

Introduction

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Roberto Mangabeira Unger's project of developing a "constructive social theory" is breathtaking. He defends the "radical democratic project." But his definition of this project is much broader and more inclusive than most others: "John Stuart Mill, Alexander Herzen, Karl Marx, P.J. Proudhon and Virginia Woolf were all champions of the cause." He is influenced by Marxism, especially those Marxist theories that emphasized the autonomy of politics. But he is not a Marxist, because he refuses to entangle transformative aspirations in determinist assumptions. He argues for "disentrenchment," "destabilization rights," and "negative capability." But he does not belong to the school of "deconstruction," because his own "constructive" theory recognizes that our freedom to resist, reimagine, and reconstruct the social worlds we inhabit is itself a variable up for grabs in history. He is not an antiliberal. But he calls his theory "superliberal," in the sense of realizing the highest aspirations of liberalism by transforming its conventional institutional commitments.

How does he reach such an unusual intellectual standpoint? What is the practical relevance of his "constructive social theory?" Without trying to do full justice to this most ambitious social-theoretical work of the late twentieth century, my introduction seeks to highlight some salient features of Unger's social theory in the hope that it will motivate readers to study the text on their own.

SOCIETY AS ARTIFACT

Unger's social theory can be understood as an effort to carry the idea of "society as artifact" to the extreme. He teaches that "society is made and imagined, that it is a human artifact rather than the expression of an underlying natural order."

The idea of "society as artifact" has its origin in the European Enlightenment. However, its full implications have been worked out only halfway: the effort to push the idea of "society as artifact" to its limits has been blocked by the countertendency within modern social theories to develop a "science of history."

The intellectual reason for this countertendency is too complicated to deal with fully here. For now, we need only remember that modern social

thought was born in a post-Christian situation. The idea of “society as artifact” implies, at the minimum, that human history is not subject to divine providence. Rather, people can make and remake society at their will. There are many expressions of this idea of human agency in early modern social thought. One prominent example is the argument by Hobbes that “natural right” is not derived from “natural law.” In this way, modern natural rights and social-contract theories started to strip away the theological content of the medieval conception of natural law and sought to develop social theory based on the idea of “society as artifact.” Another famous example is Vico’s argument that amid the “immense ocean of doubt” there is a “single tiny piece of earth” on which we can stand firmly: this world of civil society has been made by man.

However, modern social thought failed to take the idea of “society as artifact” to the hilt. Some people believe that the reason for this failure lies in an over-reaction to the demise of Christian eschatology. When modern thinkers abandoned Christian eschatology, they still wanted to develop a “philosophy or science of history,” as if they desired to show that modern thought can answer any question raised by Christianity. In a sense, modern social thought began “reoccupying” the position of the medieval Christian schema of creation and eschatology. In this light, Tocqueville’s view of the irresistible march of democracy as a divine decree may be more than a simple metaphor.

Whether this explanation is historically true is a controversial matter going beyond the reach of this introduction. However, we can be sure that the search for the “law of history” has led modern social theory astray. What Unger calls “deep-structure social theory” is the star example of the effort of modern social thought to develop a “science of history,” rich in lawlike explanations. Although Unger chose Marx to exemplify “deep-structure social theory,” he made it clear that Durkheim and Weber – the other members of the social-theoretical canon – also bear the stamp of this tradition.

According to Unger, deep-structure social analysis is defined by its devotion to three recurrent theoretical moves. The first move is the attempt to distinguish in every historical circumstance a formative context, structure, or framework from the routine activities this context helps reproduce; the second is the effort to represent the framework identified in a particular circumstance as an example of a repeatable and indivisible type of social organization such as capitalism; the third is the appeal to the deep-seated constraints and the developmental laws that can generate a closed list or a compulsive sequence of repeatable and indivisible frameworks.

Unger shows that deep-structure social theory has reached an advanced state of disintegration. Its commitment to the above-mentioned three moves is becoming increasingly discredited by historical and contemporary practical experience. One response to this discredited deep-structure social theory is “positivist social science,” which denies altogether the distinction

between a “formative context” and “routine activities” within the context. But Unger argues that positivist social science is no way out. For the rejection of the context–routine distinction leads social scientists to study routines of conflict and compromise within the existing institutional and imaginative context only. As long as a formative context is stable, its influence upon routine activities can be forgotten. The study of voting behavior of different groups in a stable social framework is an apt example. Thus positivist social scientists miss the conflict over the formative context – the fundamental institutional and imaginative structure of social life. They end up taking the existing formative context for granted and seeing society through the eyes of a “resigned insider.” Caught between the pretense of “deep-structure social theory” to be “the science of history” on the one hand, and the uncritical approaches of positivist social science on the other, modern social thought worked out both “partial dissolutions and partial reinstatements of the naturalistic view of society.” Unger’s theoretical work, in a nutshell, is an effort to carry the idea of “society as artifact” all the way through, to develop a radically antinaturalistic, antinecessitarian social theory. In this sense, Unger’s social theory stages a double rebellion against classical social theory, with its functionalist and determinist heritage, as well as against the positivist social sciences.

AGAINST STRUCTURE FETISHISM AND INSTITUTIONAL FETISHISM

Unger rejects “deep-structure social theory” and “positivist social science,” but he is not a nihilist. He preserves the first move of deep-structure theory – the distinction between “formative contexts” and “formed routines” – while rejecting its two other moves – the subsumption of each formative context under an indivisible and repeatable type, and the search for general laws governing such types. This selective approach distinguishes Unger from conventional Marxists, who wholeheartedly embrace deep-structure social theory, as well as from positivist social scientists who deny the context–routine distinction. It also distances him from any nihilist practice of post-modern “deconstruction.”¹

The distinctive conceptual instrument for Unger’s theoretical innovation is his insight into “formative contexts” and the *degree* of their revisability or disentanglement vis-à-vis human freedom. As Perry Anderson well observed, the notion of “formative context” is “presented expressly as an alternative

¹ Richard Rorty nicely captures Unger’s theoretical position in his discussion of Castoriadis and Unger: “Castoriadis and Unger are willing to work with, rather than deconstruct, the notions that already mean something to people presently alive – while nonetheless not giving the last word to the historical world they inhabit.” See Richard Rorty, “Unger, Castoriadis, and the Romance of a National Future,” in Robin W. Lovin and Michael J. Perry, eds, *Critique and Construction: A Symposium on Roberto Unger’s Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

to the mode of production in the Marxist tradition, cast aside as too rigid and replicable. A formative context is something looser and more singular – an accidental institutional and ideological cluster that regulates both normal expectations and routine conflicts over the distribution of key resources.”² Although we can never escape completely the constraints of a “formative context,” we can make it more open to challenge and revision. Unger argues that this degree of openness is itself variable. For example, hereditary castes in ancient India, corporately organized estates in feudal Europe, social classes today, and “parties of opinion” tomorrow mark the presence of groups characteristic of increasingly open or “plastic” formative contexts. Unger proposes the notion of “negative capability” to signify the relative degree of openness and disentanglement of a formative context.

The term “negative capability” comes originally from a letter of John Keats, dated December 28, 1817. Unger’s usage generalizes and transforms the poet’s meaning. It denotes the active human will and its capacity to transcend every given formative context by negating it in thought and deed. To increase “negative capability” amounts to creating institutional contexts more open to their own revision – so diminishing the gap between structure and routine, revolution and piecemeal reform, and social movement and institutionalization. Unger values the strengthening of negative capability both as an end in itself – a dimension of human freedom – and as a means to the achievement of other goals. For he holds there to be a significant causal connection between the disentanglement of formative contexts and their success at advancing along the path of possible overlap between the conditions of material progress and the conditions of individual emancipation.

Therefore, Unger’s distinctive theoretical standpoint is characterized by a two-sided view of formative contexts: while recognizing their resilience and power, he deprives these contexts of their aura of higher necessity or authority. He emphasizes that “to understand society deeply” requires us to “see the settled from the angle of the unsettled.” This perspective gives rise to the critique of structure fetishism and institutional fetishism.

According to Unger, structure fetishism denies that we can change the quality of formative contexts. Here, the quality of a formative context is characterized by its degree of openness to revision. Structure fetishism remains committed to the mistaken thesis that “a structure is a structure.” A structure fetishist may be a skeptical post-modern relativist, who gives up on universal standards of value and insight. Alternatively, a structure fetishist may be a nihilist, whose concern is to deconstruct everything. However, both theoretical positions are pseudo-radical, because they end up subscribing to the view that, because everything is contextual, all we can

² Perry Anderson, “Roberto Unger and the Politics of Empowerment,” in his *A Zone of Engagement* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 135.

do is to choose a social context and play by its rules, rather than change its quality of entrenchment. Unger's thesis about the relative degree of revisability or disentanglement of formative contexts provides a solution to this dilemma of postmodernism-turned-conservatism. The way out is to recognize that when we lose faith in an absolute standard of value, we need not surrender to the existing institutional and imaginative order. We can still struggle to make institutional and discursive contexts that better respect our spiritual nature, that is to say our nature as context-transcending agents.

You may wonder about the metric of this "degree of openness and revisability." It is measured by the distance between structure-reproducing routine activities and structure-challenging transformative activities. The less the distance, the more open and revisable a formative context becomes.

Here we touch upon a crucial point in Unger's social theory. Unger does not share with most other contemporary social theorists and liberal political philosophers the obsession with establishing the "neutrality" of our basic institutions among clashing ideals of human association. For him, the mirage of neutrality gets in the way of the more important objective of finding arrangements friendly to a practical experimentalism of initiatives and a real diversity of experiences. We cannot distinguish within human nature attributes that are permanent and universal from those that vary with social circumstance. It is futile to present an institutional order as an expression of a system of rights supposedly neutral among clashing interests and conflicting visions of the good.³ What counts is to narrow the distance between the reproduction and the revision of our practices and arrangements. We thus help fulfill the requirements for those forms of material progress that can coexist with the liberation of individuals from rigid social divisions and hierarchies.

If the critique of "structure fetishism" attacks from one direction the fate allotted to us by our institutions, the critique of "institutional fetishism" attacks this fate from another direction. Institutional fetishism, for Unger, is the imagined identification of highly detailed and largely accidental institutional arrangements with abstract institutional concepts like representative democracy, a market economy, or a free civil society. The institutional fetishist may be the classical liberal who identifies representative democracy and the market economy with a makeshift set of governmental and economic arrangements that happen to have triumphed in the course of modern European history. He may also be the hard-core Marxist who treats these same arrangements as an indispensable stage toward a future, regenerate order whose content he sees as both preestablished and resistant

³ In his comparative study of Rawls, Habermas and Unger, Geoffrey Hawthorn points out that the search for neutrality looms large in both Rawls and Habermas. See Geoffrey Hawthorn, "Practical Reason and Social Democracy: Reflections on Unger's Passion and Politics," in Lovin and Perry, eds, *Critique and Construction*.

to credible description. He may even be the positivist social scientist or the hard-nosed political or economic manager who accepts current practices as an uncontroversial framework for interest balancing and problem solving.⁴

One prominent example of institutional fetishism is what Unger describes as “the mythical history of democracy.” According to this mythical viewpoint, “the trials and errors of modern political experience, and the undoubted failure of many proposed alternatives, have confirmed that the emergent institutional solutions were much more than flukes.”⁵ Contrary to this “mythical history,” Unger insists that we recognize how accidental are the institutional arrangements of contemporary representative democracies and market economies. For example, the liberal constitutionalism of the eighteenth century sought to grant rule to a cadre of politically educated and financially secure notables, fully able to safeguard the polities they governed against mob rule and seduction by demagogues.

This early liberal constitutionalism was not the royal road to democracy. One of its legacies has been a style of constitutionalism combining the democratic fragmentation of power with an antidemocratic bias toward the deliberate slowing down of politics and the perpetuation of constitutional or electoral impasse. Both the American presidential regime of “checks and balances” and the need to base political power upon broad consensus within the political class in parliamentary regimes exemplify this legacy.

In contrast, Unger proposes a new constitutional program. This program accelerates democratic experimentalism and breaks away from eighteenth-century constitutionalism. It combines a strong plebiscitarian element with broad and multiple channels for the political representation of society. In fact, the “dualistic constitutions” of the interwar period (1918–39) and the Portuguese Constitution of 1978 hinted at the possibility of a constitutional regime more open to democratic experimentalism.

Another prominent example of institutional fetishism is what Unger describes as the “mythical history of private rights.” According to this mythical history, the current Western legal system of property and contract embodies the inherent logic of a market economy. Contrary to this view, Unger insists that a market economy has no unique set of built-in legal-institutional arrangements. The current Western system of property and contract is less a reflection of a deep logic of social and economic necessity than a contingent outcome of political struggles. It could have assumed other institutional forms. The deviant cases and tendencies within the current law of property and contract, such as “reliance interests” not dependent upon the fully articulated will of contracting parties, already suggest

⁴ Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 200–201.

⁵ Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 211.

elements of an alternative legal–institutional ordering of the market economy. Unger devotes a major part of his constructive social theory to the development of alternative systems of property and contract. He shows how we can achieve this goal by redirecting and restructuring the deviant tendencies within the current private-rights system.

Unger’s critique of the “mythical history of democracy” and the “mythical history of private rights” is only a part of his institutional genealogy. He also presents an alternative, possibility-enhancing view of the genesis of contemporary institutions of government and labor. He outlines a parallel genealogy of Soviet and communist Chinese institutions. In each case, Unger “makes the familiar strange,” that is he shows how accidentally these institutions were generated and evolved, and how they look “natural” in retrospect only to a mind under the spell of false necessity.

The overall theme of Unger’s genealogy is the falsehood of institutional fetishism: existing institutional arrangements form a subset of broader possibilities. Unger emphasizes this fact in his treatment of “petty commodity production”: the economy of small-scale, relatively equal producers, operating through a mix of cooperative organization and independent activity. Radicals and conservatives alike have usually considered “petty commodity production” doomed to failure, because it precludes the economies of scale in production and exchange vital to technological dynamism.

Unger sees “petty commodity production” differently. He neither accepts nor rejects it in its unreconstructed form. Rather, he tries to “rescue” it by inventing new economic and political institutions. For example, we can satisfy the imperative of economies of scale by finding a “method of market organization that makes it possible to pool capital, technologies, and manpower without distributing permanent and unqualified rights to their use.” This solution amounts to the new regime of property rights in Unger’s programmatic proposal, discussed below. We can invent new institutions rescuing from the old dream of yeoman democracy and small-scale independent property the kernel of a practical alternative, open to economic and technological progress as well as to democratic ideals.

Indeed, one of the most fascinating themes in Unger’s discussion of the new forms of a market economy is the connection he establishes between these institutional problems and the emerging advanced practices of vanguardist production today. Here again, Unger helps us realize that inherited and established arrangements do not reflect the higher order of a “natural law of human history.” We can transform them if we want. By so doing, we can remain faithful to the progressive impulse of democracy.

PROGRAMMATIC ALTERNATIVES TODAY

Unger’s critique of structure fetishism and institutional fetishism is closely related to his programmatic arguments; a strong bond unites the explanatory

and the programmatic sides of Unger's "constructive social theory." As Unger puts it, the programmatic arguments of his social theory reinterpret and generalize the liberal and leftist endeavor by freeing it from unjustifiably restrictive assumptions about the practical institutional forms that representative democracies, market economies, and the social control of economic accumulation can and should assume.

In today's world, Unger's programmatic arguments are urgently needed. The pseudo-scientific thesis of convergence has gained intellectual respectability worldwide. This convergence thesis stipulates that market economies and representative democracies in the world are converging to the single best set of institutions – some variation on the established arrangements of the North-Atlantic democracies. In the Third World and the former Soviet-bloc countries this same thesis, sometimes also called the "Washington consensus," takes the form of "neoliberalism." Carried to its hilt, this convergence thesis is "institutional fetishist" to its core. As it hails, for example, the fading of differences among American, German, and Japanese styles of corporate governance, it fails to identify, or sympathize with, other differences that are in the process of appearing.

In its most abstract and universal form, neoliberalism or the "Washington consensus" is the program committed to orthodox macroeconomic stabilization, especially through fiscal balance, achieved by the containment of public spending rather than by increases in the tax take; to liberalization, accomplished through free trade (free for goods and capital, not for labor); to privatization, understood both more narrowly as the withdrawal of government from production and more generally as the adoption of standard Western private law; and to the deployment of "social safety-nets" designed to counteract the unequalizing effects of the other planks in the orthodox platform.

What is striking about this dominant version of neoliberalism is that it incorporates the conventional social-democratic program of social insurance. This fact shows clearly that the social-democratic ideal has long lost its radical transformative inspiration. Instead of challenging and reforming the institutions of the existing forms of market economy and representative democracy, the social-democratic program merely seeks to moderate the social consequences of structural divisions and hierarchies it has come to accept. Conservative social democracy defends the relatively privileged position of the labor force working in the capital-intensive, mass-production industries, at the social cost of exclusion of large numbers of outsiders in the disfavored, disorganized "second economy." If the division between insiders and outsiders is already a formidable problem in European social democracies, its proportions and effects become far more daunting in countries like Brazil and Mexico. Compensatory social policy remains unable to make up for extreme inequalities, rooted in stark divisions between economic vanguards and economic rearguards.

Because neoliberalism incorporates the social-democratic program,

Unger's programmatic alternative to neoliberalism is at the same time an institutional alternative to social democracy. It seeks to overcome economic and social dualism in both rich and poor countries by making access to capital more open and decentralized, and by creating political institutions favorable to the repeated practice of structural reform. The main reason for the existence of economic and social dualism – the division between insiders and outsiders of the advanced industrial sectors in both rich and poor countries – is the privilege current arrangements afford to the insiders. However substantial the interests that pit workers in advanced sectors against their bosses, they nevertheless share common interests against those of the disorganized working people (the outsiders) at large.

Conservative social democracy defines itself today by contrast to a managerial program of industrial renovation. This program wants to strengthen the freedom of capital to move where it will and to encourage cooperation at the workplace. It manages the tensions between these two commitments by devices such as the segmentation of the labor force. Conservative social democracy responds by seeking to restrain the hypermobility of capital through something close to job tenure. It also wants to multiply the recognition of stakes and stakeholders (workers, consumers, and local communities as well as shareholders) in productive enterprises. The result, however, is to aggravate the complaints of paralysis and conflict that helped inspire managerial programs while accepting and reinforcing the established divisions between insiders and outsiders.

The intuitive core of Unger's proposal for economic reconstruction lies in the attempt to replace the demand for job tenure by an enhancement of the resources and capabilities of the individual worker–citizen and to substitute a radical diversification of forms of decentralized access to productive opportunity for the stakeholder democracy of conservative social democracy. The first plank in this platform leads to the generalization of social inheritance through social-endowment accounts available to everyone; the second, to the disaggregation of traditional private property and the recombination and reallocation of its constitutive elements. Both planks, in turn, need sustenance from institutions and practices favoring the acceleration of democratic politics and the independent self-organization of civil society. The traditional devices of liberal constitutionalism are inadequate to the former just as the familiar repertory of contract and corporate law is insufficient to the latter.

Unger draws out the affirmative democratizing potential in that most characteristic theme of modern legal analysis: the understanding of property as a “bundle of rights.” He proposes to dismember the traditional property right and to vest its component faculties in different kinds of rightholders. Among these successors to the traditional owner will be firms, workers, national and local government, intermediate organizations, and social funds. He opposes the simple reversion of conventional private ownership to state ownership and workers' cooperatives, because this

reversion merely redefines the identity of the owner without changing the nature of “consolidated” property. He argues for a three-tier property structure: the central capital fund, established by the national democratic government for ultimate decisions about social control of economic accumulation; the various investment funds, established by the government and by the central capital fund for capital allotment on a competitive basis; and the primary capital takers, made up of teams of workers, engineers and entrepreneurs. Underlying this scheme is a vision of the conditions of economic growth and of the terms on which economic growth can be reconciled with democratic experimentalism. In this vision, the central problem of material progress is the relation between cooperation and innovation. Each needs the other. Each threatens the other. Our work is to diminish their mutual interference.

We can appreciate Unger’s ideas about “disaggregated property” from the standpoints of both the radical-leftist tradition and the liberal tradition. From the perspective of radical-democratic thinking, Unger’s program is related to Proudhon’s petty-bourgeois radicalism. Proudhon was a forerunner of the theory of property as a “bundle of rights,” and his classic work *What is Property?* provides a thorough critique of “consolidated property.” It is important to realize that, in its economic aspects, Unger’s program amounts, in a sense, to a synthesis of Proudhonian, Lassallean, and Marxist thinking. From the petty-bourgeois radicalism of Proudhon and Lassalle, he absorbs the importance of the idea of economic decentralization for both economic efficiency and political democracy; from the Marxist critique of petty-bourgeois socialism, he comes to realize the inherent dilemmas and instability of petty-commodity production. This realization stimulates Unger to reverse the traditional aversion of an emancipatory and decentralizing radicalism to national politics. He develops proposals for decentralized cooperation between government and business. He connects these proposals with reforms designed to accelerate democratic politics through the rapid resolution of impasses among branches of governments, to heighten and sustain the level of institutionalized political mobilization, and to deepen and generalize the independent self-organization of civil society.

From the perspective of the liberal tradition, Unger’s program represents an effort to take both economic decentralization and individual freedom one step further. In today’s organized, corporatist “capitalist” economies, economic decentralization and innovation have been sacrificed to the protection of the vested interests of capital and labor in advanced industrial sectors. Unger’s program remains more true to the liberal spirit of decentralized coordination and innovation than does the current practice of neoliberalism and social democracy.

Conventional, institutionally conservative liberalism takes the absolute, unified property right as the model for all other rights. By replacing absolute, consolidated property rights with a scheme for reallocation of the

disaggregated elements of property among different types of rightholders, Unger both rejects and enriches the liberal tradition. He argues that the left should reinterpret rather than abandon the language of rights. He goes beyond both Proudhon–Lassalle–Marx and the liberal tradition by reconstructing law to include four types of rights: immunity rights, market rights, destabilization rights, and solidarity rights.

In this sense, we can understand why Unger sometimes describes his program as “superliberal” rather than antiliberal. Any reader of John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography* would recognize that “superliberalism” – the realization of liberal aspirations by changing liberal institutional forms – recalls Mill’s new thinking after his mental crisis. Unger forces us to confront the difference between a liberalism that, through its emphasis upon cumulative and motivated institutional tinkering, keeps democratic experimentalism alive, and one that remains satisfied with tax-and-transfer-style redistribution within an order it leaves unchallenged.

We can thus view Unger’s programmatic alternative as a synthesis of the radical-democratic and liberal traditions. This synthesis bears in at least three ways on the future of the democratic project.

First, the synthesis of Proudhon–Lassalle–Marx and the liberal tradition nourishes a program of “empowered democracy.”⁶ It represents an economic and political alternative to neoliberalism and social democracy, with great appeal for a wide range of liberals, leftists and modernist visionaries. In our post-Cold War era, it reopens the horizons of alternative futures, and rescues us forcefully from the depressing sense that history has ended.

Second, this synthesis promises a reorientation of the strategy of social transformation of the left in rich and poor countries alike. One embarrassment of the Marxist-inspired left is the historical fact that the industrial working class has never become a majority of the population. Fear of the left and resentment at organized labor have often separated the “middle classes” from industrial and agrarian workers and turned them toward the right. Unger’s synthesis of Proudhon–Lassalle–Marx and the liberal tradition may prove to be a useful mobilizational tool for a more inclusive alliance in the service of radical-democratic change.

Third, this synthesis gives new meaning to the idea of “society as artifact.” Unger’s social theory represents an effort to theorize “jumbled experience.” He draws upon, and attempts to encourage, forms of practical and passionate human connection that recombine activities traditionally associated with different nations, classes, communities, and roles. Through this worldwide recombination and innovation, we broaden our collective sense of the possible. This enlarged sensibility in turn helps sustain the institutional arrangements in Unger’s program of empowered democracy. Thus,

⁶ Unger’s forthcoming book *Democratic Experimentalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1998) develops in detail his programmatic vision, linking it with contemporary problems and opportunities.

Unger's institutional program and his vision of change in the way individuals associate reinforce each other.

This book is a selection from Unger's three-volume *Politics, A Work in Constructive Social Theory*. The first part of the selection draws from the first volume of *Politics*, which describes the starting points of Unger's "radically antinaturalist social theory" and shows how the criticism of classical social theories and contemporary social sciences generates materials for an alternative practice of social understanding. The second part of the selection is from the second and third volumes of *Politics*: the relation between the openness and flexibility of formative contexts and the development of our collective capacity to produce or to destroy. The third part of the selection takes material from the second volume of *Politics*, which presents Unger's programmatic proposals to reconstruct our economic and political institutions. The last part of the selection comes from the first and second volumes: texts showing how Unger's institutional program and "cultural-revolutionary" personalist program reinforce each other.

Several reviewers of Unger's work, Richard Rorty among them, have emphasized that Unger is a Brazilian citizen. In Rorty's words, "Remember that Unger – though he has put in many years of hard work here in North America, changing the curricula of many of our law schools and the self-image of many of our lawyers – is a man whose mind is elsewhere. For him, none of the rich North Atlantic democracies are home. Rather, they are places where he has gathered some lessons, warnings, and encouragements." Reading this sentence, I cannot help recalling Max Weber's remark that inspiration for many decisive cultural accomplishments has often come from the periphery of a civilization.

In Unger's description of Brazil in 1985, we find him saying, "Indefinition was the common denominator of all these features of the life of the state . . . All this indefinition could be taken as both the voice of transformative opportunity and the sign of a paralyzing confusion." These words could equally describe today's world as a whole. I view China now as Unger does Brazil. Is Perry Anderson right in seeing in Unger a "philosophical mind out of the Third World turning the tables, to become synoptist and seer of the First"? The hope of progress toward a more vibrant democratic experimentalism may reside today in the large but marginalized countries like Brazil, China, India, and Russia, countries that can still imagine themselves as alternative worlds. We are all living in a time when a great chance of democratic transformation of all aspects of social life coexists with great confusion in our explanatory and programmatic ideas. It was in this condition of need, confusion, and hope that I first came to read Unger's work three years ago, and found it so inspiring that I felt it had been written expressly for me. It is my hope now that this feeling will be shared by other readers of this volume of selections from Unger's *Politics*.