

Contemporary Circus Careers: Labour Relations and Normative Selfhood in the Neoliberal Scenario

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This paper reports and analyzes insights into diverse circus careers against the backdrop of the current neoliberal moment, taking recent developments within the circus world as reflective of contemporary social, economic, and political transformations and disciplinary discourses. It draws on an ethnographic inquiry into the contemporary circus scene in the Italian capital of contemporary circus, Turin. This case study is conceptually grounded in the increasing importance of creative “passionate work” (Arvidsson, Malossi, and Naro 2010, 295) in neoliberal labour relations, and in the neoliberal emphasis of contemporary consumer society on individual responsibility for adequate constructions of identity and subjectivity.

The redefinition of circus as a form of art and a formalized educational path is an ongoing process in Italy, where until very recently circus was associated solely with a family-run form of popular entertainment and a traditional, marginal, and closed community. On the other hand, circus practice has profoundly changed since the amateur and social circus movement started at least twenty years ago, and the practice of circus has been developing “a rich culture and a strong sense among the members of being different from other people” (Hughes 1984, 296). Thus, the research considered circus as both a field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993) under construction and a community of practice (Paechter 2003; Wenger 2010). The data were generated mainly through a year of participant observation of circus spaces in Turin and thirty-nine in-depth interviews with circus practitioners and professionals from different areas (including amateur, artistic, and social circus.)

Within this frame, the term career is employed in Hughes’ (1984) sense of process through which a “bundle of activities” (292), values, and skills acquire meaning within specific social and historical contexts. Careers in this sense include personal and professional life, official roles, and images of self and self-identity (Murgia 2006). In this meandering—rather than linear—sense, circus careers represent particularly significant effects of the interplay between subjective and structural elements of social life.

More specifically, the case of contemporary circus becomes paradigmatic of a neoliberal framework in which the status of “art” justifies labour and existential precariousness, highlighting the social role and the symbolic value of artistic professions and practices, and new articulations of art as opposed to—or in compliance with—current notions of work, labour, and leisure. Artistic practices blur symbolic and material needs, aims, and gains, reflecting the reconfiguration of the relation between paid labour and vocation work in the post-Fordist context, in which the capability to transfer subjectivity, emotionality, innovation, creativity, originality, and sociability directly through produced goods and services becomes central to the value of labour, which in turn is “charged with existential aspects” (Chicchi, Savioli, and Turrini 2015, 10).

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I will focus below on a few traits which clarify the relevance of such a conceptual framework and analytical focus, showing how the apparent marginality of the circus case fades in a society in which, in the words of one of my interviewees, “no profession is safe anymore, so the gall I showed in daring [a circus career] became let’s say the necessary condition for today’s students [no matter in what field], who know that as soon as they’ll finish they will have to throw themselves in a jungle and will not have a permanent job” (Emanuele, 36, professional).

First, uncertainty characterizes a labour market in which social capital still counts more than formal, explicit criteria for access and success. Those criteria are underpinned by the construction of a professional social network as well as peculiar factors when forming groups and producing performances, such as strong social ties, artistic affinity, and self-direction. While traditional, travelling and family-run circuses in Italy can be defined as closed and rigid communities of life and work (Caforio 1987), the new market of contemporary circus performers seems to value free association and choice rather than ancestral ties: “a circus in which . . . you choose your own company” (Marco, 36, professional).

While auditions represent the main tool to access the field and operate on the labour market in dance and theatre (Bassetti 2009; Luciano and Bertolini 2011), only a few well-known international companies employ such a method in Italy, where the formalization of the contemporary circus field has only recently started. As well as founding small companies and informal groups, circus artists are employed in dance, theatre, and opera productions, hired by local traditional circuses as seasonal performers, occasionally contracted by the organizers of events and festivals, or self-employed in street work.

Second, the diversification of sources and the constant search for funding represents a common point between circus—in which less than a third of the sources to produce circus shows (local and national) are public institutions (Malerba and Vimercati 2016)—and other performing genres (Bassetti 2009; Luciano and Bertolini 2011). Performing artists operate in a labour market in which short-term and project-based contracts prevail, and the public social security provided is minimal.

Thus, contingent employment and “casual labor” (Menger 1999, 548) still prevails, despite the highly skilled, mobile, and diversified character of artistic jobs, in an artistic sector in which professionalization made possible the “triumph of creative individualism” and maximized the role of risk taking (571). These workers can thus be taken as paradigmatic examples of the importance of individual—rather than systemic—strategies to face career obstacles and seize opportunities.

A third aspect is tied to the ambivalent role of creativity in contemporary society. On the one hand, circus practitioners respond to an artistic notion of creativity, in which the reproducible, commercial value of art production is separated from its unique, symbolic value. On the other, “unicity” has lost its aura (Lavaert and Gielen 2009, 75) in a context in which the imperative of creativity leaks from the aesthetic to the political and the economic fields in general, while an “efficacy imperative” to meet “productivity goals and expectations” (Hurley 2016, 75) determines the artistic as well as the business world. This implies that “unicity” is not only expected of a work of art, but of any kind of experience and product, and that it is underpinned by entangled notions of creativity, innovation, and authenticity. “Acting in one’s own authority, being truthful to one’s self, achieving congruence between feelings and communication, being distinctive and coherent” (Svejenova 2005, 950) become cornerstones to building creative, “boundaryless” (947) careers in a society in which not only circus artists, but all individuals are considered owners and agents of their trajectories.

In such a context, formal professional artistic training which aims to increase the opportunities of former students to access the labour market (Wilf 2010), insists on the importance of creativity, inventiveness, and originality in building and teaching “methods, with its own handouts” (Luca, 45, school manager) and “systems” (Emanuele, 36, professional) to acquire the skills to “turn the artist’s technique into something other than the demonstration of technique” (Luca, 45, school manager), and showing the authenticity and fragility of the artist as a special and unique human being.

Rather than virtuosity and technical skills, these ambivalent notions of creativity and innovation, pulling together rationalization and authenticity claims, determine artistic success. This is, in turn, entangled with economic success, as being creative counts to “sell oneself” in contemporary circus (Garcia 2011, 44)—that is, as market as well as symbolic value. While a shared representation still circulates among artists and practitioners that these are separate, success for professional artists is inseparable from the material—as well as the symbolic—gains drawn from artistic work, so much so that to be part of the artistic professional community, the first requirement is to make a living out of one’s practice.

The reasons why circus as a profession is both very attractive and profoundly scary is the inextricable intertwining of the privilege of freedom, of having “no obligations except the ones you create yourself” and the constant risk of “not making it” (Mara, 25, amateur), and having to resort to intensive and extensive career diversification. Thus, the material gains from circus activities acquire an intrinsic symbolic value.

To make sense of these boundaryless careers, circus artists activate a “defence mechanism against disenchantment” (Menger 2014, 111). The majority of the professional artists interviewed tend to distinguish between the essential and side aspects of their professional choice, and between more and less desired tasks, resigning themselves to the idea that there is an often hidden “business side” to their bodily, creative, and “purely artistic” activity. Emphasis is generally placed on the appreciation of the privilege of having a profession which is also a passion, an opportunity to have fun, meet people, travel, achieve ecstatic states, and gain the admiration of an audience, and of the responsibility to move, share emotions, and communicate relevant and innovative content. The fact that insecurity and precariousness often obscure this mission, forcing performers to extensively and intensively diversify their career and leading to the waste of a great amount of energy and time in these and other strategies of risk management, is either rationally framed as a clever attitude or assumed as a (frustrating and temporary) part of the game.

Defence mechanisms underpin social reproduction thanks to their invisible nature as “taken for granted”: not only does the emphasis on creativity and authenticity obscure the economic—and precarious—side of this very same coin, but the latter remains simultaneously an unrecognized (materially, at least) and necessary (if one is to make a living out of his or her art) part of the artist’s work. On the other hand, in the neoliberal context, artistic and so-called “ordinary” jobs converge under the social imperatives of creativity and (economic) efficacy to which individuals must respond.

The ideal successful artist does not need to manage risk through the combination of circus work with work in sectors outside the arts or other artistic sectors, or through different activities in the circus sector. However, he/she is also able to dedicate a significant part of his/her career to artistic—as opposed to commercial—production. As we saw above, notions of artistry are

inextricably tied to notions of creativity and authenticity, which imply a higher and deeper investment of the body, the emotions, and the self in labour and commercial settings.

Circus practice implies bodywork that aims to cultivate a fit, healthy, and responsibly looked-after body able to train, create, and perform. It entails emotion work, both the search for the “authentic self” and the staging of “spontaneous, “natural” feeling” (Hochschild 1983, 190). It emphasizes creativity as the attempt to express the “unique nature” of each person, “one’s inner voice and impulses,” and “the rejection of outside structures and prearranged models for action” (Wilf 2010, 568–69). This both responds to a “cultural anxiety about mass production and mechanical reproduction” (567) and is expected to increase one’s opportunities to access and succeed on the labour market. In this sense, contemporary circus careers represent pivotal nodes to look at the entanglements between normative selfhood and material success, and at the new, subtle ways in which these engage our inner selves.

More location-specific insights may be drawn from the above analysis of the Italian case. Significant differences can be highlighted in relation to the cultural politics of other European countries and, on the other hand, the North American business-oriented model. While Italian contemporary circus draws extensively on the French and Belgian aesthetics and professional training models, cultural policies in Italy are far from providing the same kind of favourable bureaucratic, working, and welfare conditions, and the same status to artists and artistic production as these countries. On the contrary, the recent cultural policies in the sector of live performance in Italy have imposed a diversification of activities that only those actors and organizations with enough economic and human resources to operate in very diverse domains can sustain and have resulted in the concentration of funding and political power (Luciano and Bertolini 2011).

Against this backdrop, the only feasible solution for many circus artists is the entertainment market. However, like in other artistic fields, much of commercial art is not considered “real” art. Cirque du Soleil, for instance, is seldom taken as an artistic reference, due to its status as a multinational entertainment company. With such contrasting material and symbolic references, how is Italian contemporary circus to develop? Is artistic development possible when the most important criterion to identify a professional artist is still the ability to survive out of one’s activity, rather than the creation of excellent, original, and innovative content? In the current Italian situation, the responsibility to reply still seems to be left to the artists’ creativity, which shapes all aspects of their lives, not merely their production.

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