

## **Modern Times: a reading of labor through images**

*Carlos Jardel de Souza Leal<sup>1</sup>*

Once upon a time, not all that long ago, the social, political and economic order under which men and women were living was taken for granted. Among the people of those idyllic times, many of course were poor, sick, or oppressed, and consequently unhappy; no doubt, others managed to feel unhappy for seemingly less cogent reasons; but most tended to attribute their unhappiness either to concrete and fortuitous happenings – ill luck, ill health, the machinations of enemies, an unjust master, lord or ruler – or to remote, general and unchangeable causes, such as human nature or the will of God. The idea that the social order – intermediate between the fortuitous and the unchangeable – may be an important cause of human unhappiness became widespread only in the modern age, particularly in the eighteenth century. Hence Saint-Just's famous phrase "The idea of happiness is new in Europe" – and it was then novel to think that happiness could be *engineered* by changing the social order, a task he and his Jacobins companions had so confidently undertaken.

Albert O. Hirschman (1982, p.1463)

### **Introduction**

The opportunity to conduct a debate on questions related to daily life in the workplace stimulated me to recuperate a text written years ago in which I dealt with the theme in the form of a commentary on the film *Modern Times* of Charles Chaplin. Only after promising to comment on the film in a seminar on History and Cinema using the resources of the economic sciences, I realized the size of the challenge that confronted me. Immediately, I concluded that even a maximum effort would be insufficient to capture in its fullness the multiplicity of the situations portrayed in the film. To arrive at such a conclusion just meant the recognition of the advantage of using the instruments of images rather than written language to represent the process of reality even when written language was supported by instruments furnished by science, especially when the first form is expressed through desires and passions as motivations for human actions. In the case of the filmography of Chaplin, the challenge was even greater due to the human dimension that problems in the workplace acquired, from the utilization of gestural language as a fundamental resource of communication and his method of approaching

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<sup>1</sup> Technician, DIEESE - Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies.

situations whose principal characteristics consists of making explicit the contradictory character of behaviors.

In *Modern Times*, Chaplin portrays the human necessities and the relations that individuals establish between themselves in order to overcome such relations, without appealing to any type of formal mediation, escaping through this the dishonesties that market-based contractual rules represent. The very signs of modern capitalist social relations are expressed in the film through their absence or shortage. And this absence functions as the motor of subordination of the individuals who are devoid of resources through the dehumanizing social logic of capitalism. There is no mention in *Modern Times* of the monetary expressions that salaries and prices assume in market economies. The focus rests on the concrete conditions of work (the production process) and life (housing conditions, food, clothing, etc.). Chaplin's denunciation takes on a profoundly radical character through this method.

Conscious of the limitations that I face in this task, I decided to undertake a reading that aimed to capture the most significant economic aspects of the film, daring as much as possible to surpass a strictly economic approach when necessary. To accomplish my objective, I needed to appeal to resources furnished by other areas of the social sciences.

*Modern Times* was launched in the United States in 1936. At this moment, American society was embroiled in the great economic depression resulting from the 1929 Stock Market crisis. Unemployment had reached record levels in the nation that at that very moment had become the richest in the world yet was marked by spectacular poverty symbolized by poor tenement housing. There were 14 million unemployed workers in 1933; combined with their family members, this formed a larger contingent than the entire population of the United Kingdom at the time. The American government estimated in 1937 that one third of the population lived in tenements (see Huberman, 1983, pp. 248 and 273).

The Crisis of 1929 interrupted a period of two consecutive decades of economic growth in the United States that had made it a world power on the international scene, substituting England in important industrial production sectors. One of the principal characteristics of this development was the energetic process of the concentration of capital in large industrial corporations. At the same time, Henry Ford introduced a method of work organization known as "the assembly line" which combined:

in the same process, a new model of the production of capitalist goods (with relatively high salaries for a fraction of the working class and a great increase in productivity due to mass production and rationalization) and the fulfilment of the value created (with the development of mass consumption for a part of the working class whose conditions of life approximated that of the middle class) (Beaud, 1994, p. 259).

The dimensions of the economic crisis led the American government, since 1933 commanded by President Franklin Roosevelt, to introduce a group of measures to combat the depression known as the “New Deal”. In addition to proposing solutions to reorganize and reactivate fundamental sectors of the economy (banks, industry, agriculture, energy and transport) and to recuperate the country’s favorable position in the world market, it also proposed a new social commitment through the introduction of job creation stimuli (the prohibition of child labor, reduction of the workday, minimum wage), unemployment insurance, pensions, the right of workers to unionize, etc.

Despite the success of this “new commitment” until as late as the 1960s, the fundamental critique of Chaplin in the film was the alienating character imposed on working conditions in industry and the permanent subordination imposed by the rules of control that surpassed the factory walls, cramping the individual freedoms of those who needed to work to survive. This problem persisted since the debate over the production process itself was overshadowed by the dispute around income distribution provided by the constant growth in productivity generated by Taylorist-Fordist methods of the organization of production. As a consequence, we may affirm that 75 years since the launch of *Modern Times* its thematic permanence and criticism remain to this day, echoing with great force, despite the transformations that the production process has undergone on an international scale in recent times. In calling attention to the problem of unemployment as one of the major social dramas confronted by the American people in the 1930s, the film focused on a central question that has continued to torment a great part of the population in the majority of nations with few consistent measures adopted to overcome it in the short, medium or long term.

The reach of Chaplin’s critique assumes a dual dimension in our time. The first is that we are experimenting on an international scale with the transformation of the economic structure whose origins lie in attempts to overcome the Taylorist-Fordist model of production that has imposed obstacles on the growth in labor productivity required by the process of capital accumulation. The exhaustion of the model of production founded on the fragmentation and

simplification of tasks and the use of workers in a sole job post was already evident by the end of the 1960s in the context of growing social movements in the Western capitalist countries, provoking a rupture in the institutional apparatus of the welfare state that had supported the old economic system.

The second dimension is related to the fact that labor relations, while modified in various aspects, still preserve their alienating and insalubrious character, generating in many cases even more intense precariousness for those who work in the productive process. This last point reveals the profoundness of Chaplin's denunciation, pointing out the mutilating facet of the human condition that the organization of work in modern industry incorporates. In this sense, in underscoring the constant threat to the mental equilibrium of the factory worker, Chaplin calls into question the very dynamic of the operation of the modern capitalist mode of production, critiquing its very foundation.

Centered on two characters on the margins of society, Chaplin lets the spectator take a critical position on the social environment in which he/she lives, illuminating the situation of the helpless, which in the current world have multiplied everywhere, a phenomenon until recently identified solely as typical of third world societies. In this way, Chaplin treats social exclusion as an inherent problem in a social model founded on values contrary to the preservation of ties of human solidarity.

Based on what the director himself has described, *Modern Times* tells the story of two destitute people trying to accommodate themselves to the times, a situation marked by economic depression, by strike movements, by street agitations and by unemployment. It is also a story that aims to denounce the constraints imposed on factory workers by assembly lines in which "big industry, attracting healthy young men off the farms who, after 4-5 years at the belt system, became nervous wrecks" (Chaplin, 1964, p. 383).

### **Industry and Individual Experience**

Who will tell us what is behind the stonewall?

Who will reveal to us its secrets?

Who will tell us that what is produced is also a factory of fear?

Chaplin's film, therefore, is a cutting critique of modern industrial society for its incapacity to incorporate the aspirations of the great majority of society who are forced to search for work as the only alternative to obtain the necessary means to satisfy the most basic needs. Without losing his sensitivity and very refined humor, Chaplin utilizes a poetic language expressed in gestures, emphasizing the conditions of industrial work, misery and the struggle to find alternative means of survival. He also portrays the dreams of finding happiness for those trying to cultivate human dignity and freedom as supreme values even when they are on the margins of society living in deep poverty.

In accentuating the confrontation between individual behavior and that of the collective mass, the film allows us to observe the role played by the latter in the validation of the attitudes of subordination, dictated by the hierarchical order of the factory environment. This results in the conformation of the group of workers to an authoritarian power exercised in the name of a technical rationality imposed by the machine system, deified as a mechanism with its own logic. At the same time, the individual action that does not conform to the masses is presented as an obstacle to the full functioning of the system, an affront to human nature and to the only social model capable of reconciling multiple individual interests.

The non-subordinated individual is in permanent conflict with others, who identify him as an "unbalanced" element. Unable to submit to factory discipline, he becomes a permanent threat to the process of the "rationalization" of work due to his constant breaks of the sequence. This process of "rationalization" results from the supervisor's control of the labor process who directs it to execute the objectives established in the administrative sphere.

With the factory concentration that originated in the first moments of industrialization, in function of the upgrading of equipment and processes,

the factory was more than just a larger work unit. It was a system of production, resting on a characteristic definition of the functions and responsibilities of the different participants in the productive process. On the one side was the employer, who not only hired the labour and marketed the finished product, but supplied the capital equipment and oversaw its use. On the other side there stood the worker, no longer capable of owning and furnishing the means of production and reduced to the status of a hand (the word is significant and symbolizes well this transformation from producer to pure laborer). Binding these were the economic relationship – the "wage nexus" – and the functional one of supervision and discipline (LANDES, 1969, pp. 5-7).

The film portrays the duplicity of situations with which individuals encounter modern society. While the production manager, isolated in his spacious office exercises his command activities, affirms his personal authority over every sphere of the factory, at the other extreme and in an inverse position, the worker has his individuality deprived of any meaning, left with the sole possibility of recognizing himself through his adjustment to collective behavior. Such a characterization reflects the contradiction between the individuality of the worker, empty of content, and the collective existence whose logic is strange since it is imposed by the factory cogwheels and the workers' position in the production process.

In exercising absolute control over the spaces of industry, the president of the company has exaggerated dimensions of authority, portrayed as an omnipresent and omniscient figure. For his part, the worker, with his movements submitted to the control of management, loses his autonomy entirely, his freedom of action and even his thinking, becoming a part of the industrial cogwheel and submitted to the designs of capital within the factory.

In this process, the worker is treated as a "thing" as in the scene where Chaplin tests the introduction of the "eating machine". The "machine" is introduced with the objective of reducing production costs by guaranteeing the continuity of work during meal periods since the hands of the workers remain free to continue in work activity. The grotesque scene in which the Tramp is "used" as if he were a doll exposes the complete contempt for the human condition. It brilliantly portrays the place conferred to the worker in a productive process with the man appearing, on the one hand, as his own subject, his own manager, and, on the other, as a mere instrument in the service of the objective to be reached.

While threatened with being swallowed by the gears of the machine that he operates, the Tramp's irreverence puts him in even greater risk: complete subordination to the imperatives of the machine. Would craziness be a type of escape, in the last analysis, or a form of human resistance to subordination? The rescue of individual liberty appears to be the major triumph aspired by the Tramp, deserving of any sacrifice to preserve it.

### **Control of Time and Obedience to the Clock**

How long, yeah how long.

Forgive me for the hurry. It's the soul of our business.  
 Ah, you're welcome. I also only walk a hundred miles an hour.  
 Lyrics of *Sinal Fechado* by Paulinho da Viola

In the opening scene of the film, an enormous clock indicates that it is only a few minutes to six o'clock. On the streets, a crowd walks in the direction of the factories in an allusion to a flock of sheep. The clock is one of main symbols in industrial society, showing the necessity for social regulation. Control of time is a central question in the production process of commodities. Work time functions within this imperative as a basic measure of the extraction of a growing volume of riches in the production process.

Work time appears in the classical economic literature as a principal measure of the exchange value of goods. Smith, Ricardo and Marx, despite great differences in focus, began from the premise that the value of a commodity is measured by the quantity of labor used for its production that is measured in work time.

Work assumes the condition of a central category for classical economists as it is identified as the only generator of value. However, for Smith and Ricardo, this condition is altered in the wake of the process of the modernization of the economy, permitting the owner of the means of production to appropriate the parcel of value created in the productive process in the form of surplus: the profit of the capitalist. The justification for both the authors is in the fact that the capitalist provides capital, for both salaries and for the acquisition of materials used in the productive process.

In his book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, Smith justifies the appropriation of profit by the capitalist in the following terms:

As soon as stock has accumulated in the hands of particular persons, some of them will naturally employ it in setting to work industrious people, whom they will supply with materials and subsistence, in order to make a profit by the sale of their work, or by what their labour adds to the value of the materials. In exchanging the complete manufacture either for money, for labour, or for other goods, over and above what may be sufficient to pay the price of the materials, and the wages of the workmen, something must be given for the profits of the undertaker of the work, who hazards his stock in this adventure. The value which the workmen add to the materials, therefore, resolves itself in this case into two parts, of which the one pays their wages, the other the profits of their employer upon the whole stock of materials and wages which he advanced. He could have no interest to employ them, unless he

expected from the sale of their work something more than what was sufficient to replace his stock to him; and he could have no interest to employ a great stock rather than a small one, unless his profits were to bear some proportion to the extent of his stock (Smith, 2005, pp. 45-46).

In this state of things, the whole produce of labour does not always belong to the labourer. He must in most cases share it with the owner of the stock which employs him. Neither is the quantity of labour commonly employed in acquiring or producing any commodity, the only circumstance which can regulate the quantity which it ought commonly to purchase, command or exchange for. An additional quantity, it is evident, must be due for the profits of the stock which advanced the wages and furnished the materials of that labour (Smith, 2005, p. 47).

Ricardo, while more sophisticated than Smith, does not alter this basic content of the argument, that is, the labor extracted from the worker is the exclusive source of value: “not only the labor directly applied to the commodity affects its value, but also the labor spent in implements, tools and buildings that contributed to its execution” (Ricardo, 1974, p. 49).

In Marx’s thinking, labor figures as the only source of value in all and any phase of the development of capitalism. Defining the production of commodities as the base of the system, he sustains that this requires the transformation of the labor force itself into a commodity in typically capitalist production. To accomplish this, the workers were separated from the means of production that went on to become privately appropriated by capitalists. In these circumstances, the worker ends up selling his/her labor power as the only means of survival through the capitalist contracting his/her services for a stipulated workday in return for a salary.

According to Marx, the force of labor, transformed into a “commodity”, permits those who contract the worker to extract a quantity of value greater than that necessary for his/her reproduction (the salary). Thus, the surplus of production corresponds in Marx to the value not paid to the worker, expropriated as a form of “surplus value”.

Surplus value may be increased by means of the intensification of work or the lengthening of the workday, generating the process of the extraction of “absolute surplus value”; or by way of the reduction in the time necessary to produce the corresponding value of the salary, through productivity gains made possible by the introduction of new technologies, generating the process of the extraction of “relative surplus value”.

As a result, the dispute over time is seen as inherent in the conflict in the production process, defining the generation and the appropriation of the values created by capitalists and

workers. The more time productively employed, the greater the extraction of surplus by the capitalist. (Marx, 1978, Part I)

While the rules establish the necessity of registering the productive and unproductive time of the worker through the time clock, the worker searches to gain some extra time in the bathroom, showing the existence of a conflict over the appropriation of time. It also demonstrates the preservation of the consciousness of the worker in the maintenance of the contradiction between his own interests and those of the managers of the productive process even when the latter have “complete” control over this process.

### **Work on the Assembly Line and the Individual Worker**

You take me alive, I escape dead.  
 All of a sudden, you look at me again,  
 disturbing the peace, demanding the change.  
 Look at the old man, look at the boy.  
 Such fear you have of us.  
 Lyrics of *Pesadelo* by Maurício Tapajós and Paulo César **Pinheiro**

On the assembly line, each worker is tied to a specific job, corresponding to the execution of a sole task, simplified to the maximum, consisting of the completion of pre-established routinized movements. Through the prescription of these movements, the “Scientific Direction” controls the time used by the worker, completely devoid of meaning since the only thing required of the worker is his/her purely manual skills.

Chaplin’s denunciation in relation to the transformation of the worker into a mere executor of stupid tasks that in no time threatens his mental health directly engages with the notions defended by Taylor in “Principles of Scientific Management”. Taylor defends the expropriation of the knowledge of the worker, which is seen as an obstacle to be overcome, as a necessary condition for the achievement of control of the production process by management. Taylor’s elaboration of a plan to realize this, as described by Benjamin Coriat, consisted of three distinct phases:

1st Phase: First, it is necessary to reduce the workers’ complex knowledge to its simplest elements, proceeding in this way to a type of flattening of technical knowledge. The way to achieve this decomposition is through the measurement of movements and time. The

entrance of the chronometer in the workshops permitted this objective to be accomplished. “To each movement corresponds a time” – such is the instruction given by the operators of the chronometer.

2nd Phase: Once all movements are controlled, this torn apart knowledge is systematically decoded and classified.

3rd Phase: For each operation, you may only retain “the best form” which consists of a combination and only one of the simple elements selected. The mechanical operation in this form is transmitted to the workers each morning through a particular time required for each simple element. Taylor summarizes this in a phrase: “[...] The management is tasked with gathering all the elements of traditional knowledge that, in the past, was the property of the workers, classifying this information, making a synthesis and extracting the knowledge of the rules, laws and formulas”. We would say that this does not only deal with the expropriation of the knowledge of the workers, but also its confiscation, gathering and systematization for the exclusive benefit of capital that authorizes the name of the confiscation. What is achieved here is the separation of conception and execution of work, one of the key elements of the separation of manual and intellectual labor (Coriat, 1976, p. 94).

Chaplin reserves his strongest criticism for this objective in the production process since the integrity of a worker submitted to such a condition is threatened as an individual, as a knowing being. Faced with such profound alienation or subordination, this conflict leads the Tramp to a nervous breakdown making him lose his job yet preserving his condition as an individual capable of searching for alternative forms of survival in conflict with the ideological, moral and cultural system of social control, exercised in the figures of the state representatives and by those who sustain such values.

Accompanying the capitalist perspective of completely abolishing the unproductive time of the workers, Chaplin presents in the form of caricature, the experiment of a new invention, the “eating machine”, whose objective is to allow the workers to keep their hands free for work while they are eating their meals. A total displeasure for the person of the worker is revealed during the experiment, as if he were the property of the company.

It is from the norms dictated by the “Principles of Scientific Management” combined with the Fordist assembly line system that the Tramp suffers a nervous breakdown and is sent to the insane asylum. He reacts by intervening in the control of the rhythm of the assembly line, disorganizing the factory system.

Recovered from his crisis, the Tramp leaves the hospital with the recommendation that he should avoid agitation. Unemployed during a recession with factories closing, he gets involved with a workers' demonstration, ends up becoming their leader and is arrested. Seeing a red banner falling from a truck and trying to return it, he ends up attracting the demonstrating workers who were going in another direction. Faced with the police repression of the protestors, the Tramp, with the banner in his fist, is identified as an agitator.

Prisoner among "bandits", this leads the Tramp to again involve himself in an incredible situation. Motivated by principles after recovering from a trance provoked by the inhalation of cocaine sold within the prison, he disarms a group of prisoners and impedes a prison break, giving him more privileges in the prison. In these circumstances, his life appears to reach a rare moment of stability and security, with food and lodging, and the consideration of the authorities that he will no longer agitate on the streets. When he receives word that he will be freed, he shows his preference for the "security" of prison. A few minutes before receiving word, he experiences the disgrace that society has brought to him, through contact with the spouse of a reverend visiting the prison. As compensation for his act of bravery, he receives a letter of recommendation for a job from the director of the prison.

A new job opportunity appears, but he encounters the same difficulties in adapting to the new job. Without any training to give him the skills for the new job or understand the whole production process, the Tramp ends up causing an accident. A possible interpretation of the scene in which a vessel in construction is launched in the sea is that, due to the attempt to exhaust all intellectual content in the exercise of the job of a "non-skilled worker", there is no preparation whatsoever needed for the accomplishment of the tasks. In these circumstances the worker only has a fragmented notion of the job that impedes him/her from knowing how the various parts relate to one another and how they compose the whole. The logic of subordination, which makes the worker a victim, also becomes a victim of its very product, the alienated worker. Feeling alone due to the accident, the Tramp decides to return to prison.

In the sequences that follow, the Tramp will have the opportunity to reveal his sensitive side and his sense of solidarity that his marginal life has not yet destroyed.

### **The rise of a new character and the search for happiness**

When a wall separates, a bridge unites.  
 If vengeance faces it, remorse punishes.  
 You come to grab me, someone comes to free me  
 And if the force is yours, one day it will be ours.  
 Lyrics of *Pesadelo* by Maurício Tapajós and Paulo César  
 Pinheiro

Confronting the misery of hunger, a young woman, without a mother and with an unemployed father, practices small robberies to feed herself and her two younger sisters. On the day her father dies, shot by police during an unemployed workers' demonstration, her sisters are taken by state social workers to an orphanage. Desiring to avoid the fate of her siblings, she becomes a "fugitive" from the law.

Threatened with prison for stealing bread, the young woman Paulette finds in the Tramp a protector who shows a willingness to assume guilt for the crime: an heroic act that shortens the path to his previously defined objective: a return to prison. Witness to and denouncer of the robbery, a proper elderly lady with "good customs" intervenes and reaffirms the guilt of the young woman so the Tramp is freed and his objective frustrated. This fact, however, does not impede the creation of another situation that provokes his detention by the police: ordering a large meal with no money to pay for it.

The prison, full of delinquents, gives him the opportunity to once again find his young "protected" lady friend. With courteous behavior, he gentlemanly cedes his place to better accommodate her, giving her his handkerchief when she begins to weep. Faced with her desire to escape, he ends up freeing himself from prison accidentally and inspired by her, begins a long-term, definitive partnership.

From then on in, he will not face the difficulties of life alone: they dream together of having their own house, trying to find new jobs, trying to begin new lives, discovering their true calling and aiming to construct new lives in other places. The camaraderie and affection established between the two serves to stimulate them to confront the difficulties that arise in their lives. Dreams and reality become confused in a scenario marked by the usual poverty.

In the Tramp's utopia, abundance dispenses the need to work to obtain food. In reality, he needs to submit himself to a job as a security guard to furnish some comfort to his protected. The

drama of unemployment arises again for him when an old workmate from the factory whose solidarity saves him during the robbery of a store by a gang motivated by misery, but he ends up being fired and is sent to prison for a second time.

In recuperating his freedom, two new facts await him: his romantic partner Paulette at the prison gates and a house on the riverside. The precariousness of the living arrangements are not reasons for discouragement. Everything works out and the kind Tramp gives his young girlfriend the best space; faced with the risks of how they have been getting their survival, he resolves to return to the factory whose gates will reopen on the following day.

He is given a job as a maintenance assistant, but after such a long time away from the factory, he becomes confused with all the unknown tools and instruments; while moving them in an enormous and heavy box he is unable to coordinate his own movements. Once more the worker is swallowed by the machine he unsuccessfully tries to fix, but a strike ends up squashing his plan to keep his new job. Faced with aggressive treatment by the police while leaving the factory, the Tramp reacts and accidentally paddles a brick into a police officer and ends up detained again.

Once again, the scene of the reencounter with his romantic interest appears again when he is freed, but with a difference: his well-dressed companion announces that she is employed as a café dancer and that there is a chance to hire him in the same establishment. After a brief experience as a waiter, he shows himself to be very funny, gaining laughs and applauses from the clients. The two partners discover their vocations: the art of performing. Yet when everything appears to be leading to a happy ending, the persecution of Paulette as a fugitive from justice shows how arduous the achievement of a solid place has been in a world which is so adverse for both of them.

Returning to poverty and to the margins of society and faced with the unhappiness of his companion, the Tramp refuses to give in, declaring to a demoralized Paulette: “Buck up – never say die. We’ll get along”. And with his back to the world, they search for a new place where they can realize their dreams. Hand-in-hand, walking firmly and happily holding their heads high they start out in the direction of freedom, of comradeship and of kindness, in which their right to individual autonomy is preserved in the construction of their new lives.

Thus, Chaplin’s film is a manifesto of human integrity in the face of the permanent threat of mangled by the cogwheels imposed by “modern society.” It is an anthem to love, hope and

human solidarity and a clamor to the courage of the degraded and to their resistance to every insane rule.

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