

The subversive nature of Charlie Chaplin's films

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Abstract:

The paper would be dealing with the films of Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin was one of the most popular actors and directors of the modernist and postmodernist era. He started with silent films and later on went to make talkies. His work needs to be analysed under the prevailing conditions during that time. He was the man of his times historically and politically. He made films that were subversive in nature and challenged any form of authority. The figure of a tramp was common to his films that stood for the oppressed class. A comparison is also made later in the essay with the proletariat in Brecht's plays.

Keywords:

subversive; figure of tramp; oppressed class; alienation; Chaplinesque.

Charlie Chaplin belonged to the age that saw various drastic events such as the two world wars, the Cold War and the Great Depression. With an increase in scientific fervour the world went through industrialisation that led to the spread of capitalism and it got reflected in his films. In America, there was an increase in the hobo population during the early twentieth century with the growth in industrial capitalism and great economic depressions. His films had a leftist ideology in them. A huge influence could be traced of that of Marxism on him and his films. The major concern of my paper is to analyse the subversive nature of the films of Chaplin. The figure of a tramp in his films became the epitome of oppressed because of industrialisation, war or capitalism. The tramp is part of the masses and is subjected to the pathetic lifestyle of the working class at the hands of the

masters. The working class audience could very well relate themselves with the tramp. The tramp subverted the authority in a comical way by aligning himself with the authority and disrupting the action within the order, thus satirizing that order. The tramp obeyed the totalitarian regime and yet resisted it by satirizing it. The films by Chaplin emerged as anti-establishment in various forms.

Karl Marx saw the problems his father encountered as a lawyer: the poverty of the working people, crying social injustice, the contempt of the powerful for the impoverished, the political trial of those who opposed the authorities. Therefore he devoted his life for the betterment of the people and for their justice. The motto of his life became: "To work for Mankind". (Volkov, 13-14) He wrote his *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) in collaboration with Frederick Engels and described the basic contradiction of the capitalist society as the conflict between the productive forces and the relations of production. In these productive forces, the bourgeoisie had generated the very class that would turn against it—the class of proletarians.

The proletariat class is at focus in Chaplin's films. The proletariat class suffers at the hands of the capitalist masters or the bourgeois. Chaplin's *Modern Times* depict a labourer working in a factory. It gives a poignant picture of automatization of the labour class that takes place in such capitalist units. Marx was Chaplin's predecessor and the films by Chaplin have a huge Marxist ideology in them. Chaplin was aware of the class struggles since he came from a lower background. One could notice

that he had internalised the workings of class politics in his works. This could be seen even in the titles of their works. For example: *The Tramp* (1915), *The Pawnshop* (1916), *The Vagabond* (1916), *The Fireman* (1916). The protagonist in these was a common man from the working class, and if the protagonist was from high class he was a satirized character, for example, Hynkel in *The Great Dictator* which was a parody on Hitler.

Chaplin's tramp used to dress in baggy pants with a small moustache on. He also used to wear a hat. He also had a cane in his hand. The art forms that came after Chaplin had a huge influence from his works. For instance, Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* and also in Indian cinema, the actor-director Raaj Kapoor made films using a figure of a tramp. He also depicted the plight of a common man in a corrupt world. The major criticism of capitalism could be seen in the scenes from the film *Modern Times*, that described human life enveloped in the factory life. (1) The film began with three images- (a) a ticking clock, (b) hundreds of sheep moving in a herd and (c) hundreds of workers shuffling into the factories; (2) Chaplin dressed as a tramp working in a factory and was subjected to the rhythms of the machine. His limbs moving like a machine and he continued with the same action even when he had stopped working, he was always a victim of circumstance and forced to give his one nut one-sixteenth of a turn every two seconds throughout the day; (3) Wellow's automatic feeding machine. The model, of what it did to the common man, could be seen in these factories. The industrialisation and capitalisation made the labour class automatons. These factories were owned by the Bourgeoisie who owned a lot of private property and employed the proletarians at these workhouses. The assembly line at Lordstown, Ohio, in 1972, when 7,800 members of the United Automobile Workers Local 1112 walked off their jobs in protest against being forced, every 36 seconds, to perform an identical task in order that the

line itself could produce 1500 automobiles a day. This kind of division of labour does not contribute to the cohesion of society. (Chaplin, 6)

Karl Marx, in his *Manifesto* said that the workers were compelled to sell themselves as a commodity. Driven together under a many-faced despotism—the bourgeois state, the manufacturer, the superintendent, even the machines, of which they were but the adjuncts. (Volkov, 27) This led to the alienation of the wage-labourer. He had no property in the means of production, the labourer treated his labour as a commodity therefore he had no interest in the work itself but only in the wage. He did not belong to himself but to the private property. It was a forced labour and belonged not to him, but to another. He created beauty but deformed himself. (Arthur, 7) The alienation of this kind estranged men from the object of production and his basic human essence. To sum up, the worker was alienated from—

(1) Object of Production—Chaplin's *Modern Times* depicted the workers trying to fix the bolts but the object of production was not of their use. They could not own that product. For example, in a cracker factory, a child as a worker is producing something that he would not be able to use.

(2) Act of Production— In *Modern Times*, the labour was external to the worker. They were working for somebody else, the head of the factory. The heads acted as despots.

(3) Creative faculty—It is our creative faculty that makes us human. Alienation made the life of a worker monotonous and devoid of any recreation. Marx had read aesthetics and was aware of the creative powers of humans. Forced labour leading to alienation made the capacity to create freely, as thwarted, denied and suppressed. It was a situation in which the creations rule the creators, in which like the sorcerer's apprentice; the creators become the victims of their creative powers. (Carver, 250)

(4) The fellowmen – In *Modern Times* workers treated each other as objects and there was no interaction between them. Only

the boss was given his voice. The workers were voiceless in the movie. The tramp overcame his alienation when he came into contact with the destitute girl. That was the only humane bond depicted in the movie. In *The Good Person of Szechwan* by Bertolt Brecht, Shen-Te, a Lumpenproletarian, was seen by others just as a sex-object, to reach an end. They used her for their own means. Marx felt that the alienation from fellowmen was the most serious of all. He also said that only the working class had the power to turn the world upside down.

Chaplin told one of the reporters that his films were for the underdogs. His major focus was on the gestures of his characters, mainly, the tramp. Chaplin used slapstick in order to generate comic effect. The silent slapstick tradition could be traced back to the Italian tradition of Commedia dell'arte of Harlequin. The actions of the tramp are exaggerated in order to convey the absurdity of the authoritarianism that he is subjected to. Chaplin used his music hall techniques in his films that he had learnt from the Victorian stage in England when he was young. Stance and gesture were used by him to illustrate and heighten the emotional subtext of the drama and to express feelings that could not be stated in words. (Powell, 152) This came to be known as Chaplinesque. His movie *Modern Times* depicted the life of a Tramp during the Great Depression and depicted the ill-effects of industrialisation on human beings. Chaplin showed the repetition of the action of the workers and its impact on the human mind making them machines. The image of a tramp was realistic and his actions depicted the absurdity of that reality which looked unrealistic. Marx had rightly said that a worker is forced to become an appendage to a machine in order to yield maximum production.

Karl Valentin and Chaplin showed Brecht how comedy could contain violence and criticise it, through scenes in which its victims were naïve, its perpetrators, grotesque and inhuman tyrants. (Thomson & Sacks, 76) Chaplin in his *The Great Dictator*

(1940) depicted it in the beginning when the barber was shown comically blundering with the weapons used in the combat and also last speech delivered by him. In the Chaplin's *Monsieur*, he through his character voiced his views against war and said—"one murder makes a villain, million a hero". Brecht's *Mother Courage* depicted War as business – that war is evil in itself and showed the extreme case of the war of every man against every man which is capitalism. Also his *Man is Man*, the economic motives behind war were depicted in comic terms when one soldier asks another 'who this war's against' to which the answer given was "If they need cotton, it's Tibet ; if they need wool, it's Pamir". (Thomson & Sacks, 76)

Brecht's works show his attraction for Marxism which was of reason, not of belief. He realised that there was another way to improve conditions in the world than the discredited religious and ethical nonsense. He followed this humanitarian path and provided a critique to the authoritarian organisations of the bourgeois ideology-family, science, charity, religion. There were many things that Brecht and Chaplin shared, mainly the way they depicted the working class with a Marxian approach, although they chose different art forms. Chaplin met Brecht, at the time of his movie *Monsieur Verdoux*, both felt similar anxieties and wanted to transform the society. Their works could be read as highly political and having the element of optimism in them. Both of them used gestus as the major element of their work in order to make the audience realize and act accordingly. Brecht famous epic theatre had its core characteristic to make them observers and not just spectators. They wanted the audience to think about their lives and not settle for ready-made solutions. Eugene Ionesco felt similarly when he wrote his *Rhinoceros* which was play that attacked the monolithic totalitarianism.

Marx was against any kind of an authoritarian power. Such an institution would force people to think singularly and

would not let them think rationally. A similar theme of anti-establishment could be seen in Brecht's *Life of Galileo* that depicted Galileo against the institution of religion. Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* depicted human struggle against fascism that got reflected in its famous last speech. The famous speech by the Jewish barber was so powerful that the Communist Party used it as their pamphlet. The barber was mistaken for Hynkel (parody of Hitler), he being his doppelganger, and was asked to make a speech. Chaplin came out of his character and gave a six minute speech of his own condemning fascism and reversing Hynkel's anti-Semitic policies. He called for humanity in general to break free from dictatorships and to make the world better instead. Although Theodore Adorno, a Marxist critic, felt that mimesis was the highest goal of artistic production and Chaplin failed in doing so in the character of Hynkel. According to him Chaplin was not able to deliver a true picture of fascism and the impact of Hitler got lost in slapstick.

The critic Walter Benjamin noted that Marx was 'a teacher of satire', and it was with Marx that Brecht had gone to school. (Thomson & Sacks, 69) Brecht got his spectator in Marx and his actor in Chaplin. They were the political humourists who brought Marx to life. They were trying to help people overcome their alienation and transform the world around them. Their works were not fatalistic and believed in the power of Man. Brecht and Chaplin lived their latter part of life in exile, both being accused of exercising un-American activities and being a part of the Communist Party.

Chaplin was thought of being a part of the communist party because of the subversive nature of his films. His films were under a scrutiny by FBI under J. Edgar Hoover, an American counter-subversive, during the age of McCarthyism for being propagandist. He was under suspicion during the Red Scare in America. His films were anti-establishment challenging the establishment be it capitalism or Nazism. His films had

leftist leanings be it anti-capitalist, anti-nazi, anti-war, anti-atomic weapon.

Marx was a utopian thinker. He was optimistic about the revolutionary fervour of the Proletarians if they could get aware of their self-consciousness. He was sure that the ultimate alienated class of the Proletarians would realise its objective position in the social division of labour and would rage up in revolt against the Capitalist class realizing their oppression and exploitation. Marx predicted by saying "The capitalists produce their own gravediggers". (Volkov, 29) He also pointed out that "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities. The proletarian movement is self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority". (28) He wanted that the working class should reorient itself. He also believed in the power of art to transform a society. Chaplin through his works tried to stir the audience in comical way in order to act. Though Chaplin failed at times but it did leave a huge mark on the lives of his audience. His silent films were even more impactful than a talkie.

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