

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Reflective Humor: Ridiculing Modernity

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### Abstract:

*This essay attempts to capture relationship of humor to macro structures of the new era of mankind i.e. modernity. Instrumental rationality that characterizes modernity is prevailing all social intuitions that, in turn, has changed modus operandi of the social institutions: the alienated working conditions at industrial sector; the usage of technology to conquer nature and uncertainties of economic structure of capitalism, to name a few are contents of jokes that we hear these days. Also, the humor brings to surface irrationalities embodied by ostensibly rational structures and asserted-independence of social institutions from normative order of a society. Reflective humor, a kind of humor that contains satire on modern structures, brings under its critical evaluation the whole idea of modernity. Hence, by doing so, the humor questions the idea of progress that human beings have championed. The humor suggests that the reality is the other way round: human beings are now more at the mercy of macro structures that have acquired such a tremendous power that it is becoming beyond human's capacity to influence over them.*

**Key words:** Humor, Modernity, Capitalism, rationalization, alienation

### 1. Introduction

In its inception sociology found itself overwhelmed with macro-structural changes of its time such as industrialization, urbanization, secularization etc. Later in twentieth century it focused on 'everyday businesses' and micro-level reality of society. Yet, sociology never attempted to explain not-serious interaction of human beings such as humor. It got its way into sociological studies, as late as 1970s, when sociologists found that humor was intertwined with other problematic issues such as race, ethnicity, political and social resistance, and gender (Kuipers, 2008).

This essay is an attempt to establish that a particular type of humor which I have named *reflective humor* contains satire of the modern world. It makes fun of irrationalities that are in-built in the structures of modern-bureaucratic institutions because of their distinctive modus operandi; ridicules on the change of values in modern era i.e., economic and calculative attitudes of modern men; sneers at the elusiveness of economy, politics, science etc., from substantive values and alienation of workers in capitalist economy. Put simply, it derides facetiously at modern bureaucratic institutions' (mean-end) instrumental rationality, which characterizes modern era, from the standpoint of substantial/value rationality or institutions like religion. As Kuipers (2008) says that jokes' contents are, to a large extent, shaped by society and culture; therefore they are spacio-temporal and most of the time they address social, cultural, political and moral order either of a society or a group likewise, reflective humor addresses structural malaise of modern era, in particular the process of rationalization and the alienated state of human beings. Moreover, it also questions the 'progress' of the modern world by revealing that how hazardous it could be for human species.

Instrumental rationality is defined as the employment of cost-effective means to an end. Though for practical reasons the rationality is indispensable and has no challenging alternative, but for Critical Theorists its inability to reflect on the ends given has serious consequences, i.e., the uncritical application of it to destructive ends has made the world no more a sanctuary (Horkheimer, 1982). The domination of nature and other human beings by way of technology under the fear of self-preservation has engaged the world in race of deadly weapons, for instance, atomic bomb that has brought human kind at the brink of self annihilation (Berendzen, 2009). Rationalization of social institutions has rendered emotional elements and unexpectedness of mundane daily activities obsolete and it spares no/less place for any substantive, religio-metaphysical or ethical values.

Unlike the theories that confine humor to an unconscious (or sometimes purposeless) phenomenon this essay emphasizes that humor, at times, can prove to be very critical of alienating social realities and rationalization of institutions. Such a capacity of humor, thus demonstrates that it can also be a conscious-purposeful-social act that can, at times, serves as an invaluable tool (much better than serious thought) to understand complexities of social world.

Scope of this essay, being exploratory in nature, is to look for a new dimension in the field of humor, particularly, understanding the phenomenon by applying M. Horkheimer's concept of instrumental rationality, Marx idea of alienation and Weber's ideal typology: substantive/value rationality and formal legal rationality. Reflective humor is employed by members of a society to bring before their consciousness the undergoing process of rationalization in social institutions; alienation in work under

capitalism; the independence of social institutions from normative order of a society and repercussions of the development, characterizing the modern world, on mankind's liberty and existence.

Relationship of comic with social structures was first comprehensively dealt by Sigmund Freud. His is of the view that humor works as safety valve against oppressed structures of a society (Kuipers, 2008). In particular, he emphasized jokes relationship to taboos. Jokes, says he, prove a mean to avoid censorship in a society. Putting it otherwise, jokes are an expression of protest against internalized social restrictions. The libidinal urges in human beings have been suppressed by normative order of a society, for instance sex and aggression, which otherwise dissent against the 'constraint' through jokes (Morreall, 2009). By avoiding social restrictions through jokes, put by society on our drives, we get delighted.

Later scholarship of humor however, disagreed with Freud that his theory is more true of humor about gender and the 'others' i.e., if one group shows its hostility against or dominance over others through jokes. In fact, many have argued that gender humor also falls into the category of dominance. They maintain that gender humor reflects domination of men over women – a patriarchal structure. Despite a lot of criticism on his psychoanalysis and ambiguity found in his theory Freud immensely inspired scholarships about humor after him.

Some sociologists like Mary Douglas (1968, cited in Oring, 2008) have exaggerated relationship of humor to social structures to the extent that had there been no social structure there would have been no jokes at all. But this position could barely be substantiated in the light of various empirical studies done. Nevertheless, she posits that jokes are subversion of normative control in both religious and civic form: it is a protest against 'administered' societies which are characterized by invasion into the private sphere of individuals. Hence, as a consequence of controlled approach to life "joking promotes community over hierarchy and reveals ambiguities in the fabric of society" (Oring, 2008, p. 187).

A significant association was observed by Davies (1992) between jokes on calculative behavior, calculative rationality and penurious attitude of Calvinist people and the emergence of capitalism supporting Weber's thesis that close affinity was found between Protestant ethics and the rise of capitalism. He found a steady growth of jokes about Scott and New Englishmen ridiculing their calculative, greedy, and penurious habits – perfect ethos for the development of early capitalism, happening coincidentally with the rise of capitalism in West.

## 2. Some Instances of Reflective Humor

This section deals with description of reflective humor. As described before that reflective humor ridicules modernity, I shall take some instances of the humor that is available in films. I will attempt to show that how, through humor, the modern age is jeered at. A silent comic movie of mid twentieth century – *Modern Times* – is one of the best instances of reflective humor. The movie brings under critical scrutiny the changed nature of work during/under the process of industrialization and its negative repercussions on human social life. Charlie Chaplin, a protagonist of the movie, works on a belt of an assembly line. Through his act he highlights plight of the working class that work has become monotonous and more alienated in this new era of mankind.

His duty is to fix bolts that are running before him on the belt. Meanwhile, president of the industry gives instruction to one of his subordinates to speed up the production process by accelerating speed of the belt. Therefore, to cope with speed of the production belt machine workers have to move their hands more quickly to catch up speed of the machine. The scene in the movie tries to make fun of meaninglessness in work at industrial sector; workers on assembly line have to do a specialized task such as tightening bolts which not only makes work meaningless and monotonous, but also signifies deterioration of dexterity in work skills and impediment in the realization of 'human nature' in Marx's terms.

The film also criticizes instrumental rationality that in industrial sector the voracious derive for profit maximization of elites has rendered workers as mere extension of the machines' mechanic processes: they have to cope with pace of the machine and work for it so that the machine could become more and more efficient and productive. Work at industry has been dehumanized, because of the market law, by relegating workers to mere a cog: they are now themselves *mean* towards an *end* i.e., reducing cost and maximizing profit. This impact of instrumental rationality of machine towards workers is best represented when once in the movie Chaplin himself is swallowed by the machine and rotates in between the machine's gears as if he himself were a gear. Ironically, machines that were made to assist workers in their work have turned the workers to work for machines. Furthermore, cyclic unemployment of the protagonist in capitalist economy represents the uncertainties of the modern economic institutions, let alone the repercussions faced by him that are ensued by the crises of capitalism – a regular feature of the economic order.

In pre-modern societies both work and production were confined to assuaging needs of a society i.e., subsistence economy and were regulated by normative order of the society. However, with the rise of industrial capitalism both of them have now become subdue to economic gains. Moreover, production sector now operates according laws of its 'internal logic' or impersonal market laws (instrumental rationality) and has asserted independency from any normative structure of a society (Weber, 2008). To pursue economic gains work process has been simplified through division of labor which has resulted in alienation. Also, workers are now mere 'input' in the whole mechanized process of the Machine Age that they are added and subtracted as per machines' requirements. Alienating and dehumanized working conditions eventually results into breakdown of the protagonist's nervous system.

The movie also makes fun of bureaucratic-administered approach towards work; through inventions like that of assembly line not only work related activities, but non-work activities have also been brought under the laws of bureaucratic-administration. Such an attitude towards work maximizes the production by minimizing the time spend on non-work activities (such as food eating) in an industry. Furthermore, the film also brings to limelight the impact of technology on work. Cameras in the industry for instance, keep watch on workers' activities in as much as it 'invades' private sphere of the workers.

In "Dr. Strangelove or How I Stopped Worrying and Love the Bomb" (1964) director Stanley Kubrick tries to make a point that how instrumental rationality has brought the world to a brink of nuclear holocaust. The movie is about cold war between USSR

and USA that are engaged in nuclear arms' race surpassing each other. An insane general of the US army orders execution of plane R: the plane is supposed to attack Russia with nuclear war heads. A unique feature of the plan, which is another form of instrumental rationality, is that once execution orders of the plan are passed down to commanders in the field it cannot be retracted. US president appraises Russian diplomat about the unexpected step taken by the insane General at his own discretion. The Russian diplomat in that fraught moment reveals before the US diplomats and Generals that in case Russian was attacked the 'Doomsday Machine' would destroy all forms of life on the earth for about more than hundred years. The Doomsday Machine triggers automatically in case Russian was taken by surprise by the US – her rival. Its working resembles Nazi concentration camps – an archetype of instrumental rationality.

The movie also ridicules at science and technology industries for having asserted their independence from normative structures of societies wherein they operate. The two realms of modern capitalism operate under its own rules regardless of any value considerations. Moreover, director Kubrick also makes the point that politics too has become an art of advancing 'national interests' – a state's 'activity', but no more influenced by public – regardless of any value for human kind. It is less likely to be taken as a mean for some higher *ends*. Elaborating, the so called strategic or national interests are perused as a mean-in-itself under the fear of self imagined/imposed threats from other nations. The movie exposes that how national interests have lost any *normative* justification and the brutal reality has become fact of the day i.e., instrumental rationality is the only resort where national/strategic interests find its refuge (justification). Though humans have made progress and witnessed remarkable achievements of the institutions, but their elusiveness from by and large societal values whether they are religious, ethical or cultural has ended in a technology that is meant to efficiently and effectively massacre the world's population and politics as one of the means to further make difficult survival of the marginalized nations.

An Indian comic movie "Munna Bhai MBBS" which, in many ways, is similar to "Patch Adams", protagonist of the movie makes fun of irrationality (red tape) embodied by rational bureaucratic-administration of a hospital. The protagonist of the movie accosts dean of a medical school and asks whether it was necessary to fill in a registration form when someone was in emergency about to die. The movie also ridicules 'scientific' way of dealing patients. In a hospital where the protagonist works patients are more treated like 'objects': the doctors have no emotional attachment with them. Also, the doctors no more practice the traditional cure method which they snubbed in the movie as obsolete or non-scientific. Likewise, in an American comedy television series "Parks and Recreation" (2009) a pit in an abandoned construction lot is demanded by a community to be turned into a park. Despite a strong resistance from the community the relevant department officer renders the project as unfeasible because of red tape of the department's bureaucratic law structure.

### 3. Conclusion

In all of the foregoing instances of the movies reflective humor throws light on the era of modernity by making fun of it and at times ridicules it. The humor makes us laugh by revealing that how human beings have been overwhelmed by the 'internal logic' of various social institutions. It looks down upon the way bureaucracy has made processes more complex and unnecessary long. Equally, it speculates far into future that what adverse repercussions, bring about by the process of rationalization and capitalism, may have on mankind's liberty and on life on the earth as such.

Heidegger has expressed this concern of him under a series of lectures entitled *The Question Concerning Technology* on relationship or more precisely 'orientation' of man to technology. He concludes that under capitalism technology has made us 'destined' to look at nature as a 'standing reserve' (Heidegger, 1997). The process/development typifies enmity between nature and man and the antagonism between the two be overcome by subjugating of nature through technology. By doing so, we are irrevocably devastating our environment beyond measures.

The humor also calls our attention to the possibility of elimination of substantive, ultimate or religious values that are under constant pressure or constantly being replaced by instrumental rationality or formal legal rationality. One of the dire consequences unleashed by the processes is that scientific knowledge is less utilized for the beneficence of mankind, by and large, but is used to appropriate whatever available in our access to subdue nature and other human beings through lethal technologies. Such attitudes of modern men have not only done an irrevocable loss to the environment, but also the production of nuclear weapons and other deadly technologies are constantly haunting existence of human life on the earth. Further, under the pretext of rejecting an act non-scientific various societies are becoming more homogenized culturally by adopting a *standardized* (scientific) approach towards their problems.

Reflective humor that embodies critique of the modern world brings to surface the apprehensions of ordinary men about progress made by the world. It does not only questions developments at macro level that are affecting lives of laymen, but it also contains fear. For instance, fear of technology and other machines that are snatching away freedom of human beings. Putting conclusively, the humor critiques, protests and shows apprehension about anything but the possibility of more alienation, confinement in iron-cage, wiping out of tradition (traditional values and social structures) and the instrumental rationality making the world no more a desirable and safe place to live.

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