3
The Political Consequences of Late Modernity

The utopian realist perspective enables a reading of Giddens that makes his analysis of late modernity defensible in relation to its critics; however, there is no indication of how exactly his analysis of late modernity points towards social reform or transformation. This is problematic, firstly because Giddens explicitly notes that this is the aim of his work, and secondly because without a clear focus on how to achieve social transformation, his analysis of late modernity is vulnerable to charges of elitism. To address these points, we need to consider one further element of his analysis of late modernity. Having told the story of globalization, post-traditionalism and reflexivity, and having provided evidence that he is essentially aware of structural constraints inhibiting these developments, *The Consequences of Modernity* and *Modernity and Self-identity* both conclude with a discussion about the need for political action.¹

In both works, he makes the distinction between ‘emancipatory politics’ and ‘life politics’ (*1990: 156, 1991a: 209–10*). This distinction lines up with the tension identified in his analysis of late modernity between the potential for a more empowered, reflexive self on one hand and the forces inhibiting its emergence on the other. Emancipatory politics is the term Giddens chooses to summarize what most scholars of politics will identify as the principal well-established struggles between the political left and right:

…in all cases, the objective of emancipatory politics is either to release under-privileged groups from their unhappy condition, or to eliminate the relative differences between them…. Emancipatory politics is concerned to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression.

(Giddens, 1991a: 211)
Such a definition encompasses anything from allocation of resources and redistribution to the legal emancipation and equality of marginalized groups, though Giddens notes that the financial and redistributive element of emancipatory politics has generally been given the highest importance compared to the other emancipatory issues he mentions (ibid: 212). These issues of the emancipatory category are all centred on the issue of equality (in the widest sense of the word). Life politics, by contrast, is the politics of self-actualization:

...life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies.

(ibid: 214)

In the moral void left by post-traditionalism, life politics becomes a significant area for debate in which moral grounds need to be created, which in turn enable decisions on issues that emerge for knowledgeable, reflexive agents or for collective groups thereof. The notion derives from the New Social Movements of the 1970s and 80s (Habermas, 1981; Offe, 1985), and Giddens cites nuclear power and nuclear armament, environmental protection and changing lifestyles of women (beyond the legal elements of women’s emancipation) as just some of the crucial issues that appear in this context, but he is also suggestive of a vast quantity of other, perhaps smaller-scale issues that may emerge in this field (ibid: 217–23).²

His discussion of politics goes some way to complete the utopian realist reading of the analysis of late modernity. In line with the logic of utopian realism, most of Giddens’ analysis highlights empirically verifiable tendencies and developments, which he sees as desirable; then he briefly acknowledges that these tendencies and developments are inhibited by structural forces. Finally, he points towards the need for political reform so that said tendencies and developments can be fostered towards universal emergence and that the new political issues that will arise as they take hold can be anticipated. In the context of his belief in the transformative power of sociological writing, he has thus succeeded in identifying social developments that he views as desirable and points towards the kind of social reform and transformation required to build on and foster these developments.

To an extent, the utopian realist reading is then successful: it answers critics of Giddens’ analysis of late modernity, and through