Anthropologist As Clown

In June 1992 from Devries interviewed Yoram Carmeli, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Haifa in Israel, about his experiences in conducting research in a travelling circus in Britain. Carmeli was at that time a visiting Professor at Victoria College, University of Toronto.

ID: I'd like you first to tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to be interested and involved in studying the circus.

YC: I think that in much anthropological field-work there is a hidden side which is probably more directly related to the anthropologist's biography than usually is the case with other scientific work. For the more personal part, the circus initially attracted me as a musician. I wanted to study the problem of doing art, the experience of performing. The other part was shifting from sociology to anthropology. I taught sociology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and we had this positivistic kind of sociology, a theoretical discipline which very often sacrifices the holistic - both the holism of the individual and even the holistic view of the group or the community - in favour of categories and in favour of correlating dimensions, etc. This sociology is old-fashioned now but that was the sociology I was involved with, so I missed something more direct, and more synthesizing. The few anthropological works that I read from the English anthropological tradition attracted me. These were monographs about West African societies: Black Asante, the Nuer, and Meyer Fortes' work on the Tallensi. I liked these coherent systems. Of course, I was critical and theory made a strong case against that kind of anthropology, against the closed system approach, but I liked it a lot. There was something very aesthetic about it and it appealed to my artistic imagination. That's what attracted me to anthropology. In addition to this, there was this challenge which is now reality commonplace but at that time was quite new: that was an anthropology of modern society and anthropologists learning about their own society or at least learning about their own culture. I felt that if I did anthropology it must be an anthropology of modern society. So these elements combined. At the time I was a soldier in the Yom Kippur War: I had six months on the west bank of the Suez Canal. I reflect on what I was going to do intellectually. All three, together brought me to England, the 'home country' of classical anthropology.

ID: What happened then?

YC: That was a fun story because I came as a mature student. I was thirty five years old, and a fairly experienced sociologist. I registered at University College, London, as a graduate student to be supervised by Mary Douglas and I was about to start taking courses. However, after two months I realized that I wanted to get cut into the field. The department was flexible enough and, after examining me, allowed me to go and start my field-work.

ID: How did you find a circus to work with?

YC: It was Christmas and there was a circus on Clapham Common in London. So I came to the circus and went behind the ring doors. I tried to talk to people but they all discouraged me and said that no one would take me in the circus because I'm not familiar.

ID: Because you are not family?

YC: Because I'm not from a circus family and because, well, you see, outsiders come to circuses, for a week or for a few days, if they are journalists, and then go away. They're not very liked by circus people. (TV people are more acceptable because they provide a chance of being seen). But then they all told me about Gerry Cottle (who is Mr. Brown in my paper) and they said that Gerry Cottle might be interested because he is not from a circus family and is more open-minded than others. I met Jerry Cottle at the blackjack, where his circus was performing its Christmas show. When I offered my services as a cello player he said, 'Well we don't need a cello player but can you play a trumpet or saxophone?' We agreed that I would contact him when I was ready to play the saxophone. I bought a saxophone and started to take lessons in London. For five weeks I used to practice in spite of all my neighbors. However, you can't develop a habit in five weeks. When I came to the circus I talked to the band-leader's exam but Cottle agreed to take me as a tentman and that's where my Circus career started.

ID: Can you say something about the way in which the other people in the circus viewed you.

YC: In the beginning I didn't have accommodation in the circus and as long as the circus stayed in the London area I travelled every day to my work as a tentman. That kept me a little bit of an outsider and the relationship didn't crystallize, but once I had been allocated some space in the organizer's caravan, then circus people immediately had to categorize me. I said I was a student of the circus and that I wanted to write an Anthropology of the circus but that sounded strange. Besides, I was working on a tentman. But then again, although I was working and generally considered a tentman, some of the people knew about me supposedly being a musician or expecting to be a musician in the circus. There is a big cleavage in the circus between being a musician and being a tentman. They asked me but couldn't make sense of it. I was a musician, but worked as a tentman! Also because I wanted to be honest with them, I told them that I was going to write about the circus. So first they thought that I was simply one more journalist. They were suspicious, but gradually my tentmanship took over. I was a very good work, I also had this mystique of being an ex-tankman soldier who could handle difficult tasks. The performances, however, were not very cooperative. The issue of hierarchy was very, very strong in circuses. Either you were a tentman, coming as a draft from somewhere, going away to somewhere else or you were born to the circus. I was a tentman and I stayed.
Circus wedding

It was the day the circus came to the Town Hall at Weymouth, the day that unicyclist Roland Santus married 19 year old Anne Strawford.

ID: On the other hand, being a tentman must have given you the opportunity to view entire performances a number of times and get a sense of what the whole organization was.

YC: That's right. That could be done, also, from an artist's point of view, as happened to me later, but as a tentman I could learn a lot of things. For instance we used to crawl every morning underneath the seats to see what people dropped. That was an interesting experience. It was also interesting to see what the tentman tried to pick up and collect. I always give this story to students in my anthropology courses as an exotic example demonstrating how responsible anthropologists are as far as data collecting is concerned.

One morning, when we were crawling, my wife Big Brian found a lapel button and asked me, in his Yorkshire accent, "Read it to me, read it to me." I couldn't understand him at all at that time and he couldn't understand me. Eventually I said, "Read it yourself!" and he became very angry. Later I asked someone, "Why was Brian angry?" and they said, "Don't you know he cannot read?" I found out about Brian's illiteracy by actually confronting it. Later on, there was another case. We arrived in Portsmouth and he fell in love with a prostitute and really wanted to marry her. He kept dreaming about it, especially that the woman would cook for him. When we left, Portsmouth the girl was left behind, and then he started corresponding with her, but as he couldn't write his letters, the owner's secretary wrote letters for him. That was another proof that Brian could not read and write. Then there was another occasion when we came back to the Portsmouth area. I was driving a truck and he was sitting alongside me. Suddenly he identified something on the roads, on the traffic signs, and he said, "Oh are we around Portsmouth?" I said, "Yes." "Oh Fuck! I could find that girl!" That was another opportunity where I could see that Brian could not read and write. I had gone about this question of reading and writing by using a sociological questionnaire. Brian would have kicked out of his canvass. That's a good example showing how anthropologists can collect data so that it moves something. I could learn only these details about a tentman. I could, of course, also feel how heavy and tough it is to be a circus tentman. One day in the circus tenting parachutes and how things are composed from bits and pieces. It was very important to my own experience of the circus. As a tentman I had an opportunity for personal experience which I did not have as a performer where I had to cope with the pressures of other performers. I could experience the circus hierarchy from the bottom up. I also gained a sense of England from below, for instance being called "Boys," "Gentry's Boys," by T.V. people who came for some shots. I was one of the boys.

ID: Can you say something about the family connections in the circus and how that works at getting people jobs in the hierarchy. For example, to be a performer you really have to be a relative of people who run that particular circus?

YC: It's hard to be precise but that's fairly correct. There are...
time and thus reifying for the public an illusion of historical time, of relations, of community. That's what circus, or the tradition of the circus, tried to convey for a long time, till we came to the postmodern age. The modern circus started creating a unique genre which grew out of the traditional fair to establish something new which fitted into nineteenth-century experience.

ID: How did you find yourself filling into that as a participant observer?

YC: First of all, it was hard to be accepted because obviously if we talk about people who live by discommunicating themselves by displaying their "real" offstage life, then abhorring somebody from the outside becomes very problematic. These people's life experience involves having a family as a very important dimension. Their lives become in the family they lived and relate as subjects, have their own historical time, their own biographies, and themselves as a circus people. If someone tries to penetrate from the outside, to break in without being part of the family, in other words to erode the principle of the family, then this person erodes something very crucial to their life experience and to their survival. Thus it was hard to be accepted. It was also difficult for me to understand the very experience that I'm now talking about. These people speak through a character who trips on his own tools or hits himself by his own hand, by making self-referential movements which display him as not being aware of himself. English clowning is very much into slapstick. It's not reflexive or artistic like European clowning; it's into stupidity and the physically grotesque. Although I was a white-faced clown, which is supposedly the clown clown, the role was basically dominated by this concept of clowning. I tried to immerse myself in this experience of someone who forces the public with a display of being unaware of his own identity, objectified by his own doing. The clowning experience augmented the rest of my circus experience - this business of travelling from town to town as an alien, the sense of constantly presenting my being estranged or of my being on the outside. It was much more difficult to be a clown than to be a acrobat. Although, of course, it was an important experience.

ID: Can you make that specific in terms of being a clown?

YC: There were many layers which made my being a clown problematic. First of all, they hated my suggesting from lemmingship to being an artist. That's something which shouldn't be done. You can become a clown only if you are family. They hated my skills; I was a misfit and I could not want into some kind of proper role so they tried to sabotage my work in the ring (which was the performance). It was much more difficult to be a clown than to be a acrobat. Although, of course, it was an important experience.

ID: There were times when you left the circus and either went to the United States or back to Israel. What did they think of you over a period of time?

YC: I had become a clown and then, suddenly I'd leave. From their point of view there was something strange about it. I was so lucky, so successful, and yet I left. The second time that I left I sensed that the people started to believe my stories about being an anthropologist. At the same time the whole issue of my identity became less important because by coming and going I was less threatening. Later I realized I didn't really mean to be in the circus at all and therefore was not dangerous enough. Later on they thought that being a researcher was a way of life, a way of being weird, of being strange. That was a kind of solution because these people themselves lived the...
experience of being weird and I think at that point they could already relate to me, in some ways. Unfortunately the day came when I had to stop my field-work. I wouldn’t say "finish" because there is no end to field-work but I had to stop. When I felt that I was partially accepted and beginning to understand the "circuit" rejection of me and my own rejection of the circuit - it was also the time when I had to leave.

ID: Can you say anything about the background of the people who work in the circuit? Gypsies? Working class? Unskilled or semi-skilled? The bourgeoisie down on their luck?

YC: In many cases they or their circuit parents came from working class families. However, looked at from a public standpoint, circus people comprise a category of their own. They have the stigma of being vagabonds, which is an old tradition in England. It’s not even that they are working-class entertainers. The idea that they are associated with gypsies is bizzare. Circus people hate the idea and try to differentiate themselves from gypsies. That is seen by them as an externally imposed stereotype. They see gypsies as giving samaritan a bad reputation.

Basically, the circus presents a totally different life situation from the gypsies. In the popular imagination, gypsies are outsiders who ignore any social contract. They are people who come to stay, while the circus goes away once it has performed its acts. The circus doesn’t threaten society, nor present an alternative way of life. The circus is perceived as being constantly on the move while enhancing dominant values.

ID: Would you say something about the audiences? Was it similar in every town or did it vary?

YC: Of course it varied. When we performed in Portsmouth, Leicester, or Finchley Park in East London, we’d have this rougher kind of public. The reactions were different. When we performed in King’s Cross or in Barnet in North London we had this middle-class educated public. With "civilized families" coming, the reactions were different. There was lots of giggling as if they didn’t take it seriously. Circus is a whole thing as an ancestral thing, part of ongoing nostalgia in the working-class areas, or in mixed neighbourhoods where there is unemployment, and in Moreton town, the whole experience of being objected to was created to in a different manner. In a way it was a grossly living performance that it was in the middle-class areas. The circus is challenged even from outside. It is subtitled. There was much more tolerance there. You could even see it when the performer did their regular quirk. For instance, when performing "in the high wire" or when putting their legs on swords, they acted more carefully, more provocatively. For instance, during the Strong Man’s act, the performance the ringmaster challenged the public, "Is there anybody who wants to lift me?" Well, there was this very tall, very strong guy, who came and picked up the Strong Man’s weight. That was a very critical intervention which wouldn’t have happened in a middle-class area. But the Strong Man’s act captured by very simple, he tapped this guy on the shoulders and he took him, in full view of the public, behind the bars. He needed him a Strong Man as well, rather than turning himself into an ordinary human being.

ID: So what is the essential uniqueness of circus?

YC: Circus differs from other genres in its claim to present the "real." In creating a sense of its own reality. In this respect it rejects the clear Illusion and presence which are incarnated in fairground games, and yet it is not a performance like a rock concert or a theatre show. The circus performance of the real has its particular characteristic. It is not simply that the circus performs real, rather that it seems itself to be subject-subject. When I was talking about circus performance of life-communication and self-reflectionation, that’s what I was trying to describe and it can be done very simply. You don’t have to be a great performer, perhaps even the opposite. If you’re a great performer you spoil the whole show, because if you try to attract a public to the way you perform, then it’s already clearly in play, just a performance act and not the happening. One of the secrets of the circus is that there is no secret. The public has high expectations of the English circus. That’s an important part of the significance of the circus, the idea of the form of families and a long tradition, beyond history and time. That’s what objections is about. But to do that, to create this imprecision, doesn’t uphold - and as a matter of fact somewhat contradicts - the notion of performance and the role even the criteria for good and bad performance. The public is not called to judge the performance. The public doesn’t want to judge it. It is not interested in how elaborate the act is; it just wants to see this subject/object play and display, and to have an experience which can be revealed by very simple: he tapped this guy on the shoulders and he took him, in full view of the public, behind the bars. He needed him a Strong Man as well, rather than turning himself into an ordinary human being.

ID: What is the circuit of the rich or its evolution metaphorically in different ways? It’s been painted, photographed, unencapsulated into works of literature. Yet in some important respects it sits outside the concerns of most artists or of most novelists. I wonder if you can say something about that.

YC: I want to relate both to academic and artistic interest - or lack of it - in the English circus. When I first tried to write about it I was looking for other writings about circuses and I couldn’t find any serious academic material. You can say that the circus is no successful in being outside, in presenting itself as the epitome of being outside, that it readily rejected researchers who wrote about serious subjects. This way - according to my understanding - they were actually playing to the public and not participating in the performance, in keeping the circus outside. At the same time, on the continent, Europe things seem to be different. This is true not only for academic but also for artistic interests. It’s interesting that the high culture relationship with the circus is much more developed on the continent than in Britain. There the circus is more of a play, performed by ordinary human beings. The European circus is more prevalent or attractive as a metaphor of all of that. Of course, that circus is still a marginal phenomenon and it encapsulates modernity, in the sense of searching the search or longing for totality; it’s alienated, and a metaphor for the experience of alienation. But in order to be observed and used as a metaphor circus needs to be more apparent, more conspicuous. In England, according to my experience, circus people are considered as outside the special order in such a way that has fundamental way that excludes them even from counting as subject for scientific or artistic "metaphor." This in itself is a very interesting research question.

ID: Is there a post-modern English circus?

YC: There is, but the concept raises difficulties. The Circus Arachne version is typical. When I saw the production two years ago it had so much "Englishness" in it, and it sort of exploded what the circus always contained in itself and presented by being outside society. Circus Arachne explodes society by exploring the circus’s significance. But once you’ve seen it, that’s enough. You’re not likely to go and see another Arachne. If you want to go and see children to see it in order to watch how they continued your own tradition, nor how you would grow up, compared to your children. That is something that the traditional circus provides by being the same, by not changing. But this doesn’t work. And in a way it blew up and escalated the old circus experience. There are other ways of post-modernizing the circus. So far these have been no greater purchases, but which should be somehow related to the particular English context.