

Films and Society

Charles Chaplin

Modern Times

Questions

- What is typically American about Charles Chaplin's character?
- How is the American Dream depicted in this movie different from ours today and how is it similar?

Charles Chaplin

- Born in 1889 in England (4 days before Adolf Hitler)
- Begins acting on stage at age 9
- First travels to the U.S. in 1910
- First movie *Making a Living* 1914 (one-reeler – reel=11-12 min)
- The first time the famous Tramp character appears
- is in the movie [Kid Auto Races](#) in Venice 1914

- First feature film is [Dog's Life](#) 1918
 - 1919 founded United Artists (with Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, D.W.Griffith)
- Followed by a series of feature (three plus reels)
- Some of the best ones are
 - The Kid 1921
 - [Gold Rush 1925](#)
 - City Lights 1931
 - Modern Times 1936
 - Great Dictator 1940
 - Limelight 1952

In 1952 he is exiled from the US not to return until 1972



The Image

- Bowler hat



- Moustache
- Jacket
- Cane
- Shoes



Modern Times

by Charles Chaplin

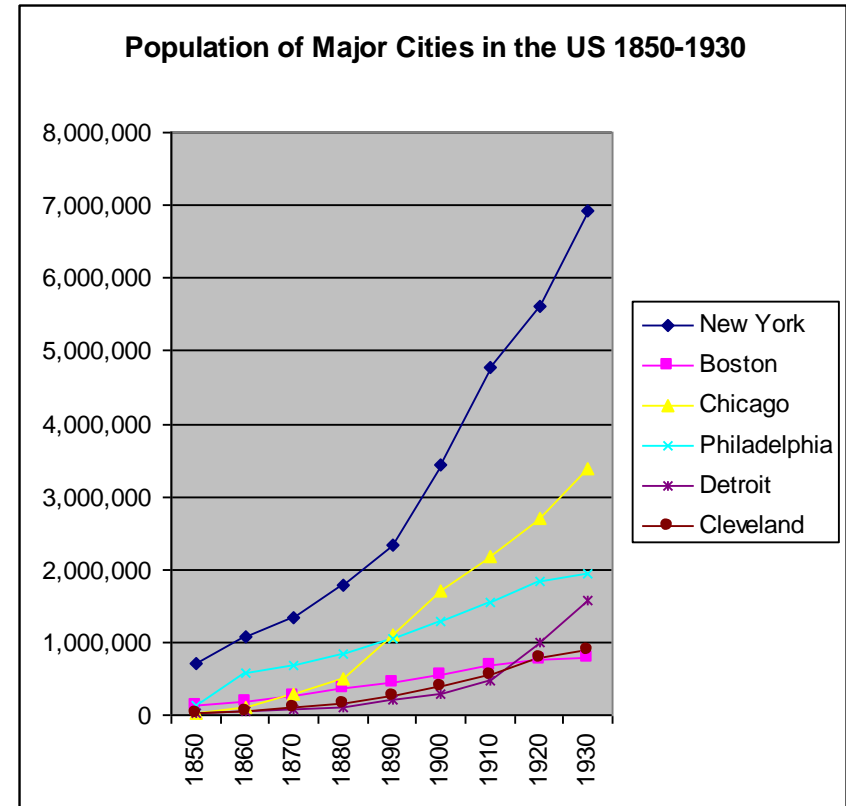
- Modern Times 1936
 - the last major silent film and
 - the last film with Chaplin's little tramp character

Background:

- Industrial Age
- Factory and mass production
- First wave of mass consumption
- Great Depression 1929-1941
 - it hits bottom in 1933

The Industrial Age

- Rapid urbanization
- Great Wave of immigration between 1880s and 1920s
- The expansion of factory production
 - Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915)



Mass Production

- Henry Ford (1863-1947)
 - Production of the Model T begins in 1914
 - Assembly line and interchangeable parts
 - 18 million sold and price dropped from \$600 to \$250 in 15 years
 - Unpleasant work, high turnover -- \$5 a day pay



Mass Retail

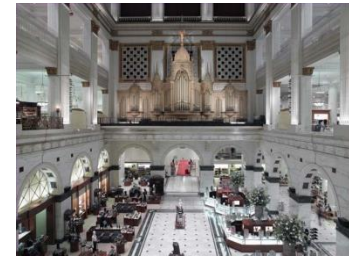
- **Wanamaker's (1876) Philadelphia/New York**

- Opens in a train depot for the American Centennial Exposition
- Opens its New York store in 1896
- It moved to its palatial building in 1910
- John Wanamaker: "The customer is always right."



- **Marshall Field's (1881) Chicago**

- In Chicago, remodeled in 1901-1906



- **Macy's (1858/1902) New York**

- **Woolworth (1878/1913) New York**

- Discount merchandise

- **Montgomery Ward (1872) Chicago**

- First catalogue

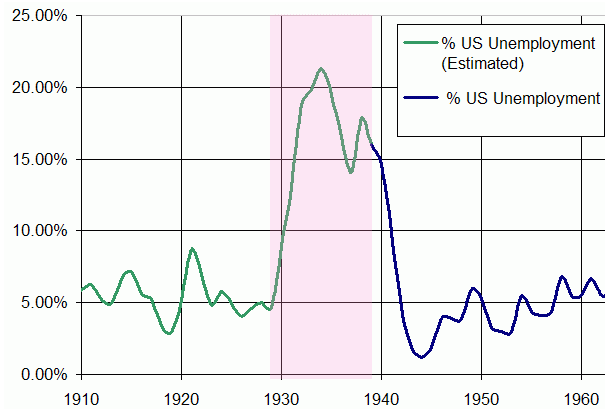
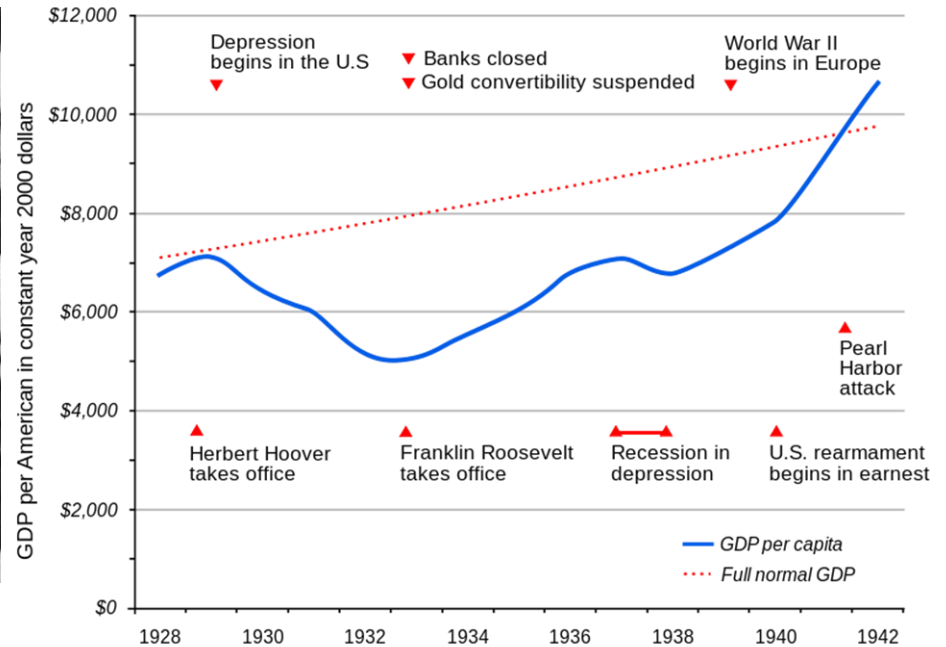
- **Sears (1886) Chicago**

- Famous catalogue that had over 300 pages by 1894



- **JCPenny (1913) Salt Lake City**

Great Depression



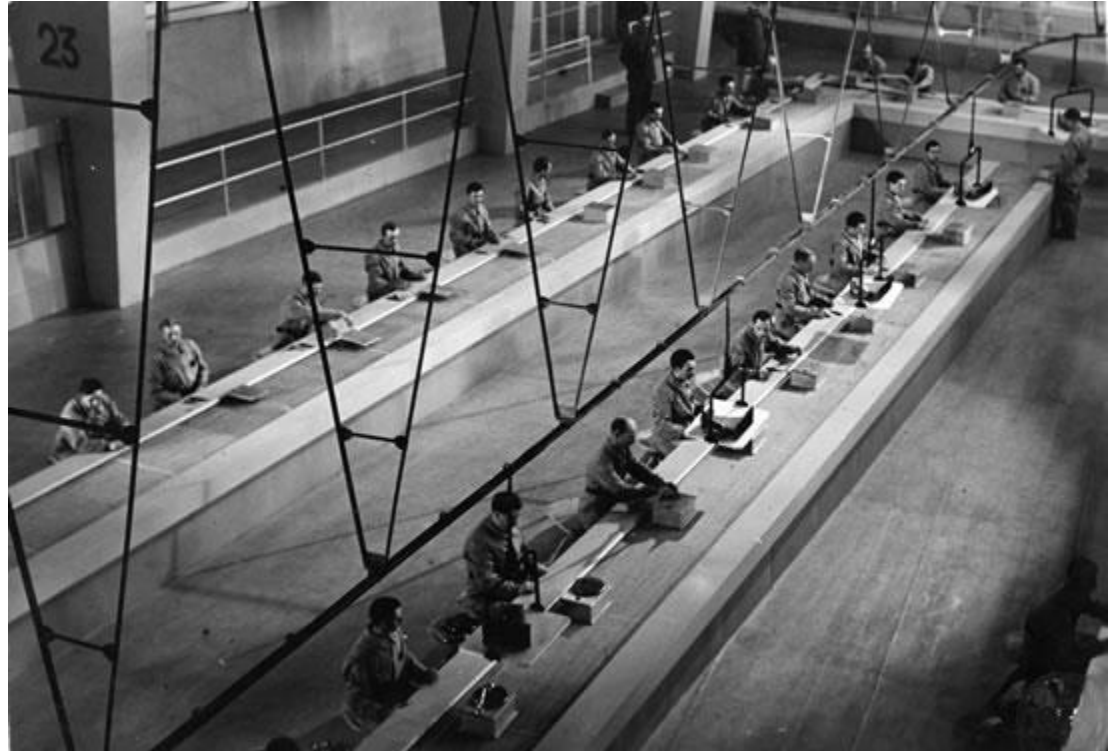
Making Modern Times

- Until the Modern Times no completed script
 - Setting up a scene or premise and then improvise
 - Developing the film on the set – many retakes (53 per scene in The Kid)
 - Rigorous perfectionism – long production (MT from October 11,1934 to August 30,1935)
 - Chaplin eventually in charge of the entire production – music, camera, script, direction, acting etc.
- Modern Times – shot in Chaplin’s studio (1416 N.La Brea Ave, Hollywood) and the San Pedro docks (close to Long Beach)
 - Inspired by a news article about an autoworker in Michigan going berserk and a conversation with Gandhi
 - Original title was The Masses – plan was to make a talkie (speed would have been inflexible)
 - The movie would have ended by the Tramp suffering a nervous breakdown, returning from the hospital to find the Gamin became a nun
 - Parts of the movie, still in progress was screened for the visiting Soviet Cinema Commission further fuelling speculations of Communist content
 - Hays Office cut several sequences for “vulgarity”:
 - first part of the “pansy” gag with the knitting cellmate, the word “dope” from a printed title, most of the stomach rumbling scene, the bra gag in the dept. store, close up of the cow’s udder
 - Great success – banned in Nazi Germany for “Communist tendencies”

René Clair À nous la liberté (Freedom for Us) 1931

A satirical comedy of two ex-convicts, Emile and Louis. Louis escaped jail and became a factory owner, overseeing a highly mechanized production of phonographs. Emile failed to escape, served his time, released and finds a job at a factory that turns out to be Louis's.

Afraid of being exposed, and realizing the inhumanity of his factory, Louis gives his company to his workers and escapes with his friend to freedom. At the end of the film, we see them on the open road as tramps.



Modern Times

Critique of the Age of Mechanization

- Technical control (assembly line)
- Separation of conception and execution (deskilling)
- Alienation
- Repressive state (the police)
- **The Dream** (and the constant presence of danger)
 - Charlie's first dream home (bucolic idyll)
 - Department store
 - Charlie's second dream home
 - Single unit, detached family home, waterfront property with guest house (although 'no Buckingham Palace')
 - Success (Red Moon Café)

What is the only place where he finds happiness AND full security?

The American Dream and the Little Tramp as a typical American character

- Ultimate individualist:
 - No family or permanent friends (except for the woman required for melodrama)
 - No past, history (immigration)
- Freedom --- indomitable
- Looks for salvation through work
- Tries hard (perseverance)
- Dreams of material success
- Desperately tries to fit in but ultimately rejects authority
- The underdog who eventually prevails

The Little Tramp's Dream and Ours

- Similarities and Differences

Orson Welles, Citizen Kane 1941



- Orson Welles (1915-1985)
- One of the most controversial movies in Hollywood
- How does Kane become a millionaire?
- How does Charles Foster Kane embody the American Dream?
- What are the limits of power and money?