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## Affluence, Poverty and the Idea of a Post-Scarcity Society

This article briefly summarises Giddens'(1996) *Affluence, Poverty and the Idea of a Post-Scarcity Society* and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of its interpretations and arguments.

Giddens starts the essay by sketching the background of Enlightenment meta-narratives, through the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber, highlighting the importance of science, knowledge, and history in enhancing human control over the world and thereby achieving progress and prosperity in post-feudal societies. However, the world we live in at the dawn of new millennium is as uncertain , if not more , as it was at the dawn of Enlightenment. Knowledge over ignorance has created its own uncertainties, " *they come in some substantial part from our own interventions into the history and its surrounding world."* ( Giddens 1996:366). Giddens terms it as 'manufactured uncertainty', and depicts three major social changes occurring in the context of these uncertainties, that is, Globalisation, Detraditionalisation, and Social reflexivity.

Globalisation, is cumulative change in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres of modern life across the globe. Dialectical interplay of global and local traditions, has created the phenomenon of Detraditionalisation, where tradition is divested of its ritualistic baggage, and it no more remains as a '*given'* tradition. Globalisation and Detraditionalisation, in turn, have altered the basic contours of societies we are living in , ushering in the process of social reflexivity, where "*Every one in some sense must reflect upon the conditions of his or her life, as a means of living a life at all"* ( Giddens 1996:369).

In globalised world of ‘reflexive’ modernity, social changes brought about by the processes of globalisation, detraditionalisation, social reflexivity, and manufactured uncertainties, make social and political institutions as well as human relationships undergo fundamental transformation. Giddens attributes these situations as harbinger of new mechanisms, required by late-modern world to effectively deal with life-problems arising due to manufactured uncertainties, which brings about, “ *a transition from emancipatory politics to life politics...rather than a politics of life chances life politics is a politics of life decisions.”* ( Giddens 1996:371-2).

As life-political questions, generated by life-problems dominate the contemporary detraditionalised world, need for post-scarcity society assumes pressing relevance and importance . Giddens characterises his concept of post-scarcity society by trends of life politics, decline in productivism, growing manufactured risks and realisation of limitations of modernity to solve self created problems. He therefore visualises life-style bargaining as the way out, in ecological, economic as well as emotional life, *“ in condition of manufactured uncertainty and detraditionalisation, such bargaining is likely to become a central feature of formal and less formal political manoeuvring* “ Giddens 1996:376).

**2.** Strength of Giddens’ arguments, lies in capturing the spirit of late-modern age we are living in, and emphasising the role of reflexivity that is, human agency , in confronting life-problems created as a consequence of modernity and transforming the same by life-politics. Giddens sketches the contemporary life of modern man, as the one in which the ideas, narratives, institutions, body, tradition, knowledge, self, nature, in a sense the life as a whole, looses the *given* notions we are used to. This has altered the very meaning and contour of Self and the surrounding world.

Giddens, further argues that modernity has shattered the sureties of tradition and nature and daily life of modern man is being shaped by dialectical inter-play of global and local forces beyond human control. In such a scenario of 'runaway world', he highlights the importance of reflexivity, the role of human agency in transforming the Self and in the process the world around. Here we find similarity in ideas of Giddens with that of Freire, *"the man's ontological vocation is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world*', ( Freire 1970:14).Author, raises the issue of ethics of Self, through the concept of 'reflexivity', which is a process of moral self-actualisation of individuals. Giddens, finds the mechanisms and institutions of emancipatory politics , based on emancipation from exploitation, inequality and oppression, as inadequate for dealing with life-problems of detraditionalised world.

Giddens' concept of life-politics revolves around the role of social actors in 'making a difference' to their individual as well as collective life by reflexive life-decisions. Life-politics is , an existential and moral confrontation with new life-problems in individual, inter-personal as well as social life, *" In many areas of social life thus detraditionalised, new decisions have to be taken; these decisions are almost always politicised, involving as they do an ethical or value dimension."(* Giddens 1996:372). He elaborates his arguments about life-politics, citing moral and ethical issues involved in decision making in life-problems created by contemporary developments in areas such as, genetic engineering, nuclear armaments, global warming, changing gender relations, divorce, remarriage, abortion etc.

Giddens, substantiates his interpretation by pointing out changes taking place in the scope and power of Welfare State, in this regard. Welfare state, based on emancipatory politics and management of external risks, has come under severe strain and questioning by civil society, which is reflected in growing visibility of cases of corruption and inability of State to withstand

challenges of alternative mechanisms of solutions, provided by market, say in case of life-insurance. Giddens , thus, visualises life-politics as a New way, by which reflexively organised individuals, in the process of self-actualisation, develop new form of post-traditional social order. He cites, feminism organised on the principle of 'personal is political', as a movement transcending the emancipatory politics and reaching near the life-politics.

Giddens further, connects the concept of life-politics with the concept of life-style bargaining, *"Life-style bargaining involves the establishing of trade-offs of resources, based upon life-political coalitions between different groups."* ( Giddens 1996:374). His arguments of life-style bargaining, in areas of active risk management, ecological, economic and emotional life, assume importance in the context of globalisation of these issues. The recent controversy about Genetically Modified (GM) foods, can be cited as a life-problem, involving life-politics, which goes beyond the purview of current framework of emancipatory politics, liberal or radical. A decision to ban GM foods in one country, say U.K, will make little change on developments in this area globally. Thus life-politics involving life-style bargaining between scientists, farmers, Trans National Corporations, consumers, and nation-states across the globe only, can solve the problem by 'trade-off' between these different social actors.

Thus, strength of Giddens' interpretations and arguments, lies in visualising new form of transformatory politics, that is, Life-politics created by reflexive project of Self in the context of social changes, brought about by the processes and consequences of Globalisation, Detraditionalisation, Manufactured uncertainty and Social reflexivity in the age of high modernity.

The role and ethics of Self and its relationship with social change, in form of Life-politics propounded by Giddens, finds support from Foucault, who is also sceptical of emancipatory projects, *"Self, must put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and*

*desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take"* ( Foucault 1984:46).

3. Weakness of Giddens' arguments and interpretations lies, in the fact that he does not establish an analytical link between his concepts and political, social and economic structures, which renders his constructions devoid of radical realistic force, required to operationalise the ideas in real-life situations. Consequently, his concepts become post-modernist deconstruction, engaged with existential confrontation of elitist self-refashioning, *" the kind of solution proposed by Giddens, that collapses actor and structure into one composite entity and therefore, fails to specify precisely the relationships between the two, remains therefore problematic"* ( Long 1994:84).

Giddens' essay centres around the concept of 'manufactured uncertainty', caused by Enlightenment interventions in history and nature, as a consequence of modernity. Further, he finds the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers, like Marx, Weber and Kafka as not 'corresponding to the world, at the end of twentieth century'( Giddens 1996:366).It is worth mentioning here, that Karl Marx had clearly elaborated the consequences of capitalism and modernity in causing 'alienation' in the life of individuals; Max Weber similarly had bemoaned the inevitable 'beauracratic rationalisations' of capitalist societies in creating human unhappiness; and Franz Kafka through his novels 'Trial' and 'Metamorphosis' had creatively expressed the eternal conflict of external world with the intimate life of modern man. Carbridge rightly clarifies the issue by stating that, *" the puzzling uncertainties of modernity might reasonably be explained in discourses of modernism: that is by going back to work of Marx and Weber"* ( Carbridge 1994:98).

Further, Giddens completely overlooks the fact that Globalisation, is essentially an economic phenomenon, represented by internationalisation of trade and finance, which, according to certain Globalists has rendered even 'nation-states' powerless in the face of global market forces. It is, therefore, not understood as to how individuals can have the power to shape the course of change through life-politics. Harvey ( 1989:102), points out the weakness of Giddens' interpretations in these words, *" Money fuses the political and economic into a genuine political economy of overwhelming power relations, a problem which macro-social theorists like Giddens - with his strict division between allocative and authoritative sources of power --can not grasp".*

It is, really ironic that Giddens' construction of post-scarcity society, does not say anything on how to deal with concrete problems of reducing inequality and alleviating poverty, which the essay sets out as the goal. Consequently, the idea of post-scarcity society appears more as a work of poetic imagery than a work of social theorist. Further, considering the fact that 57% of world population living in Third World, survives just on 5% 0f World income( Begg 1997:4), Giddens' concept of post-scarcity society, has limited, if any, appeal to First World situations only.

**4.** Giddens' essay, is a very creative as well as critical account of late-modern age, we are living in. He, successfully captures the basic changes taking place in the globalised world today, as a consequence of modernity.

Further, unlike ahistorical and apolitical critique of modernity by post-modernists, he visualises transformatory politics in terms of life-politics, which can transcend the current form of emancipatory politics, based on Enlightenment meta-narratives.

In view of the discussion and analysis in the paper, in my view Giddens' ideas provide, powerful tool to 'emancipated' social actors, to mitigate the alienating effects of high modernity, by achieving self-actualisation, and ' making a difference' within the institutional and social frameworks of their existence. However, his ideas don't hold sufficient force for majority of populations, particularly in Third World, who are still caught in emancipatory struggles to overcome exploitation, inequality, and oppression. To conclude with, in my opinion, Giddens' post-Marxist construction of post-scarcity society, seems as utopian as Marxist idea of classless society, has proved to be.

## **Refere**nces


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