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Geras on means and ends: the case for a prefigurative constraint

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I

The overall arc of Norman Geras's writings in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s shows a long-standing preoccupation with the ethics of socialism.[1] This was particularly clearly expressed in his seminal work on Rosa Luxemburg (Geras, 1976), in his authoritative account *Marx and Human Nature* (Geras, 1983), and in the work summarized in 'The Controversy over Marx and Justice' (in Geras, 1986). Geras persuaded many others to take seriously the ethics of social change and political agency, and his later political development, including his support for and advocacy of humanitarian interventionism, is perhaps only fully explicable in relation to his thinking about socialist morality in the 1970s and 1980s.

One of Norman Geras's most important pieces towards the end of this phase of his work is a characteristically lucid article in the *Socialist Register* for 1989 (Geras, 1989). It is, in many respects, a pivotal piece, representing both a conclusion drawn out from, and a shift away from, the more exegetical work on Marx and the classical Marxists such as Luxemburg. By 1989 Geras had clearly concluded that there was a significant lacuna in classical Marxism: it was blind to serious and detailed discussion of the ethics of radical social change. In 'Our Morals: The Ethics of Revolution' Geras argues that 'socialist discussion of revolutionary ethics . . . and the discussion in particular of ends and means, tends to be framed in abstract generalities of a sort which yields neither specific rules or norms of conduct nor much practical guidance for concrete cases'. He goes on 'to suggest that there is a lot to be learned here, by way of trying to

repair the deficiency, from another tradition of discourse altogether'
(Geras, 1989: 185).

This tradition is the Just War tradition, a tradition that undergirds
his political positions in the new millennium. According to Geras,
socialists and others thinking about radical political change, and the
morally proper ways to go about achieving it, ought to look to the
tradition stretching from Aquinas to Michael Walzer, rather than the
largely consequentialist formulations that were part of the classical
Marxist canon – and the accompanying abstract generalities that fail
to be action-guiding. It may be right to see this shift as part of a
backlash against consequentialism in the later half of the twentieth
century, along with Rawls, Nozick, Williams, Scanlon, and
Macintyre; or, at least, to place Geras at the left pole of such a
backlash, the part that took as its target audience the active left, and
as its object, radical political action.

Such actions include the formation, policy, and internal regime of
political parties, activist groups, and civil associations (especially
trade unions), and the interventions that these groups make; the
nature of participation in electoral processes; the structure of demo-
cratic citizens' forums; the formation of alliances, and the bases on
which these are made; the organization of demonstrations, marches,
meetings, and campaigns, together with their demands and slogans;
strikes, pickets, and other industrial action; occupations, publicity
campaigns, campaigns of consumer or other boycotts; methods of
fundraising, recruiting, and organizing, including online; up to
hostage taking, blackmail, and covert and violent political action,
including social revolution.

When Geras writes about means and ends, he is generally
concerned with *socialist* transformations and *socialist* revolution. But
similar considerations to those brought to bear by Geras onto
socialist transformations apply to other sorts of radical political
change – actions designed to prevent or ameliorate global warming,
and directed towards the establishment of a sustainable global
economy; actions for the establishment of a society which is equal
between the sexes; actions directed towards the reconciliation of
communities which are in conflict on the basis of national antago-
nisms and competing narratives, land claims and the like. A more
modest social-democratic objective – realizing Rawls's principles of
distributive justice, for example – involves a similar framework. In
each case we can consider a morally valuable outcome, or situation,

or state of affairs – an end – and we can consider political actions aimed at securing the just outcome – transformative projects, or means.

Assume that these states of affairs are all of moral value, an assumption that I will return to, and we turn our attention to the political actions, decisions, and movements that might bring these about. We attend, then, to the moral theory of a *transformative politics* and confront Lenin's question: what is to be done? This is easily read as a tactical question, directing us to consider what is effective in bringing about a (more) just state of affairs. But, with Geras in 'Our Morals' (1989), we can consider also the reverse question – what is *not* to be done? What is proscribed for transformative politics? What does an ethically permissible transformative politics look like?

II

The first form of moral theory to be encountered in thinking about socialist ethics is consequentialism. By consequentialism, I mean the view that the rightness of an act, or more generally a policy, is entirely a matter of the goodness of its consequences. By crass consequentialism, I want to identify, outline, and be rude about a variant of this way of grounding moral judgements, whilst at the same time indicating the view that there are variants of this approach that are much more sophisticated and intellectually substantial. Crass consequentialism is consequentialism conceived of as both criterion of rightness (CR) *and* decision procedure (DP). The most notable proponents of this view are Ted Honderich, Noam Chomsky, and Peter Singer; and the view is common in leftist intellectuals. In the body of literature that I am concerned with this is primarily expressed in the little booklet of Trotsky, 'Their Morals and Ours' (1938) – to which Geras clearly nods in 'Our Morals: The Ethics of Revolution'. Much of the left is broadly consequentialist in this way. For this left, the actions to be undertaken are those which are, in the long term, effective in bringing about a more just society; the actions to be avoided, are those which fail to do so – hence the specifically limited nature of Trotsky's criticism of terrorism as *counterproductive*.[2]

On the other hand, the Just War tradition is, broadly speaking, rights based. As Walzer puts it in the preface to *Just and Unjust Wars*, 'the arguments we make about war are most fully understood . . . as

efforts to recognise and respect the rights of individual and associated men and women. The morality I shall expound is in its philosophical form a doctrine of human rights' (Walzer, 1977: xxi–xxii).[3] With these affiliations in mind, it looks as if Geras's paper 'Our Morals' is a rights-based attack on consequentialist ethics. In general, this is how much of the discussion of the problem of political action looks – as an argument about what sort of moral constraints ought to be placed on effective political action. The views here can reach a high degree of sophistication, but are, I think, categorizable in terms of this dualism of effectiveness/permissibility.

But there is a third view. The third alternative can conveniently be labelled 'prefigurative socialism'. Its central idea is that the movement for a state of affairs has the same shape or figure as the state of affairs itself. Rather than effectiveness, or permissibility, the relational term here is representativeness, or exemplification. By using the 'shape' or 'figure' metaphor here, I mean that the means possess certain (moral) properties, moral properties that are replicated in the sought-after end state. As Geras puts it (whilst criticizing this view), 'in the struggle for liberation the end must be prefigured or anticipated by, reflected or adumbrated in, the means to secure it'; 'The burden of performing this simultaneous affirmation and denial is carried by precisely that array of terms in which the means/end relationship is typically formulated: the end is prefigured, anticipated or foreshadowed by, reflected, embodied or expressed in, the means with which it is achieved' (Geras, 1976: 141, 147).

III

Taking this three-fold division we can situate possible political acts, or means, in a Venn diagram (Figure 1), according to whether they fit in the set of effective actions, rights-respecting actions, and prefigurative actions. We can look at the interrelations between these different criteria. Three-fold divisions of moral theory are familiar.

Moreover, when the first two divisions are very generally aligned with utilitarianism and rights, respectively, there is an almost irresistible temptation to slot virtue ethics into the third hole. The architectonic works here, too: prefigurative socialism has quite a lot to do with Aristotle and virtue ethics, though that avenue cannot be pursued here.

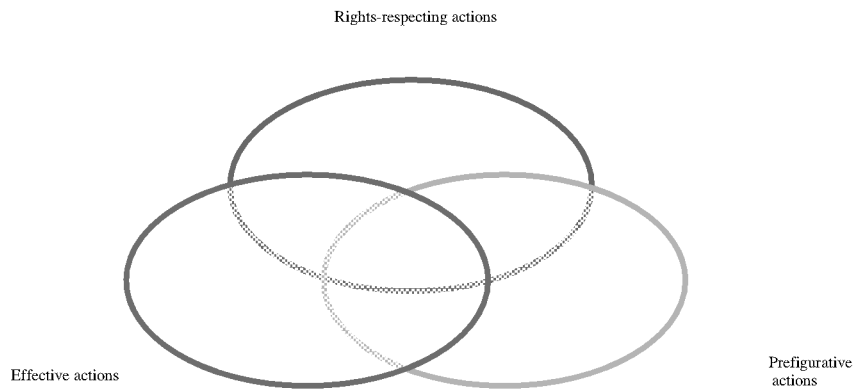Before I outline the relations between the three approaches, and in

Rights-respecting actions

Effective actions

Prefigurative
actions

Figure 1 Three properties of political actions

order to get to grips with the argument, it might help to consider a particular policy option – carbon trading. Carbon trading allows relatively rich states to maintain high levels of carbon emissions by buying the carbon quota of relatively poor states. Consider such proposals against a series of criteria.

First, they look as if they may be effective in reducing, in the medium term, carbon emissions. At least it is not clear that they will be ineffective, though it depends on the policy to which carbon trading is compared. In comparison to the absence of international agreement on carbon emissions, it seems likely that carbon trading will reduce overall levels of carbon emissions; but against a comparison with a tightly enforced and restrictive policy that policed national and non-negotiable targets, a carbon trading policy would be less effective. But the efficiency of carbon trading is not the issue.

Second, it is not obvious that carbon trading is rights-violating, most obviously because it involves free market exchange. It may be said that the rights of future generations are violated by excessive carbon emissions, that carbon trading permits excessive carbon emissions and consequent rights violations. But this relies on a rather extended and controversial account of rights, and amounts to a rights-based objection to any moderate policy on carbon emissions now.

But third there is still something troubling about a policy of carbon trading even if its effectiveness and its rights-respecting character are both conceded. This concern on a third dimension

points to a prefigurative account. On the basis of a prefigurative constraint, carbon trading would be ruled out, because it fails to prefigure international arrangements which are non-exploitative and egalitarian. If this is right, the policy is permissible from a consequentialist point of view, permissible from a rights-respecting point of view, but ruled out on the basis of a prefigurative conception of transformative politics.

However, it might be objected that that this is an issue which can be captured within the idea of deontological constraints; that the apparent need for a prefigurative conception arises because the contrast has been set up between consequentialism and rights, rather than between consequentialism and deontology (which can include a commitment to rights but isn't exhausted by it); and that a deontologist might object to the lack of non-exploitative and non-egalitarian relations *now*, rather than making any appeal to the idea of prefiguration.

I have two responses to this objection. First, in emphasizing the breadth of deontological commitments, the objection is in order, yet there are still morally relevant properties of sought-after states that are not easily captured by either crass consequentialist or deontological perspectives: the prefigurative constraint is neutral – indeed empty – between sought-after end states. It merely prescribes that the means used to reach a sought-after state of affairs prefigures that state of affairs. To object that the state of affairs could incorporate some other morally valuable property, which would then need to be prefigured or equally instantiated in a means, seems to concede this critical point. If it is the case that the sought-after end state is constituted (in part) by non-exploitative relations, then it either follows that the means to achieve this ought to be non-exploitative, or it does not follow. Prefigurative constrainers argue that it does follow.

Second, the objection seems to miss out on the means/end specificity of the prefigurative concern – the specific idea that something has gone wrong in utilizing means to an end which *rub up against* that end – and that this can only be captured with means/end talk. Now, it may be that those means have something wrong with them quite independently, but I want to argue that there is something awry in the bare lack of fit between means and end, over and above an independent evaluation of the means and the end.

I now turn to some relations between these approaches to transformative politics. As will be familiar, a common critique is that,

whilst consequentialism rules out certain actions, it does not rule enough out, and, even when it does rule actions out, it rules them out for the wrong reasons (Williams, 1985).

Prima facie, Just War theory is more restrictive than consequentialism: it imposes further obstacles on actions that would be effective, by ruling some of them out as unjust according to the rules of war.[4] For example, Just War theory prescribes that the rules of war are founded on rights, and endorses non-combatant immunity which consequentialism characteristically rejects. Suppose we simplify by thinking of Just War theory as essentially a rights-based theory (whilst acknowledging that there are substantial chunks of Just War theory, such as the issue of proportionality, which are heavily informed by consequentialist considerations). The constraints built into Just War theory prefigure a situation in which rights are protected and respected, and if such a situation were to obtain, then Just War theory would 'wither away' – it would be a set of empty categories of historical interest only. From this angle, Just War theory and prefigurative theory coincide.

At first sight, prefigurative strategies look yet more restrictive than Just War theory. It is possible that an action meets a rights-respecting constraint but not a prefigurative constraint, since the action does not resemble or prefigure the state of affairs to be achieved, as in the case of carbon trading. Applying a prefigurative constraint to the selection of political policies and actions will rule out actions that are rights-respecting but are not prefigurative, so it seems that a prefigurative constraint would be more restrictive than a rights-respecting constraint, ruling out a further subgroup of actions that was rights-respecting. In so far as the state of affairs that is sought after is one in which rights are respected, then it looks as if the prefigurative strategy must be one in which rights are respected.

However, this is not quite correct, for a prefigurative constraint, on its own, does not exclude all actions that fail to be rights-respecting. To see this, reflect that the content of the sought-after state of affairs is, thus far, unfixed. It could be that the sought-after state of affairs is one in which rights are respected, in which case prefigurative action to secure that state of affairs will also be rights-respecting action. But these are not the only states of affairs that one might aspire to achieve: the sought-after state of affairs may be one in which rights are not respected. States of affairs in which – to put it at the extreme – liberal rights are superseded by a society of universal

friendliness are not prefigured by a movement in which those liberal rights form absolute – or even stringent – constraints. It is possible for the sought-after state of affairs to be one in which rights 'wither away' into a society of universal friendliness – as Aristotle puts it, 'when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well' (Aristotle, 1931: 142).

While it may be tempting – indeed, while it may be right – to dismiss this possibility as a hopelessly utopian and politically dangerous notion, its analytical significance is plain. Jeremy Waldron, for example, depicts the argument between those who seriously entertain the notion of the withering away of rights and those who do not, in the following way:

> The dispute here is between those who yearn for communal bonds so rigid that the question of what happens when they come apart will not arise or need to be faced, and on the other, those who are, first, realistic enough to notice the tragedy of the broken bond and ask, 'What happens next?'; and, second, optimistic enough to embrace the possibility of the construction of new bonds and new connections and ask 'How is that possible?' (Waldron, 1993: 391)

The yearning for communal bonds so strong that they cannot 'come apart' may be a sign of utopianism. Nonetheless it is conceptually quite in order to think of prefigurative actions that do not respect rights and that prefigure 'super-strength' communal bonds of the sort that Waldron has in mind. For present purposes, this is enough to show that prefigurative actions and rights-respecting actions do not necessarily coincide. Some of those who take seriously the idea of prefigurative politics have, at the same time, made clear their preference for super-strength bonds: the two often stand together.

Here, for example, is the eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin:

> subcultures begin to emerge which emphasise a natural diet against the society's synthetic diet, an extended family as against the monogamous family, sexual freedom as against sexual repression, tribalism as against atomisation, community as against urbanism, mutual aid as against competition, communism as against property and finally, anarchism as against hierarchy and the state. In the very act of refusing to live by bourgeois structures, the first seeds of the utopian lifestyle are planted. Negation passes into affirmation; the rejection of the present becomes the assertion of the future within the rotting guts of capitalism itself. (Bookchin, 2004: viii)

But those 'bourgeois structures' may be rights-based structures. It is clear how 'tribalism' (interestingly characterized by Bookchin in this positive way against atomism) can violate important rights. The further that the sought-after state of affairs diverges from a society in which rights are respected, the further prefigurative politics diverge from rights-respecting politics. The divergence in terms of the sought-after state of affairs from a rights-respecting state of affairs takes place in two dimensions – which we may stipulate as dimensions of *compliance* and of *relevance*. On the first dimension, compliance, a shift from rights-based means would follow from an explicit, if partial, denial of rights-respecting ends. Here, it is important that the sought-after state of affairs abandons various 'bourgeois' rights and, consequently, that the means to such a state of affairs actively negates or denies them. The other involves departures along a scale of relevance – that rights talk is not enshrined in the sought-after state of affairs, and is to that extent not involved, either by being acknowledged as a constraint, or negatively, as an active negation, in the movement to achieve the state of affairs. The specification of a relation of prefiguring depends on the sought-after state and the prefiguring act possessing the same, morally relevant properties. For some conceptions of sought-after states, rights-respecting is irrelevant. The compliance/relevance distinction provides a way of acknowledging some of the nuances of means/end relations. Theoretically informed sought-after states of affairs do not prescribe every property or feature of a state of affairs: they foreground one or another. Consequently, for a prefigurative act, some properties are more morally relevant than others.

In short, then:

(1)   An action's being *effective* is neither necessary nor sufficient for its being rights-respecting or prefigurative.
(2)   An action's being *prefigurative* is neither necessary nor sufficient for its being effective or rights-respecting.
(3)   An action's being *rights-respecting* is neither necessary nor sufficient for its being effective or prefigurative.

Nevertheless, an act's moral value derives from its being effective, or rights-respecting, or prefigurative, or some combination.

Geras's criticism of the lacuna of the left, and in particular the Marxist left, on the moral basis of political acts is instructive, yet he

is a strong critic of prefigurative politics. Geras's critique of prefiguration is most explicit in 'Our Morals: The Ethics of Revolution' and is worth quoting at length:

> I dispose in short order of one kind of answer to these questions. This is that in any such struggle the means must be prefigurative of the ends in view. Setting aside some problems about its precise meaning – for what does a quantity of timber prefigure: a scaffold or a barn? And what the laying down of weapons – a return of peace? Or impending massacre? One may concede a value to some such rough idea. If we can exemplify, can display, our good ends in the good ways and means we use to achieve them, so much the better. But in the present context, means cannot in general only reflect the ends in view, because they will also reflect their own beginning, so to put it. They are doubly determined: not only by what they are intended to achieve, the putative goal, but by that situation which is their starting point as well. It is in the nature of the problem under discussion – of revolution – that this starting point has ugly features, including the mobilisation of violence on its behalf. How could the means of opposing it not reflect some of that ugliness, how, even in trying to prefigure a better future, avoid being scarred by an awful past? Shooting at the direct agents of a hated tyranny is still killing people; it is a state of war and as such not prefigurative of human harmony or even of reasonably tolerable social order, though it may be necessary in order to achieve that. To point this out is just to insist on an indispensable minimum of realism. At the same time, it may then be said, revolutionary means must at least prefigure their intended ends to some, large, extent. But to what extent? Which non-prefigurative means, if one is going to speak in this way, may, and which may not be used in a just revolutionary struggle? The notion of prefiguration gives no determinate answer to our question, merely another language in which to formulate it. (Geras, 1989: 188–9)

There are three separate objections in this passage to the idea of a prefigurative constraint on action. The first is that the prefigurative requirement has no precise meaning. The second is that the prefigurative requirement necessarily ignores the fact that means 'reflect the ugliness of the starting point'. The third objection responds to a modification of the demand for a prefigurative constraint: the modification is that the means 'must reflect to some extent' and Geras rejects this as vague and not action guiding. On his account, the modified prefigurative requirement fails to discriminate between those actions that are permissible and those that are impermissible.

Here I essay a rejoinder to Geras's critique. First, I turn to the objection to the vagueness of the prefigurative constraint, illustrated by the questions about a quantity of timber, and the laying down of arms. Since a quantity of timber is not an act, let alone an act exhibiting specifiable moral properties, it does not seem to be in the right category for consideration as a prefigurative act. What about the laying down of arms? This is an act, and an act with specifiable moral properties. One moral property of the act is the setting aside of violent means for resolving conflict. It prefigures a more general state of affairs in which violent means for resolving conflict are set aside.

But the laying down of arms may not, of course, *bring about* a general state of affairs in which violent means for resolving conflict are set aside. It may bring about a massacre of the defenceless. It is no part of my argument that prefigurative acts ought to be recommended when such consequences arise: distinguishing the different constraints which an act ought to be measured against invites us to consider the extent to which an act meets *more than one* constraint. Distinguishing the relation of prefiguring a state of affairs from the relation of being effective in bringing about a state of affairs is helpful in understanding how acts might *both* prefigure and be causally efficacious in bringing about a state of affairs, *or* prefigure, but not be effective, *or* be effective but not prefigure, and so on.

Geras's second objection appears to recognize all this, and the response is straightforwardly concessive: the task here is to disentangle the significance of prefigurative politics from concern about an 'indispensable minimum of realism'. Realism cannot be dispensed with: the important questions here are answered only casuistically, on the basis of calculations of effective political strategy and so on. It seems reasonable here, though, to suggest that the overarching thesis that Geras advances in 'Our Morals' points towards an answer to this particular problem: the need to take seriously the Just War tradition as a guide to socialist action cannot be adequately rebutted by invoking 'an indispensable minimum of realism'. Why should not the same be said for prefiguration? Walzer's Just War theory takes realism seriously, as evidenced by his account of 'supreme emergency': conditions where, in the face of an imminent existential threat, the normal rules of war can rightfully be suspended. Under these circumstances, a minimum of realism entails the suspension of the ordinary rules of war: bombing the civilian population of a hated

tyranny could also be permissible in conditions where a nation faces an existential threat, yet the rules of war are still normally operative. If, as Geras suggests, 'shooting at the direct agents of a hated tyranny' is necessary in order to achieve a reasonably tolerable social order, this may be considered analogous to the case of supreme emergency – whatever, the analytical work seems to start at this point, rather than end, with the citing of an 'indispensable minimum of realism'.

This leaves the third objection: about the indeterminateness of which prefigurative means ought to be employed to secure some desired state of affairs. Clearly, amongst the selection of means, criteria of effectiveness and rights-respecting need to be met: we ought to consider those means which are effective, rights-respecting and prefigurative. Amongst the prefigurative means to be selected are those prefigurative means which contain/reflect/exemplify/instantiate those aspects of the end which give it – the end – moral value. Once again, it is important to tease apart the effectiveness of an act in bringing about a state of affairs from its prefigurative moral value. The value of a prefigurative act is a derivative value – not because it inevitably, or probably, *leads to* a state of moral value but because it contains *within itself* some moral value, by virtue of its resemblance to, or exemplification of, a state of affairs of moral value, even if that state of affairs does not come about. The moral value of a prefigurative act arises from its resemblance to – its prefig-uring (in the relevant respect) of – a state of affairs that *itself* has moral value. This sort of deflationary response seems in order.

So we can set up a rough schema, asking the questions: does the act bring about the state of affairs? And does the act look like the state of affairs? In both ways, there are three different respects in which a precedent act can stand to a state of affairs – positive, negative, and neutral – and this applies to the figuring relation and the consequential relation. Each relation, therefore, has three different aspects (Figure 2). (Note, as stated, that the figuring relation between the act and the state of affairs is not causal: there is nothing implied about the consequences of the act for the state of affairs, although the respects in which the different relations stand map across to each other as in Figure 2.)

One result of this way of looking at things is that the source of moral value of a prefigurative act becomes clearer. Actions that are effective draw moral value from the state of affairs that they *bring*

Figuring relation	Prefigurative	Non-prefigurative	Counter-prefigurative
Consequential relation	Effective	Ineffective	Counterproductive

Figure 2 Some relations between actions and ends

about. Actions that are prefigurative draw moral value from the states of affairs that they *prefigure* – at least when they exemplify or instantiate the state of affairs, when the relation is that of a token to a type. Actions that are *counter-prefigurative* may, at the same time be *effective* in bringing about a state of affairs which, figuratively, they do not represent, exemplify or resemble – rather, they misrepresent, and counter-exemplify that state of affairs. A war to end all wars may succeed in ending all wars. Coercive intervention may establish democratic institutions. A strategy of organized ostracism may secure mutual respect and friendship. Violent revolution may usher in a society of universal friendliness. In each case, counter-prefigurative actions may be effective. But in each case something of moral value is lost.

The middle column of Figure 2 is important in the relation of actions to states of affairs in the following way. First, look at the consequential relation. An action may be effective in bringing about a state of affairs, or be counterproductive in bringing about that state of affairs. But it may also simply be *ineffective* – neither productive nor counterproductive. Here, empirical information drawn from the history of the left, especially that part of the left that Geras concerns himself with in this period, is germane. For political actors, particularly political actors on the left, this ought to be freely admitted as a very common category. Some sort of political action is tried, and it just fails. It does not bring substantial social change, but it does not make things altogether worse. The dominance of the category of the 'ineffective' as an empirical reality ought to be admitted. It is certainly possible to suggest that in the long run, and for reasons to do with the massive causal ramifications of quite trivial acts, there is always some net effect, in some way, on the course of events, and the bringing about of states of affairs from any action. But the recognition of such long-term ripples does not undermine the view that very many political acts – electoral interventions, demonstrations, conferences, marches, pickets, blogs, and so on are both trivial and of nugatory effect.

There is a similar category which applies to the figuring relation. We have seen various ways in which an action may prefigure a state of affairs, and ways in which it might be counter-prefigurative, but the middle ought not to be excluded. An action may look like the state of affairs it is designed to bring about, or it may resemble the photographic negative of the situation it is designed to bring about. But also it may simply not resemble such a state of affairs – it may be dissimilar, neither possessing the morally relevant properties, nor possessing corresponding morally relevant properties of disvalue. Whilst it is easy to argue for a constraint against action that is counterproductive, and – on the basis laid out above – to propose a constraint against actions that are counter-prefigurative *ceteris paribus*, the value of a concern with prefigurative acts comes about when we consider those acts in the middle column.

There are many political acts are ineffective, though not counterproductive in bringing about the sought-after political change. Likewise, there are, in the panoply of political acts, many that neither prefigure nor counter-prefigure the sought-after state of affairs. Nevertheless, an action which is itself non-exploitative, or just, or egalitarian, or respects the dignity of persons prefigures the sought-after state of affairs which is non-exploitative, or just, or egalitarian, or respects the dignity of persons. *Acts* which respect the dignity of persons – just like large-scale social relations that respect the dignity of persons – have value. They have value in so far as respecting the dignity of persons has value. Egalitarian acts which are directed at an egalitarian state of affairs have value because egalitarian social relations have value. In so far as equality is a value, acts which respect an egalitarian ethos also have value. (Cohen, 2000; Wolff, 1998). In selecting those acts which are directed to some end, a bias towards prefigurative acts will itself generate moral value.

Why? Where do these values come from? Here I want only to gesture at a way of answering these questions with which Geras might be expected to have some sympathy. The sought-after state of affairs, and the actions that precede such a state of affairs, have value because of their coincidence with human needs. Geras clearly explicates the source of such moral value in his work on Marx's conception of human nature. He demonstrated both that Marx had a theory of human nature, and that he was right to do so. Geras argues thus:

an ethical position resting on a conception of human nature is a perfectly possible one, possible in the sense of being logically unobjec-tionable, coherent in principle. If one places a value on human life and human happiness and there exist universal needs that must be satisfied respectively to preserve and to promote these, then this furnishes, the value and the fact conjointly, a basis for normative judgment: such needs ought to be satisfied *ceteris paribus*. (Geras, 1983: 101)

Consequently, evaluating states of affairs according to the extent to which those human needs are met is entirely reasonable. With both the normative and the descriptive premise in place, we are in a position to deliver judgements on the possible states of affairs that are attainable or even merely imaginable. The point here is not to defend such a conception of the source of moral value against objec-tions, though I have no serious doubt that it could be so defended. It is rather to say that such a conception of the source of moral value is obviously available to Geras, and there can be, in consequence, no serious problem in attributing moral value to sought- after states of affairs, by virtue of their possession of specific moral properties – such as being states of affairs of non-exploitation, or equality, or of respect for persons through a framework of rights, and so on. And it seems to me to be clear that acts designed to bring about such states of affairs of moral value, can themselves exhibit the same properties, and be for that reason, of moral value themselves.

IV

Any discussion of action directed towards deep social transformation must address the probabilities of success. A moral perspective on a push for *socialist* change needs to pay the utmost attention to the certain historical fact of its own disastrous failure. In his work in the 1970s and 1980s, Geras was writing about a project which, at least in appearance, was in the process of failing. In considering the moral responsibilities of those who continue to pursue similar or associated projects, there are multiple reasons for endorsing a conservative and prefigurative approach to moral means. The alternative is to say something like the following: we are aiming for a state of consider-able moral value, one in which human capabilities will be liberated as never before, exploitation will be eradicated, persons will be respected, and so on. We acknowledge that, in the recent past, attempts to establish such states of affairs have gone disastrously

wrong, and caused great harms. Nevertheless, in taking actions towards such a state of affairs, in risking this project again, there is (sadly) nothing we can do now that prefigures, or resembles, or gives you a taste of the state of affairs to be realized. Rather, you need to trust us that even counter-prefigurative actions will deliver the goods.

If the prefigurative set of actions is over-hastily closed off then we need to think with the utmost seriousness about the probabilities of securing whatever it is that we aim to produce but are unable to exemplify, or model, or prefigure. When we look at the history of attempted radical transformations it is clear that some of them justified, on consequentialist grounds, action that were rights-infringing and counter-prefigurative. What was not *pre*figured, never got figured.

In this chapter I have suggested that there are several independent criteria against which to measure any proposal for political action to secure some sought-after state of affairs. I argue that such action can be considered for its effectiveness, against a series of moral proscriptions and judgements drawn from the Just War tradition, and according to whether it prefigures the sought-after state of affairs. Matching each of these criteria is a mark of value against an action. For those seeking radical social transformation, the task of pursuing prefigurative means, side by side with these other considerations, has particular importance.

Notes

1 I wish to thank Carolyn Price, Derek Matravers, Timothy Chappell, Chris Belshaw, and the editors of this volume, Eve Garrard and Steve de Wijze, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this material.

2 '"Just the same," the moralist continues to insist, "does it mean that in the class struggle against capitalists all means are permissible: lying, frame-up, betrayal, murder, and so on?" Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means, we answer, which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality and its democratic echoers, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle. Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible' (Trotsky, 1938: 172).

3 There is, of course, a considerable literature on the topic of Dirty Hands in politics (see de Wijze, this volume, pp. 000–000). This literature

examines the significance of constraints on political actions, but, to the best of my knowledge, it does not separately discuss a prefigurative constraint. See for example Coady, 1993; Walzer, 1973.

4 Consider the Venn diagram presentation (Figure 1), which indicates that there is no reason at this level of abstraction to consider Just War theory as more restrictive than consequentialist theory: Just War theory does not rule out ineffective actions in the way that consequentialist theory does. It's merely a waste of time to consider those actions that lie outside the set of effective actions.