

ARTICLES

Is Social Circus “The Other” of Professional Circus?

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Introduction

Social circus is one of the many categories found today in circus practice. It is commonly located in the contemporary circus world together with the categories of community circus, youth circus, and other sub-genres that materialized after the 1960s. Social circus is broadly understood as a program operating outside the professional and performance circus worlds that uses circus skills as a tool for “assisting” vulnerable populations. An alternative approach is found in Latin America where social circus does not differentiate itself from the professional scene; rather, it is conceived and promoted as a professional option.

Revisiting the official definitions and the origins of social circus yields two crucial insights. First, there is a complex history behind the emergence of this circus category in which Colombia and Latin America have played a more central role than is generally recognized. Second, social circus, according to its official narrative, is a hybrid; it emerged from a combination of approaches involving circus training and peripheral populations around the world. In this process of hybridization, the original meaning of social circus in its accepted Latin American usage was translated into the principles and priorities of funders and stakeholders.

The first part of the essay revisits the official definition of social circus and its historical construction, both of which are associated with Cirque du Monde and what is called community circus in the global North. It later explores the First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, acknowledged as the occasion where related initiatives from all over the world agreed to use the term “social circus” as a common identifier (Lavers 2016, 509). This meeting indicates that Latin America was the place where the term social circus was first used to denominate this common goal. My revision opens a parallel history in the emergence of social circus and the confluence of forces that gave birth to the way this practice is officially understood. The second part of the essay illustrates the differing uses of the term social circus in Colombia and Britain and the implications of the official narrative on the practice of circus.

I conclude this analysis by opening a debate about whether the issue in question is that of circus professionalization or about issues of distinction between those who are able to make art (according to experts) and those for whom art is seen simply as therapy or a tool of intervention. I further explore the extent to which the social-professional binary works more at the level of narrative, thereby perpetuating the stratification of social practices. The aim is to reflect on the way in which the official narrative of social circus both reproduces and reinforces the hierarchical sociopolitical and cultural structures of power.

This analysis is part of a doctoral research project that analyses the process of recognition of circus as art in the twenty-first century in Britain and Colombia within the disciplines of cultural studies

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and circus studies. The methodology includes semi-structured interviews, textual analysis, political economy, and multi-sited ethnography. On a theoretical level, my approach is particularly guided by the insights of academics working in the interrelated fields of social sciences and global studies, who have brought forward notions such as “connected histories” (Bhambra 2014, 4), “southern theory” (Connell 2007, ix), and “epistemologies of the south” (Sousa-Santos 2016, ix), which call for understandings of the world beyond the Western, Eurocentric theoretical tradition and account for the invisible figures and systems of knowledge marginalized in the construction of modern societies and “the West and the Rest” discourse of power (Hall 1992, 276).

I draw on anonymous interviews with sixty artists, circus administrators, and policymakers in both countries within the traditional and contemporary circus movements.¹ Interviews were extended to relevant figures such as representatives from Cirque du Monde, Cirque Pour Tous, and the directors of Latin American organizations working in social circus. The analysis is complemented by my experience working closely with circus practitioners in both countries for almost a decade, as well as my previous roles as a policymaker and arts manager in Colombia and Britain.

Definitions of Social Circus and the History of the Term

The origins of social circus as a practice are generally attributed to a program initiated by Cirque du Monde, the humanitarian arm of Cirque du Soleil, in partnership with nongovernmental and community organizations around the world (Arrighi 2014, 206). Social circus is explicitly envisioned as separate from the professional world; here, the primary goal is not to learn the circus arts, but rather to assist with participants’ personal and social development (Cirque du Soleil 2017). Social circus thus understood encourages the development of self-esteem and prioritizes the acquisition of social skills, artistic expression, and occupational integration over the artistic result (LaFortune and Bouchard 2011, 14).

The beneficiaries of social circus practices include a wide range of population groups: “peripheral youth” (Lobo and Cassoli 2006, 62); “from homeless youth to remote indigenous communities” (Spiegel 2016, 51); and “at-risk youth, homeless populations, or adults living with learning disabilities” (McCaffery 2014, 30). The condition of being “at-risk” is defined as “not taking their place in society as contributing adults, at risk of suffering disenfranchisement through low achievement in education, or as a result of mental or physical health challenges” (Arrighi 2014, 206).

Various attempts have been made to historicize social circus as a practice. Rivard, Bourgeault, and Mercier (2010, 182) point to Latin America in the early 1990s. This assertion is questioned by Bolton (2004, 13), who establishes a direct link between social circus and the community circus of the global North. His claim is supported by earlier attempts to involve vulnerable youth in circus, including Le Grand Magic Circus and the Festival of Fools in the late 1960s, as well as his own work in underprivileged areas of Edinburgh in the 1980s (Bolton 2004, 12–13). More recently, Lavers (2016, 508) highlights Circo de Los Muchachos (Circus of the Boys), a program founded by the Spanish priest Jesus Silva in the 1960s. This program involved the teaching of circus skills to homeless children and youths in fascist Spain. The priest and his Circo de Los Muchachos toured the world in the 1970s, and the program subsequently expanded to various countries in Latin America (see Forero 2014, 33).

Community circus encourages nonprofessional performers to participate in the circus arts by providing community workshops for schoolchildren, disabled people, and other groups (Selwood, Muir, and Moody 1995, 51). The emphasis is on the use of circus arts as a means of self-expression and personal development. A similar movement, referred to as youth circus, emerged alongside community circus and focuses on the needs of young people. Both community and youth circus are defined as mainly recreational and extracurricular activities rather than a method of pursuing professional goals.

In Australia, for instance, social circus and youth circus are analyzed under the broader category of community circus to “indicate a re-imagining and a re-purposing of the circus arts within a social situation other than the professional/commercial entertainment arena” (Arrighi 2014, 200). Youth circus, which provides recreational, extracurricular circus skills training to young people, involves activities programmed in accordance with school terms and the quotidian rhythms of the family (204). More than simply a recreational pursuit of the circus arts, social circus designates “the co-opting of circus skills to an agenda of social change” (206).

These categories are all defined as being outside the professional world. Differences are marked more in terms of the participants’ psychological and sociodemographic background. Youth circus is directed at schooling youth with a family unit, while social circus is extended to children and directed at those living in perilous conditions; the first program provides recreation and extracurricular activities, while the second intervenes in the lives of “targeted” groups and supports an agenda of social change.

The First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, La Seyne-sur-Mer, France, 2002

The early years of the new millennium witnessed crucial moments in the history of contemporary circus. While French scholars debated the repercussions of the institutionalization of the new circus (Wallon 2002, 11), the Arts Council of England reiterated its commitment to the recognition of circus as art and its inclusion in cultural budgets (Hall 2002, 5). At the same time, circus practitioners from the global North and South signed the Charter of the Creation of the United Nations of Social Circus (PRICT 2002, 8) at the First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, organized by Cirque Pour Tous, the international fundraiser arm of Colombia’s NGO Circo Para Todos (Circus for All).

This meeting is credited as the moment when circus organizations from twelve countries agreed to use the term social circus to denominate the pursuit of a common goal of combining “circus and social work to assist young people at risk” (Lavers 2016, 509). Among the participants were the Australian Women’s Circus, Cirque du Monde, Circo de Los Muchachos, the Belfast Community Circus (UK), La Fabrik (France), and Latin American representatives Circo Social del Sur (Argentina), Circo del Mundo (Chile), and Circo Para Todos (Colombia), all of which are recognized today as pioneers of social circus. Over the course of the meeting, crucial issues were discussed around social circus, the different terminologies used around the world to denominate circus initiatives, and the distinctive characteristics of their common agendas. At the end of the meeting, a set of principles and common objectives were agreed and endorsed under the charter (PRICTS 2002, 8).



Les participants de Premières Rencontres Internationales du Cirque et du Travail Social

First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, France, 2002. Photo: PRICTS (2002, 11). Reprinted with permission.

The charter describes circus as an appealing endeavour for disadvantaged groups and an effective way of engaging with these populations while transforming their lives. Rather than envisioning circus “to assist” individuals (Lavers, 2016, 509) with their self-esteem (Cirque du Soleil 2017), circus is linked to education, emancipation, and economic development. The common goal and commitment of the new collective is defined as “the use of circus as a tool for social transformation” (PRICTS 2002, 8).

At the same time, the understanding of social circus as “assisting” was problematized in the meeting. French sociologist Brigitte Bailly drew attention to the terminology used by conventional social work programs, where participants are addressed as objects in an assistance equation, depicted as potential victims or problematic entities in need of help. Such perception leads to a denial of participants’ competencies and potential (Bolton 2004, 12). With support from her study on *Circo Para Todos* Bailly noted: “The logic underlying the project in Cali is different. The participant is not considered a victim or a potential malefactor, but as a student . . . Circus breaks the ‘aid’ paradigm which prevails in work with ‘youth at risk’” (cited in Bolton 2004, 4).

Circo Para Todos offers professional circus training to young people living in difficult circumstances. It was founded in 1995 in Cali by a Colombian and a British circus artist who met in Brazil in the early 1980s. By teaching circus skills at a professional level, *Circo Para Todos* offers an alternative to the youth to construct a positive future path (CPT 2017). Under this model, circus arts are used to support their social and economic integration into society beyond a mere recreational or psychological tool.

An apparent contradiction can thus be observed when revisiting official descriptions of social circus as an intervention tool for assisting marginal children and youth at risk, along with the common goal defined at La Seyne-sur-Mer. The document and further analysis (e.g., Bolton 2004, 11) evidence the critique raised by Latin American participants in conventional social work programs where participants are portrayed as in need of assistance. By contrast, an alternative approach is suggested in the case of Latin America, as will be further explored in the following section.

Another key discussion at La Seyne-sur-Mer concerned different terms used in the global North and global South to describe similar approaches. Even though the term social circus is adopted and intrinsically accepted in the charter, the proceedings of the meeting recall different terminologies while suggesting “substantive disagreements” to be addressed in future debates, stating:

The very topic of the meetings gave rise to semantic “contortions.” When referring to the same subject, Latin Americans would evoke social circus, where English and Nordic (language) speakers would refer to community circus, as the French (speakers) sought to underline a clear distinction between the artistic dimension and social work. (PRICTS 2002, 3)²

Beyond semantic and cultural disputes, the debate held in France touches on several crucial points concerning the construction of social circus and the social-professional divide: first, the hybridization of diverse approaches under a single category called social circus; second, a crucial distinction marked between art and social work. Representatives from Europe, especially France, insisted on separating social from artistic aims; one of the reasons highlighted was that in countries such as France art enjoys a more elevated reputation and attracts more funding than social work. In addition, the combination risks “moralizing art,” “depoliticizing social issues,” or confounding the roles of the art instructor and social worker (PRICTS 2002, 3).

Such differentiation could be understood in the light of the modern discourse of aesthetics coined during the European Enlightenment, the moment when art was conceived as a supreme and independent realm from other human endeavours (Eagleton 1990, 9; Wolterstorff 2015, 26). These ideas are the product of the specific socioeconomic and political conditions of eighteenth-century Europe, when artists were trying to gain independence from religious and political patronage to exercise their practice (Belfiore and Bennet 2008, 182–83). A discourse promoted by the growing European middle class in their struggle for political hegemony (Eagleton 1990, 3) led to the consolidation of an elitist and inaccessible modern art world (Wolterstorff 2015, 5–16). The new structure was only judged by experts and accessed by those with the taste to appreciate it and the money to buy it (Eagleton 1990, 368).

Circus in Latin America: An Alternative View

Representatives from Cirque Pour Tous and the above-mentioned Latin American organizations were interviewed for this research in order to obtain clarification about the debates that occurred in France. Two previous meetings are reported as the direct antecedents of La Seyne-sur-Mer: the first and second Latin American summits on social circus, organized by Chile’s Circo del Mundo in 1998 and Argentina’s Circo Social del Sur in 2000. This confirms that the term social circus was in use in the Latin American context before the meeting in France. All of the interview participants concur that resistance to the term social circus was evident at La Seyne-sur-Mer. This debate is still an open one today in contexts where structural disagreements concerning understandings of social circus continue to exist. One interviewee said: “The idea of the meeting in France was to clearly differentiate professional circus from circus with nonprofessional goals; although the contents of the two forms are similar, the European way of naming them at that time was not” (Latin American circus administrator 1).³



First Latin American Summit of Social Circus, Chile, 1998. Photos provided by Circo del Mundo (Chile).

While art and social work may be considered separate or mutually exclusive in the European context, this is not the case in Latin America. Analyzing the case of Circo Social del Sur in Argentina, Infantino explains: “many young artists active in the renewal of the circus genre found in social circus an innovative way to combine their artistic interests with their desire to transform inequalities and social problems affecting different social sectors, especially disadvantaged children and young people” (2015, 57).

In the words of the director of Circo Social del Sur:

We intend to confront the problem of exclusion of certain sectors of society that are often pushed to a relegated cultural life. We bet even more: not only we intend to guarantee access to cultural goods and services but also to the right to produce art in social sectors that otherwise would not have access to it, on an equal standard of opportunities. In this sense, we do not appeal to youth as beneficiaries of social assistance, but rather as producers and actors in artistic events, as creative subjects. (quoted in Infantino 2015, 57).

Again, social and professional components are neither divorced nor considered mutually exclusive in this approach; instead, the aim is to break down the cultural and sociopolitical barriers imposed on low-income groups via circus professionalization. Rather than attending a therapy session to increase self-esteem, participants are approached as capable individuals who aim to learn circus skills and eventually become professional artists like any other circus student. The three Latin American organizations mentioned above offer professional and artistic training, and their participants perform at both professional and artistic levels. These organizations all emerged at different points in the late 1980s, becoming formalized and institutionalized around 1995. All recognize the origins of the movement in Brazil and the work of Intrepida Trupe, a collective of artists performing and providing circus workshops to middle-class and low-income youth in Brazil.

Hector Fabio Cobo and Felicity Simpson, co-founders of Circo Para Todos, were part of Intrepida Trupe. Inspired by their work with the collective, they decided to open a professional circus school in Cali, Cobo’s home town. In an interview for this research, Simpson comments how the initiative emerged in a very spontaneous way; at the time, “our aim was not to save the world.” The energy, the attitude, and the resilience of the low-income group provided Cobo and Simpson with a more challenging and interesting environment in which to practise circus; as

Simpson adds: “they were not cry babies; they threw themselves into the activities. That was pure joy for both participants and teachers” (quoted in Sorzano 2018, 188).

The Latin American initiatives soon crossed paths with Cirque du Soleil and the Canadian NGO Jeunesse du Monde working in Brazil. The initial involvement of Cirque du Soleil came in the form of benefit galas in the name of Latin American organizations, the provision of circus instructors, and complimentary tickets to Cirque du Soleil shows. Cirque du Monde was born in the midst of that process as a “stakeholder in an emerging alternative trend” (Rivard, Bourgeault, and Mercier 2010, 182). A crucial difference exists between Cirque du Monde, as the so-called initiator of social circus, and Cirque du Soleil as a sponsor of and contributor to initiatives already taking place in South America and other parts of the world. In 2000, Cirque du Monde launched a program for training social circus instructors, which has since been implemented widely across the world in newer organizations that use circus as a tool for education and social agendas.

The movement in Latin America differs from Cirque du Monde’s approach in terms of circus professionalization and its understandings of social transformation beyond aid, intervention, and assistance, as well as its preestablished divisions between art, professionalization, and the engagement of peripheral groups. The trend responds to particular forces in the region throughout the 1970s, a decade marked by complex cultural, socioeconomic, and political phenomena in the so-called developing world, which rejected the transplantation and assimilation of Western ideals and models that had characterized the previous two decades.

As Healey explains, in the 1970s the “indigenization of social work” (2008, 82) began in Latin America as a response to traditional models of social work—shaped in Britain and the US in the nineteenth century—that had expanded across the world in the postwar period to counter “underdevelopment” (82). Over the course of the decade, ideas of social work in the region were rethought as emanating from Latin America’s own reality rather than borrowing models from industrialized countries (Healey 2008, 83; Parada 2007, 563). All social action was seen as having a political dimension. Healey (2008, 84) highlights the influence of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire on the reconceptualization of social work in Latin America, which was grounded in participation, organization, and consciousness-raising, moving away from the three accepted U.S. social work methods of casework, groupwork, and community organization.

Freireism and Boalism are acknowledged as the currents of thought behind the emergence of social circus in the 1990s in Brazil (Rivard, Bourgeault, and Mercier 2010, 182). During his exile in Argentina in the 1960s, Brazilian director and playwright Augusto Boal wrote his famous work *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which he further developed in Paris in the following years. In 1986, Boal returned to Rio de Janeiro to establish a major centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed. This coincided with the circus initiatives emerging in Latin America, mostly in partnership with theatre and social science professionals. The influence of his work on combining art and social change worldwide is widely documented (e.g., Jackson 2009, 306; Mills 2009, 552; Vieites-García 2015, 161).

The circus movement in Latin America thus came to be understood as having emerged at the intersection of Boalism and Freireism, the very intersection between art and social work that worried European participants at La Seyne-sur-Mer. The movement developed an attractive approach that captured the attention of NGOs and circus authorities, including Jeunesse du

Monde and Cirque du Soleil. La Seyne-sur-Mer marks the formal occasion when similar approaches came together, influencing one another and triggering the hybridization and separation of circus movements.

A Gap between Terminologies and Aims: From Professionalization and Social Transformation to Intervention for At-risk Groups

As discussed above, the predominant narrative points to Cirque du Monde and the assistential approach; several circus organizations have adopted the official narrative and terminology. Nevertheless, the objectives and principles of various organizations classified today as social circus seem not to be crucially affected; many of them are training artists at professional levels and occupy a central place in the development of contemporary circus around the globe, as will be further explored in the second part of the essay. They are indeed transforming the realities of children and youth across the globe.

At the narrative and institutional level, however, several additional forces are at play: on one side, the adoption of certain terminologies and categories in order to comply with funding bodies and bureaucratic language; on the other, the impact that such terminologies have on the collective consciousness. The combination of these factors works to diminish the real impact that social circus is having in breaking down cultural and political barriers and balancing the unequal global structures that resulted in the rise of the Western empire. If France rejects the term social circus because what it understands as art is more reputable and better funded than what it understands as social work, the opposite is true in Latin America and other geographical regions, where funding is more readily allocated to socioeconomic targets than art.

In the fundraising and formalization process, artistic language is translated into bureaucratic language. This was another crucial topic of discussion at La Seyne-sur-Mer where the religious and military connotation of terms such as “vision” and “mission” employed by social circus organizations was debated at length (PRICTS 2002, 6). Participants voiced their discomfort owing to the fact that their aims and ideals were not identified with such terminology, which was inherited from the donors’ lexicon (6). A question arises about the negotiations made by cultural organizations in the course of fundraising, such as the terminology used to describe their initiatives and aims. To what extent are these organizations able to safeguard their own lexicon and principles?

Social Circus: A Hybrid

More than a direct descendant of community circus in Europe or the work of Father Silva, then, social circus is the result of the hybridization of various approaches. Tracing the origins of social circus exclusively via Cirque du Monde and the global North neglects the role played by fundamental actors such as Latin America and so-called marginal groups. It also neglects the role of resistance against hegemonic structures of power and, in fact, reinforces these structures. The 1990s constituted a specific moment in circus development when an alternative movement arising in Latin America became organized and institutionalized. In the process of hybridization, the movement was translated into the narratives and canons of the North. The role of Latin America and so-called marginal groups in the emergence and consolidation of a circus movement has been overlooked and even neglected by official narratives. Distinctive elements of that approach, such as offering

professional and artistic training to peripheral populations and challenging modern ideas of art and social work, were removed during the construction of the hybrid and the appropriation of the movement.

Social circus is understood today in terms of an orthodox, top-down version of aid and social work, a program developed by those at the centre of sociopolitical and economic structures to help those in the peripheries. Latin America and other peripheral groups are once more portrayed as populations in need of assistance; they are regarded as the recipients, rather than the architects, of a circus movement. Children and youth, Indigenous groups, disabled populations, homeless citizens, refugees, and women affected by violence are all placed together under the category of “marginal” or “at-risk” populations, following the terminology used in traditional social work directed to children and youth (e.g., Follesø 2015, 243; Infantino 2011, 36). They are all portrayed as targets lacking in self-esteem and other psychosocial skills. The result is a hybrid and confounding entity that reflects hegemonic socioeconomic and cultural inequalities stemming both from the global North and the global South.

In spite of the different approaches and specific contexts, crucial similarities are observed between community, youth, and social circus: in short, they are all responses to limitations imposed on various groups across societies, and especially on those traditionally regarded as the other.

Looking more closely at the work of Reg Bolton, a pioneer of community and youth circus in the global North, it becomes clear that his intention was not to become a circus professional or circus performer; rather, he wanted to open the learning of circus skills to everyone. In reaction to a “repetitive and discouraging” experience as a student at L'École Nationale du Cirque in France, Bolton opened a summer circus school in Edinburgh in 1977 “that was, at least, fun” and different from his experience in Paris (Bolton 2004, 150). In the preface to *Circus in a Suitcase*, Bolton clarifies that his work was written “not for these already highly skilled performers, but for the thousands of individuals, young and old, who are trying circus skills for the first time.” It was an equal-opportunity book, driven by the belief that both girls and boys can and should do everything, and challenging the aesthetic standards imposed on gymnasts and professional circus artists (Bolton 1988, 19).

A similar testimony is provided by the cofounders of Circo Para Todos in Colombia. Their Intrepida Trupe was created with eight Brazilian “dissidents” from the National School in Rio de Janeiro (Pratt 2000). Looking for explorative approaches outside formal training, students left the Brazilian circus school to organize the collective of artists. Felicity Simpson, who also studied at L'École Nationale du Cirque in Paris, soon became disenchanted with the European style of circus; in looking for something different, she arrived in Brazil only to find that “the school was a copy of Europe!” (Pratt 2000).

Community, youth, and social circus in the globalized world speak to the confines of a professional sphere, including aspects such as enrolment fees, socioeconomic background, aesthetic style, physical attributes, race, and gender. They share elements of circus practice and a clear political agenda of fighting cultural and socioeconomic discrimination, which is reinforced by the modern art world. A final note on Father Julio Silva: his proposal shares many of the elements of social circus, including that of circus professionalization. More needs to be said, however, about the proposal functioning under the colonial structures of social assistance run by the church under charitable models.

Implications of the “Social Circus” Narrative in Colombia and Britain

In the cases of Colombia and Britain, social circus organizations have been crucial in both the development of contemporary circus practice and the recognition of circus as art in recent decades. Artists who were trained through these initiatives are now performing at professional levels. In spite of this reality, the official narrative of social circus remains powerful. In both countries, social circus is associated with specific populations or nation-states and undervalued through stigmatized preconceptions associated with low artistic quality and the poor, as this section further explores.

Social Circus in Colombia

Social circus is regarded as a constitutive part of contemporary circus in Colombia. The movement is reported as having been introduced to the country by foreign organizations sponsored by “international circus companies” (Villa and Pinzon 2011, 16). Social circus is described as offering circus training and professionalization to children and youth who have been overlooked by formal education systems (16). Organizations such as Circo Para Todos (Cali, 1995), Circo Ciudad (Bogotá, 2003), and Circo Momo (Medellin, 2006) are the most representative examples and all offer training programs. Circo Para Todos is the only professional circus school in the country (Villa and Pinzon 2011, 17; Ruiz and Ramirez 2013, 44; Forero 2014, 30). It offers four types of programs: community circus workshops, professional circus school, training for trainers, and a “bridge program” (*programa puente*) that supports graduates in starting their professional careers.

In 2005, Circo Para Todos updated its name to National School Circo Para Todos with the endorsement of the Ministry of Education, offering a four-year fully subsidized professional program. Applicants must complete an audition process, which assesses physical, acrobatic, and artistic skills. Circo Para Todos guarantees 70% of places to low-income groups, while 30% are allocated regardless of socioeconomic background. The program was designed by circus and theatre professionals and based on a thorough investigation of curricula from national circus schools in Cuba, Brazil, Canada, China, and France.

Graduates of Circo Para Todos now perform all over the globe in the professional and performance worlds. They take part in circus Olympiads and have obtained medals in renowned contests such as the Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain (Paris), the Wuhan International Acrobatics Art Festival (China), the International Circus Festival Circuba (Cuba), and the Circus Master Awards (Russia). They run their own circus-training programs in Colombia, France, Croatia, the US, and the UK. Those working with the production company Circolombia perform in various settings including the Roundhouse in London, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Cirque en Chantier in Paris, New Vic Theatre in New York, the Adelaide Fringe Festival in Australia, and the International Circus Festival in Rio de Janeiro. Graduates of Circo Para Todos regularly perform at venues such as Jackson’s Lane, the Place, and the Hippodrome in London. Others teach at the National Centre for Circus Arts, and those working permanently in London run training programs in artist and community centres. Graduates of Circo Ciudad have also performed with Zippo’s Circus (London) in their 2016 Hyde Park Christmas show. Those graduates interviewed for this research comment on their long history of performing in Colombia with La Gata Cirko and in various countries such as Italy, Cuba, and France, as well as auditioning to enter the national circus in Canada (although funding and visa issues prevented this). All of these performers are part of the pool of circus artists in Colombia and Britain, working in partnership with artists from all over the world, influencing and constituting the contemporary circus scene.



Circo Para Todos and Circolombia Performances and International Contests. © Circolombia and Circo Para Todos archive (2006–2012)

Social Circus in Britain

Social circus is a relatively new term in the “U.K.-based discourse” (McCaffery 2014, 33); community circus has historically been the term used to describe initiatives involving circus and nonprofessional performers (33). The term social circus is now increasingly applied to these initiatives. The most representative example is the Belfast Community Circus, which is classified today as social circus in both practice and academic literature (Bolton 2004, 164; Belfast Community Circus 2017). Social circus has recently attracted the attention of the UK media, where circus is reported no longer as “a romantic way of escaping the family and leaving behind conventional society,” but instead as “a way of preventing marginalised young people from dropping out” (Pickles 2015). In short, circus is now portrayed as offering an opportunity to join the system rather than challenge it. Emphasis is placed on the social impact of circus and the increasing number of scholars, or circademics, who are analyzing the socioeconomic impact of the form. Social circus is becoming a crucial means of demonstrating both the overall value of circus and its specific advantage: namely, its power to transform societies and to contribute to the social order.

Social circus is associated with determined populations and nation-states and located outside the performance world. The abovementioned article by Pickles (2015) reports the power of social circus as “particularly useful for young people in conflict zones and divided societies such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Northern Ireland.” On the other hand, the *Circus Diaries* blog clarifies that because the blog is “a website primarily devoted to circus performance,” little information is provided about social circus “where skills are used to benefit communities and the disadvantaged—to help people learn, grow and develop as individuals.” *Circus Diaries* identifies social circus as a “widening area in which circus-trained artists are working” (2016). The relationship with the professional world is established in terms of a job, rather than a constitutive part of artists’ or participants’ performing experiences.

Inspired by a visit to Ethiopia and research in Colombia and Brazil, the Roundhouse in London developed its street circus and youth circus programs directed at youth in the borough of Camden, with special emphasis placed on vulnerable groups. They offer circus training and a performance space for the local youth as a platform to either continue an artistic career or simply enjoy circus and artistic engagement. Even though the program follows the social circus methodology, different terms are used to denominate their initiatives. Similar programs are run by commercial venues and circus organization working with excluded communities in the UK. Circus administrators

interviewed for this research refer to those initiatives as “education programs,” which are described as similar initiatives to the work Circolombia is doing with social circus at the Roundhouse.

Various related terminology is used in Britain, and some confusion and contradictions have arisen as a result. For example, even though community circus and/or social circus are regarded as separate from the professional and performance worlds, organizations classified as such are described as offering professional and performance spaces. Community circus, for instance, has been reported as an influential movement in the emergence of the new circus of the 1980s (Selwood, Muir, and Moody 1995, 61). It is also recognized as the initial motivation for the Arts Council to invest in circus in the 1990s (53) when the contemporary movement began to emerge.

The Belfast Community Circus (BCC) is described as both a school and performance venue, providing circus workshops and professional training (Hall 2002, 13; Bolton 2004, 164; Belfast Community Circus 2017). In the 1990s, the organization was mentioned alongside Circus Space (today the National Centre for Circus Arts) and Circomedia as places offering circus training (Hall 2002, 13). BCC is recognized as a central actor in the emergence of the circus artists who gave birth to contemporary circus in the 1990s (13).

An increased number of professional and performing circus companies have chosen to incorporate into their work the desire to break down social barriers and transform the lives of performers, audiences, and communities. An example is Diversecity, a circus organization that involves the participation of diverse artists, hidden stories, silenced voices, and excluded talents, both at the level of circus training and performance, producing circus shows featuring a cast of disabled and non-disabled young performers without making clear divisions between them (Diversecity 2017). While these initiatives are not necessarily classified as social circus, this terminology is increasingly used to describe the combination of circus and socially excluded groups.

Social and Community Circus in the Recognition of Circus as Art

As suggested above, official descriptions and narratives attached to terms such as social circus do not correspond to the reality of the circus practice. Community circus in Britain and social circus in Colombia are both influential movements linked to the professional circus scene and the emergence of the contemporary circus. Moreover, they have played a crucial role in the recognition of circus as art, as well as in circus developments worldwide. The work of Circo Para Todos in Colombia and the success of its graduates performing across the world with Circolombia are among the main reasons for the Ministry of Culture investing in circus and recognizing circus as an artform (Sorzano 2018, 202).

A similar situation can be found in Britain with community circus and organizations such as the Belfast Community Circus. The Arts Council began to invest in circus and to open a place for it within the cultural sector in response to the community initiatives of the new circus movement of the 1980s. The performance element of the new circus was rather overlooked, however, when the Arts Council began to include circus within its cultural policies and funding (Selwood, Muir, and Moody 1995, 53).

In the twenty-first century, circus is recognized as art; however, further divisions and segmentations have taken place, and, with them, resistance toward and internal rejections of social circus. Not-

withstanding the close links between social circus and the professional world of contemporary circus, there remains a tendency for the art world to reject both individuals and organizations coming from the social circus movement. This resistance operates more at the level of narrative and ideology than that of real practice, where individuals with social circus backgrounds are indeed performing on professional platforms. In Britain, a circus administrator comments on the opposition raised by certain artistic circuits in Europe, and more specifically in France, to the programming of “social circus” groups in arts venues. Among the arguments provided, the participant declares “an eventual responsibility of the arts to resolve the problems that governments are meant to solve; together with questions such as: are they artists if coming through a social program?” (British circus administrator 1).

Fifteen years on, the discussion held at La-Seyne-sur-Mer prevails. When arguing for a separation between art and the “responsibility . . . to resolve the problems that governments are meant to solve,” the artistic circuit is not only neglecting the central role they play in social stratification and cultural distinction (Belfiore and Bennet 2008, 165–66) but also endorsing the place that modern societies have assigned to the so-called poor, vulnerable, and others as residual members of society (Hall 1992, 277–80). The responsibility for these people appears to lie with the church or the government, rather than society as a whole. Both in Britain and Colombia, a series of stigmas and stereotypes still exist. A group of contemporary artists in Bogotá refer to the “Cali school” as training gymnasts rather than artists, while they are looking for the kind of dramaturgy, dance, and integral programs offered by circus schools such as those found abroad. An amateur acrobat from an upper-class background commented on the absence of circus training in Colombia, mentioning the “Cali school” as the only option directed at “the poor” while s/he is looking for “quality” and “proper training” (Colombian amateur acrobat 1). One student participant returned to Colombia after finishing a degree in Contemporary Circus and Performing Arts at the Universidad Mesoamericana in México and decided to audition for Circo Para Todos. This student became aware of the Colombian school while studying abroad and joined looking for further circus training: “I think in Latin America it is one of the circus schools with a higher technical level; besides this, the social component makes it a more valuable venture for this country” (Colombian circus artist 1).

Further concerns are raised by circus administrators, mainly regarding the use of the “social” label as a mere fundraising or commercial tool. In Colombia, the director of a contemporary circus company commented on the various artists who come from the city slums and difficult backgrounds: “I have never used this information to raise money as many other organizations do. I work hard every day to dignify the artistic profession rather than presenting artists as ‘street kids’” (Colombian circus artist and administrator 1). In Britain, when artists from Circo Para Todos are seen performing with Circolombia at a professional level, the socioeconomic background and artistic commitment of these performers are rigorously questioned; for example, two comments from interviews with different circus administrators: “I have worked with them, and they are not all street kids” (British circus administrator 2), and “are they doing circus as the only option they had?” (British circus artist and administrator 1).

Varying evaluations of skill and artistic level are also made in Britain as found in testimonies provided by participants interviewed for this research. Adjectives such as “raw,” “crazy stuff,” and “messy” are attached to Circolombia’s performances, while the skills of their performers are reported as not being “at the level of the Russians or the Chinese” (British circus administrator 1). One participant describes Circolombia as doing “astonishing things,” although “very scary” and “a bit undisciplined in theatrical terms” (British circus administrator 2). On the subject of circus and its

distinctive characteristics as an art form, the same participant comments: “in circus there is no established way of doing things; in theatre you are very much bounded by sort of established methods . . . dance never feels like it is risking everything to me; there is too much discipline in dance” (British circus administrator 2). When another participant was asked how *Circolombia* is received by the contemporary scene in Britain, the answer was:

Mixed. Nobody doubts their skills and everyone thinks they are amazing, which they are, and it is a real spectacle and they have done so much in this country in terms of developing circus audiences. Contemporary circus audiences stay away from it because they went, “Oh! commercial.” It wasn’t playing to them, it was playing to a wide audience; and I think it is a bit of jealousy. (British circus administrator 3)

Several questions emerge regarding the criteria by which these artists and organizations are evaluated by the contemporary circus world. To what extent do professional artists in Colombia and Britain meet the standard set by the Chinese and the Russians? Is this the gauge by which a circus artist in the twenty-first-century narrative-driven form should be judged? Is the “messy,” “raw,” and “undisciplined theatrical style” a positive or negative factor when assigning value to a circus performance? Is this a response grounded in theatrical and dramatic canons, rather than the distinctive character of circus as a diverse, physical, and flexible form? Is circus professionalism being questioned here, or a specific aesthetic taste, or the socioeconomic and cultural background of the artists and organizations? And, finally, to what extent is this response a matter of funding and market segmentation?

In the meantime, while a particular subset of funders, arts managers, and artists debate whether individuals coming through social circus initiatives are artists or not, street kids or not, artists from *Circo Para Todos* performing at professional and commercial levels around the world respond:

What makes me an artist? A long process of ten years of my life invested in this endeavour and now I am seeing the results, and understand it is indeed possible. (Colombian circus artist 2)

For me, being an artist is to be on stage and make people applaud and when you come out after the show and they all say “Wow, that was incredible!” That’s the only thing that makes me an artist, right? (Colombian circus artist 3)

When asked if the “social” label had opened or closed opportunities in their artistic careers, answers lean toward:

No, people don’t even pay attention to that . . . people, artists, and society in general care about the quality of the show and how good you are on stage. . . . While those who manage the projects like circus schools, the consul, the venues, those who deal with the money, they must pay attention to that because it is what brings them benefits and what provides them something . . . but people in general . . . no way! How many years working here and I’ve never used the “social” story . . . some people are interested in hearing it and I told them, but people here . . . no way! (Colombian circus artist 3)

The above-quoted professional artist, named both in the literature and in the media as a street kid, vulnerable, marginalized, disadvantaged, at-risk, and poor, arrived at a similar conclusion to this analysis, summarizing straightforwardly and sharply the situation of social circus today: in short, it is a matter of funding and structures of power.

In another interview, an artist who had graduated from the National Centre for Circus Arts in Britain was asked if s/he considers him/herself an artist. They responded:

Yeah I'd like to think so. I don't know what makes an artist or not; I think I'm an artist of intention. I want to create art . . . at the end of the day, creating art is not that easy; well, because you have to sell tickets, is not that easy. . . . Art is a weird word. (British circus artist 1)

Art: a “weird word” coined in the European Enlightenment (Shiner 2001, 3), together with the “bourgeois modern aesthetics” (Eagleton 1990, 8) discussed above, is influencing both the practice of circus and its recognition in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: Is Social Circus the Other of Professional Circus?

This analysis of social circus and professional circus in Colombia and Britain suggests that the construction of the social–professional divide and the disputes between these two worlds have deeper roots that transcend the professionalization of circus as such. Social circus and professional circus are highly intertwined, as artists who came to the art form through social circus initiatives are performing on national and international platforms at commercial and artistic levels. The question, then, is to what extent the debate centres around professionalization—understood as training under a consistent program over a certain period of time, combined with a career trajectory in circus—and to what extent it concerns issues of class, otherness, aesthetic taste, and funding and commercial strategies. To what extent is this divide a result of social stratification and the perpetuation of modern sociopolitical structures of power, as maintained by the “grand narrative of art” (Wolterstorff 2015, 25) and traditional social work?

Social circus is becoming the other of professional circus at the level of narrative, discourse, and ideology. The definition of social circus and the social–professional divide, far from reflecting the real practice of circus, is operating more as a discourse; a discourse that produces knowledge through the use of language, entering and influencing practices while shaping new realities (Foucault 1980, 201–3). The term social circus was initially used in Latin America to denominate an alternative circus movement that emerged when circus and theatre artists encountered children and youngsters who had been excluded by society. Inspired by their attitude and energy, as well as their physical, intellectual, and emotional capacity for learning circus, these young professionals found a new way of practising their art form. The result is a consolidation of professional training programs offered to those traditionally labelled as deprived youth that also breaks down cultural and sociopolitical barriers.

A more horizontal and complementary approach is observed between participants and social circus organizations. A different relationship is also observed between Cirque du Monde and the Latin American organizations that worked with peripheral groups and facilitated circus professionalization in the early 1990s. Various forces emerged and worked to translate the initial meaning of social

circus; among these were the modern division between artistic, political, and social spheres, as well as the hybridization of the Latin American approach with similar programs found in the global North such as community circus and youth circus, both of which are defined as nonprofessional and outside of the performance world. Another factor was the consolidation of Cirque du Monde as Cirque du Soleil's corporate responsibility platform, supporting and investing one percent of their benefits in social initiatives around the world. The relationship seems to have been transformed at the level of narrative, funding, and institutionalization.

Social circus is understood today as social work rather than art, following a division established in the global North. Individuals taking part in social circus are referred to as marginalized or at-risk populations and portrayed as targets in need of assistance, following the lexicon of development programs applied in the global South. The result is an ambivalent category that combines global structures of power and the stratification of cultural practices according to the individuals' socioeconomic background. The social component dominates the narrative while the political component disappears.

Nevertheless, social circus is transforming the reality of peoples all over the world while also breaking down traditional socioeconomic and political barriers. The practice constitutes a palpable example of the emancipatory struggles of our times (Sousa-Santos 2016, ix) through its contribution to global social justice. However, the translation of the movement into the languages of the Centre and the North is diminishing both the transcendence of the social circus movement and the reality of circus practice as a whole.

Notes

1. Different terminologies exist to denominate the multiple transformations of circus across the ages. "Modern circus" provides the historical reference to explain the origins of circus "as we know it today" (Speaight 1980, 7). "Traditional circus" refers to the consolidation of the modern format over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—a general notion of circus as an organized sequence of animal and human skills performed under the big top. "New circus" is associated with a break with the traditional format in the 1970s: performances outside the big top and no longer displaying animals. "Contemporary circus" represents the most recent and striking transformation, where the circus totally breaks with the classic aesthetic, format, and content. This category is further divided into multiple subcategories such as social circus, community circus, youth circus, and many more.
2. This and subsequent translations are mine.
3. This and subsequent interviewees' citations are part of my doctoral research. Participants' identities have been kept anonymous and further information is provided in Sorzano (2018). The final version of the dissertation and amended pages will be available for open consultation at City, University of London in the second half of 2018 via <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk>.

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