman and Judy Russell (both Vinyl Mania) and Yvonne Turner (Colony). Meanwhile, Record Pool DJs provided record companies with feedback sheets on the popularity of their promotional releases to encourage them to focus their promotional efforts on the best music (Lawrence, 2004).

The gains coincided with the wider opening up of the workplace. As Nancy MacLean notes (2006) of the preceding era, white men monopolised good employment and were considered the core of the nation. However, by outlawing workplace discrimination in addition to ending segregation the 1964 Civil Rights Act triggered a grassroots struggle for employment justice that saw Black and female workers file complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, gaining workplace victories. By the end of the 1970s, African Americans and white women enjoyed 'a presence and a voice' in the workplace 'as never before', argues MacLean (2006: 346), with Latina/os, Asian Americans and LGBTQ workers also making advances, albeit to a lesser degree. The progress occurred within the context of an economy that saw Nixon declare 'we are all Keynesians now' and wages rise to a peak in 1973 before they plateaued in the mid-1970s, when inflation, stagnation and falling profits led the corporations to fight back. Cowie (2010: 239) acknowledges the importance of the struggle for occupational justice yet notes how it turned 'almost solely on breaking down exclusion – gaining access to better and more skilled jobs for women and minorities – rather than linking the project of integration with that of structural change'. It's possible to wonder what workers who didn't fit the white male archetype were supposed to do. Systematically discriminated against in wider society and marginalised within the trade union movement, female and minority workers rallied against the disadvantages they faced, only for it to be suggested that their real responsibility was to campaign for progress for all. Ultimately the dance floor offered them a place to congregate as equals, to relax and, in many instances, to earn a living.

The Recalibration of Factory and Office Life

Concerned as much about tedium as exploitation, the party scene contributed to the recalibration of factory and office life – a timely development given

that an OECD meeting held in 1971 highlighted a deterioration in workers' behaviour and motivation. ('The young no longer wished to work and especially not in industry', observe Boltanski and Chiapello [2018: 174].) Discotheque and private party employees broke with the formalities of the post-war workplace, from the requirement to work a nine-to-five day, five days a week, to the need to dress according to company requirements. However, even apparently menial tasks could become meaningful and pleasurable if carried out in a creative and sociable environment. Initially opposed by the American Federation of Musicians, DJs struck precarious agreements with employers, formed devoted friendships with one another and cultivated a uniquely responsive relationship with their dancing crowds as they innovated a new form of information-based musicianship grounded in the improvised, antiphonal, unrepeatable, elongated selection of vinyl records that cut across genre, time and space. They also formed the New York City Record Pool, a cooperative centre that distributed free promotional records to DJs, established after Steve D'Acquisto and David Mancuso became impatient with the inconsistent, lottery-style practices of the record companies as well as the unfriendly opening hours during which DJs were supposed to pick up promotional vinyl. The labels eventually adapted to the rhythms of the emergent culture, accommodating the irregular waking patterns of the DJs and accepting that the DJ booth could operate as an alternative to the company office as place where information could be exchanged and agreements struck.

With the ex-industrial spaces of party culture's heartland shaping the experience, disco re-imagined what it might mean to work, including when the activity wasn't paid (as was all kinds of labour, from rearing children to caring for the elderly to volunteering for charities and community organisations). The marathon dance sessions that started at the Loft and spread outwards, with parties lasting for ten-plus hours, required a new form of physical commitment, albeit a pleasurable one (and one that was more obviously joyful than the grimace-based activities of jogging or going to the gym, at least if the smiles on the faces of the participants are taken as the measure). The emphasis was on nonstop, immersive, sweaty dancing. The purpose was pleasure and the exploration of a new form of reality. If this was an escape, it was a real escape. Carrying physical and mental memories of the experience as they returned to what some called the outside world, participants often experienced the dance floor as transformational. The dance floor became a place where many people most wanted to spend their time. The end of civilisation, at least as Freud imagined it, was nigh, as society moved to reject the social contract that determined that, in exchange for regular pay, work should be highly structured and prioritised over pleasure, with pleasure experienced within the family unit.

A fully immersive dance floor experience enabled dancers to loosen their concern with the bounded self – and loosen their egos – by connecting with other dancers through the medium of visceral music. They also discovered that, as Marcuse forecast, the body became re-sexualised when it ceased to

be a full-time instrument of labour, displacing this with a new form of pleasurable labour. 'The regression involved in this spread of the libido would first manifest itself in a reactivation of all erotogenic zones and, consequently, in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and in a decline of genital supremacy', Marcuse (1998) wrote in an unwittingly accurate description of how the evolved dance floor would operate. Having been historically required to sacrifice control of their bodies, LGBTQ, female and of colour dancers were more receptive to entering into the polymorphous terrain of the dance floor than those who came more obviously privileged backgrounds. Nor was the experience restricted to the most progressive venues of the downtown dance scene. As Maureen Orth (1976) noted (rather uneasily) in her description of the Brooklyn discotheque Enchanted Garden in a November 1976 feature published in *Newsweek*: 'There is no stigma attached to girls dancing with girls or boys with boys – and no compulsion to find a mate. For some, discos are an Antonioni film on noncommunication come to life. For others, they are a harbinger of the Somazonked masses of 1984'. Then there were the drugs, which arguably undermined the keep-fit benefits that came with a night of nonstop dancing and confirmed that capitalist society's combination of consumerism and drudgery didn't represent the ultimate expression of human potential. The culture reflected the acid-oriented utopianism of Mancuso's first 'Love Saves the Day' party, for even if successor parties didn't always match the Loft's version of utopia, many of them came close and almost all of them were in one way or another connected to Mancuso's pioneering event.

Historically suspicious of pleasure, and already unsure how to respond to the countercultural movement, the historic Left came to view disco as, in the words of participant and researcher Richard Dyer (1979: 20), an 'irredeemably capitalistic' safety valve that encouraged weary employees to find meaningless pleasure in a weekend-oriented activity that distracted them from the task of class struggle and societal change. Disco's success is additionally assumed to have forestalled the possibility of more meaningful action away from the dance floor. The 'total fulfilment' of disco's false promise 'in the fictive realm of the strobe-globe precludes and always exceeds its realisation elsewhere', argues Anne-Lise François (1995: 443). It remained unclear, however, if those who didn't go out dancing were more likely to engage in political action than those who did. And what was the duty of dancers anyhow? Responsibility for the politically directionless nature of the 1970s lay more obviously with the decade's presidents (Nixon, Ford and Carter), the trade union movement and a range of other civic and activist organisations. Emerging as a niche culture generated by outsider participants, disco could never be expected to resolve the deep-rooted and apparently mounting problems faced by the United States, yet it did support the development of an alliance that crossed class, ethnicity, gender, race, sex and sexuality as it explored an essentially basic, cheap, anti-consumerist pleasure. Counterculture had already struggled to combine its disparate elements into

a pluralistic yet unified movement. Black Panther Fred Hampton launched the original 'Rainbow Coalition' as a multicultural revolutionary movement that encouraged participating organisations to support each other's political protests in April 1969, after which Jesse Jackson formed Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) as a reformist equivalent in late 1971. Less overtly political, yet also more diverse and popular, disco forged its own rainbow coalition, one that encouraged participants to interact with one another, enter into conversations, share music and dance moves and enjoy meaningful, friendly interactions, even forming friendships, in a way that hadn't occurred before. The result witnessed the formation of arguably the first explicit melting pot coalition in the history of New York City – a city built on its reputation for being a melting pot.

Party culture, along with its discotheque/disco manifestation, was also largely resistant to corporate co-option. Aligned with the growing service economy – or the growing focus on buying experiences and information rather than physical products – private parties and public discotheques were owned and run by hands-on entrepreneurs, many of them dedicated to the culture; attempts to corporatise the experience through the establishment of chains were only fleetingly successful. Meanwhile the major labels showed minimal interest in the genre between 1974 and 1977, preferring to back the established sounds of pop and rock, Polydor/MGM's reluctance to promote Gloria Gaynor's 'Never Can Say Goodbye' being a case in point. The corporates were also reluctant to support the 12-inch single, a format that they initially hoped would be available only to DJs, encouraging dancers to buy the seven-inch single followed by the album. However, dancers wanted to be able to purchase the extended mixes they were hearing on the dance floor and their demand for the product persuaded Salsoul to market it commercially in 1976. The new format implicitly challenged the industry's profit model, which sought to maximise income by releasing a sequence of singles followed by an album that would also include the singles. Cheaper to buy than an album, the 12-inch single discouraged many consumers from purchasing a particular album (Lawrence, 2004).

Disco, Post-Fordist Work and Neoliberalism

Small and medium-sized businesses drove the popularisation of disco between 1976 and 1977 before the genre shocked the music industry by outselling rock in 1978. Prelude, Salsoul, TK and West End operated at the cutting edge of the sound. Neil Bogart's Los Angeles-based Casablanca Records, which included Donna Summer on its roster, notched up the most hits, many of them featuring Eurodisco elements that regulated and simplified – or as critics had it, 'whitened' – the disco aesthetic. Music industry trade magazine *Billboard* organised the 'First Annual International Disco Forum' at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York. Suburban discotheque owners Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager opened the flashbulb midtown discotheque Studio 54 with

the support of an investor, generating business through a celebrity presence, media coverage and exclusionary door queues. Independent record and production company RSO released the Brooklyn suburban discotheque movie and soundtrack *Saturday Night Fever*, which provided a whitened and straightened narrowcast version of the culture while breaking box office and album sales records. Although lines of influence could often be traced to the downtown scene – Rubell, for instance, likened his door policy to tossing a salad, or creating a diverse mix of people – the underlying trajectory of these developments was to recalibrate disco in order to market the culture and the music beyond their multiracial, polysexual and predominantly working-class urban base. The corporate sector only co-opted disco on the back of these developments, with Warner Bros. the first to open a disco department in December 1978. Having been slow to enter the game, the majors pumped the market with substandard, generic, personality-less releases. Cowie (2010: 321) maintains that disco, draining the funk out of funk, the soul out of soul and the rhythm out of the blues, quickly came to represent the ‘triumph of capitalism over art’, but in reality, the hyper-commercialisation of the genre didn’t happen until 1978.

Heartland blue-collar workers, their livelihoods in doubt, their numbers in decline and their consciousness rising, formed a ‘disco sucks’ movement that called for the death of the genre and staged various hate acts during the opening months of 1979. Peaking with a record burning rally held in Chicago that summer, the backlash was partly driven by taste. Rock fans had been slow to warm to disco in the first place and when the hollowing out of the genre coincided with worsening economic prospects they became vocal in their opposition. Barely a subtext, the backlash was also homophobic, racist and sexist, with disco seen to have supported the rising influence of minorities just as the white working-class found itself in retreat, ‘stagflation’ having culminated in an economic downturn during 1979. Although the incremental gains made by disco’s rainbow coalition weren’t responsible for the deepening uncertainties experienced in the industrial heartlands of the United States, disco brimmed with scapegoat potential. Craig Werner (1998: 211) notes that in addition to driving disco out of the charts, the anti-disco alliance ‘also succeeded in destroying the last remaining musical scene that was in any meaningful sense racially mixed’. Ronald Reagan would exploit the schism, winning over significant numbers of working-class Democrat supporters by foregrounding traditional ‘moral majority’ values and the primacy of the Christian nation on his way to victory in the November 1980 presidential election.

Cultural values had shifted. When the oil crisis of 1973 tipped the US into recession during 1974–1975, the desire to go out dancing, a cheap way to engender a sense of wellbeing, was understood to be a common-sense response to the worsening economic situation. Yet the downturn of the late 1970s produced a different conclusion: that it was time to stop dancing and knuckle down. Part of the problem was that inflation was spiralling

and the culture that had inflated most visibly during 1978 (while giving the impression of being happy and work shy) was disco. Moreover, whereas the corporations had been willing to support wage rises during the opening years of the decade, by 1978 they had started to win the argument that inflation needed to be controlled through the creation of unemployment, which would place a downward pressure on wages. Other factors that contributed to the problem of increasing costs, including the oil crisis and the Vietnam war, were sidelined as figures such as the monetarist economist Milton Friedman argued that by tackling inflation the nation would also take care of a number of related problems, including a 'generalised erosion in public and private manners, increasingly liberalised attitudes towards sexual activities [and] a declining vitality of the Puritan work ethic' (quoted in Chernomas and Hudson, 2017: 89–90). The music corporations responded to the collapse of disco – a collapse they helped engineer – by introducing disproportionate cuts to their recently opened disco departments and declaring disco dead.

In his influential account of the rise of neoliberalism David Harvey (2005: 19) argues that US corporations and business interests responded to the declining profitability of the late 1960s and early 1970s by embarking on a 'political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites'. He traces the shift back to a confidential memo that argued for the strategic rebuttal of those who sought to destroy American business, sent to the US Chamber of Commerce in August 1971, and the establishment of the Business Roundtable as an organisation committed to the revitalisation of the corporate sector in 1972. Embracing Hayek and Friedman, they called for free markets to be recognised as an ethical force that needed to be liberated from the suffocating control of the state through the introduction of deregulation, welfare cuts, the slashing of taxes on corporations and high-income earners and the desirability of unemployment. New York City's fiscal crisis of 1975, during which the banking sector demanded the introduction of austerity-oriented measures that would inform the future rollout of neoliberalism, amounted to 'a coup by the financial institutions against the democratically elected government of New York City' (Harvey, 2005: 45). The ideology of individualism rippled out as the 'narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality and identity became the leitmotif of bourgeois urban culture' (Harvey, 2005: 47). If disco embraced these values, as subsequent critics have argued, then it effectively colluded with this 'counterrevolution from above' (Harvey, 2005: 46).

But did the corporations lead the call for increased flexibility and freedom in the workplace in order to reboot its business model or were their actions responsive? Even if the corporate class devised its new ideological strategy as early as 1971, with the rollout more sustained during the second half of the 1970s (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018), the development didn't anticipate a wider rethink about work so much as respond to the challenges posed by counterculture. Whether or not the ensuing proto-disco movement exerted any influence on the shift, the music majors were reactive and slow

in their response to culture, treating DJs with suspicion and backing disco late into its cycle. Aside from Atlantic, where ‘the top of the company was not that far from the street’ according to disco journalist Brian Chin (quoted in Lawrence, 2004: 368), the corporates messed up their co-optation of disco, their centralised and hierarchical structures having led them to overproduce a mass of substandard records (Dannen, 1990). The corporate attempt to mass market disco through radio rather than the record pools revealed additional Fordist tendencies. The example of disco therefore suggests that the corporations were reactionary rather than proactive.

The repositioning of disco as a predominantly working-class, multicultural and polysexual movement that explored new forms of pleasure, work and sociality, rather than a pliant agglomeration of self-absorbed individuals, suggests it should be considered alongside Autonomia. The comparison almost came about in the late 1970s after *Semiotext(e)* editor Sylvère Lotringer observed how the downtown art and music scene had unwittingly realised many of the ideas explored by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari (Lotringer and Morris, 1978); he could have said the same of the DJ-led party/disco scene had he been aware of it. Even if most participants didn’t articulate an explicitly left-wing politics, they understood, like Autonomia, that work preceded capital, the innate creativity and productivity of workers becoming the things that businesses turned into profit. Like Autonomia, they understood that even if their labour could never be wholly autonomous from capital it could constantly assert itself as independent. The party scene was also ahead of the curve when it came to recognising that culture could be a meaningful place of struggle – an outlook embraced by Autonomia only after new social subjects (including the marginalised, precarious workers and students) came to the fore and the pirate radio station Radio Alice began to contribute to ‘an explosion of creativity and experimentation in new ways of living’ (Keir, 2001). Negri might as well have been referencing the downtown party scene when he wrote that the key to Autonomia’s new outlook was ‘the affirmation of the movement as an “alternative society”, with its own richness of communication, free productive creativity, its own life force’ that sought to ‘conquer and to control its own “spaces”’ (Negri, 1988: 236).

Ultimately the failure of the two movements to consolidate and protect their position through the establishment of political alliances made them vulnerable. In Italy, the Autonomist movement unravelled following sustained state repression. In the United States, and in particular New York, the DJ-led party and disco movement survived the national backlash only to find itself newly constrained by the revival of the corporate sector, especially from 1983 onwards. The record-breaking success of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* encouraged the majors to re-enter the dance market. Although some lessons were learned from the disco debacle, the wider expansion of the corporate sector turned New York into a newly costly and increasingly regulated city that led to the contraction of its music and art scenes. In 2008, Elizabeth

Currid (2008) argued that the corporate sector had become so entrenched it threatened to destroy the communities that underpinned New York’s creative economy.

Disco’s attempt to loosen the strictures of the post-war settlement and the Protestant work ethic didn’t turn its participants into the handmaidens to neoliberalism. As Theodore Roszak argues in the reissue of *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Roszak, 1995: xxxiii), ‘For all its quiriness, the counter culture dared to envision a better future, and in fact the one interesting post-industrial vision we have thus far been offered’. Rooted in counter-culture, disco’s collective, democratic, creative, flexible, pleasure-oriented praxis mapped out a progressive rather than a self-indulgent/escapist/hedonistic version of post-Fordist labour. Disco only became embroiled in a wider corporate, governmental and think-tank strategy to ‘both garner consent as well as support the shift to casualisation’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018: 326) as the post-war settlement reached its denouement. The ‘work hard play hard’ mantra that emerged as part of the epochal shift to neoliberalism amounted to capital’s compromise: employees could party hard so long as they remained productive and accepted that their backs wouldn’t be covered if they fell.

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