

Freedom: From Collectivist to Individualist Structures and Realities

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I frequently listen to classical music while I am working and in the evening before going to bed. The music during the day tends to be from the so-called classical era (from Haydn to Beethoven, with some bowing to later composers like Schumann, Brahms and Dvorak). For me, this is more than background music. I find the music of these 18th and 19th Century giants to be filled with wonderful themes, variations and intriguing dissonance. I must admit, however, that I find the often-predictable structure of their music to be particularly reassuring and pleasant on the ear.

In the evening, the radio often trots out 20th and 21st Century fare. Much of it plays well in my untrained ears. The narrative work of composers like Copland, Barber and Thompson is, of course, fitting for my American ears. I also happened to be enthralled with Mahler's massive work, as well as the lyrical work of Debussy and Ravel, and the Russian compositions of Prokofiev and early Stravinsky. There was a major shift from a universal Sonata form to the often-nationalistic, programmatic music of the late 19th Century. The structure had changed but there was still the fundamental "story-line" of the musical narrative. A tale was being told.

But something happened in the 20th Century that made music harder for me (and many other musical novices) to hear and comprehend. The structure was abandoned! Sure, there was the highly-structured 12 tone music, but structure for the most part was tossed aside by 20th Century Composers. We do have the simple and highly repetitive structure of contemporary late 20th Century and early 21st Century minimalist composers, but I don't think this qualifies as being comparable in any way to the large, multi-tiered musical structures of 18th and 19th Century classical music. I don't think this is simply a matter of "getting use to a new sound" (like we are asked to do as old folks with contemporary rap and hip-hop in the domain of popular music). I think that something more profound has occurred.

The Life and Death of Shared "Standards"

I propose that the shift in musical compositions is aligned with a much broader change in many of our contemporary societies. The classical music of the mid to late 20th Century and early 21st Century is no longer based on a shared compositional "standard". The collective is no longer holding up. Now, the structure (if there is any) is unique to each composer (even each composition). There is sometimes the informal structure found in 19th Century narrative/programmatic compositions (like the work of Richard Strauss). There might now be structure inherent in contemporary compositions that build on frequent repetition of a specific theme, sequence of notes or rhythm (an extended version of what Ravel was playing with in Bolero). There is also the use of a unique sound (often dissonant) to which the composer frequently returns to gain a powerful effect. But none of these variations on a basic theme/structure constitutes anything like a compositional "standard."

The broader alignment to which I am referring resides at the heart of what many philosophers, art historians, and social observers, including myself (Bergquist, 1991), have referred to over the past thirty

years as *post-modernism*. In this new world, we must all look for and impose a tailor-made structure on our life and on the way in which we interpret and act upon reality.

Collectively-imposed standards were dominant in most societies for many centuries. In Europe, we can look to the old days when church bells governed daily life (especially in John Calvin's Geneva). Among the Catholics there were similar (though not as stringent) calls to prayer as well as a weekly ritual of church attendance and a yearly calendar of religious celebrations and holidays. Even further back, we can find the powerfully-imposed standards in Judaism (that are still to be found in the more conservative branches of Judaism).

Today, we still witness the strong role played by standards in Islamic countries. I remember hearing pronouncements beamed over loud speakers from the high minarets in Istanbul when I was working in Turkey. These words of divinity were very impressive (especially for me as a person who grew up in a highly secular community in California). The exertion of standards coming from the minaret would seem to say much about how those who are observant should schedule their day and conduct their life. These pronouncements are a daily reminder to observant Muslims (as if they are not already fully aware of their duties).

As a respectful (but naïve) nonobservant, I find myself amazed at (and appreciative of) the way these powerful Islamic standards seem to culminate in the religious pilgrimage to Mecca during the observance of Ramadan. The remarkable flow of the Islamic faithful around a square is miraculous—what chaos and complexity theorists would describe as a self-organizing system: no formal choreography or organizing group. Powerfully organizing and deeply-shared standards of conduct are fully operational in this Mecca gathering.

What about standards in contemporary secular societies? Certainly, there was the structure imposed on work life during much of the 20th Century – when the modern, industrial era was dominant in Europe, North America and many other “developed” countries. The 9 to 5 work day was normative, as was the weekend. While premodern societies typically did not (and still do not) have a regular work day, there are standards in the modern world. Many premodern societies have relied heavily on the extraction of natural resources (lumber, minerals, fish) or the cultivate of plants and raising of domesticated animals (agriculture). In these societies, the work day typically begins at dawn and ends at dusk. Work is often dictated by seasonal patterns (heat, moisture, wind, etc.) rather than an arbitrarily-imposed standard work day.

Even older premodern societies (that are rare today) relied on hunting and gathering, with tribes being nomadic, traveling with the food source or with changing weather conditions. There was little imposed structure in each the agrarian or hunter-gatherer societies, other than a keen awareness of the shifting nature of the environment in which members of the society lived and worked. There certainly are rituals and patterns in these societies, but the structure is usually informally imposed (“tradition!”) and adjustable (dancing with the environment).

Perhaps, we shouldn't go too far in accepting this analysis of structure in premodern societies. The structure might more closely resemble late 19th Century music in the Western World – the structure is provided through the narrative being offered around a fire, during a dinner or while sipping on some mind or mood-altering libation. In the hunter-gatherer society, a compelling narrative is particularly appropriate since the traditions of this society are embedded in their culture, rather than in any one

specific location (which is more often the case in an agrarian society). Perhaps the narrative of journey in a hunter-gatherer society is comparable to the narrative of journey in a Richard Strauss tone-poem.

The Nature of Freedom

All of this reflection on music and societal patterns leads to a fundamental question that I have been pondering since listening to old and new classical music and listening to the calls emanating from an Istanbul minaret. My question is: what is true freedom? Is freedom something more or something else than the absence of imposed structure and standards? Can freedom be found in a society that also holds some standards? Is there a religious freedom (or liberation) to be found in the shared practices of those living in a sacred world? Is there such a thing as communitarianism (a term used by George Lodge) that provides a balance between individual rights and collective responsibility—or is this just an idealistic fiction that soon falls apart amidst the reality of contemporary polarized politics and religious zealotry?

These questions and a host of similarly-oriented questions reside at the heart of a series of essays to be produced by the Freedom Project that is operating at The Professional School of Psychology, where I serve as President. Some of these essays are based on writing I did while spending time in Estonian during the early 90s when the Soviet Union was collapsing. My time in this remarkable country, culminated in a book, *Freedom*, that I co-authored with my colleague, Berne Weiss, who was living through a similar transformation in Hungary. Other essays have been prepared by students and faculty at my graduate school who come from countries throughout the world. Each of these essays focuses on one or more aspects of freedom and addresses the fundamental issue of balancing individualism and collectivism.

At a basic level, freedom seems to have something to do with standards that are or are not imposed on or inculcated in the hearts, minds and lives of citizens living in a specific society. Given this contextual perspective on freedom, a series of additional questions emerge. Can people from different societies, with different opportunities for freedom, readily appreciate each other's world? Can they easily collaborate in our new global work space? If they were suddenly transported into our 21st Century world, could Haydn and Mozart live comfortably beside and collaborate with minimalists such as Adams and Gorecki—or would they long for and revert to shared musical standards? Would Haydn or Mozart begin composing music with their own distinctive style applied to each of their compositions? After all, these two 18th Century composers played a major role in setting the musical standards that remained in place for almost a century in the world of Western classical music. Are standard bearers often free from their own standards. Does their freedom lead to the loss of freedom among those who follow in their footsteps? Stay tuned . . .

Next Steps

With this brief introduction to the elusive and complex topic of freedom, I wish to begin introducing you to other essays that are products of the work being done by doctoral students enrolled at The Professional School of Psychology or products of the Freedom Project at PSP. I provide links to these essays below. I feel confident that you will find these essays to be thought-provoking and quite timely given the postmodern world in which we are all now living.

Freedom, Loneliness and Big Business

Xiaoyun (Sharon) Ma offers a powerfully insightful analysis of ways in which loneliness can be leveraged in the creation of a multi-trillion dollar business in China.

[How to Turn Loneliness Into a Multi-Trillion Dollar Business](#)