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REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN CARNIVAL AND RELATED PERIPATETIC SOCIETIES

by Marcello Truzzi & Patrick C. Easto

Unlike the American circus, which has attracted the attention of many (cf. Flint 1972), the American carnival --aside from journalistic accounts-- remains largely unchronicled (the major exception being McKennon 1972). There is an emerging body of analysis by social scientists (Bryant 1970; Cuber 1939; Dembroski 1972; Easto 1970 and 1975; Easto and Truzzi 1972 and 1974; Krassowski 1954; Nathe 1969; Perloff and Perloff 1977; Truzzi and Easto 1972; and Weingand 1977 and 1978), but intensive field work and solid comparative ethnographic analysis remains lacking. This essay does not attempt to fill that vacuum; rather, it is a modest attempt to give rather preliminary consideration to some of the taxonomic difficulties and to reflect on the likely place of carnivals in any general consideration of peripatetic societies.

The Peripatetic Society as a Constructed Type

Peripatetic societies, which we would prefer to term peripatetic communities (following the usual distinction between societies and communities common in the sociological literature), are essentially geographically mobile or nomadic communities. They can vary widely in terms of size, demographic composition, visibility, the character of products and resources exchanged with their visited host societies, whether they are welcome or unwelcome visitors, and in terms of the maintenance and permeability of the community's boundaries through interactions with their host societies. Thus, the analytic construct peripatetic society contains multidimensional components that likely need explication before productive comparisons can be made.

As typological category, then, the notion of a peripatetic society is actually a "fuzzy set," and might best be treated as a constructed type (cf. McKinney 1966 and 1970 on the process of typification), one which most empirical cases only approximate in a pure (perhaps even ideal typical) form. Following is an initial list of some of the dimensions that might be considered in cataloging peripatetic societies:

Some Dimensions of Peripatetic Societies

Variations in time:

- Age and historical pattern (revivals, ups & downs)
- Seasonal versus nonseasonal

Variations in space:

- Geographical distribution
- Rural versus urban
- Limitations in geography, culture, language
- Travel distances
- Migratory patterns (including some related nonmigratory forms, as in the case of amusement parks which are related to carnivals)

Characteristics of the peripatetic community:

- Demographic composition (age, sex, etc.)
- Internal stability, constancy versus regroupings with or into other peripatetic units
- Subgroups and denominations versus solidity/singleness

Characteristics of host community(s):

- Demographic composition
- Resources available sans peripatetics (within the host community)
- Resources available for peripatetics
- Resources needed by hosts

Relationship to host culture:

- Total institution (self-contained, insulated) versus total integration with host society
- Host culture and interchangeable resource center versus a specialized or even unique resource center
- Inferiors and Outcasts or Pariahs versus Superiors, Idealized & Romanticized
- Exchange with hosts favoring peripatetics versus favoring hosts
- Visible versus invisible
- Legal versus illegal functions
- Welcome versus unwelcome
- Seeking assimilation versus preferring isolation
- Distinct group language versus host language
- Internal recruitment only versus recruitment from host societies (e.g. running away with the circus)
- Mediating roles (patches, police, etc.)
- Common cultural characteristics: values (e.g. patriotism), language, etc.
- Significant cultural differences: values, etc.
- Issues regarding authenticity:
 - Of roles (frontstage/backstage variations for each)
 - Of products and resources exchanged

Functions of the interaction of peripatetics and hosts:

- Patterns of accommodation
- Symbiotic versus parasitic interrelations
- Manifest functions/dysfunctions for each community
- Latent functions/dysfunctions for each community

The American Carnival as a Peripatetic Community

The Carnival and Its Definition

The basic demographics about carnivals remain largely unavailable. Sorrows (1983:20) indicates there are probably well over 2500 annual fairs, and that the attendance for just the top 100 in the United States and Canada (for which some data sources are available) exceeds 54 million people. Krassowski (1954) estimated that about 85 million people annually attend medium-sized and large carnivals. Sorrows points out that over 2500 annual engagements are formally listed (presumably in Amusement Business, the "bible" of the outdoor amusement business), but these include only those of higher priority and exclude thousands of smaller bookings. Writers vary, but most estimates state that between 300 to 500 carnivals are currently operating in the United States. Size varies greatly. Small units, called "gillies," "rag bags" or "forty-milers" may consist of half a dozen trucks, but a large railroad carnival may include 45 double-length flat cars with up to 800 personnel. A reasonably large though typical carnival might include about 60 families.

Further complicating matters, the usual American carnival consists of various independent contractors (entrepreneurs, some of whom may own several attractions or concessions) who come together in different arrangements, sometimes for the whole season but also just for specific engagements. Thus, the carnival as a social unit for analysis is actually a cluster of sub-units which can aggregate into different forms; one cannot absolutely specify the necessary or sufficient ingredients for what must compose a carnival. An editor of Amusement Business pinpointed the problem in his discussion of estimating the number of carnivals:

Estimates range from 800 to thousands, and the larger number is frequently correct. That is, because whenever the...(independent) owner with two or three rides sets up for business, he has a carnival. The following week he may tag along as a part of a larger show, paying a percentage as an independent operator. But this week, if his name is Pinson, he has every right to call his little display "Pinson's Mighty Grand Spectacular Exposition Shows." (Billboard Publications 1969:55)

Like the "peripatetic society," the "carnival" is a constructed type, with the most recognizable instances being those clusters that include three major features: (1) riding devices; (2) shows or exhibits; and (3) concessions, including both games and refreshment operations (cf. Easto and Truzzi 1972). A "real" or "proper carnival" (from the standpoint of most carnival workers) would be expected to include these three elements.

A taxonomy of carnivals might fruitfully be developed. Such a taxonomy would include many, but not all, of the dimensions we proposed (above) for classifying peripatetic communities. That analysis, we think, would reveal that some would fit into analytic clusters that might match other peripatetic social forms in ways that would reveal analytic similarities now not apparent. Thus, carnivals might be revealed to have more analytic dimensions similar to, say, a group of craft exhibitors and concessionaires at a large annual Art Fair (which the public does not associate with carnivals) than they have to circuses (which the public often

confuses with carnivals).

The Carnival as a Deviant Work System

Much of the literature on the carnival has come from sources (particularly police) concerned with the need for social control of its illegal activities (e.g. Sorrows 1983; Patterson 1984 and 1985). In recent years, there have been several television documentaries dealing with carnival fraud (most notably the 1981 Geraldo Rivera report on CBS's "20/20 News Magazine"). One policeman, Captain Donald Patterson of the Cheyenne, Wyoming, police department, has even been giving training classes to various law enforcement agencies around the country and has put together a training manual on crooked carnival games.

As we have discussed elsewhere (Easto and Truzzi 1974), the carnival is a "marginally legal work system," one which neither fully conforms nor fully deviates from either legal or community norms. As such, we argued there (pp. 350-352) that the carnival system shares characteristics common to what we called "deviant," "outsider," "vigilante," and "conforming" work systems and that there has been a historical shift as the carnival has moved into greater conformity with legal and community norms. That analysis suggests that any analysis of the carnival as a peripatetic community must take into account the historical changes that have been taking place. That is, the carnival of 1890 may be analytically quite different from that of 1980.

Carnival Membership and Carnival Elites

Krassowski (1954:10-14) divided carnival actors into five categories: (1) the boss and his staff; (2) the ride operators; (3) concessionaires (owners and operators); (4) the owners, operators and performers of the side shows; and (5) families of the carnival workers. We (Easto and Truzzi 1972:556) choose to instead divide carnival personnel into four: (1) the show owner and other administrative personnel; (2) the independent ride show and concession owners; (3) performers; and (4) workers. Since then, we feel it would be useful to expand our categories to include two others. At the top, we have newly developing top administrative personnel who work for the owners of not one but several different carnivals, even heading what now resemble international conglomerates. These include professional accountants, lawyers, and similar personnel normally well integrated into the host society. At the edge, we now also have an emerging body of peripheral but highly relevant specialized suppliers including builders and creators of rides and new technology available to carnivals (even including such things as computerized photo printers for t-shirts and computer fortune tellers).

Recruitment patterns for carnival personnel clearly vary for these different categories. Workers primarily come from the host culture, and most performers probably came into the carnival world from other segments of the entertainment world (e.g. carnival strippers and comedians often came via burlesque shows). Independent ride and concession owners, however, frequently have their family roots in the carnival community. Similarly, a survey of 54 carnival owners (Easto 1975) indicated that nearly 80% started with entry into the carnival itself (with about 13% being born into a carnival-owning family) as opposed to about 11% who first entered from a circus background. Hard data on the entry patterns of carnival personnel is simply absent, but indications are that the boundary maintenance is relatively loose

and that permeability is greatest at the lowest (worker) level.

Carnivals, Circuses and Related Forms

Major Differences Between Circuses and Carnivals

We have previously noted several important dimensions of difference between the carnival and circus worlds (Easto and Truzzi 1972). (1) Unlike the circus, which is primarily a display of skills, with the audience acting as passive viewer, the carnival is an entertainment which seeks the active participation of its customers. (2) Within the general outdoor amusement industry, circus personnel generally are ranked higher in the stratification order, largely due, we suspect, to the quasi-legal and illegal activities that are part of the carnival (and which were once part of circus life as well, cf. Inciardi and Petersen 1972). (3) For the most part, circuses are under a single ownership whereas carnivals are made up of an owner-operator who has entered into contracts with independent ride, show, and concession owners. (4) The circus stays relatively constant in size whereas the carnival changes its size and content during the working season. And (5) whereas circuses have been declining in numbers during this century, carnivals have grown greatly.

Overlaps Between Circuses and Carnivals

Though the circus and carnival worlds are largely distinct, there are important areas of overlap. In fact, there seems to be more today than ever before. As we noted above, about 11% of carnival owners had their first entry through circus work. Performers (freaks and others) in the circus "side show" frequently also worked in the similar shows found in the carnival, there called "ten-in-ones." Some concessionaires (especially refreshment and novelty sales personnel) have had work experience on both carnivals and circuses. A few circus performers occasionally worked with carnivals as "free acts" to attract customers, and largely through those contacts, in recent years numerous retired circus performers have become involved with carnival rides and concessions. Finally, the advent of the amusement park has created some degree of internal migration between the various forms of outdoor amusement.

Other Related Forms

Today there are a large number of peripatetic social groups that are clearly related, both analytically and culturally, to the carnival. These would include: (1) forty-milers, those small mini-carnivals which do not include all three components usually considered necessary for a "real" carnival; (2) concession and craft groups that tour about and get booked into shopping malls; (3) medicine shows, some of which still tour rural areas; (4) small groups that play the school circuit, bringing such things as "donkey basketball" and special assembly programs of drama, puppetry, etc.; (5) roadside hawkers who set up sales of things like paintings on black velvet, plants or lobsters trucked in from other states, etc.; (6) buskers and street performers, including some groups of performers who go where other activities (like craft shows) are taking place; (7) flea market entrepreneurs, many of whom travel around from one to another; (8) personnel connected with state and local fairs who do not migrate but who regularly (annually) participate; and (9) workers at amusement parks, boardwalks, and other sedentary carnival-type

entertainment centers.

Social Change and Adaptation

As we have noted, carnivals have undergone substantial changes. There are strong indications that carnivals, like circuses in the past, are moving into greater respectability and integration with the host communities. In fact, a recent work (Sparrow 1983) pleads for carnival reform to "save" the true carnival. At the same time, the illegal operations within some carnivals have grown in sophistication and shown greater assimilation with modern forms of criminality (the old "patch" is to some degree being replaced by teams of lawyers). Modernization comes in all directions.

Economic changes are taking place. While there are forces towards decentralization, external pressures (e.g. state laws requiring ride inspections and similar controls) and internal pressures (increasing numbers of conglomerates) seem to be moving the carnival world into greater centralization. There is growing economic integration and adaptation taking place, with increasingly close relationships between some conglomerates and the banks. Finally, there is increasing internationalization, with some large carnivals sending units abroad for bookings and with foreign carnivals exchanging resources with American owners.

There appear to be growing technological changes impacting on carnival life. New developments in machinery and transportation are changing the travel patterns, and we now see truck convoys, CB communications, and other such developments in the carnival. Computers are finding their way into carnival life, too, both in regard to accounting and payroll/bookkeeping functions and in new types of computerized amusements and products.

Perhaps most noticeable, however, are the moves towards greater assimilation with and acceptance by the host communities. Many retired carnival workers have settled in "Gib-town" (Gibsonton, Florida), and this has given "roots" to many. Groups like the Outdoor Amusement Business Association (which even gives college scholarships to children from carnival families), the Showman's League of America, and the Greater Tampa Showmen's Association have tried to counteract the negative publicity given to carnivals by initiating a variety of community services. Along with these activities, there has been a growing integration of carnival personnel into the broader arena of show business (largely facilitated by the many star performers who now routinely get booked into the larger state and regional fairs).

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