Review Essay:
Radical Theory and Programmatic Thought


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In the three volumes of *Politics*—the beginning of a projected series—Roberto Unger seeks to restore the relationship between social theory and radical politics. Concluding that current modes of social thought impede radical social change, Unger tries to transform the social disciplines and reorient the relationship between the study of society and the struggle to transform social life. *Politics* critiques contemporary social thought, offers an alternative mode of social analysis, reassesses key issues in world history, and outlines a program for radical transformation.

Perhaps the boldest and most controversial claim in *Politics* is the assertion that programmatic thought must be made an integral and essential aspect of all social inquiry. Unger argues that any adequate theory of society must include an effort to reimagine social arrangements. By insisting that programmatic thought is not just a by-product or “application” of social knowledge but an essential element in its production, Unger challenges the practices of most social researchers in the modern university.

Robert Mangabeira Unger teaches law and social theory at Harvard and is a political activist in his native Brazil. He has written on ethics and epistemology, legal and political theory, and the politics of Brazil. In these volumes, he has thrown down a challenge that the social disciplines can ignore only at their peril. Many will disagree with Unger, but no one can dismiss him. This is a work that demands attention and rewards close study.

I. THE RADICAL PROJECT

No idea is more important to *Politics* than the concept of a “radical project.” Unger wants to remake social thought because the existing discri-
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plines, whether Marxist, "postmodern," or positivistic in inspiration, hinder the accomplishment of "radical" aims.

Unger's idea of a radical cause draws on a "modernist" conception of the self that he developed in an earlier study entitled *Passion: An Essay on Personality* (New York: Free Press, 1984). In this conception, the personality is "an infinite imprisoned within the finite" (p. 4). The self always contains capabilities and demands disproportionate to the social and personal circumstances in which it is embedded. Yet only within these constraining contexts—modes of thought and perception, forms of personal attachment, and social and political institutions—can we realize ourselves.

Thus, Unger's concept of the self seems to rest on a paradox: there is no self outside of social contexts, but no social context exhausts the possibilities of the self. It is the resolution of this paradox that gives Unger's view of the self normative force for the social disciplines. This resolution comes from his notion of the relative "plasticity" of all social contexts, including discourses, relationships, and institutions. According to Unger, contexts are always conditional, imperfect, and transformable. The more a context is "plastic," the more easily it can be revised and, thus, the more it will permit self-realization, given the infinite possibilities and contextual nature of the self. "Radicalism," then, means the quest for more self-realizing contexts—the search for ever moreurable bodies of knowledge, personal relations, and social institutions.

Unger argues that the radical cause has its roots in Christianity and the romantic movement, leftist politics, and modern literature. While radicals of many stripes have in the past contributed to this idea of human potential, Unger thinks they have failed to carry through on or integrate their varied visions. Leftists have emphasized political and economic barriers to emancipation; modernists have focused on the constraints private life places on the development of the self. Unger wants to draw these strands together: *Politics* offers a social theory adequate for a "unified version of the radical cause" (*Social Theory*, p. 13).

II. FALSE NECESSITY

The central volume of the trilogy is called *False Necessity* because that is what is wrong with contemporary social thought and radical politics. Unger thinks our modes of understanding the world have failed to recognize fully the plasticity of society and thus the possibilities for transformation. He offers three concepts that embody the theme of liberation from false necessity: *formative contexts, negative capability, and history without a script*. Formative contexts are the institutional and imaginative practices that shape a society's routines. They are structures—like the modes of production in Marxism—that limit what can be imagined and done. Unger wants us to recognize the importance of such contexts but also grasp their mutability. No formative context is necessary or inevita-
ble; contexts can be changed in many ways and in many directions. Moreover, not all contexts are equal; some are more easily revised and thus made more likely to realize human potential.

Unger uses the term negative capability to measure the degree of revisability, or the absence of entrenched power, in any formative context. To complete the radical project, Unger tells us, we must work toward contexts with greater negative capability. These efforts must be guided by a recognition that there is no foreordained path in history. Unger rejects the idea that history has a script, that is, that the outcome of social struggle is determined by forces the contenders cannot master or restraints they cannot alter. Unger thinks most contemporary social thinkers, from Marxists to positivist social scientists, fail to grasp the mutability of contexts, the possibility of more revisable contexts, the “it could always have been otherwise” nature of historical outcomes. This failure has led the social disciplines to succumb to false necessity and to betray the radical project (see Social Theory, pp. 117, 223–24).

III. THE SITUATION OF SOCIAL THEORY

Unger lays out his detailed critique of the social disciplines in the first volume of Politics, entitled Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task. While focusing on Marxism, neoclassical economics, and positivist social science, Social Theory critiques all forms of social theory that make the following “deep structure” assumptions: (i) we can draw clear distinctions between the frameworks (formative contexts) of society and the routines these frameworks shape; (ii) such frameworks (like “the capitalist mode of production”) are indivisible and repeatable; and (iii) they must succeed each other in a predetermined sequence (e.g., capitalism must follow feudalism).

Unger argues that deep-structure theory disempowers radical politics. By insisting on inevitability and sequence, it “disorients political strategy and impoverishes programmatic thought” (Social Theory, p. 93). Committed to false necessity, deep-structure theory obscures the relationship between structure and agency and limits our ability to grasp transformative possibilities. To escape from these limits, Unger argues, we must rework the notion that frameworks shape social routines, removing from it any deterministic elements of the “framework” idea, and must jettison ideas of indivisibility and sequence altogether.

Politics contains an undisguised polemic against Marxism, which Unger feels is incurably wedded to deep structure and false necessity. While he recognizes antinecessitarian strands in Marx’s own work and appreciates the efforts of latter-day Marxists to loosen deep-structural assumptions, Unger asserts that no amount of revision can cure this doctrine’s commitment to indivisibility and necessary sequence. As a result, Marxism reifies structures, fails to recognize transformative possibilities, and cannot generate meaningful programmatic ideas.

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Since Unger indicts Marxism for reifying structure and thus paralyzing radical politics, one might expect him to applaud those who want to move away from structure altogether. But he does not. Politics also includes an attack on the “ultratheorists,” who are accused of not taking “structure” seriously enough (Social Theory, pp. 165–69). Unger sees the ultratheorists’ wholesale rejection of all ideas of structure as equally dangerous to the radical cause because ultratheorists (he has in mind Michel Foucault and some radical thinkers in the Critical Legal Studies movement) cannot produce the explanatory accounts and programmatic ideas needed for radical politics.

IV. THE ALTERNATIVE: “CONSTRUCTIVE” SOCIAL THEORY AND THE PROGRAM OF EMPOWERED DEMOCRACY

The critique of the social disciplines is a prelude to the exposition of Unger’s own explanatory theory of society, which he labels “super theory” (False Necessity, p. 1), and his program for social reconstruction, which he calls the “program of empowered democracy.” This program includes ideas for a radical revision of individual and collective rights, proposals for reorganizing state and economy, and a sketch of a new constitutional system.

The juxtaposition of explanatory and programmatic argument is far from accidental. Rather, Unger’s dual commitment to social explanation and to the development of relatively detailed ideas for large-scale social transformation is an essential part of what he calls “constructive social theory.” If one accepts the radical project as Unger restates it, one is forced to recognize that programmatic imagination is essential for social theory.

Unger’s account of the role of private rights in the West illustrates how the programmatic and explanatory aspects of Politics enrich each other. Although he recognizes the importance of the private-rights complex in maintaining the status quo in the West, Unger wants to demonstrate that the current system of private rights is not based on necessity, effectiveness, or moral superiority. He contends that our institutions of property and contract work only because they are linked with other arrangements (like hierarchical power in the workplace) that negate the liberal ideals these institutions seem to encode. He argues that, in the course of defending the private-rights order, apologists have been forced to define a series of exceptions and counterdoctrines that he calls deviant elements. He thinks that these deviant tendencies, originally introduced as justificatory moves within conventional legal discourse, would—if more fully developed—form the basis for a radical alternative to existing economic relations and institutions. In the program of empowered democracy, he develops these strands, articulating such novel concepts as a right to solidarity, grounded on reliance and trust; a right to destabilization, grounded on the necessity to revise institutional contexts constantly; and
a right to immunity, grounded on the individual's need for security as a precondition for participation in transformative politics.

By juxtaposing explanation and program, Unger argues, we can both better understand our situation and identify elements in the present—like the deviant tendencies in contract doctrine—that prefigure the future we aspire to. Furthermore, according to Unger, our ability to imagine credible alternatives to present contexts is essential for the radical cause of self-realization and institutional revision. We cannot revise the institutions that contain us unless we first imagine how they could be otherwise. Therefore, we must engage in programmatic thought or give up the radical cause altogether.

Thus the argument comes full circle. For, with the development of the program of empowered democracy, Unger completes the critique of the social disciplines launched in Social Theory. It is not that he disagrees with other people's programs—he thinks they have none. Unger thinks that all the main currents of modern social thought share the same failing: their inability to grasp the necessity and inevitability of programmatic thought. Marxists wait for the turn of history, positivists accept the current parameters of social life (today's formative context), as inevitable, if not also desirable, and ultratheorists engage in purely negative trashing. Unger calls on all these thinkers, in the name of the radical project many of them espouse, to turn toward programmatic thought. And he gives us a rich set of examples of what such thinking should look like.

V. CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

Politics covers so many topics, from economic, legal, and military history to moral philosophy and political doctrine and programs and takes so many bold, controversial positions that specialists could spend lifetimes critiquing any part of the argument. It seems to me, however, there are several major themes that require close analysis if we are to accept and develop the call for constructive social theory.

The first of these is the relationship between Unger's concept of the self and his theory. Unger denies that the former is the grounding of the latter; in Passion he says, "We cannot hope to deduce views of the self and of society from each other" (p. 85). Yet the argument of Politics draws on the Christian-romantic-modernist idea of the self to such a degree that the book lacks persuasive force if one rejects this account of personality. This suggests that the ultimate effect of Politics depends, in no trivial sense, on Unger's ability to persuade us that his theory of the self is one we accept.

The second theme is Unger's stance toward Marxism. Politics includes a root and branch condemnation of Marxism. Why does he devote so much energy to an effort to condemn all varieties of Marxism to the dustbin of intellectual history? After all, Unger recognizes that recent efforts to rethink Marxism have softened, if they have not yet completely eroded, this doctrine's commitment to what he calls deep structure. Fur-
ther, Unger’s social explanations draw heavily on Marxist-inspired work, and his program of empowered democracy includes elements drawn, inter alia, from contemporary Eastern European experiments. Finally, a large portion of the adherents to the radical cause profess adherence to Marxism, however diluted. Unger might have sought them as allies, but he insists they join him as converts. What explains this position?

Finally, Unger’s call for programmatic thought in the social disciplines might have been more effective if he had drawn attention to and discussed the work of others who accept this view of social thought. Unger is not the first academic to believe that programmatic thought is an essential element of social theory, and other contemporary writers have developed programs with elements similar to his. More recognition of parallel trends in the social disciplines—including those in Marxist-inspired work—would have strengthened, not weakened, the arguments of Politics. In his analysis of legal history, Unger drew skillfully on deviationist tendencies in law to demonstrate alternative possibilities for social life; the same could have been done for a full account of the state of social theory today.

Perhaps this is the ultimate challenge for Unger and for those of us in the social disciplines who accept his views on the necessity of programmatic thought. We must all look closely at the work that is already being done and develop those aspects of the programmatic imagination already present in our fields. If Politics spurs such an effort, it will help realize Unger’s deepest ambition, which is to reunite speculative inquiry, academic research, programmatic thought, and transformative struggle.