

Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture No. 14
‘Factory scene’ from ‘Modern Times’ (1936)

Welcome back to the session. I hope you remember that in the previous classes we had a discussion about modernity as a very specific defining historic moment and we also had a detailed discussion about why these three important scholars that is Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber are widely considered as the theorists of modernity.

If you go through the previous discussion, we will see elaborate discussions about why they were fascinated with the kind of condition known as modernity, why they were appreciative of that and why they tried their level best to try to make sense of the kind of rapid changes that happened in Europe during that particular time and why they understood it as a inevitable process that the whole mankind not only Europe but the whole mankind need to encounter. And also why that all of them were critical of the various aspects of modernity. So, that particular session, those discussions are something important for us to get a better sense or the kind of classes that we are going to discuss in the coming sessions.

I am starting the session on Karl Marx, one of the most important and towering intellectual of the modern period. A person whose contribution has significantly reshaped or significantly shaped the course of social science theory especially sociological theory.

A discussion on Marxian thought, Marxian social theory is something very fascinating and it is also challenging given the kind of stature of Karl Marx as a very important social theorist. So, before setting out to do that in detail, I thought I will share with you a small clipping, a film clipping of another legend of the modern times, that is Charlie Chaplin, an actor, a film maker of no comparison. Charlie Chaplin’s this particular film, The Modern Times, I am using a small clip from that film ‘The Modern Times’ and it is widely known as ‘The Factory Scene’.


Many of you must have seen this film and almost every films of Charlie Chaplin. But I thought that I would screen this particular clipping so that it provides you a very

interesting introduction to discussion on Marx, on capitalism, on modernity and a host of other related issues and we know that the place of Charlie Chaplin in the history of World Films is something very unique. He is widely seen as a comedian but everybody knows that behind his comedy scenes, behind his humour, there are very stark social realities.


While we laugh at his films and laugh watching his films, we also cry inside. Because most of the themes that he depicts are something of very significant and serious nature, whether it is poverty, dictatorship, or a host of other issues.

This particular film title 'The Modern Times' and this particular scene around 14-15 minutes long film clip, 'factory scene' is something extremely important. So, please watch that and we will come back for a small discussion after that. I hope you watched the scene and you really enjoyed this particular scene. I would really urge you to watch the whole film the Modern Times, not only this particular scene but for our discussion this is something very important.

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- Why the 'factory scene' is so instructive of the modern times, especially of industrial era?
- Faster pace of the frames
- Working condition ✓
- relentless pressure, the idea of productivity
- Pervasive surveillance



Now, let us spend some time trying to understand why that this particular scene, 'the factory scene' as it is widely known is something so instructive of the modern times or why that a teacher like me find it as an extremely important tool to introduce a thinker like Karl Marx or to introduce a larger theme like capitalism and modernity to students.

What are the features that are characteristics of this particular factory scene as they are widely considered as the markers of the industrial era, the markers of capitalism, and that of modernity? There are whole series of themes, issues and observations that you can come up about this particular scene but we would discuss a couple of them. One is you must have seen the very fast pace of the films or of the frames.

You would see it as if you have increased the pace of the frame or the pace of the film. But it is deliberately short and played in a much faster pace. What does this faster pace indicate? We know that by this enhanced speed of the film whether it is when Charlie Chaplin is making it or the interaction, everything is set at a much higher pace.

So, this indicates a much higher pace of the modern world, in comparison with the traditional society which was supposed to be more relaxed, much more slower, much more unchanged, the pace of change is seen or it has to be brought to the fore as a very defining character of the modern times especially within a factory setting an extremely faster pace is something very important and the filmmaker wants to bring forth or he wants to foreground that in the very beginning thing.

Another important thing that you would come across is the kind of a working condition. What kind of working conditions are the workers employed in that particular setting? What are the kind of features? What are those scenes tell us about their dressing, the kind of the break they get, the kind of food that they eat, the kind of working atmosphere, the kind of level of supervision and surveillance.

So, the whole work culture if you want to define the particular term, it provides a very stark picture, a very dark picture about the kind of situation that the labourers in that particular scene are supposed to endure or they actually endure in their everyday life. We know that there is relentless pressure because it shows an assembly line where the workers' pace of action is predetermined by the pace of the artefact that comes in front of him.

He is not the master who can decide at what speed he needs to work and this assembly line is considered to be a major invention of modern times. It actually has increased productivity manifold which really produce goods at a much higher pace.


Once you are in an assembly line you need to work in tandem with the pace of the articles that comes in front of you. So, the pace of work within a factory floor is decided. It is streamlined, it is determined by somebody who can increase the speed of this conveyor belt or decrease it and that is very closely connected with the idea of productivity. We will come back to this whole idea of productivity and other things because they are some of the other defined features of a capitalist mode of production.

Another important thing that we come across is the kind of a pervasive surveillance and there are cameras when Charlie Chaplin goes out or when he works within the factory floor. There are managers who supervise the activities of every worker and when he wants to take a break to go to the loo, then again there are cameras installed.


There is a giant screen in which the owner, the man in that suit is supposed to be the owner. So, he is able to see even what his workers are doing even in the restroom. That kind of a pervasive sense of surveillance is something very difficult to miss or it is a very important theme.

You can only imagine the kind of improvements that must have happened or that has happened in this area of surveillance in the recent times when he was shooting or when this film was made during early 1930s. The kind of technology for surveillance was not this advanced. But only that we have mastered the acts of surveillance through various technological means and other things.

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- Natural rhythm of body is lost: a process of dehumanization
- Class distinction
- Capitalist logic and the feeding machine: "don't stop for lunch; be ahead of your competitors"; "increase your production and decrease your overheads"
- Techno-managerial outlook towards efficiency



Another very important, extremely fundamental theme that Chaplin wants to bring forth is that the natural rhythm of the body is lost. There is a process of dehumanization. And it is very evident and while it looks very comical that Charlie Chaplin is not able to walk properly. He is not able to feel as human. Immediately after the work he request some efforts to feel himself as a human being because his boldly actions are seen as a continuation of the time when he is working.

So, that is again a very important theme that we will come across later when we discuss a concept of alienation as elaborated by Karl Marx. Another major theme is this very distinct, stark class distinction between the people who work on the factory floor and the people who are supposedly the owners of the factory.

The class distinction is portrayed in a very stark manner because the person who owns the company his attire is different, his dressing is different, his actions and attitude everything is different, whereas the people who work on the floor look very different. You know that class distinction which gets translated through a host of other symbols like the kind of food, the kind of dress, the kind of confidence on your face, the kind of way in which you appear.

So, this class distinction between the workers and the owners are again brought forth in a very stark manner in this particular film. There are some more central themes if you come across, it appears to the fore when the sales representative come and they try to persuade the owner of the factory to buy that feeding machine. And just like any

other sales representative they are trying to impress upon the owner of the factory to buy that with a single aim to increase productivity.


The sentences that they utter are very important because they are so instructive to understand the logic of capitalist production. They say that “do not stop for lunch; be ahead of your competitors”. As you must have seen that hilarious scene when they are trying to experiment with the feeding machine, when he tries to put food in the mouth of Charlie Chaplin and the kind of scenes are very hilarious. But behind that hilarious scenes there is a very dark humour because that dark humour comes from a capitalist logic that if you can find out certain mechanism to feed the workers during their lunch time, so that if you can free their hands and mouth, they can work.

They can work without any kind of wastage of time, wastage of production activities they are able work. So, ‘here do not stop for lunch; be ahead of your competitors’, that particular sentence really captures the logic of capitalist production “and increase your production and decrease your overheads”. So, this seems to be the mantra. This seems to be the innate logic of the every capitalist production and the people who are there to sell the feeding machine are harping on this particular logic.


The whole idea of a lunch break that the workers need to have their food properly, these human ideas and human necessities are seen to be irrelevant in the larger logic of capitalist production. We will come back to that point later when we discuss Marx’s notion of alienation and workers productivity more in detail.

The scene also talks about a kind of techno-managerial outlook towards efficiency. When efficiency becomes the catchword, when productivity becomes the catchword, when the entire scientific thinking is oriented towards the productivity by making a series of inventions then a whole set of other concerns about the welfare about the workers, about keeping them in good shape and there are some of the very important and basic human needs all these things take a backseat and that is having or that will have very devastating consequences on the social and psychological health of the worker as an individual and as a working class as a whole.

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- Huge machine parts
- Man becomes a 'cog' in the machine
- He ceases to be a normal human being



Another very interesting way of looking at that film is that you must have seen that the machine parts are huge in size. They are very gigantic and we would immediately realize that this is an artificial depiction. If you look at the livers, the various machine parts, they are huge in size and human beings are seen as much more smaller, much more insignificant in that and this is again a very interesting and important symbolism that Charlie Chaplin has used extensively in the particular film.

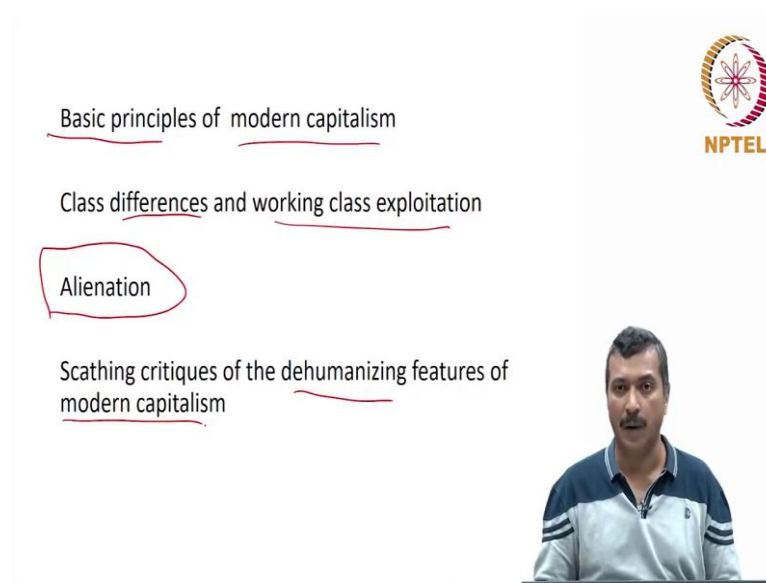
There is a very iconic scene in which he passes through the film, through the machine parts and then they were forced to stop the machine and that particular picture, that particular frame where he is seen as lying inside this machine parts is a very iconic one. That is actually indicative of this particular argument that the man has become or the worker has become a 'cog' in the machine and this particular term is used by Karl Marx, when he describes the role of human being instead of playing a central role in the production of materials and artefacts, the man, the role of the worker is reduced as a 'cog' in the machine. So, instead of human beings using the machines for their own sake, the contrary is happening. The opposite is happening in where human beings are being reduced to a machine part. They are seen as an annexure to the machine part. They are seen as an extension of the machine. So, they are all very important and stark critic of the logic of capitalism.

He ceases to be a normal human being and that is what exactly happens at the end. He loses his mental control, he becomes insane and all those scenes look very funny but

we realize that it is his relentless working pressure and inhuman working condition in that factory floor that has made him a mental wreck.

This again is a central concern for a scholar like Karl Marx where he used most of his intellectual energy to describe, explain and to overcome or even over through the kind of a system that produce that dehumanize the workers into an inhuman kind of a situation.

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So, through this film we can see that some of the very basic principles of modern capitalism is being analyzed. The logic of the bourgeoisie, the way in which workers are exploited, the very inherent and fundamental logic of the capitalist system that you need to increase the productivity, you need to increase the time that the workers are supposed to spend in the productive activity, the pressure to reduce the intervals or other kind of known working hours for the worker and to synchronize and to standardize the working practices, the working actions.

All these aspects are very beautifully captured in this particular film and as I mentioned earlier the class differences and the working class exploitation, and i do not think that anyone of us would disagree with the fact that what was happening or what was depicted in that factory floor was nothing but class exploitation.

Exploitation of workers by the factory owner who understands that every moment that the worker spends outside this assembly line is a wastage. So, in that process workers

are dehumanized. The virtue of a worker as a human being is not recognized. It is not appreciated.

It is all leading to something that Marx elaborated as alienation. We will have a detailed discussion on alienation later maybe next week or after that because alienation is an interesting and an important theme that Marx elaborated. He borrowed this idea from Hegel who identified it as emerging from certain kind of insufficient mental ideological insufficiencies, but Karl Marx provides a very beautifully very important materialist explanation for alienation.

So, this particular scene, this factory scene and this film in general 'Modern times', it provides a very scathing critique of the dehumanizing features of modern capitalism and I thought that this particular introduction would be something very helpful when we discuss Marx, Marxian intellectual contribution or Marxian theories on class exploitation, on class struggle and the ideas of surplus value, the kind of revolution that he romanticized and host of other things. So, we will now move on in the next class to more focused discussion on Karl Marx and we will see you there. Thank you.