The #MeToo movement and the case against Charlie Chaplin: How and why the American establishment constructs sex scandals

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Comic and director Charlie Chaplin was the world's leading film personality in the late 1910s, 1920s and beyond, and, by some reckonings, the most popular man on the planet. In an epoch when numerous comic giants were at work, a contemporary asserted that Chaplin was "undoubtedly the only comic genius of our time." He added, "He'll be the only one still talked about a century from now." The latter claim may have proved to be something of an exaggeration (others, including Buster Keaton, certainly are still talked about), but the point is clear enough.

The product of an impoverished and often painful childhood in South London, Chaplin developed generally left-wing views. He sympathized with the Russian Revolution and in the 1930s (having moved to the US in 1913) became one of the American film industry's leading "friends of the Soviet Union." He came to the attention of J. Edgar Hoover and the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation (formally named the FBI in 1935) as early as 1922. Chaplin's socially critical films *Modern Times* (1936), *The Great Dictator* (1940) and *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) generated tremendous hostility and fear within the American political establishment. The FBI ended up assembling a more than 2,000-page file on Chaplin.

As noted by John Sbardellati and Tony Shaw in their 2003 article, "Booting a Tramp: Charlie Chaplin, the FBI and the Construction of the Subversive Image in Red Scare America," the federal police were very sensitive to the cultural and political dangers Chaplin represented. Sbardellati and Shaw recount that Richard B. Hood, special agent in charge of the Los Angeles FBI Office, sent Hoover an article from a left-wing publication in March 1944 with this passage emphasized: "There are men and women in far corners of the world who never have heard of Jesus Christ; yet they know and love Charlie Chaplin. So when Chaplin makes a picture like 'The Great Dictator,' his thoughts reach a far greater audience than do the newspapers, the magazines or the radio—and in picture words that all can understand."

Contrary to "leftist" intellectuals the likes of Theodor Adorno, who dismissed the "culture industry" as nothing more than a factory for producing consumer goods that allegedly lulled the masses into passivity, more astute FBI officials, as Sbardellati and Shaw remark, considered Hollywood among the most important American institutions, "for they understood the film industry to be 'one of the greatest, if not the very greatest, influence upon the minds and culture' [FBI report from August 1943] of people the world over."

With the help of right-wing gossip columnists like Hedda Hopper and the American media generally, Hoover and the FBI concocted a combined sexual and political smear campaign that resulted in damaging Chaplin's film career, isolating him from his audience and eventually excluding him from the US in 1952.

Sbardellati and Shaw argue that "Charlie Chaplin's troubles in the 1940s and 1950s constitute a valuable case-study of McCarthyite persecution." They point out that not only was Chaplin "attacked as both a political subversive, because of his leftist views and associations, but as a sexual subversive as well." His views and his "sexual misbehavior" provided ammunition "for those who sought to transform Chaplin's image from popular star to despised subversive."

The campaign against Chaplin sheds important light on the current #MeToo sexual witch-hunt and its implications. In our first commentary on the Harvey Weinstein affair last October, we noted: "There is a lengthy history of sex scandals in America (and Hollywood—Charlie Chaplin and others), none of which has led in a progressive direction. The sex scandal is a mechanism through which *other* issues are resolved, often to the satisfaction of powerful economic interests and generally with the result that politics is pushed to the right. The Clinton-Lewinsky affair, manipulated by the right wing and a subservient media, took center stage in American political life for nearly two years and almost led, in what was an attempted coup d'état, to the removal of a twice-elected president."

Sexual scandals have a very bad pedigree. They are almost invariably right-wing operations, aimed at stirring up the most backward sentiments, diverting attention from burning social contradictions, settling various political and financial scores, strengthening the forces of law and order and bourgeois respectability, and demonizing "heretics" and the socially unconventional, often with anti-Semitic or racist undertones. In the US South, accusations of rape were frequently used against black men, in the infamous Scottsboro Boys case, among others. Harper Lee's famed novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was inspired in part by that case. The Nazis portrayed Jewish men as sexual predators, eager to violate Aryan women, and so forth.

The principal product of the ongoing wave of sexual harassment accusations has been the further undermining of elementary democratic rights in the US, including the presumption of innocence and due process, the legal obligation of the prosecution to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Those "leftists" who are celebrating this assault are playing a very dangerous and reactionary game. As Leon Trotsky once argued, "Theory, as well as historic experience, testify that any restriction to democracy in bourgeois society is eventually directed against the proletariat, just as taxes eventually fall on the shoulders of the proletariat."

Numerous careers and lives have been destroyed over the past eight months primarily through unsubstantiated claims that the media instantly accepts as fact—a media, Trotsky also pointed out, that "lies as a matter of course, without hesitating or looking back." As we have written, "Once again it's 'scoundrel time.' The film world, it is clear now, has learned nothing from the McCarthyite period. The same essential modus operandi is at work: the naming of names, the guilt by association, witnesses who can't be questioned, the right-wing forces who weigh in, the studios that

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instantly blacklist those accused."

The conditions of working class women have not been advanced one inch, but the prospects for an already affluent layer of female professionals in various fields have certainly improved. For instance, the *Hollywood Reporter* (incidentally, one of the leading witch-hunting rags during the McCarthy period) took note June 6 that actress Jessica Chastain had benefited from her vocal support for the sexual harassment campaign: "These public acts of feminism have become a natural extension of the way Chastain conducts business, which in turn has raised her profile in New Hollywood to heights beyond what even her two Oscar nominations and more than $1 billion in career box office would suggest. In 2016, she founded the women-led (by Chastain and former Weinstein Co. producer Kelly Carmichael) Freckle Films, which has garnered attention for a commitment to equal pay—and a series of high-profile sales, most recently the international spy thriller *355*."

Meanwhile, through this witch-hunt the Democratic Party is attempting to consolidate its hold on upper-middle class strata and channel opposition to Donald Trump in a rightward, anti-democratic direction.

Sbardellati and Shaw, Richard Carr in *Charlie Chaplin: A Political Biography from Victorian Britain to Modern America* and others have chronicled how Hoover and the FBI plotted against Chaplin.

In the introduction to his book, Carr suggests that Chaplin's "world view" was shaped in the post-World War I period by such individuals as "radical pamphleteer Max Eastman" and socialist Upton Sinclair. He writes that "these figures shaped Chaplin's vague sympathies for the American (and British) working man into a more positive line on the recent communist takeover in Russia. Indeed, according to a letter from the US Department of Justice to J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, by 1922 Chaplin stood as 'an active part of the Red movement in this country.'"

The filmmaker, beloved by millions, was a largely unassailable figure in the 1920s and early 1930s. The conditions of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe undoubtedly compelled Chaplin to take up more distinctly political—and thus more contentious—subject matter.

Modern Times aroused nervousness in bourgeois circles for its depiction of a worker who "is subject to all manner of indignities including constant supervision from an overly attentive boss (who looks suspiciously like Henry Ford), and being subjected to a force-feeding machine" (Carr). Chaplin later told Eastman that the film "started from an abstract idea… an impulse to say something about the way life is being standardized and channelized, and men turned into machines and the way I feel about it."

In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin bitterly satirized the fascist rulers of Germany and Italy at a time when Hollywood studios were very reluctant to offer such criticism. He played two roles in the film, a Jewish barber and the Hitler-like Adenoid Hynkel. The prospect of Chaplin's effort and other anti-Nazi films so unnerved Hitler that in a January 30, 1939 speech, according to Carr, he "thundered that 'the announcement of American film companies of their intention to produce anti-Nazi—i.e., anti-German—films, will lead to our German producers creating anti-Semitic films in the future.'"

During World War II, at a time when the US was in an alliance with the USSR, Chaplin made various pro-Soviet, pro-Stalin pronouncements, which went unpunished. But the FBI was keeping track. In October 1942, for example, Chaplin, in a speech at Carnegie Hall, said that as a result of the war, "they say communism must spread out all over the world. And I say, so what?"

A couple of months later, in addition to disgracefully defending the Moscow show trials, Chaplin explained in another address, "I am not a Communist but I am proud to say that I feel pretty pro-Communist. I don't want any radical change—I want an evolutionary change. I don't want to go back to the days of rugged individualism… I don't want to go back to the days of 1929… No, we must do better than that." An FBI source was on hand taking notes.

Sbardellati and Shaw in their "Booting the Tramp" essay point out that the bulk of Chaplin's FBI file "concentrates on the period after 1942 and documents the exhaustive efforts of FBI officials to connect Chaplin to movements, organizations, ideas, or individuals that they considered subversive." The officials linked Chaplin "to various 'front' groups such as the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, Russian War Relief, Artists' Front to Win the War, the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, and other organizations that included communists," along with "radical émigrés like Hanns Eisler, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Lubomir Linhart, labor leader Harry Bridges" and "Hollywood radicals like Paul Jarrico, Herbert Biberman, and Dalton Trumbo."

Hoover and the FBI worked might and main in the 1940s to find evidence that Chaplin was a Communist Party member or even possibly, according to a 1948 FBI memo, "engaged in Soviet espionage activities." That same year, Hoover "notified other FBI officials that a Security Index Card listing Chaplin as an Alien Communist was on file, thereby including him among individuals to be detained in the event of an emergency" ("Booting the Tramp").

The desire to discredit Chaplin's generally anti-capitalist views and undermine his standing in the public eye were the motivating forces behind the US authorities' attack. However, the element of sex scandal provided the FBI with the weapon, through the medium of the filthy American media, with which to brand Chaplin as a "pervert" and a "beast" deserving to be ostracized, imprisoned or deported (the comedian-director had maintained his British citizenship).

As Carr notes, Chaplin's "proclivity towards young women (or, in some cases, 'girls')," and generally his "activities with the opposite sex would soon attract the attention of a powerful enemy, J. Edgar Hoover…. In short, Chaplin would not have been so politically exposed had he not been so sexually exposed, and this was a trend ingrained during the roaring twenties."

He married Mildred Harris in 1918 when she was 16. They soon divorced. Chaplin wed Lita Grey, who was also 16, in Mexico in 1924. That marriage didn't last either and the divorce case in 1927 provided the media with a great deal of sensational material. Grey accused Chaplin of serial adultery and of being a "sexual deviant" for his interest in oral sex.

Chaplin faced his greatest difficulties in the 1940s. As "Booting the Tramp" explains, "His wartime affair with Joan Barry proved most damaging to his reputation. Chaplin first met the twenty-two-year-old actress in 1941, and a romance soon developed. Barry's history of mental illness quickly turned the affair into a nuisance for Chaplin (on one occasion, a hysterical Barry held Chaplin at gunpoint and threatened suicide). He tried to terminate the relationship, but Barry refused, kept showing up at his residence, and, when she became pregnant, claimed the child was his. Shut out by Chaplin, Barry decided to file a paternity suit against him. To get her side of the story out, she turned to Hollywood gossip columnists Hedda Hopper and Florabel Muir."

Hoover got wind of the scandal, and soon the Department of Justice opened an investigation. As Carr points out in *A Political Biography*, "In February 1944, the Federal Grand Jury in Los Angeles indicted Chaplin under the terms of the Mann Act. This had largely been instigated at the behest of the FBI and Hoover's orders to 'expedite [the] investigation' of Chaplin's activities in this regard."

The Mann Act, or the White-Slave Traffic Act (1910), which prohibited the interstate transport of females for "immoral purposes" and was ostensibly intended to address prostitution, had become a means of pursuing political persecution or racist vendettas. It was used, for example, against African-American heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson because of his consensual relationships with white women.

Essentially, Chaplin was charged with violating the Mann Act because he had paid for Barry, his girlfriend at the time, to travel from Los

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Angeles to New York! After a trial lasting two weeks, write Sbardellati and Shaw, "the jury soon acquitted him, but his image was soiled." Had Chaplin been convicted, he would have faced a sentence of up to 23 years in prison.

As noted above, however, the unstable Barry (who was also conducting an affair with J. Paul Getty) had filed a paternity suit in 1943, claiming Chaplin was the father of her child, Carol. Carr observes that "the second Barry trial to settle the paternity of her daughter would rival Lita Grey's 1927 divorce papers in terms of public embarrassment and reputational damage for Charlie."

Blood tests proved that Chaplin could not be the father, but such tests were not yet admissible in California courts. Barry's attorney Joseph Scott resorted to vile personal attacks on Chaplin, which inevitably made their way into the daily press.

Scott told the jury, for example: "This pestiferous, lecherous hound…. I'm sorry he isn't here so I could… hand it to him right on the chin…. Did you ever hear the story of Svengali and Trilby? This fellow is just a little runt of a Svengali. He's not even a monster… just a little runt… This fellow doesn't lie like a gentleman. He lies like a cheap Cockney cad…. That man goes around fornicating… with the same aplomb that the average man orders bacon and eggs for breakfast. He is a hoary headed old buzzard… with the instincts of a young bull… a master mechanic in the art of seduction."

A first jury was deadlocked. "Barry's legal team insisted on a retrial that, after similar theatrics from Barry's team, cast its verdict on 17 April [1945]: this time nine votes to three against Charlie" (Carr). He was ordered to pay maintenance until the child's 21st birthday.

Hedda Hopper in her columns "linked Chaplin's perceived political and sexual sub- versions, at once criticizing his second front speeches [the demand that the Allies open up a second front in Europe to relieve Soviet forces] and his 'moral turpitude,' which she believed was 'sufficient grounds for the deportation of an alien.'"

The attacks on Chaplin in the American mass media multiplied around this time and essentially never let up during the postwar period. Again, while the denunciations were often focused on his sexual unorthodoxy, the underlying motive was political and ideological, to rid the American film industry—and American society—of an insistent radical critic. In this regard, one should bear in mind the current campaigns against Woody Allen, Roman Polanski and others, taking into account, of course, that for definite historical reasons none of the contemporary targets is so highly "political."

But the attacks on Chaplin and the current #MeToo campaign reveal how the American media functions on a daily basis, how it disparages, demeans and drags its victims down in the dirt, how it lies and slanders without shame, how it manufactures storms of filth, how it manipulates public opinion, how it leads the susceptible by the nose, how it pollutes the general atmosphere, how it deflects attention from the society's decay and crisis…

Carr writes about the Barry affair: "The *Chicago Tribune* gave front-page headlines to the case, and the moments of peak coverage were almost uniformly negative. Meanwhile, *Newsweek* headlines such as 'Chaplin as Villain' and *Time* magazine's assertion that the Barry case 'fitted into a familiar pattern' of 'unassailable arrogance and… affairs with a succession of pretty young protégés' did not help Charlie's declining image."

In 1947, during a US Senate hearing, William Langer (Republican from North Dakota), who had unsuccessfully introduced a bill two years earlier directing the attorney general to investigate Chaplin for the purpose of deportation, wondered out loud how "a man like Charlie Chaplin, with his communistic leanings, with his unsavory record of lawbreaking, of rape, or the debauching of American girls 16 and 17 years of age, remains [in the country]."

Rep. John Rankin of Mississippi, notorious racist and anti-Semite, denounced the leftist publication *New Masses* in 1945, adding he was sure the magazine "got into the home of Charles Chaplin, the perverted subject of Great Britain who has become famous for his forcible seduction of white girls."

Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* was released in April 1947, just as the American political and media establishment's anticommunist campaign was shifting into high gear. The House Un-American Activities Committee hearings into "Communist influence" in Hollywood grabbed headlines day after day in the autumn of 1947. Ultimately, the "Hollywood Ten" were convicted and sentenced in April 1948. Throughout that year the Communist Party leadership in New York City faced prosecution under the Smith Act, which outlawed conspiring to advocate the forcible overthrow of the government.

Monsieur Verdoux, the first film since 1923 in which Chaplin played no version of the Tramp character, is a dark comic work centered on the title character, a dapper former bank teller who was laid off after 35 years. To support his disabled wife and child, Verdoux comes up with the idea of marrying wealthy women and killing them for their assets. In a voiceover, referring to his murderous activities, he explains, "This I did as strictly a business enterprise to support a home and family."

When he is finally arrested and put on trial, Verdoux argues that as for his being "a mass killer, does not the world encourage it? Is it not building weapons of destruction for the sole purpose of mass killing? Has it not blown unsuspecting women and little children to pieces, and done it very scientifically? As a mass killer, I am an amateur by comparison."

Needless to say, this remarkable (and often very funny) work did not find favor with the American establishment, the FBI or the media. Carr provides this picture of an April 12, 1947 press conference, meant to publicize *Monsieur Verdoux*: "Charlie addressed journalists in a tense voice: 'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the press. I am not going to waste your time. I shall say, "Proceed with the butchery!"' The first voice sprung up, 'Could you answer a direct question: are you a communist?' Chaplin confirmed, 'I am not a communist.'" It went on from there.

The collusion between America's "free press" and its political police finds consummate expression in this incident, also reported by Carr: "In April 1947, just as Chaplin was trying to launch *Monsieur Verdoux* to a skeptical public, [Hedda] Hopper had received an advance copy of *The Story of the FBI* from J. Edgar Hoover himself. Thanking him for the book and endorsing its red-baiting content, Hopper had replied, 'I'd like to run every one of those rats out of the country and start with Charlie Chaplin. In no other country in the world would he be allowed to do what he's done. And now that he's finished another picture, and Miss [Mary] Pickford is back in NY helping him sell it, what are we doing about that? It's about time we stood up to be counted. You give me the material and I'll blast.'"

That just about sums it up.

Hopper kept at it, both providing the FBI with salacious gossip on Chaplin and receiving material from Hoover and company. Another major political figure inserted himself. In May 1952, Richard Nixon, two months from becoming the Republican vice presidential candidate, wrote to the gossip columnist, "I agree with you that the way the Chaplin case has been handled has been a disgrace for years. Unfortunately, we aren't able to do too much about it when the top decisions are made by the likes of [Secretary of State Dean] Acheson and [Attorney General James] McGranery."

The vicious attacks on Chaplin, continuing to combine his moral and political failings, eventually bore official fruit. In 1947, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) contacted the FBI and the two government agencies began working away at making the case for "establishing a 'subversive' charge to justify his deportation," Sbardellati and Shaw explain. They proceeded cautiously, still concerned about Chaplin's great popularity. Moreover, the FBI never came up with proof

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that Chaplin was a Communist Party member, which he was not.

Their opportunity came in 1952, at the height of the anti-Communist hysteria during the Korean War. Chaplin had directed his latest film, *Limelight*, about an aging, washed up comic performer (Chaplin) and his relationship with a young dancer (Claire Bloom). It is a memorable, elegiac work, made all the more extraordinary by the sequence in which Chaplin and Keaton perform together (for the only time in their brilliant careers).

In July 1952, the INS issued Chaplin a reentry permit for a trip abroad to promote the new film. "Booting the Tramp" describes what took place next: "In the months before his trip, INS and FBI officials communicated frequently. On September 9 Hoover met with INS officials and Attorney General James McGranery, and together they decided to revoke Chaplin's permit *after* he left the country. On September 19, the day after Chaplin and his family set sail from New York City, McGranery's office announced the revocation, saying that Chaplin would have to answer INS questions about his politics and morals before he would be allowed to return."

Government officials, concerned that they did not have a sufficiently strong "political" case against Chaplin, hoped that the new, ultra-reactionary McCarran-Walter Act would give them "wider grounds for exclusion—providing the opportunity to exploit the morality charge," i.e., his alleged sexual promiscuity and his supposed payment for two abortions for Joan Barry.

Whether Chaplin could have successfully been prevented from returning is a moot point. He chose not to try. In April 1953 he surrendered his reentry permit and issued this statement: "It is not easy to uproot myself and my family from a country where I have lived for forty years without a feeling of sadness. But since the end of the last World War, I have been the object of lies and vicious propaganda by powerful reactionary groups who by their influence and by the aid of America's yellow press have created an unhealthy atmosphere in which liberal minded individuals can be singled out and persecuted. Under these conditions I find it virtually impossible to continue my motion picture work and I have therefore given up my residence in the United States."

The reactionary filth who had helped drive out one of America's greatest cinematic and artistic geniuses rejoiced at Chaplin's departure. As "Booting the Tramp" observes, "The conservative *Chicago Tribune* justified the revocation [of the reentry permit] by pointing to Chaplin's support of 'Communist-organized' peace conferences, the Joan Barry sex scandal, and the charge that he had always 'scorned citizenship in this country.' Not surprisingly, Chaplin's old foes celebrated the occasion. [Right-wing columnist] Westbrook Pegler, describing Chaplin as a 'filthy character who is a menace to young girls,' saluted what he believed was the 'first honest show of initiative against the Red Front of Hollywood by the Department of Justice.' Hedda Hopper's farewell—'Good riddance to bad company'—was circulated by *Time*."

Chaplin lived in Switzerland until his death in 1977, returning to the US only in 1972 to accept a special Academy Award. He made two more films, *A King in New York* (1957) and *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967).

Numerous commentators have dragged Chaplin's name into the current sexual witch-hunt, retroactively smearing the comedian and director in the light of current allegations. The names of Chaplin and Polanski have been coupled as "child rapists." One headline reads, "Harvey Weinstein says Charlie Chaplin was his 'idol'—he certainly seems to have taken after him." Others ask, "What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?" and "When should we separate the art from the artist?"

Shamefully, Richard Carr argued in a recent article that "Chaplin's behaviour may not have been exactly the same as the allegations levelled at Weinstein, but the case of Chaplin—'one of the greatest filmmakers' in Weinstein's view—remains illustrative of a trend of the misuse of power in Hollywood that one can draw from Chaplin through Roman Polanski and Woody Allen to allegations most recently being made against the actor Kevin Spacey." Carr calls it "in part a parable of unchecked male power, wealth, and the implicit protection that comes with both."

Carr's comment, as does nearly all the mainstream media, academic and "left" coverage of the #MeToo movement and its consequences, leaves out one small thing: the location of the sexual harassment campaign in American and global social dynamics.

Chaplin was not persecuted in the 1940s and 1950s and Weinstein, Polanski, Allen and Spacey are not being pursued today because of their alleged sexual misdeeds, even if or when those rise to the level of the criminal. The American ruling elite, *truly* criminal from head to toe, is regulating and manipulating the sexual hysteria for its own political and ideological purposes. On the eve of great social struggles, it is determined to impose an atmosphere of conformism and repression and encourage every gender and racial division, every illusion in the forces of "law and order" and every ounce generally of social backwardness and prejudice.

Anyone who fails to grasp that reality fails to grasp the essential character of the current situation.

A few examples of Chaplin's art:

The Fireman (1916)
One A.M. (1916)
The Pawnshop (1916)
The Rink (1916)
The Immigrant (1917)
Shoulder Arms (1918)
The Kid (1921)
The Gold Rush (1925)
The Circus (1928)

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