**UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

DP 63

# AFFLUENCE, POVERTY AND THE IDEA OF A POST-SCARCITY SOCIETY

**by Anthony Giddens**



**May 1995**

# ◆ Preface

As Anthony Giddens notes in the opening pages of this essay, we live in a world which — far from becoming more orderly and predictable — seems increasingly to run out of control. This sense of crisis and disorientation was a theme emerging repeatedly at the UNRISD conference on **Rethinking Social Development,** held in conjunction with the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen on 11-12 March 1995. At the event, ten distinguished social scientists and writers — Ralf Dahrendorf, Amitai Etzioni, Johan Galtung, Anthony Giddens, Eric Hobsbawm, Fatema Mernissi, Tetsuo Najita, Emma Rothschild, Wole Soyinka and Tatyana Tolstaya — explored and interpreted the current social crisis and sketched alternative scenarios for the future.

For Professor Giddens, what is striking about today's world is not that it is more uncertain than in previous generations, but that the **sources** of uncertainty are changing. If in the past the risks faced by most people were generated by forces (whether natural or divine) considered to lie beyond human control, we now increasingly confront new forms of uncertainty which are created by our own attempts to alter nature and to change the course of history. Thus there is a shift from what Giddens calls **external** to man-made or **manufactured** risk.

The "end of nature" and the attenuation of tradition, brought about during the past several decades as part of a process of accelerated modernization on a global scale, increase the need for conscious reflection on many aspects of life formerly considered to be givens. "A whole host of new decisions has to be taken (by somebody) in areas which were not 'decisionable' before", and this places many existing institutions — from the political to the economic and social — under strain.

The impact of such developments on the welfare state in advanced industrial countries is particularly noteworthy. In a very interesting aside, Giddens points out that the welfare state as traditionally conceived is an insurance system designed to cope with old-fashioned external risks. But to an increasing extent, it must confront manufactured risks generated by personal relations and social institutions that do not conform to earlier patterns.

Therefore Giddens suggests reforming existing welfare systems through "the active mobilization of life decisions rather than the passive calculation of risk". This is congruent with his more general conviction that the enormous expansion of the scope for reflexivity — the growing need for everyone to take specific decisions on many different aspects of daily life — is creating a new politics of "life decisions".

In developed and developing countries alike, new questions of personal choice and ethics (such as those so prominently associated with the abortion issue) form the basis for a kind of "life politics" which is different from — and supplements, but does not replace — the longer-established practice of "emancipatory politics", concerned above all with issues of social justice. In Giddens's view, it is thus no accident that the controversy over "the family" has come to play such a prominent part in the present-day politics of many nations, or that there is a resurgence in the political significance of religious fundamentalism. In important respects, these are "life political", rather than solely emancipatory, issues.

In the concluding section of his essay, Giddens suggests that "life politics" can form the basis for new strategies to reduce inequality and alleviate poverty. While existing prescriptions tend to be based upon the direct transfer of wealth or income from the more affluent to poorer groups (the first losing what the second gains), it also is possible to implement strategies in which everyone gains through improving some element of the quality of life. In such a "post-scarcity" setting, trade-offs might be established between different groups to redistribute access to paid work, to protect the environment or to improve health. To a certain extent, this is already being done by people who relinquish hours of work to others in order to gain more leisure; and by environmental groups in North and South who have a common interest in preserving natural resources.

At the same time, "few things can be more significant worldwide than the possibility of a new social contract between women and men, since sexual divisions affect so many other forms of stratification in societies of all types". This element of "life politics" holds the key to many positive-sum changes in human relations. A pact between the old and the young might also lessen deprivation within both groups.

In sum, Professor Giddens has provided a powerful reminder that societies are changed by personal decisions about how we want to live.

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May 1995

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My starting point in this discussion is a world that has taken us by surprise. By “us” I mean not only intellectuals and practical policy makers, but the ordinary individual too. In the West, at least, we are all the legatees of certain strands of Enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment was a complex affair. Various different perspectives of thought were bound up with it and the works of the leading Enlightenment philosophers were often complex and subtle. Yet in general the philosophers of Enlightenment set themselves against tradition, against prejudice, and against obscurantism. For them the rise of science, both natural and social, would disclose the reality of things.

Understanding was always itself understood as an unfinished and partial affair — the expansion of knowledge is at the same time an awareness of ignorance, of everything that is not and perhaps will not be known. Nevertheless, knowledge was presumed to be cumulative and presumed also to yield a progressive mastery of the surrounding world. The more we are able to understand ourselves, our own history, and the domain of nature, the more we will be able to master them for our own purposes and in our own interests. The underlying theorem, stripped bare, was extremely plausible. The progress of well-founded knowledge is more or less the same as the progressive expansion of human dominion.

Marx brought this view its clearest expression, integrating it with an interpretation of the overall thrust of history itself. In Marx’s celebrated aphorism, “human beings only set themselves such problems as they can resolve”. Understanding our history is the very means of shaping our destiny in the future. Even those thinkers who took a much less optimistic view than Marx of the likely future for humanity accepted the theorem of increasing human control of our life circumstances. Consider, for example, the writings of Max Weber. Weber certainly did not see history as leading to human emancipation in the manner envisaged by Marx. For Weber, the likely future was one of “uncontrolled bureaucratic domination” — we are all destined to live in a “steel-hard cage” of rationality, expressing the combined influence of bureaucratic organization and machine technology. We are all due to be tiny cogs in a vast and well-oiled system of rational human power.

Each of these visions of the imminent future attracted many adherents. Marxism, of course, shaped the very form of human society for many. Others, perhaps critical of Marxist thought, recoiled before the sombre vision offered by Weber, Kafka and many others. Marxism, as we all know now, has lost most of its potency as a theoretical perspective on history and change. But Weber’s more sombre vision has also lost its hold over us. It does not correspond to the world in which, at the end of the twentieth century, we in fact find ourselves. We do not live in a world which feels increasingly under human control but, rather to the contrary, one which seems to run out of control — in the words of Edmund Leach, a “runaway world”. Moreover, this sensation of living in a world spinning out of our control can no longer be said to be simply the result of lack of accumulated knowledge. Instead, its erratic runaway character is somehow bound up with the very accumulation of that knowledge. The uncertainties which we face do not result, as the thinkers of Enlightenment tended to believe, from our ignorance. They come in some substantial part from our own interventions into history and into the surrounding physical world.

I do not think one could say that the world in which we live today is more uncertain than that of previous generations. I do not see how such a claim could be validated in any case. It is the sources of uncertainty which have changed. We live increasingly in a social and material universe of what I shall call **manufactured uncertainty**. Manufactured uncertainty, or manufactured risk, comes from human involvement in trying to change the course of history or alter the contours of nature. We can separate manufactured risk from **external risk**. External risk refers to sources of uncertainty which come either from unmastered nature or from "unmastered history" — that is, history as lived by taken-for-granted traditions, customs and practices.

The debate about global warming — which is a debate about "nature that is no longer nature" — offers one among many examples of the advent of manufactured uncertainty. The majority of scientific specialists believe that global warming is occurring, even if all forecasts of its likely consequences are imponderable. Some scientists, however, believe that the whole idea of global warming is a myth, while there is a minority view that what is taking place is actually the reverse — a long-term process of global cooling. The uncertainties which surround the global warming hypothesis do not derive from "unmastered nature", but precisely from human intervention into nature — from the "end of nature". Since we cannot be wholly sure whether or not global warming is occurring, it is probably best on a policy level to proceed in an "as if" manner. As some of the consequences of global warming could be calamitous, it is sensible for nations and the larger world community to take precautionary measures.

Manufactured uncertainty is by no means limited to "nature which is no longer nature". It invades most areas of social life too, from local and even personal contexts of action right up to those affecting global institutions. Take as an example the decision to get married today on the part of someone living in a Western society. Fifty years ago, someone who decided to marry knew "what it was he or she was doing". Marriage was a relatively fixed division of labour involving a specified status for each member of the married couple. Now no one quite knows any longer what marriage actually is, save that it is a "relationship", entered into against the backdrop of profound changes affecting gender relations, the family, sexuality and the emotions.

What explains the increasing dominance of manufactured over external risk? Obviously the origins of this transition are bound up with the advent of modernity as a whole. However, a series of very basic changes sweeping through the world over the past several decades have intensified this transformation of the conditions of uncertainty and risk. Three great sets of changes are sweeping through the industrialized countries and also in some degree affecting most societies across the globe.

The first concerns the effects of **globalization**. The word globalization appears almost everywhere these days, but thus far has not been well conceptualized. As I would understand it here, globalization does not simply refer to the intensifying of world economic competition. Globalization implies a complicated set of processes operating in several arenas besides the economic. If one wanted to take a technological fix upon the intensifying of globalization in recent years, it would be the point at which a global satellite

communication system was first established. From that point onwards instantaneous communication became possible from any part of the globe to any other. The advent of instantaneous global communication both altered the nature of local experience and served to establish novel institutions. The creation of 24-hour money markets, for instance, a phenomenon that has an impact upon almost all the world's population, became possible only because of the immediacy of satellite communication.

Globalization is not just an "out there" phenomenon. It refers not only to the emergence of large-scale world systems, but to transformations in the very texture of everyday life. It is an "in here" phenomenon, affecting even intimacies of personal identity. To live in a world where the image of Nelson Mandela is more familiar than the face of one's next door neighbour is to move in quite different contexts of social action from those that prevailed previously. Globalization invades local contexts of action but does not destroy them; on the contrary, new forms of local cultural autonomy, the demand for local cultural identity and self-expression, are causally bound up with globalizing processes.

The second major source of social change over recent years is **detraditionalization**. Here again we can distinguish longer processes of transformation from the more intensified changes happening over the past few decades. Modernity, of course, always set itself against tradition — this was one of the very origins of the Enlightenment. Yet during the lengthy period of what Ulrich Beck has called "simple modernization", modernity and tradition existed in a sort of symbiosis. Science itself became a kind of tradition — an established authority to which one turned when seeking the answer to puzzles or problems. This symbiosis of modernity and tradition marks the phase of "simple modernization" — roughly speaking, the first century and a half or so of industrialization and modernity.

In the phase of "reflexive modernization", which has accelerated over the past several decades, the status of tradition becomes altered. Detraditionalization does not mean an end to tradition. Rather, traditions in many circumstances become reinvigorated and actively defended. This is the very origin of fundamentalism, a phenomenon which does not have a long history. Fundamentalism can be defined as tradition defended in the traditional way — against the backdrop, however, of a globalizing cosmopolitan world which increasingly asks for reasons. The "reason" of tradition differs from that of discourse. Traditions, of course, can be defended discursively; but the whole point of tradition is that it contains a "performative notion" of truth, a ritual notion of truth. Truth is exemplified in the performance of the traditional practices and symbols. It is not surprising, therefore, that we should see so many clashes and fracturings today across the world as embattled tradition clashes with much more open life-style choice.

Detraditionalization is closely linked to the "end of nature" and indeed the two intertwine very often. "Nature" disappears in the sense that few aspects of the surrounding material world — and of the body — remain uninfluenced by human intervention. Tradition and nature, as it were, used to be "landscapes" of human activity, carrying with them a certain fixity of life-style practices. As tradition and nature dissolve, a whole host of new

decisions has to be taken (by somebody) in areas which were not "decisionable" before.

Consider, for example, the field of human reproduction. A variety of aspects of reproduction which were previously "given" — not open to being influenced by human decision-making — now are in principle or in practice malleable. It is possible to have a child without any kind of sexual contact with another adult at all; the sex of a child can become a matter of choice; contraception becomes highly effective, so that the decision to have a child becomes something quite different from when childbearing was more of a "natural" process. The "end of nature" in the domain of reproduction, however, integrates closely with the social changes brought about by detraditionalization. Thus central to the lowered birth rate in the developed societies today is the series of changes which have promoted the autonomy of women and therefore altered the traditionally-given relations between the sexes.

The third great set of changes sweeping through the world concerns those associated with the expansion of **social reflexivity**. This is again not confined to the Western or developed societies, but is bound up with the globalization of communication. "Reflexivity" does not mean self-consciousness. It refers precisely to the condition of living in a detraditionalized social order. In such an order everyone must confront, and deal with, multiple sources of information and knowledge, including fragmented and contested knowledge claims. Everyone in some sense must reflect upon the conditions of her or his life, as a means of living a life at all. Consider as an example the case noted previously — the decision to get married. That decision is taken amid a welter of information about "relationships", "commitment", the changing nature of sexuality, of gender relations and of the very institution of marriage itself. Such information or knowledge is not simply a "background" against which the decision to marry is taken: as remarked earlier, it enters constitutively into the environment of action which it describes.

Living in a highly charged reflexive social environment brings many new rewards and forms of increasing autonomy; at the same time, it also brings new problems and anxieties. As an illustration consider eating disorders and anorexia. As a widespread phenomenon, eating disorders in Western countries are relatively recent, dating only from the past 30 or so years. They are pathologies of a society where everyone is "on a diet": that is, a diversity of foodstuffs is available, to those who can afford them, at any time of the day, month or year. Diet is no longer given by "nature" — by the local seasons and by the availability of local produce. In such circumstances individuals have to decide what to eat — in some sense select a diet — in relation to how they want to be. Diet becomes intrinsically bound up with the cultivation of the body — for some people, particularly young women, social pressures to do with bodily appearance can assume a pathological and compulsive form.

When we decide what to eat, and therefore how to be, we know that we are taking decisions relevant to present and future health. A person might resolutely stick to a traditional diet, continue to smoke and so forth, in the face of widely disseminated medical knowledge which indicates these habits

to be harmful. Yet he or she cannot do so without being aware of such knowledge claims. Ignoring them is in effect a decision.

In a globalizing world, marked by the swathes of social change just described, pre-established institutions start to come under strain. This is true of areas of social life ranging from personal and intimate social ties right through to large-scale global orders. In politics, to take one illustration, the voting population now lives in the same discursive arena as their political leaders. In such a circumstance, political legitimacy starts to come under strain. Deference tends to disintegrate, and political activities and procedures which were once acceptable start to be placed widely in question. It is not just happenstance that corruption cases have come to the fore in political life in many countries across the world. Corruption was there previously, although it might not have been treated as such; but in the new conditions of social visibility in which political life operates today, what was once accepted becomes generally seen as illegitimate (although the reverse can also on occasion be true).

Rather than developing the political example, I shall concentrate here upon the question of the welfare state and welfare institutions. Most students of social policy agree that the Western welfare state is in a situation of crisis. That crisis is ordinarily understood in fiscal terms — as part of a "can't pay, won't pay" mentality on the part of the middle classes. In the more affluent sectors of society, in other words, people increasingly refuse to accept the levels of taxation required to support others less fortunate than themselves. Sometimes the fiscal crisis of the welfare state is described, as in Galbraith's phrase, as a "culture of contentment": many middle class people have achieved a comfortable way of life and become protective about it. Others see the situation more as one of anxiety and insecurity; the middle class is no longer exempt from worries which used to concern mainly those in the lower strata of the social order.

I do not mean to say that the thesis of the fiscal crisis of the welfare state, in either of these competing versions, is a wholly mistaken one. It is not. However, one can also look at the problems facing the welfare state in a different way. The crisis of the welfare state, it can be suggested, is in some large part a crisis of **risk management**. The welfare state originated as a "security state" and was actually called such in some countries. It was the socialized, public counterpart to private insurance. Now the involvement of modernity with insurance makes an interesting and informative story.