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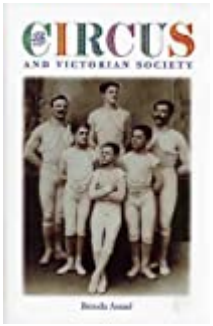

Brenda Assael. *The Circus and Victorian Society.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2005. 228 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2340-6.

Reviewed by Yoram Carmeli (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Haifa)

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Contextualizing the Circus

Lately, the circus has become a subject of growing academic interest. Brenda Assael's book is an important contribution that concentrates on the heyday of the circus during the Victorian age. Its aim, so we are told, is not just to fill a certain gap in historical writing on the circus, but "to link the cultural history of the Victorian circus with contemporary politics, religion, economics, and society in the widest possible sense" (p. 7). Many of the book's historical and contextual interpretations of the circus are indeed illuminating.

The book's main theme is introduced in the opening chapter, where Assael claims the circus is fraught with contradictions: "order versus disorder, transgression versus respectability, foreign versus familiar." Thus, the circus offers a vantage point for the study of the "contradictory and corresponding impulses underpinning the [larger] interplay between morality, censorship, individualism, the free market and the continuity of tradition" (p. 13). She explains the origins of the circus, its development from fairs, its performances in amphitheaters and in permanent buildings, the mobility of artists between shows and the instability of their working conditions, as well as the growth and rationalization of the business despite instability throughout the period. By focusing on "historically contextualized snapshots" (that is, by contextualizing different types of circus acts such as horse riding, curiosities, clowning, acrobatics), Assael is able to gradually consolidate her analytic themes. These include the role of the circus in the invocation of nationalist feeling; in the popularizing of politics beyond parliament; in elaborating on hierarchy as well as on individualism; in challenging the distinction between high and low culture; in its role in the civilization of laughter; and in the political and symbolic construction of the marginalized categories of women and children. The brief conclusion reflects on the book's methodology and main theme: "the circus presented a world inside the ring where riches were mixed with vulgarities, sawdust and tinsel.... Once revealed, that world evaporated into a fantastic, colorful, gaudy dream that was at once ephemeral and central to the Victorians and their world" (p. 155).

Assael's book makes use of a wide range of new documentation. The illustrations convincingly illuminate the text, while its language is clear and elegant. The book

assiduously and comprehensively links the cultural history of the circus and Victorian society, as promised in its opening pages. However, as is typical of a good scholarly work, the book deals with some necessary limitations and brings up some new challenges.

My first comment, thus, concerns the unavoidable limits of the material at the historian's hand. It also takes into account the possibilities open to the historian through a careful "backward" reading of material in a later age. Assael makes use of posters, municipal reports, newspapers, memoirs, woodcuts, etc. In a discipline that assiduously tries to expose details and get into the native's point of view, yet necessarily allows for the researcher's great imagination, Assael is often on a tightrope. She tries to say some things about circuses in general, but the documentation available is richer on big urban circuses than on peripheral and traveling ones. The less-documented reality of the back stage is particularly liable to pitfalls. The historian has not been there herself. One example is Assael's writing on the circus performers as skilled workers who "required constant training" (p. 6). A "backward reading" of contemporary anthropological studies might raise the consideration that, at least in the peripheral circuses, there had not been a need for that much training. (Perhaps the important secret of the circus was that there had not been that much practice in the circus, and that this "real" secret has been hidden from the outsider's gaze). Another example is Assael's talk about "real" danger in the circus, which is based on the writing of one (famous) acrobat. But perhaps this display of the back stage of the circus to a voyeuristic public ought to suggest a more critical use of documents produced from within. A third example is the place of the family within the circus organization. A reading in the anthropology of contemporary circuses points to the uniqueness of the labor intensive and self-sufficient circus family. This might provide an additional angle to Assael's discussion of the clown's poverty and circus economics. Furthermore, Assael mentions that some families presented themselves as families in the ring. A backward reading of circus anthropology would indeed show that at a certain stage the "family" turned into a main subject and theme of circus performance (leaving the question as to when this occurred). While this may draw the historian's attention back to the complex relationship between "back stage" and "front stage," and to the larger epistemological problems in studying the circus, it may also draw attention to the semiotics of the performance and to the significances that might have been embodied in a display of "family," such as time, repetition, and biography–themes which are not salient in Assael's analysis.

My other comment concerns the book's organization. Assael's decision to present her material through "contextualized snapshots" seems to have drawn her attention away from the exploration and analysis of the relationship between circus acts. A brief passage in the book's conclusion tells us that the "program may have seemed to be a collection of eccentricities but it demanded that contemporaries make sense of each one of them" and that "the process of defining and ordering [the circus acts] ... meant that the circus contributed to a system of knowledge that compelled and fueled the Victorian imagination" (p. 154). Brief and hardly validated, this argument seems to replace a more general treatment of the circus performance as text. In fact, the history and the crystallization of the circus's overall poetic structure could have helped in elaborating issues important to Assael. One such issue is the significance of danger in circus performance, which certainly goes beyond acrobatics (as in Assael's account), and underlies the presentation of animal acts, as well as circus "outsideness" and its legitimacy problems. Another example is the interpretation of the clown's character and the "clown's tears." Assael interprets the clown's famous sadness as originating in the clown's poor material and professional conditions. This point is quite surprising as throughout the book the circus performances are mostly interpreted from the spectators' point of view. (The spectators are not aware of the clown's condition, but still they perceive the clown as "really" a sad person.) A further analysis of the clown, and the way he is perceived by the public, could perhaps proceed in terms of the clown's dramatic character, his relationship to other characters, and the semiotics of his place in the show as a whole, rather then in terms of his "back stage" position.

One more challenge arises from the very richness and multifarious nature of Assael's interpretations. We learn that the circus had the dimension of a spectacle (*a la* Debord), yet it is a form of carnival (*a la* Bakhtin), in that it is transgressive yet serious; that it promotes both individualism and nationalist feelings; that it is both high and low.[1] While some of these contradictions and multivalent meanings are more convincingly elaborated than others, the sense of open-endedness and complexity, revealing as it is, leaves the reader with questions as to the overall significance of the circus in society. This comment is not a request for more solid descriptions or for more unequivocal "solutions." It is rather a plea for a higher degree of theorizing with regards to the structural

position of the circus within the larger social order. Is the circus unique in its combination of the high and low (or is it a case for a more general revision of the historians' argument)? If the circus is indeed an intersection of so many trends and significances, what is it that makes it such a unique intersection? How is the question of legitimacy related to other aspects of circus structural "outsideness"? It seems that the richness of details and the complexity of Assael's interpretations would perhaps be better grasped once such a macro-sociological view is introduced into future research.

There is, for instance, the general question concerning the relationship between cultural forms and their contextual boundaries. The historical origin of the circus in Britain, the complexity of British Victorian society, and the imperial status of Victorian Britain should not be confused with an analytic approach to place the circus in context. For example, in concentrating on the circus in Victorian Britain, the reader would like to know more about foreign influences on this circus, particularly French and American artistic influence as well as economic influences that are relevant for the period under discussion. These were aspects of the "international" flair of the Victorian circus, which, alongside its nationalist and imperial dimensions, was one of its major appeals. Moreover, an eye turned to foreign influences and contexts provides a comparative dimension that further illuminates the particularity of circus in its British context. At the same time, a comparative dimension might also disclose a meta-national layer in the significance of the circus as well as its "origins" and text. In her introduction, Assael tells us that "much of what was seen and appreciated by the [circus] public was experienced in terms of a universal human spirit" (p. 9), but she does not pursue this point in her work. This "universal" in the public experience may be deciphered through a structuralist analysis or an interpretive study of the public romance of circus. In either case it must be interpreted in terms of its historical context. The historical context of this experiential layer may well be beyond the particularity of the "British" and "Victorian" and lie rather in the "crisis of modernity" and processes of alienation, loss and nostalgia. Though Assael often refers to the "industrial world," "urban society," and "consumer culture," she does not deal with the crisis of modernity and is not explicit as to the disposition of the circus within this general, epochal process–which is perhaps the main starting point from which to proceed further.

Still, with the high quality of its research, its scope and enlightening insights, and its eloquence, Assael's *The Circus and Victorian Society* is highly recommended for professional historians, social scientists and culture critics, as well as for those generally interested in British history, and the history of culture and art–and, of course, for circus fans and lovers.

Note

[1]. Guy Debord, *Society of Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977); and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).