

Direct Your Attention to the Center Ring:

**P.T. Barnum, the Railway Circus, and
The Shaping of American Culture**

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The end of the nineteenth century ushered in innumerable changes for the United States. Two closing decades led to triumphs in nearly every aspect of life. Science, industry, and commerce exploded on the scene creating fortunes, vaccines, and easy and uneasy international relations. Affluent Americans during the twilight of the nineteenth century used their influence and money to build the world that they envisioned. Historians can find very little to agree about the nature of this change. One aspect of the new way of life that has more in common among authors is the American circus. One of the tools that shaped the American perception of their world was the traveling circus. Historians have just recently begun to investigate the impact that these events had on American Culture. While many agree with each other on most aspects, some opposing viewpoints erupt within specific examples; in this case the professional lifestyle of P.T Barnum.

Barnum's involvement in the circus world and general world renown can be used as a particular example of the duality of the American circus culture. On the one hand there was fame and fortune to be made on the rails with these shows, and on the other there was deceptive ways to control the American perception of peoples that were all essentially non American. These issues have only garnered scholarly study recently in the scheme of the circus' existence. What aspects of this culture do scholars agree on? Generally the consensus is fairly agreeable, but the particulars of matters still reveal contention within the literature.

One of the most agreed upon facet of the American circus is how the uniformed rail gauge established in the late 1860s facilitated great change for the United States. The continental country, originally connected by varying sizes and gauges of track, was

finally linked by a standardization of track. The lifeline of America was the railroad, and soon anxious individuals would use it for another purpose. People shipped goods, and themselves, by rail, but nothing that traveled those railways shaped American popular culture quite like the American railroad circus.

The circus brought the world to a city. A canvas tent brought the farthest expanses of the exotic to small rural towns and large established urban areas revealing with each new stop the riches of the world. Janet Davis prefaces her 2002 book *The Circus Age* with a story on the circus setting up in Austin, Texas. She recounts how the modern twenty-first century city took little notice of the circus setting up. This is notable she says because the circus arriving in any town a mere century before would have shut the entire town down. Only a hundred years before, everyone in the city came out to watch the circus set up.

Davis really leads the way with exploration of what the circus meant to the common American. They could see the roustabouts working to set up the big top. These men were the real world toil that the common man saw everyday. What was different was when the canvas was stretched. Under the tents was a whole new world. Exotic people and places were controlled and exhibited in three rings. Just as quickly as it arrived and set in place, the circus would quietly take down and leave for another city. Most authors feel that before one can understand the how complete the circus' influence on human consciousness, the roots of the railway circus must be explored.

One man is credited with bringing the circus to rail, as well as fathering American Popular Culture: Phineas Taylor Barnum. Other entrepreneurs carried their shows by rail only through agreements with engineers and third party trains. Barnum was the first to

purchase his own train for his traveling circus. With very few paved roads in the late nineteenth century, this proved paramount for Barnum's success.

Barnum is known as the prince of the humbug, as an exhibitor of fakes and freaks in order to swindle the public. Several authors paint a different portrait of Barnum, at least in the beginning. George Chindahl notes that in the various guises of show titles that Barnum used, the word "circus" is always located in a "subordinate position," if he even included it at all. Barnum was busy trying to build and perfect a permanent exhibit of natural history and his circus played up on the museum effectively acting as an advertisement for his own Hippodrome.

Barnum spent the end of 1873 in Europe, visiting European Circuses and Zoological Gardens.¹ The following year Barnum built his first stationary circus between "Fourth and Madison Avenue and 26th and 27th street."² Today that piece of real estate sits beneath Madison Square Garden. Only a relatively few people could make it to Barnum's Hippodrome in New York compared to the entire country. So Barnum used everything at his disposal to take it out to the masses. Calling his undertaking "Barnum's World Fair" the businessman took his exhibits to the people of the United States. A traveling version of the Hippodrome, with the same name, hit the rails in 1875. Barnum used the title "Greatest Show on Earth" for the first time during the 1876 season.³

¹ Martin, Edwin, and Don B. Wilmeth. *Mud Show : American Tent Circus Life*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 227

² Ibid.

³ Chindahl, George Leonard. *A History of the circus in America*. (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1959), 96

Over the course of the next twenty years the circus attempted to bring in profits by exhibiting the most exotic, strange, or fascinatingly interesting people and animals on the planet. This “golden age” of the circus brought Asiatic tigers to small towns in Nebraska, and Borneo Headhunters to the plains of Texas. Suddenly, the general populace could get glimpses of the world. They were relegated to looking at it through the specific lens of the American Circus, an instance that is not without importance.

Originally circus’s were small “Dog and Pony Shows.” Small and unassuming, they featured relatively tame instances of horsemanship and trained canines. The popularity of shows such as this waned around the turn of the century, and had all but disappeared by 1915.⁴ In order to compete with other shows, these small venues grew more elaborate and sophisticated. Once they succeeded, they ceased to be simple dog and pony shows and moved onto the next level: the exhibition. Barnum invented the business model for the exhibition, according to Wilton Eckley’s book, *The American Circus*. “He [Barnum] had the charisma, the nerve the sense of the dramatic, and the clear understanding of what people desired for their entertainment.”⁵

Another man stepped up to fill Barnum’s showmanship template even before Barnum’s death in 1891. William F. Cody did not create the traveling wild west show, but lending his famous moniker, knack for storytelling, and personal relationship with many of the show’s Indians, he made it his own. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows drew in throngs of spectators wherever the show set up. For every visitor that had actually seen an

⁴ Chindahl, 87

⁵ Eckley, Wilton. *The American Circus*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 14.

Indian outside of the show, there were innumerable others whose idea of “indianness” came straight from the acts portrayed during Buffalo Bill’s shows.

Chindahl sums up the general nature of a Wild West show by listing the playbill for a show in Washington D.C. on Easter Sunday 1911: “The National Anthem...introduction of the congress of rough riders of the world by Buffalo Bill; review of the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians, cowboys, Mexicans Singhalese, Dahomeyans, scouts, guides, veteran members of the U.S. Cavalry, cowgirls, Australians, “Bushmen,” Arabians, Japanese and Cossacks.”⁶ Clearly, as much of the world as could be held under a tent, was shown in these shows.

One of the most dynamic, popular, and psyche shaping shows presented by the circus was (and still may be) the ethnography. Exotic animals became more common after the turn of the century with the advent of American zoos, so something “extra” had to be included to keep the scores of paying customers visiting the canvas cities. Other bits of the 1911 show in D.C included “camel caravans, trained elephants, oriental athletes, marksmen an numerous other curiosities.”⁷

Cody built towards the heavens on Barnum’s earlier success and foundations of the traveling show. John Betts addresses “A zoological and ornithological ‘Institute’” touring the southern states in 1872 with no mention of the word “circus.” This “Institute” along with its normal freaks and curiosities exhibited “Fiji cannibals, Modoc and Digger Indians, and representatives of Chinese, Japanese, Aztecs and Eskimos...cages of

⁶ Chindahl 120

⁷ Ibid.

alligators, crocodiles, sea lions, snakes, and a rhinoceros, in addition to other animals, attracted huge throngs.”⁸

Was the circus as current application labels it Barnum’s intended undertaking? According to Betts playbills and posters variously describe Barnum’s show as a “zoological garden, Polytechnic Institute, and Coliseum of Natural History and Art.”⁹ Did Barnum intend his traveling exhibits as something more serious and scientific than a circus, even while he displayed fake Fiji mermaids and two headed animals back in New York? Was he aware of the power that the circus would wield over popular consciousness?

In a 1973 biography of Barnum, Neil Harris devotes two-thirds of the book to Barnum’s attempts at working with, and then in competition with the American Museum. According to Harris’ arguments, Barnum originally set out to add to true and scientific knowledge of his time. The circus, however “guarantee[d] him immortality...[and was] the Climax of his career.”¹⁰ Harris also mentions that geography may have helped shape Barnum’s circus days. The ancient cities of Europe, long established metropolises were large enough and wealthy enough to house large, permanent exhibits. Thousands visited these exhibits, whereas back in New York there were only hundreds. Not to mention most European countries were the size of American states. “No American town was large

⁸ Betts, John Rickards. P. T. barnum and the popularization of natural history. *Journal of the History of Ideas* (20, no. 3, 1959), 360

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Harris, Neil. *Humbug; the Art of P.T. Barnum*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 235

enough to support a permanent circus, the way Paris or London could, so the American companies concentrated on travel.”¹¹

Familiarity breeds contempt and as competition between circus companies increased, so did the pomp, circumstance, and pageantry. According to Harris, “A large elephant went for forty five hundred dollars, and the infant hippopotamus brought twenty-five thousand dollars, but tigers, lions, and leopards were averaging only six hundred dollars each, monkeys could be had for eight dollars apiece, and the tapirs, hyenas, and kangaroos had to be withdrawn from the sale entirely.”¹²

A market flooded with common exotics, was a market in need of change. The aging Barnum and the infant circus needed something new and exciting. In 1880 James A. Bailey’s London Circus was both. Bailey began to beat Barnum on the American Circus home field. Barnum could not beat Bailey, so he proposed a joint venture. Barnum signed on with Bailey and James Hutchinson for fifty percent of their profits to match his fifty percent capital deposit. Contractual verbiage indicated that Barnum would mainly “use his influence and abilities...talents, knowledge and experience” for publicity.¹³

Publicity makes the showman, and Barnum was always better at publicizing than keeping things together. Nearly all of his stationary endeavors met a fiery end. A proliferate marketer in days before marketing, Barnum sold the American public on the circus. If publicity makes the showman, what makes the publicity? What makes people

¹¹ Harris, 237

¹² Ibid, 247

¹³ Ibid, 250

listen, and pay heed to, the showman? How was Barnum able to convince so many people to spend money on his attractions?

A more recent chronicle of Barnum's life by author Buford Adams says that it is celebrity. Following Barnum's death in 1891 the *Washington Post* eulogized Barnum as "the most widely known American that ever lived."¹⁴ Barnum brought people the world, and they remembered him for it. Shows like "Civilized Nations" and "Ancient and Modern Monarchs" began to reinforce ideas of Anglo superiority in general and American Superiority in particular. Later "Cannibals, Nubians, Zulus, Mohammedans, Pagans, Indians, [and] Wild Men...all signified racial types 'that can never be effaced.'"¹⁵ Suddenly, and maybe not so surprisingly, circuses began to lean toward exotic humans instead of the customary fauna. How that new fauna was portrayed shaped the beginning of the twentieth century.

The capabilities of the American circus after Barnum's death were nothing short of spectacular for its time. The American circus grew from a fledgling enterprise into a Frankenstein that shaped public opinion and American worldview for decades. Barnum did not create the monster, but his expertise certainly saw that it was invited, and welcomed with open arms to nearly every city that was large enough for a circus to set up in. The Big Top was the canvas home of this new world portrayal, and these parades and ethnic congress shows reinforced old stereotypes and create new ones.

¹⁴ Adams, Bluford. *E Pluribus Barnum : The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1997),1

¹⁵ Ibid, 182

The railroad circus embodied and articulated the tensions of a culture at the crossroads of Victorian and modern eras. Work for the circus was divided neatly into separate spheres of propriety and racial hierarchy. On the outside, everyone was invited to partake of its riches, provided they paid the fee. The turn of the century was more than an outgrowth of a stuffy often out of date philosophy, it was a new beginning, with old roots, but with everything branching into new forms of old ideas. According to Janet Davis, 1898 was an extremely important year for the American circus. Here, seven years after Barnum was gone, another prominent circus proprietor named Peter Sells revealed the circus as a new medium.

The turn of the century marked the first time that such a showman stressed the moral, political, and economic dominance of the United States in world affairs.¹⁶ The major event that gave proprietor's such as Sells that authority was one could not have been further from the Big Top: the Spanish-American War. Through Sells, Davis reveals that the war was an "object lesson" that would cause tyrants to tremble while instilling hope within the oppressed.

Circuses had staged ethnical dramatizations before, smaller theatrics mainly involving Chinese and Indian participants. What is different after the Spanish American war was now, the circus made larger claims about the capacity of the United States for world leadership. At first, the circus seems like an odd place to go to see where the United States stood on the world stage, but Davis argues that work within the U.S. foreign relations teams bolstered circus proprietors assertions. Sells was no doubt

¹⁶ Davis, Janet M. *The Circus Age : Culture & Society Under the American Big Top*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 192

adjusting his shows to fulfill what Barnum and Bailey programs promised: shows that were educational, “uplifting” and able to “instruct the minds of all classes.”

Davis is the first historian to argue that circus provided concrete “translations” of foreign relations that, to most people, were abstract ideologies. Were else could an average American meet “Strange People from Our New Possessions” except Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. What else besides the circus could instill American Imperialism and American Isolationism at the same time?

Circus managers took as great a care in choosing what events not to dramatize, as they did displaying the finest pageantry. Scenes from the Civil War and the Mexican war are significantly absent. These wars not only reminded the nation of its slavery past, but also were extremely difficult to sell. Any Civil War battle, and there were a few dramatizations, had to be chosen carefully, and usually could not be shown again in a neighboring town. All this depended heavily on how far from and which side of the Mason-Dixon line the show was performing.

Sweeping, all-encompassing generalizations made significantly better and more profitable showing. Forepaugh and Sells circus opened a 1905 show with a pageant of men dressed in uniform from every American war. The program never indicated whether the Civil War soldiers were Union or Confederate. Davis argues that lumping the Civil war in with other American wars neutralized it somewhat. Now the Civil War could safely be portrayed to individuals as an “undifferentiated part of the nation’s historical march to the present.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid. 200

Besides diluting unpopular memories, circuses also spent extravagant amounts of money to reenact major historical events. The Kiralfy brothers spent \$500,000 to recreate Columbus discovering America. Linking, in Davis' mind American soil to later nation building. A stance that may seem odd at first, but for one simple fact about the Kiralfy brothers: they were Hungarian immigrants.

Not to be outdone, Barnum and Bailey spent three-quarters that price to produce their version of the same show. Their show ends with Columbus "taking possession" of the New World from bowing Native Americans. Watching the epoch of a nation and the steady plunge of progress cost just the price of admission. Contemporary nationalism was revered in the origin narratives of the American Revolution. Not only did these shows, increase American patriotic pride but reinforced common held folktales. One political play noted by Davis was "The Death of Major Andre, and Arnold's Treachery: or West Point Preserved, Three Acts."¹⁸

Unlike the Spanish American War, the American Revolution was fought between two Anglo countries. The present allows for a broader shaping of the historical narrative. Davis indicates that the American Revolution was framed in contrast to the French Revolution. While the American mob was quite passionate, they were markedly unlike the "French firebrands who massacred members of the aristocracy during the Reign of Terror in 1793, there American revolutionaries merely destroyed a statue of George III, not the king himself, nor did they force a wholesale transformation of the social fabric."¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid, 202

¹⁹ Ibid.

Now, not only were American's players on the world stage once dominated by Europeans, but they also came into the show much more dignified and level headed.

The circus narrative continues for those who can follow the thread. Davis analyzes the Indian Wars within that national narrative context. "Foes in '76 –Friends in '85" read posters for Little Bighorn reenactments. Many portrayed a well-armed Buffalo Bill proudly shaking hands with Chief Sitting Bull. Again, the American nation had conquered a native people. At least at this point the Indians were not bowing to Cody as they had to Columbus.

This thread reveals more than just Indian affairs. This was the training ground for American Imperialism. Speaking through Walter Williams, Davis indicates that the U.S. government's relations with Native Americans during the nineteenth century, and especially the Supreme Court's Ruling in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831, provided the United States with a model for governing colonial subjects."²⁰ If Williams is believed then Native Americans are the Ireland to America's England. These shows repeated as the Spanish American War gained in popularity with American Expansionism. The same battles portrayed on new grounds, the Cherokee and Hunkpapa Indians replaced by the Filipinos and the Spanish. Ironically the same Native American actors that portrayed themselves in earlier narratives portrayed these new foes. This, says Davis, allowed spectators to witness living symbols of the continuity of U.S. expansionism from the comfort of American Isolationism.

Eckley and Chindahl point out that at this point in popular circus shows, highly made-up Irish immigrants looking for some form of work played many of the "natives".

²⁰ Ibid, 205

While these “authentic” west shows did portray the story of America by assumingly un-authentic participants, the result claims Davis was the same had all the cases been born and bred parts.

By the time political instability lead to war in the Philippines the American Circus and Wild West Show had become so popular that one account says: “The theory of the Administration is that the trouble in the Phillipines in like the Wild West show. It isn’t war, but it looks a good deal like it”²¹ The circus was now mainstream enough to be used as a metaphor for war by politicians.

This little quip, although aimed at the Administration of the United states is also telling of the views on the circus from the upper class. From this sentence the understanding of the superfluity of the wild west war and empire narrative was clear. At least those running the country were aware that the dramatizations were nowhere near authentic, but at the same time they did “look a good deal like it.” For Americans of all classes at the turn of the century, that was good enough.

If things at the circus were close enough to reality, then the power of the ethnological congresses cannot be understated. Davis writes, “At the ethnological congress, showmen portrayed men of color living lazily in “sun-kissed” lands, while their female counterparts labored.”²² This and similar episodes, reinforced what Americans had seen in the Mexican and Spanish-American war. Male idleness and female labor was the strongest indication of human primitiveness. Other authors have remained silent on this type of negative reinforcement, leaving the discourse extremely

²¹ Ibid, 208

²² Ibid, 206

sparse, but Davis' work gives a strong cultural foundation for historians to build on in the future.

There is a stark contrasting view to Barnum and his circus legacy presented long before Davis began her work. In 1959 John Rickards Betts wrote an article for the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. The article specifically deals with Barnum and how he popularized Natural History. Betts work analyzes Barnum in an interesting light. At once, Betts portrays Barnum as a sincere scientist/showman and out to make money.

Betts shows that Barnum in 1866 “cunningly related natural history to education, scholarship, religion, science, and culture.”²³ The reality, according to Betts, was before Barnum's established museums, there were rag-tag attractions for traveling shows. “Only after the civil war that zoos and natural history museums were established on a permanent basis...enabling circuses to quarter their animals or dispose of carcasses.”²⁴ This logistical approach to the history of circuses is an entirely different point of view than any author has taken with the subject. Natural history exhibits were the precursors of ethnological congresses. Before “the only native Ubangis exhibited in the United States,”²⁵ Barnum exhibited the only “live exhibition of black dromedaries [camels] from Nubia.”²⁶ When was this shift between animals and ethnicities? Not one author has been able to pinpoint that specific timeframe; few have tried, most just ignore the issue.

²³ Betts, 358

²⁴ Betts, 359

²⁵ Davis, 237

²⁶ Betts, 360

Betts' attempts at keeping Barnum scientifically credible is usually overshadowed by Barnum's own "Yankee shrewdness." Barnum writes of his partners, "they are *showmen*—intent only on pushing the skin for profit."²⁷ Betts places this letter right before Barnum's discussion on castrating a problem elephant. A Smithsonian Naturalist had never heard of such a procedure, but Barnum promised that if the beast were killed that the museum would get the skin and/or skeleton and that the Barnum museum at Tufts College would get "whatever was left." But, according to Barnum *they* were the showmen.

Adams is less generous with praise to Barnum's ingenuity. Barnum priced the lower class out of the Lind concerts, and some of his more elaborate shows. Those shows were specifically aimed and designed for the high rollers that Barnum hobnobbed with around the New York museum district. "Barnum could legitimately claim a popular patronage," wrote Adams in 1997, "bigender, cross-class, multiethnic, and variously-aged—at his American Museum."²⁸ The classes crossed were only the middle and high, according to Adams, and he writes that Barnum believed that the newly educated middle class would bring that education "to the masses."

Following the 1865 fire that destroyed yet another Barnum museum a letter appeared in *The Nation* accusing Barnum of "unscientific exhibitions, disreputable patrons, and profit driven fakery."²⁹ Adams examines this critique in detail revealing that the gentry driven scientist of the late nineteenth century were trying to reform science

²⁷ Betts, 364

²⁸ Adams, 75

²⁹ Ibid, 79

after the Civil War. They wanted to change the very definition of ‘museum’ according to Adams. “They crafted museums that were public, but not popular...[and] remembered the [Barnum’s] American Museum as everything they were trying to avoid.”³⁰

Adams explains Barnum’s detachment from stationary museums to traveling showman with fire. He writes, “Only after the destruction of his Museum and his reemergence as a proprietor of traveling shows that Barnum succeeded in staging his international congress.”³¹ Here is the genesis of the ethnologies that Davis and others spend so much time studying. Adams argument reveals that the disconnect between scholars like Betts, writing about Barnum as museum man and Davis writing about Barnum as culture shaper is not a literary disconnect, but a true disconnect within the character of a man, and the nature of the traveling show.

If Barnum was as reputable as Betts claimed in 1959, what was it that the American Gentry was trying to avoid? The best example examined by Adams is Barnum’s Lecture Room. Originally designed as a hall to lecture scientist and public on exhibits in the museum or newly acquired goods, they quickly devolved into “museum theatre.” Barnum started producing plays in his lecture rooms, which led one popular opera manager to claim “that almost every U.S. city had its ‘theatrical traps,’ which ‘cloak themselves under the name of Museums.’”³² Reviled by the elite, these theatrics tarnished some of Barnum’s scientific shine. Smaller curiosity shops, roadside museums, and things like Ripley’s Believe It or Not continued to draw lessons from Barnum,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 167

³² Ibid, 116

eventually shaping America's newest form of culture industry: vaudeville. Adams is the only author to bridge the gap between circus king, museum and vaudeville. This interpretation gives an unbroken line from today's popular culture all the way back to P.T. Barnum.

What kept scholars like Betts from seeing the connection back in the 1950s? Adams attributes it to focus. "Twentieth-century scholars, however, have tended to pay less attention to the masses who embraced museum theatre than the elitist who reviled it; it is only recently that critics have begun to take the form seriously."³³ Knowing where to look and what accounts to listen to are key to Adams new interpretation.

Betts follows the relationship between circus and museum more closely than either Davis, Chindahl, or Adams. This is most likely due to Betts focus on Barnum in particular; as he had quite the relationship with museums in and around New York, as he actually own the Museum of Natural History for a time. In fact, Betts states that during the last years of Barnum's life he granted nearly \$100,000 to Tufts College, "in addition to animals, apparatus, and other gifts."³⁴ During those same final years the Smithsonian museum's Department of Mammals, catalogues over four hundred entries, "most of them from the Central Park Zoo, the Philadelphia Zoo, and Barnum's menagerie."³⁵

How is that the man presently associated with wonder and popular culture, the feejee mermaid, fakes, frauds, freaks, and geeks could once have been suggested as a consultant for the National Zoological Garden project in Washington D.C. In 1959 Betts

³³ Ibid, 117

³⁴ Betts, 365

³⁵ Ibid.

wrote: “For his [Barnum’s] development of aquariums and menageries, his collections of zoological and geological specimens, his stimulus to the museum movement and his popularization of natural history, the American people would long remain indebted to the one and only P.T. Barnum.”³⁶

Once Barnum began the traveling show, he poured everything he could into it. Adams writes how Barnum’s museum days gave him an almost supernatural advantage in seeing what the people wanted, and being able to give it to them. Adams also believes “even though U.S. social hierarchies might have become a bone of contention in the Hippodrome and the Ethnological Congress may have implicitly questions the West’s fetishism of science and capitalism...by the time of Barnum’s death, his show was more interested in turning politics into spectacle than in acknowledging the politics of its spectacles.”³⁷

Looking at P.T. Barnum as an example of American Circus culture is a doubled-edge sword. Barnum began what the world knows as the railway circus, but also attempted to bring real world science to the masses. Why then, is he known today for exhibiting curiosities? The answer comes from combining all the scholarly works together. Each author’s opinion of Barnum and the circus for that matter depends entirely on the point of reference that the author uses. Davis, Chindahl, and Eckley, all view the circus as the display of peoples. These exotic images shaped the mindsets of circus goers for decades. Betts looks at Barnum and the circus as cogs of a larger Natural History machine. In fact, Betts never mentions ethnographic congresses or any of the

³⁶ Ibid, 368

³⁷ Adams, 192

Spanish American war dramatizations. Adams' work, however, reveals a much more personal reason for Barnum's negative connotation today. Once he started "making fun" of the elites that snubbed his shows, his fate was sealed. In fact, Adams writes, and he is the only one who does, of how Barnumism became known as "a transient disease," and would be used to describe anything "they [U.S. Highbrows] saw as dishonest, immoral, and crass in U.S. culture."³⁸ Regardless of an author's view on Barnum's leanings, they all agree on the huge role that Barnum played, not only in the museum and circus circuit, but also as a larger entity that shaped and steered American culture at a time when America was all things to all people. The results of Barnum's actions remain the sticking point for many scholars. Was he an influence for the positive? Were educating the masses and promoting science his true goal, or was he merely playing the part that brought him the most fame and fortune?

Ernest Albrecht does not think as highly of Barnum and his colleagues. Writing in 1995 Albrecht's main focus is the "rebirth" of the American circus, starting in the late 1940s. His quick survey of the history of the circus reveals that Albrecht does not agree with the standard "golden age" of American circuses from 1870-1915. Albrecht writes that it was no surprise that the "so-called golden age of the circus" coincided with the greatest economic expansion in American history. He even claims that during this time America's unofficial motto was "All New This Year. Bigger and Better than Ever."³⁹ That motto was shared, he believes, by every circus that was traveling the country. He

³⁸ Adams, 196

³⁹ Albrecht, Ernest J, *The New American Circus* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 1

does not look at early circuses individually, nor at each circus owner, instead he uses gross generalization that sum up the decadence of the time. He compares the “circus kings:” James Bailey, P.T. Barnum, the Sells Brothers, Adam Forepaugh, and the Ringling brothers, to the robber barons of the day. Claiming that all “profited enormously from the ever expanding big tops.”⁴⁰

Albrecht does agree with Davis that circuses created “about the only culture—high or low—to which the vast majority of the American Public was exposed,” as well as the “only taste of European culture they would ever willingly embrace.”⁴¹ Albrecht sums up his feelings on the original American circus by comparing it to the one animal that has become synonymous with it: the elephant. He writes that the elephant met all three criteria of what a genuine American circus had to be, it was big, it was odd, and it was foreign. Again, when viewed from the ethnological lens the author almost inevitably sees the American circus as negative culture maker, and a shaper of dangerous stereotypes and errors.

The idea of the American circus as culture make and not just curiosity is in its very infancy. This leads to loose cannon arguments, and statements based on broad misunderstandings of the idea of the circus. This also leads to a very narrow number of historical works on a study of American circus culture. Early works, many written by journalist or other non-historians just lament the loss of America’s Golden Age. Things the author’s remember from their childhood, and how they long for its return. In fact,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 2

only one major cultural history work has been published on the American Circus. *The Circus Age* by Janet Davis will form the crux of American cultural studies aimed at the circus for many years to come. This may lead to a bias in future work, if areas other than circus ethnography are not studied. Betts revealed as early as 1959 that individuals who ran circuses, mainly P.T. Barnum, played a large part in organizing positive swings in popular culture as well as reinforcing Americanism among the people in the early twentieth century.

By focusing so much on the negative portrayals of foreign people, nearly all the authors have left a gaping historiographical hole in the study of the American circus. Davis and Betts have shown how important circuses were to the shaping of American consciousness and American science, just as it reinforced ideals of American Imperialism, and paradoxically American Isolationism. Far more historical research must be done before any large historiographical work can be completed. Scholars and not misty-eyed romantic journalist must complete this research. To truly understand the impact that the American circus had on American culture much more research needs to be added to the discourse. The fragmentary nature of the scholarship hinders any kind of major discourse between the authors of any of these works. Until scholars focus on the same aspects of the American circus, this gem of American culture will, for now, have to be viewed only one facet at a time.

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