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CHAOS AS A COMMON GOOD? ON CIRCUS PEDAGOGY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH ON THE MOVE

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ABSTRACT

As a target-group, dislocated children are pointed out as a particularly vulnerable in society. Over the past few years, Social Circus has developed as a supportive practice for children on the move. The emerging body of research report on social, and health benefits of circus interventions (see f. ex.Bessone, 2017; Bolton, 2004; Löf, 2021; Spiegel, 2019). However, there is still a need to explore Social Circus from a pedagogical perspective. Drawing upon a 1,5 year-long ethnographic fieldwork with a Swedish Social Circus program in asylum accommodations, this paper aims to explore 'commons' (Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis, 2020) in circus pedagogy for children on the move. The analysis revolves around an understanding of teachers and participants as 'commoners', engaged in circus as a 'commoning practice'. In the results 'chaos' stands out as a 'common good' in circus pedagogy, viewed upon as a catalyst for freedom and creativity.

Keywords: Circus, Commons, Chaos, Circus Pedagogy, Children on the Move

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Introduction

> As I enter the building to observe the second day of circus workshops in an asylum accommodation, one of the staff greets me with a worried face: 'It's different today. These kids have no patience – not sure if they are able to keep their concentration?' I take a seat along the long side of the large gymnasium.
> The team (4 circus artists/educators) divides the 50 or so participants into three groups and start with games as warming up. The participants are all children and youth, living in different accommodations in the area. Some have been in Sweden for a while, others have just arrived. They laugh as they play and when the workshop is starting everybody seem to be in a good mood, although a few of the participants seem to be a little 'on the edge'. […] Maybe my observation is affected by what the staff said to me as I arrived, but laughter does seem louder than yesterday, and the playfulness looks a little rougher and more competitive. As the team opens the three stations (tight wire, acrobatics and juggling), the groups dissolve and participants start moving around as they feel.
> One of the boys jumps up on the wire, dancing and pretending to fall. He laughs. Some of the others laughs with him and jumps up on the wire, many at the same time. They start a playful fight, trying to make each other fall down. The wire starts shaking and they all fall to the floor.
> Chaos.
>
> (Excerpt 1. Fieldwork, day 2, 'immersion week')

The excerpt above is from a 1,5 yearlong ethnographic fieldwork with a Swedish Social Circus program for children on the move in 2015-2016. The program, a joint production run by two of Sweden's prominent circus organisations, was a response to what is often referred to as 'the refugee crisis' (Löf, 2021). The goals of the program ranged from offering dislocated children psychosocial support through play and learning different circus skills, to opening new ways of working for staff at asylum accommodations. Hence, there was both a social and a pedagogical aspect to the program, and the members of the circus team functioned both as circus artists and as teachers.

As I observed the activities in the excerpt above, I noted 'chaos' in my notebook. The activities were imbued with what I, in that moment, experienced as beyond control. Interestingly, during the following fieldwork chaos stood out as, if not explicitly summoned by the circus educators, both welcomed and cherished as it emerged in workshops. The team of artists/pedagogues did not fear chaos. The fear was my own.

Aim

This paper aims to explore the notion of chaos in circus pedagogy as a common good. As I will demonstrate in the following, chaos played an important pedagogical role, enabling teachers to position themselves as permissive and easy going- and students to feel free. Moreover, allowing for a (safe) level of chaos also opened for creative explorations of circus skills and disciplines.

Circus Studies – a brief background

Over the past few years, Social Circus programs has developed as supportive practices for various target groups. The emerging body of research report on social, and health benefits of circus interventions (see f. ex. Bessone, 2017; Löf, 2021; Spiegel et al., 2019; Van Es, Rommes & De Kwaadsteniet, 2019).

According to Seymour and Wise (2017), social circus is an encouragement to take risks and defy norms '*where imagination and aspiration are expected to be operating at full force – almost 'out of control'* (p. 89). Circus, they argue, is an artform that demands for practitioners to be 'themselves', to do tricks in their own way and on their own premises. Risks are intimately intertwined with circus. Risks, as opposed to danger, are not viewed upon as 'bad' or as something to be avoided. Rather, careful routines for a safe training environment (Bolton, 2004) enable participants to take risks and learn new skills. Safety routines include prevention of emotional risks.

Lavers (2016, p. 513) uses the term *resilient body* to provide a theoretical underpinning for benefits of social circus as treatment of trauma. Social Circus contains body work that releases stress and gains power, which in turn opens for new ways of introducing the self to society, shifting the gaze of others and challenging narratives of victimhood.

The notion of art as socially transforming is central for Social Circus. As put forward by Spiegel (2019, p. 26), 'Collectivity – and more specifically, ways of generating collectivity – are fundamental to the art of social transformation'. Accordingly, Bessone (2017) argues that the benefits with circus practice also carry potential to impact subjectivities outside of workshops. Bessone also points out the risk of further stigmatizing a target-group identified as 'in need of support'. In a study on Social Circus in Swedish asylum accommodations, however, Löf (2021) finds that social circus can interrupt the 'othering' of children and youth on the move. The permissive pedagogical approach is enabling for all to learn from one another during the workshops. The team established a teaching environment, that enabled participants to shift from a potentially stigmatizing understanding of dislocated children and youth as vulnerable and 'in need of' support, towards a view on everyone as skilled and resourceful.

Theoretical resources

The analysis was initially conducted from a didaktik perspective (Biesta, 2011; Brante, 2016; Vallberg Roth, 2020). But, as chaos emerged as a central aspect of the practice studied, the analysis took a theoretical turn towards what Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis (2020) calls 'the emergent paradigm of the 'commons' as an alternative value and action system in the field of education' (ibid., p. 2). This perspective offers an understanding of teaching as a commoning process, and participants/staff/circus artists as commoners who collectively shape common goods.

The commons

The *commons* bring possibilities to re-define both the educational practice (i.e. the common good) and the ways children are regulated through educationPechtelidis and Kioupkiolis (2020; see also Ranciére, 2019). Children are *commoners* that participate in the collective shaping of *common goods*, through the producing and reproducing norms and rules within the organization. In this *commoning process*, children are not invited to learn from adults, or to be empowered by adults. Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis (2020) argue that a *common* habitus holds the possibility to 'challenge the core values of hegemonic neoliberal capitalism, including competition, individualization, political apathy, and indifference for collective life' (Ibid., p 4). Children thus play an active role in the constitution of organizations – and in the prolonging, children can challenge the world.

Circus pedagogy through the lens of commons

The program studied in the prevailing article is an empowering practice at heart, aiming to spark joy and self-confidence. In my exploration of circus pedagogy through a common lens, circus artists, participants and asylum staff are all *commoners*, that co-shape both what circus and pedagogy as well as who they themselves can be in their practice.

Method and material

The circus project on which this study is based, continued for 1.5 years in asylum accommodations in Sweden. The main goal of the circus project was to offer psychosocial support through play and learning different circus skills. The target group of the project was *children on the move*, but persons of all ages were welcome to participate in the activities. My research project focuses on the work of the circus team. It is through their work and their interaction with participants that circus pedagogy is understood.

Data analysis

The empirical data encompasses both recorded and handwritten materials[1], transcribed and analysed as text. The analysis revolves around the notion of chaos as a common good in circus pedagogy. This working premise has led me to analyze the material in three steps. As we could see in the introduction of this article, what stood out as chaos to me was not necessarily chaos to the circus team. Therefore, the first step, *identification of chaos,* called for a definition of chaos. I have chosen a simplified chaologist' definition of chaos as unpredicted, or random, outcomes of efforts and premises (ref[2]). In my analysis I have thus identified pedagogical 'unpredictabilities'.

In the second step of the analysis, *discovering the commoning process,* I discover if, and then how, chaos is constituted as a 'common good' by the commoners in the circus pedagogical activities (i.e., the team/participants/staff). I here asked what the commoning process looks like. Finally, in the third and last step, I have analyzed *the role of chaos in circus pedagogy*.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Gustafsson, Hermerén, & Pettersson, 2017) concerning information on aims, distribution of results, and anonymity of the subjects of the research, and was approved by the ethical vetting board before the start of the project. All the team members in the project have been informed about the project and have given their written approval to participate in the study. In the following, to safeguard their anonymity, they have been named 'Artist 1,' 'Artist 2,' etc in order of appearance in this text.

Staff at each asylum accommodation were informed before my arrival, so that the persons involved in the project activities knew the purpose of my study. It should be noted here that the individual participants are *not* included in this study as individuals, but rather as part of the group of participants.

Results

There were several unpredictabilities for the team to consider in advance of the tour (see Löf, 2021):they prepared a show and planned for a workshop that could suit participants of all ages and with various bodies and prerequisites; they made sure workshop instructions were approachable for anyone independently of spoken languages, prerequisites, and abilities; they had plans for how to divide larger

groups of participants if needed; and they created a show that was easily adapted to spatial differences.

Putting unpredictabilities into play – a commoning process

In Excerpt 1, we can see how the participants move around as they feel during the workshop. The empirical material contains many similar examples of voluntariness at play. Interestingly, participant's freedom to come as they please, and do as they wish, opens for, not only transitions *between* – but also *within* different teaching phases (Vallberg Roth, et. al., 2020). Several examples show participants in constant transitions into, and out of activities, as well as participants engaging in other activities than those offered by the team. Participants are also free to engage in activities in their own unpredictable ways. They engage with playfulness, and sometimes even with aggressive undertones.

In an interview with the team, they reflect upon the role of chaos in workshops.

Artist 1 One can try. Chaos can work.
Artist 2 It is an organized chaos. That has an immense amount of freedom to it.
Researcher Yes. Is the chaos necessary?
Artist 2 I believe so. I believe the freedom is important. To them. To us.
Artist 1 Yeah.
Artist 3 Mm. And also, the playfulness in chaos?
Artist 2 Exactly
Artist 3 Absolutely
Artist 2 Also, we can be other persons if we can allow for chaos to happen. To be the ones that say 'no' – that would be needed otherwise. That would make for another ambiance. Now it is open and free and playful, sort of.
[…]≤
Artist 3 When the kids really wanna learn acrobatics then of course we would organize it and you will have to do it in a more organized way, but since the goal is playing and trying out, having fun...
(Excerpt 2. Audiorecording, interview with the team)

Interestingly, Artist 2 says that they 'can be other persons' if they can allow for chaos to happen. Saying 'no' is put forward as something that counterplays an open, free and playful ambience. The freedom strived for is thus not only directed towards the participants, but also towards the team, that wishes to position themselves as 'other persons', as opposed to assumably authoritarian teachers -

that say 'no'. By the end of the excerpt, Artist 3 implies that whether chaos is applicable or not depends on the pedagogical goals. She formulates the goal as 'to play and try out' and underscores how this carries a specific pedagogical potential (as opposed to for example work with skills-oriented goals). From this standpoint the necessity of chaos seems to depend on the goals with the pedagogical activities.

Informed by how the team reflects upon of the role of chaos in relation to freedom, the situation in Excerpt 1 can be interpreted as *a commoning process*, in which participants act upon the freedom and voluntariness put into play by the team. As *commoners*, the team and the participants together, co-shape an unpredictable pedagogical environment.

Preventing risks in an unpredictable setting

Teaching circus is imbued with a constant evaluation of risks (see f.ex. Bolton, 2004). In advance of the tour, the team therefore estimated what risks they could face during the tour. However, the multiple ongoing transitions, the playfulness, and the high energy, adds unpredictable dangers to an already risky practice. Looking back at Excerpt 1, potential physical dangers are rather obvious. However, the team's attention to, and prevention of emotional risks stands out in the empirical material. One of the most prominent emotional risks is participants sense of failure. Participants' sense of failure does not only affect the individual participant, but it also risks jeopardizing the overall goals with the program – to offer a moment of joy and to engender a sense of self-confidence.

> Artist 3 approaches a participant who attempts to spin a plate on a stick. He drops it as we are watching him. He spins fast and loses control of the plate. Artist 3 laughs: 'That was good. But… (laughs) … then… You should have stopped!'. The participant gives it another try and succeeds. Artist 3 demonstrates how he can move the spinning plate from the stick to his finger. She spins her plate and grabs his finger and puts it under the plate. Then she removes the stick. (His eyes!! He looks incredibly happy. His eyes are shining!)
>
> (Excerpt 3. Fieldnote, workshop, immersion week)

In this excerpt we can see how failure is downplayed as a funny part of the learning process: Artist 3 laughs and then gives the participant constructive, hands-on, support to manage the attempted new skill. This humorous approach to failure is typical for the empirical material. Interestingly, chaos stands out as a resource for the team in the endeavors of tackling the risk of failure. One advantage of being 'other persons', as Artist 2 expressed it, is that the team members can shift roles during the workshop (c.f. Löf, 2021):

> Ten or so participants are engaged in a jumping contest in a corner of the gym. One of the staff is helping them with arrangements. They jump with their both feet together. They cheer when someone jumps far. They laugh when someone fails. One of the team members enters the contest. She does not jump far at all and gets laughed at. Her smile is big as she curses and makes a playful losing gesture with her hand.
>
> (Excerpt 4. Fieldnote from workshop)

In the excerpt above, one of the artists joins the jumping contest introduced by participants. By taking part in the activity on the same terms as the participants, she destabilizes the assumed role of the teacher. This manifestation of unpredictabilitiescan be interpreted as one of many actions in *the commoning process* of co-shaping chaos as a *common good*. The artist invites the participants to see her 'with new eyes'. The shift can be interpreted as unexpected: Minutes ago, she presented herself as a skilled circus performer and now she is a novice in jumping. Also, the chaos at play allows for the crowd to laugh at her failure, to which she responds with humor and playfulness.

Discussion

In the following discussion I will delve into key points raised in the analysis emphasizing the significance of chaos as a common good in circus pedagogy.

Chaos as a common good

The results unveil chaos as an intentional element in circus pedagogy. Instead of fearing chaos, the circus team embrace it as a catalyst for – or even as an embodiment of – freedom and voluntariness. As I have demonstrated, participants, staff, and the circus team collectively shape an unpredictable environment: the team establishes chaos as a tool for freedom and voluntariness and, in turn, the participants uphold the chaos by acting in unexpected ways.
Chaos can thus be understood as a common good that allows participants, staff, and circus artists/educators, to emerge as whomever they want to be in that moment. Teachers can position themselves as permissive and easy going– and students can feel free. Participants are not only free to choose activities but also encouraged to engage in them in unpredictable ways.

The findings are interesting in relation to previous research that put forward Social Circus not only as an interruption of stigmatizing views of participants as for example 'vulnerable' or 'victims' (Lavers 2016; and Löf, 2021; see also Van Es, Rommes& De Kwaadsteniet, 2019). Could it be that chaos, here defined as a permissive pedagogical approach towards unpredictabilities, plays a central role for the potential to disrupt hierarchies, even outside the social circus practice (c.f. Bessone, 2017)?

Another ‘good’ that emerges in the results is that a (safe) level of chaos can open for creative explorations of circus skills. However, this calls for a pedagogical balance between embracing chaos and mitigating (un)predictable risks (c.f. Bolton, 2004; see also Seymour & Wise, 2017). The team’shumorous approach to failure and their ability to shift roles during workshops contribute to the commoning process of chaos as a ‘good’. They navigate the unpredictabilities inherent in the activities andcreate an environment where learning from failure is not only accepted but also celebrated.

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[1] In total, the empirical material consists of 12 hours of video recordings of the team's preparations and evaluation; 1 hour of audio recorded interviews with the team; 123 hours of observations from circus shows, plus workshops and collaboration days with local cultural agents.

[2] This study is by no means chaologist, rather I use the definition of chaos as something unpredictable and sensitive to initial conditions when identifyingchaos in circus pedagogy. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos_theory