

Symposium on Roberto Unger's *Politics*

**Unger's *Politics* and the Appraisal
of Political Possibility**

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What really is politically possible? How different, over any given period of time, could our collective social and political life be caused to become? Just how is it epistemically appropriate and humanly decent to conceive political possibility?

Few, if any, questions about the meaning of human existence so directly and intimately link personal temperament and cognitive style as the question of what really is politically and socially possible. To equate our more edifying desires with the possible consequences of our political actions is merely an agreeable exercise in self-deception. On the other hand, to identify the contours of our existing social arrangements as the current embodiments of "the ancient laws of society" n1 or as structural preconditions for social and political existence here and now is the most ignominious superstition. But the happy Aristotelian mean between these two types of cognitive indignity is as hard to characterize as it is to locate.

The most striking feature of Roberto Unger's new trilogy n2 is the confidence with which it presses an answer to all of these questions. The answer is arrestingly novel in many respects,

though it draws with great cunning and analytical energy upon many strands of modern thinking and historical scholarship. The core of Unger's answer is impressively integral and unmistakably *l'homme meme* -- a direct expression of Unger's highly idiosyncratic fusion of individual disposition and cognitive style. The answer rests on a taut but oddly stable balance between an intense scepticism and an at least equally intense faith. The scepticism dictates the judgment that we can never under any circumstances know what is politically possible or how different our collective social and political life could be caused to become. But the faith -- what Unger calls "the radical project" -- insists that this limit on our cognitive powers is an occasion for exultation rather than a ground for mourning and never, under any conceivable conditions, an excuse for lassitude, torpor, or resignation. For Unger, the message of modern world history is that we should revel in the indeterminacy of the future. Despite all of its horrors, modern history is a story of human empowerment, invention, and self-recreation, both individual and collective, a history of what Unger calls "negative capability." n3

Taken on its own, the natural impetus of either element in this combination is deeply distasteful to Unger. At the level of practical reason, the sophisticated scepticism of modern understandings of the character and development of human cognition yields a nasty choice. The choice is between a radical depoliticization of the imaginationⁿ⁴ and a sinister obsession with the manipulative opportunities potentially afforded by fusing esoteric knowledge with condensed social and political power. This second option leaves the task of emancipation of men and women to the social and political cognoscenti.ⁿ⁵ They, in consequence, find themselves claiming a kind of social knowledge which is necessarily unavailable. And along with this, and presumptively licensed by it, they also claim a degree of manipulative control that sets fierce and degrading limits on the freedom of action of their fellow human beings. A wide variety of modern thinkers have explored these dangers, and Unger does not make any especially decisive suggestions on how they can be avoided.ⁿ⁶

What Unger does offer, however, is a compelling picture of the impossibility, short of thermonuclear war, of sundering the potential for drastic social and political reconstruction from the exercise of modern state power. This theory is of great importance and interest because it conflicts so sharply with the educated political sensibility in most contemporary states -- as much in the Russia of Mr. Gorbachev, the India of Mr. Gandhi, and the Japan of Mr. Takeshita, as in the United States of Mr. Regan or the Italy of Mr. Goria. Unger does not deny the massively routine

character of most modern politics. But unlike the effectively habituated observers of modern politics -- journalists, politicians, economists, political scientists, and citizens -- the strategy of understanding which he deploys resists with the greatest obduracy any equation of intelligibility with fatality.

The theoretical basis for Unger's strategy of understanding is set out in his preliminary volume, *Social Theory: Its Situation and its Task*. The strategy itself is deployed to advance Unger's preferred political, social, and economic articulation of the radical project in *False Necessity*, the centerpiece of his present trio of works. But it is in the third volume, *Plasticity into Power*, in which one can most easily see both the source of Unger's own political confidence and the fragility of some aspects of his proposals. In this volume, Unger applies his strategy of understanding to the quest for wealth and power in a wide variety of pre-modern societies. Plasticity, that is, the capacity to alter social forms fluidly and inventively to face fresh challenges and surmount ancient barriers, is itself simply an especially important element of power in modern world history (as it has been more or less urgently throughout the recorded history of our species). To tie the development of plasticity to the steady elimination of personal dependence from large-scale human interrelations (let alone to the elimination of the depersonalization which Unger himself sees as accompanying this) is a formidable challenge and an endless political task. It is the essence of the conservative political wisdom of the Western world that we already know this task to have

failed, and that it was always in principle impossible.

Unger virulently rejects this jaded but contemptuous conviction, both for the spiritual vices it discloses and for the intellectual superstitions it inadvertently exemplifies. He cannot, however, offer to replace it with a more invigorating and ingenuous conviction if that conviction claims the same conclusive epistemic authority. The very scepticism necessary to discredit the epistemic pretensions of contemporary conservatism precludes Unger from volunteering counter-convictions that claim a comparable authority. To see so unblinkingly the imperative of plasticity as a fact of power certainly calls into question the political realism of governmental and administrative circles in the modern West with their increasingly enfeebled and Lilliputian sense of alternative possibility. n7

While the precariousness of existing routines may be bad news for their more persistent beneficiaries, it is not necessarily good news for most other human beings. This is especially apparent in a period such as the present in which weapons of terminal destruction are not merely within the scope of human imagination but permanently poised to carry out their tasks. n8 Unger insists evocatively, throughout *Plasticity into Power* and more intermittently throughout *False Necessity*, that the relentless pressures of military competition -- the quest to augment man's powers of destruction and coercion -- have done as much to impose the imperative of plasticity as have man's efforts to create and produce less equivocal goods.

But the hope of giving plasticity "the focus and authority it lacks" n9 by democratizing the quest for wealth and power and by breaking down the hierarchical division of labor with its sharp distinctions between task-setting and task-implementing, looks especially forlorn in the face of thermonuclear war. It is far from apparent that what we really need today is supplementation of our destructive capabilities; nor is it very plausible that the notably hierarchical and overbearing bureaucratic apparatuses of the two greatest powers in the world will not serve all too adequately to increase these capabilities at a dramatic pace. Given the extreme difficulty of controlling the deployment of nuclear weapons and the stunningly evident need to do so, the existence of these weapons and the possibility of ultimate destruction appear to form at least one context in which the imperative of plasticity has at last met its match. Indeed, since the prospect of uncontrollable individual improvisation in crisis conditions is the most likely cause of irreversible engagement, n10 there is now a strong case for seeing reconstruction of a more dependably hierarchical set of rigidities as the central imperative of human life. n11

Plasticity into Power thus indicates some of the darker shadows cast by Unger's vision and brings out, in the perfunctoriness of its ending, n12 the contingencies of personal temperament that hold this vision together. His presentation, with its elaborate *ricorsi* of leading themes and its mildly elusive structure, leaves the reader with a choice between a variety of modern superstitions of the left or right and one of two theoretical options -- super-theory and ultra-theory -- each unmistakably of

the left, and each commended by Unger himself. But the construction of this matrix of choice relies heavily on fusing negative epistemological doctrines, pragmatist emphasis on the imperative of social plasticity and the self-estimate of the radical project according to Unger's construction of the latter. This fusion, if it is necessary rather than factitious, may give the imperative of plasticity "the focus and authority that it lacks."¹³ But to anyone who disputes Unger's reading of the radical project or finds any version of it fundamentally unconvincing, Unger's fusion of doctrines naturally encourages the opposing judgment that plasticity, fact of power though it may be, in fact possesses no such focus or authority.

The most decisive and bracing feature of Unger's work is its frontal assault on the imaginative torpor of modern social and political understanding. With great acuity he sees something about human existence at an individual, a collective, and even a global level, which only the most brazenly flippant of modern thinkers have seen -- and which the latter's lack of analytical curiosity or energy has largely prevented them from comprehending. This vision certainly consorts more comfortably with radical and modernist apprehensions of the human predicament than it does with the sedate enjoyment of assured advantage.¹⁴ But the most conservative thinker or political leader has every reason to face it, simply because it is analytically compelling. *Plasticity into Power* vividly demonstrates the force of this lesson. Unger's own evident fascination throughout his writings with the perspective of power gives even greater emphasis to his understanding of human existence. There could be no more

appropriate audience for its stringent implications than the exponents of that broadly conceived politics of social democracy, which Unger very justly characterizes as the current embodiment of conservative political decency in the modern West.

Unger takes the alienated catenae imagery of the setting of modern human existence -- the iron cage, the carceral imagination -- and gleefully supplants it with the picture of a human habitat seething with possibility. The site of this surmounting of possibility, which guarantees its omnipresence from the most intimate of individual circumstances to the most global, is simply the human imagination. This is not a metaphysical thesis. Placing a vision of possibility in the human imagination is perfectly compatible with a monistic determinism, so long as the detailing of the latter remains cognitively inaccessible to real human beings. It certainly conflicts, however, with the most widely esteemed modern techniques of social, political, or economic understanding and with the dominant models of human rationality.¹⁵ Unger's view does not, of course, disturb the internal workings of human rationality nor deprive political understanding of all analytical force. But it cuts each of them decisively away from any determinate foundation in human experience and makes their application to this experience a matter of improvisatory deftness and good fortune.

A world seething with possibility to a degree that humans can never accurately assess, and in relation to which the very idea of such an assessment is profoundly unclear, plainly offers no conclusive warrant for any particular set of actions.

n16 But to see the world in this way stimulates a style of social vision very different from that prevailing in the positivist social sciences that Unger excoriates.

One of the best ways to see the force of this conception of social causality or causal theory of history is to focus on Unger's understanding of the character and role of institutions. His greatest political merit is his insistence on the importance to any honorable and effective radical politics of institutional understanding. Unger's theory echoes a very old theme in Western political theory, n17 but one which radical political and social thought in the present century has treated in an overwhelmingly frivolous or disingenuous manner, when it has not elected simply to evade the theme completely. n18

Unger takes institutions (economic, governmental, legal, military) very seriously. In a sense, he takes them even more seriously than most positivist social scientists. Unger sees institutions as not merely subject at any given time to an operating logic and a range of internal constraints, but also as molders of the personnel of whom they are composed, as well as of the clients or victims upon whom they act. Although he recognizes that institutional niches, or on a larger scale what he calls "formative contexts," do much to constitute human agents and determine the consequences of their actions, as well as to constrain in principle the scope of the outcomes that they can bring about, he is most concerned with the ineliminable capacity to reverse or transcend these limits. n19 Once again, the site of this capacity to negate is the

human imagination: there a person may stand back from the importunities of a set of routines or practices, recast these practices, and try again.

For Unger, a context is not formative because of its unique and historically predestined eligibility but because of its relative inelasticity at any particular time and, above all, its deep impact upon the social imaginations of its denizens. We are never merely our habitats, but we are always in large measure their creatures. Formative contexts arise from the restless struggle for power and wealth; and they are shaped by invention, mimesis, and the arbitrary contingencies of historical sequence. n20

But the same forces that shape formative contexts can also serve to break them and shape their sometimes very different successors. Unger's vision of the history of institutions, like the vision of the history of science developed by Thomas Kuhn's followers, stresses both the capacity of human practices to reproduce themselves and protect themselves against external challenge, and the sharp discontinuities, inseparable from this capacity, between a self-reproducing practice and its successors. Unger's own political program in *False Necessity* attempts to weaken the self-reproducing capabilities of institutional contexts, and eventually to diminish the discontinuities between their prior and subsequent forms.

To make this conception compelling, Unger complements his account of the nature of human institutions with a denial of the possibility of determinate causal knowledge of their properties. Unger sets out this attack best in *Social Theory*. It combines a relatively

determinate negative induction from the history of human cognition, much stressed by recent epistemologists and philosophers of science, n21 with the elusively radical scepticism some draw from the later writings of Wittgenstein, from Quine, or from Heidegger. n22 If all human knowledge simply expresses a form of life, epistemologically grounded pretensions to conclusive social insight are as intellectually threadbare as they are politically impertinent and offensive. n23 But this negative doctrine secretes no definite implications for political judgment, n24 however decisive may be its criticisms of others' claims that their political judgments are grounded in epistemic authority. By itself this negative doctrine provides only the flimsiest of support even for Unger's vision.

The account of the character of human institutions, by contrast, provides more robust aid. Unger's account starts from the "obvious truism" well expressed by Alasdair MacIntyre as long ago as 1971, "that no institution or practice is what it is, or does what it does, independently of what anyone whatsoever thinks or feels about it. For institutions and practices are always partially, even if to differing degrees, constituted by what certain people think and feel about them." n25 Unger's account presses this truism to its limits. His account does not -- given Unger's sceptical premises -- tell us where exactly these limits lie. Indeed, it insists that we cannot *know* where they do lie. What Unger's account does do, still at a truistic level, is insist that the precise causal character of any institution at any time rests upon what every individual causally associated with it thinks and feels about it. n26 Here, epistemic analysis directly prompts a

sense of social vertigo. The practical dependability and facticity of the social world lurches startlingly and the role of surprise is reincorporated into human history. n27 How human beings see their social setting is never conclusively determined at any level cognitively open to the species. The immediate and volatile relation between belief and desire furnishes an endless resource for astonishing recombinations. Any human institution at any time can tip and buckle under the influence of these forces. n28

Human beings, therefore, really do make their own history. Most crucially, they make it by precariously constructing and refurbishing their own personalities n29 and by assessing the options presented by the settings in which they live. Unger's repeated and exhilarated insistence that history is always "up for grabs" and that social life is necessarily politics is one temperament's response to this understanding. Barrington Moore's resigned pessimism is another. n30 Compared to Moore's view, Unger's response luxuriates in men's and women's magnificent capacity to find themselves suddenly unable to bear a moment longer the odious conditions of their lives. Little analytical conflict exists, however, between the two perceptions. Both see the human imagination as the site where human history is finally determined, and both arrive at this view while attending to the heavy weight of power and the raw urgency of material need.

Clearly, Unger believes that the sense of closure and finitude in a given historical setting affronts human potentiality. The temperamental basis of this distaste, however, arises less from his restless sense of the absurdity of reifying the

hopelessly provisional than it does from his classically radical revulsion at the subjugation of huge numbers of human beings by far fewer of their fellows. The prominence of such subordination and exploitation, sunk deep into the property order and institutionalized division of labor of today's social democratic communities, persistently goads him into programmatic expression of his counter-imaginations. The telos of a social habitat at last made fit for human inventiveness and antinomianism -- the radical project -- lends focus and authority to the blank apprehension of social plasticity through the immense gap it exposes between the desirable and the actual. At times Unger writes as though he were confident that this gap will narrow ineluctably as time goes by. But at other times he frankly recognizes that the weight of historical experience gives no firmer warrant for an optimistic eschatology for modern social life than it does for a pessimistic one.

Many of Unger's critics will probably concentrate their fire upon the character of this telos -- Unger's idiosyncratic reading of the form of the human good. Even those who see a human society as fundamentally a relation between the imaginations of its members n31 will probably find the ferocity of Unger's insistence on individual imaginative autonomy too extreme to be sane. Those with less euphoric temperaments may well find that Unger's sheer zest for novelty and experiment renders deeply unconvincing his account of most human beings' strongest and most persistent motives. n32 Still others are likely to see his human society of endless participatory deliberation and choice as more of a forum for endlessly futile bickering and the squandering of time

and energy than they are to see it as a promise of linking individuals to their social milieu in a vital flow of interest and enjoyment. n33

Certainly Thomas Hobbes' estimate of the human rewards of political engagement still presents a formidable challenge to Unger's assessment of the pleasures of a society and polity made safe for the more loquacious amongst the petty bourgeoisie:

[S]ome will say, That a *Popular State* is much to be preferr'd before a *Monarchicall*; because that, where all men have a hand in publique businesses, there all have an opportunity to shew their wisdom, knowledge, and eloquence, in deliberating matters of the greatest difficulty and moment; which by reason of that desire of praise which is bred in humane nature, is to them who excel in such like faculties, and seeme to themselves to exceed others, the most delightfull of all things. But in a Monarchy, this same way to obtain praise, and honour, is shut up to the greatest part of Subjects; and what is a grievance, if this be none? Ile tell you: To see his opinion whom we scorne, preferr'd before ours; to have our wisdom undervalued before our own faces; by an uncertain tryall of a little vaine glory, to undergoe most certain enmities (for this cannot be avoided, whether we have the better, or the worse); to hate, and to be hated, by reason of the disagreement of opinions; to lay open our secret Counsells, and advise to all, to no purpose, and without any benefit; to neglect the affaires of our own Family: These, I say, are grievances. But to be absent from a triall of wits, although those trials are pleasant to the Eloquent, is not therefore a

grievance to them, unless we will say, that it is a grievance to valiant men to be restrained from fighting, because they delight in it. n34

The public pieties of political life over the two and one-half centuries since 1642 have gone Unger's way rather than Hobbes'. It is eminently questionable, however, whether most people's sentiments have accompanied these political pieties. The psychological realism or implausibility of Unger's favored telos and of the conception of human nature it rests upon are obviously in themselves important. They also are important, as Unger frequently reiterates, in appraising political and social possibility not merely in principle, but also in practice. In a rhetorically compelling sneer, Unger insists that those who lack a programmatic vision comparable in scope and grandeur to his own must assess the realism or absurdity of political proposals solely by the degree to which a proposal deviates from existing arrangements, and therefore presume the impossibility of significant change. The resulting torpor in social and political imagination is not, in Unger's eyes, merely spiritually unbecoming. By induction from the history of large-scale social transformation, especially over the last two centuries, it is also quite evidently intellectually ludicrous.

Those who cannot fully share his vision of the form of the human good may ask how much Unger's enriched sense of social and political possibility depends upon this vision: how readily can one recombine the components of his analysis to serve other perceptions of what human beings really do want? To judge this, it may help to go back to

Unger's radicalization of MacIntyre's truism about social institutions: that all human institutions are as they are and act as they act in part because some of their participants think and feel as they do. Both analytically and practically, even MacIntyre's truism establishes some minimal level of potential instability in all human institutions. This minimum serves as a limit point to the capacity of the institutions to reproduce themselves compulsively. At its narrowest, false necessity is Unger's name for this window of vulnerability in the stolidest and best protected of human arrangements. The necessity is "false" because it is illusory, often secured in many by false beliefs which the institution fosters amongst its denizens, and bovinely reaffirmed by its less sensitive external observers in their own erroneous estimates of how the institution has to operate. If one sees social reality as the codification of the expectations of a social territory's occupants, or as the range of equally habitual expectations nurtured by social reality's more dedicated external observers, then one sees at least one way the possible may shrink to the narrow confines of the actual. In doing so, however, one also sees this constriction as a product of imaginative indolence or capitulation.

What happens to the conceptualization of social possibility if we remove these imaginative shackles? More crucially, what, if anything, happens to the conceptualization of social probability? As we have already seen, we can more easily identify Unger's answer to the first of these questions than to the second. It is important that, despite the rich array of causal reflection on actual and possible legal, economic, and political

institutions set out in *False Necessity*, Unger never really considers quite what it means for a human state of affairs to be probable or improbable. Unger believes that the escape from false necessity would open the way once more to the realization of the radical project -- not by historical predestination but through the absence of any knowable and conclusive impediment. The defeat of false necessity would open a vast horizon, far far beyond the thwarted and humiliating intimacies of present day politics. But how should we decide upon the best route towards this horizon? What, outside the comparatively domesticated terrain of North American legal education, n35 might human beings have good reason to do if they found Unger's vision of the causal character of existing social life compelling, that they do not have good reason to do already?

At least three ways exist to envision political agency as essentially futile on a given type of occasion, and Unger plainly is anxious to shake the imaginative hold of each of them. The first, expounded with baroque exuberance by proponents of game theory and the economic analysis of public goods, focuses on the improbability of particular individuals' actions decisively securing a given political outcome, or on the antinomies between individual rationality and collective advantage. In its classic form as embodied in the free rider problem and the prisoners' dilemma, this line of thought has exerted a deeply traumatic effect upon the exercise of civic imagination, eroding the plausibility of civic engagement and subverting its putative human point. n36 Unger is pretty brutal in his handling of modern devotees of civic republicanism, n37 an

historical tradition he correctly identifies with a commitment to a savage degree of social discipline and a quite unacceptable degree of flippancy towards the claims of modern liberty, that is, the liberty to act as one pleases. n38

While he is surprisingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly?) cavalier about the potential impact of the dilemmas of collective choice on the radical project, he brings to bear virtually the whole weight of his conception of human nature upon the dispiriting cultural detritus of the free rider problem and the depleted image of human reward this problem fosters. Despite the powerful tendency in modern political thinking to see the implications of free riding as essentially a sequence of problems in institutional design, and despite his own keen and imaginative interest in precisely such problems, Unger himself, much like the civic republicans whose social goals he repudiates, is apt to regard free riding as above all an index of spiritual failure.

He may indeed be exceedingly well advised to see them as such, since none of the more analytic procedures that he develops can shake his initial image of political futility. It is precisely this image of futility that has always pressed most heavily on the great majority of human beings. In addition, this purely individual sense of political futility and impotence is for the most part not an illusion at all. It is not a credulous misidentification of necessity where no such necessity exists, but an eminently reasonable assessment of the limits of individual causal powers. n39 To shake the sense of individual political futility, it must be vision or nothing. In the face

of this challenge Unger calls once more upon his own sense of the solidarizing potential of the radical project; its capacity to "lend focus and authority" to the analytically achieved appreciation of social plasticity. n40 If individuals can see their own agency, not as a costly and hazardous contribution unlikely to secure a directly and uniquely imputable gain for anyone, but rather as an element in an intrinsically rewarding collective performance, they will repudiate the free rider problem on their own behalf.

This line of attack differs greatly from Unger's assault on deep-structure social theory and the unstable oscillations between fatalist passivity and feckless opportunism which he sees deep-structure theory as prompting. His diagnosis of the corrupting and bemusing political consequences of deep-structure social theory -- and most particularly of its Marxist version n41 -- is protracted, searching, and lethally effective. n42 Whereas his exploration of the political weaknesses of deep-structure social theory, however, immediately aids the formation of political judgment, it is quite difficult to distinguish the agitational from the analytical elements in his interpretation of the nature of deep-structure social theory. Hence even the best intentioned are likely to find it difficult to employ Unger's critique of deep-structure social theory directly in the refinement and disciplining of their own political judgment. This is not simply a matter of Unger's inadvertence. It follows from his intense and arrestingly personal ambivalence about the very idea of political judgment itself. Unger sees political realism, in its characteristic modern forms, either as an epistemically pretentious claim to know what

necessarily no one can know, or as a limp capitulation to the actual. Either way, Unger is intensely suspicious of the very attempt to subject political judgment to systematic analysis.

The qualities that he approves in political judgment are, naturally, on display throughout his book. These qualities are most accessible, however, in his more condensed sketch of the virtues appropriate to a cadre in one of the political movements that in his view carry the banner of the emancipatory struggle, n43 even though this struggle aims eventually at "effacing the starkness of the contrast between who is and who is not a cadre." n44 The "realistic, second-best solution to the problem of the cadres," n45 the non-Platonic solution, is the addition of a relatively small number of people who eschew the polar vices of pious conservatism and sectarian bigotry in favor of the benign mean embodied in Unger's own opinions. n46 The addition of these individuals leavens the substantial lump constituted by their less discerning fellows. Unger plainly sees this as a true realism, by no means conflated with the "realism" of the paralytic conservatives whom he scorns. Just as plainly, Unger regards the elaborate institutional forms which he proposes for the transformative movement, within their own hypothetical terms, as eminently realistic; and by "realistic" he means just what the conservatives whom he views with such contempt would mean by the word. What they disagree about is not what realism is but which social expectations are in fact realistic. It is in their causal beliefs, not in their analytical concepts, that they are genuinely at odds.

Since the late seventeenth century, most Western social and political thinkers of any great force have rested their causal beliefs about societies, economies, and politics, either openly or tacitly upon some conception of probability. n47 Unger's emphasis on the desirability of the "persistent exercise of an almost frenzied inventiveness," n48 and on the prospective triumph of the "principle of pitiless recombination," while presumably in some sense inductively grounded, sets him very much at odds with the by now hallowed imaginative framework based on probability. But these views of his do not really furnish him with an alternative analytic matrix which could possibly serve to supplant the old framework. A diffuse expectation of forthcoming surprises, however urgent and eager, is scarcely a framework for analyzing anything. There is, therefore, only a quite arbitrary link between his vividly imagined and carefully considered program of emancipation and his more analytic perspective on the human past. The link is an exercise of will and a reflection of temperament, not a dictate of understanding.

Consider the relation between individual human agents as choosers of their own actions and the same persons as judges of the potential consequences of their possible actions. As choosers of their own actions, human beings perceive, reflect, and judge as best they can. From the perspective of practical reason, and from their own point of view, people are best off if they do not deprecate their capacity for invention and self-discipline before attempting to exert either. None are so inefficacious as those who do not try. From the viewpoint of theoretical

reason, however, dismayingly robust epistemic grounds for pessimism may exist even in relation to oneself. These same grounds may carry through, with all too crushing cogency, to any consideration within the bounds of practical reason, of the prospective conduct of one's fellows. For what reasonable alternative is there for any human agent, to conceiving the space on which she or he can and must seek to act, if they are to act at all, as a set of varyingly possible consequences, surrounded by a blank cliff of sheer impossibility? Over time, few things matter more to any human being than the structure of risks and opportunities presented by the prospective conduct of others. Except with the extremes of downside risk, what is likely to happen is almost always more important to a human agent than what just conceivably might happen. If humans are to dissipate the sense of futility that hovers over the vast bulk of individual political agency, from the most routine and conformist to the most intractably subversive, what they must above all alter is their sentiments and not their causal beliefs.

Here Unger confronts two other further sources of the feeling that for most humans most of the time, political agency is irretrievably futile. A fatalist and monistic vision of the historical process deconstructs the very idea of rational agency, offering to individuals, as well as to classes, states, or national communities, a perspective on their own strivings which renders the latter comically self-deceptive. Even a less extreme and analytically determinate structural explanation of large-scale historical change requires the adoption of a sociology of fate in lieu of one of choice, and prescind firmly from the

standpoint of human historical agency. n49 Unger's rejection of this perspective, both in its metaphysically full-blown version and in its analytically more modest and controlled version, follows from his emphasis on imagination's inherent unpredictability, and on the severely provisional character of all human cognitive achievement. Even if the most metaphysically extreme version of determinism were in fact valid, human beings could never ascertain that this was the case and could never construe any definite implications for their own agency that followed from its validity. Whatever they chose to do would, *ex hypothesi*, follow from its being so.

In a sense Unger adopts the ultra-idealist reading of the fundamental determinants of historical change suggested by John Warr, Unger's mid-seventeenth century English predecessor in radical legal criticism: "But yet the minds of men are the great wheels of things; thence come changes and alterations in the world; teeming freedom exerts and puts forth itself." n50 Unger, however, gives this judgment depth and sociological credibility by offsetting it with his conception of human agency's formative contexts and the heavy imaginative weight of habit and cumulative dismay that crushes the powers of negative capability that he sees as the birthright of every full human being.

In a similar manner Unger's conception of world-historical struggle in the twentieth century supplements a recognition of the causal weight of mimesis, invention, and sheer nerve in determining the course of twentieth century revolutions, n51 with a particularly illuminating insistence on

both the necessarily improvisatory character of most revolutionary political struggle and on the endless range of institutional possibilities available to those attempting to reconstruct a social world. Unger is a powerful political critic of the twentieth century revolutionary tradition, who nevertheless understands why this tradition has developed as it has. But he displays not the slightest patience with this tradition's tendency to cling desperately to its most adventitious and blatantly discreditable improvisations. He denies, perhaps a trifle hazardously, that any set of human circumstances is knowably impossible, and refuses to dignify any given set of shabby accommodations to the temporarily convenient with a title to historical necessity. He is an equally sharp critic of twentieth century reformist traditions, though it is striking how little his reading of their largely involuntary self-limitation really differs from the reading of their more pedestrian interpreters. n52

The rejection of a closed set of possible worlds, n53 however much it might or should open up a person's sense of historical possibility, probably will not, for fairly obvious reasons, directly sharpen anyone's political judgment. Addressed to human beings individually, nothing in Unger's *Politics* shakes the rationality for most people in the contemporary world of presuming that political engagement for all but the most obsessive and narrowly motivated will prove in practice hazardous or massively unrewarding, and very probably both. Unger grounds his confidence in human self-emancipation, in effect, on a Platonic philosophical psychology in association with a deeply un-Platonic conception of value for human beings.

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The judgment that vision shapes desire, and shifts in vision effectively reshape it, still powerfully challenges the debilitating impact of Hume's naturalist insistence that human beings' inclinations fundamentally determine the reasonableness of their actions. n55 But the judgment that vision shapes desire remains not merely the oldest but also the most robust foundation for genuinely Utopian social thinking, a genre which Unger's present work dramatically revives. The direct address to vision, however, alters what human agents have good reason to do to the extent, and only to the extent, that it changes how they happen to see. The only audience likely to be able to take Unger's work as it was intended is, therefore, the array of ideal cadres -- a category predefined to a perilous degree in terms of the theory in the first place. Because they share his sense of what really matters for human beings and what truly is desirable, this array of cadres can develop the passionate pragmatism of Unger's exploration of the vulnerability of existing social and political forms in harmony with the goals that he holds dear, and not in the service of more disparate and distressingly contingent purposes of their own. For most others, however, exposure to Unger's vision, while intellectually striking and agreeably enlivening in itself, is likely to leave the world of politics in very much the same condition as they previously supposed it to be. For even the more sympathetic of such readers, the most lasting aspect of *Politics* is likely to be particular felicities of Unger's institutional explorations and not the diffuse euphoria induced by the first encounter with his text as a whole.

Unger makes the role of modernist legislator, for which he discreetly offers himself, inherently more self-effacing than its ancient predecessor. It is scarcely surprising that he should feel the need to repudiate the mantle of "an omniscient and benevolent Lycurgus" towering over the world of ordinary agents created by his historical action. n56 By virtue of its very commitment to institutionalized self-extinction, however, the role depends upon the inspirational impact of the vision it conveys, both for its historical efficacy and for its human authority. It is therefore a rather delicate and searching test of the soundness of his programmatic "super-theory" as a whole, just what its effect on the vision of others does prove to be: how plentiful and how ideal the "ideal cadres" actually turn out.

Quite certainly, the ideal cadres will continue to have not merely a plethora of fanatical or backsliding colleagues but also a wide array of political opponents. Some of these colleagues and opponents, naturally, will be simply beneficiaries of privilege, determined to defend their privilege for its own sake. But others will oppose Unger's program because they do not share his vision of the form (or formlessness) of the human good and because they do not trust his political judgment. In the last instance, it is impossible to evade the issue of trust in politics. n57 Why should anyone believe that a belligerently dissident opportunism really makes a benign contribution to human life everywhere? The zest for interminable self-reconstitution appears as febrile at a personal level as it appears unpromising as a collective political project. The hope

of doing good through political agency obviously excites Unger more than the fear of doing harm through it unnerves him. This is certainly one dimension to the political opposition today between left and right. But since one can do harm by political action much more easily than one can do good, the left, and especially the foes of subjugation and hierarchy, would be unwise to construe it as the sole or even the most decisive line of division between the two. Unger, like Georges Sorel, believes the politics of human emotion is just as important as, and perhaps even more important than, the politics of consequence. n58

Certainly, history presents human beings with the circumstances they directly encounter. Unger, like Sorel, refuses to believe that humans must accept the circumstances as given. He offers his sophisticated attack on the muddled fatalism of modern social theory, which often echoes Sorel's accents, as a negative spiritual exercise in self-strengthening. Radical intellectuals, plainly in the West but also possibly in the Third World, are likeliest to draw strength from it, since they find their identities at present in such urgent need of reinforcement. The union between radical intellectuals and oppressed masses has been the most turbulent and consequential liaison in modern politics. It is not an easy romance to chronicle justly. But it seems most unlikely that one can describe it more honestly or understand it more clearly simply by restoring the self-confidence of radical intellectuals.

We may be unable in principle ever to know just what we must take as given in human affairs. But it is a criterion of sanity for every human being to accept very much as always being given.

(Compare Thomas Carlyle on the universe.) Even to formulate coherent intentions, we require a human world with very highly interpreted properties. To formulate political intentions with any amount of ambition and determinacy requires a correspondingly sharper degree of causal assessment. The urgency, and on occasion the flair, of Unger's institutional imaginings indicates the limits of the hostility to a strictly political division of labor of even the most modernist of legislators. It does not, however, wholly still the suspicion that this rethinking of the radical project holds more for radical intellectuals than for their indispensable partners, the *malheureux*, who no doubt potentially remain *les puissances de la terre*, but who are usually less preoccupied with self-reconstitution.

With magnificently reckless self-exposure, Unger concludes *False Necessity* by affirming as the goal of his program for radical democracy "a better chance to be both great and sweet." n59

The wish to be both great and sweet is a recognizably modern yearning; the wish to be sweet being, for example, comparatively undeveloped amongst the Roman governing classes. It is a natural goal of a radical program to make a social world fit for radical intellectuals. But perhaps it is less reassuring as a rubric for political action. In particular, this kind of goal gives too little weight to the dangers of political miscalculation by the best intentioned leaders, or to the thoroughly demotic realism with which most human beings still view the hazards and frustrations of ambitious and vague projects for political and social reconstruction. Only a more pedestrianly consequentialist approach could distinguish between wise and foolish

instances of such projects. And only the conviction that solid and dependable reasons for undertaking them exist can render these projects exercises in rational cooperation for great masses of human beings rather than exhilarating adventures for the talented, daring, and determined few. This is especially true in light of all the political turbulence, ambiguity, and anxiety which Unger rightly insists will always accompany them. Human fragility does not make social oppression any more forgivable than its radical critics suppose it to be. In fact, it is precisely human fragility that makes social oppression such a clear evil, and the same fragility that makes the burden of judging accurately the central responsibility of anyone who aspires to guide political practice. Human life is too short, too tiresome, too sad, and too beset by danger for Unger's sense of the heroic to furnish a compelling basis for political judgment for mankind at large. Gracchus Babeuf, the precarious bridge between the thought world of classical republicanism and the harsh manipulative adventures of the professional revolutionary tradition, put the case admirably:

The republican is not a man in eternity, he is a man in time. His paradise is on this earth; he deserves to enjoy there liberty and happiness, and to enjoy it for as long as he has being, without postponement, or at least with as little as possible. All the time he spends outside this condition is lost to him, he will never recover it again. n60

What to do in politics always depends on what we can, and will, cause to come about. Unger correctly insists that we can seldom or never *know* this. Such epistemic opacity, however, merely

implies that we must learn to judge it better in practice: an endless task. Over time, and for this purpose, Unger's scepticism and preoccupation with institutional form are likely to prove more instructive than the ardor of his faith.

FOOTNOTES:

n1 A. DE TOCQUEVILLE, *THE RECOLLECTIONS OF ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE* 116 (A. Teixeira de Mattos trans. 1959).

n2 SOCIAL THEORY; FALSE NECESSITY; PLASTICITY INTO POWER; *see also* THE CRITICAL LEGAL STUDIES MOVEMENT; PASSION.

n3 "Negative capability" is the modernist index of human progress, a startling existential totalization of Karl Popper's falsifiability criterion for scientific inquiry. *See, e.g.,* K. POPPER, *OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE: AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH* (1972).

n4 J. DUNN, *Political Obligations and Political Possibilities*, in *POLITICAL OBLIGATION IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT* 243-99 (1980) [hereinafter J. DUNN (1980)].

n5 K. MARX, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in 5 K. MARX & F. ENGELS, *COLLECTED WORKS* 4, 7 (1976).

n6 He does offer an elaborate inventory of recommended practices, *see* FALSE NECESSITY; THE CRITICAL LEGAL STUDIES MOVEMENT, which, if they were implemented, would presumably have the effect of avoiding these dangers. But his own analytical views

effectively preclude him from presenting a practical diagnosis of how these arrangements can actually be implemented anywhere in particular.

n7 This is perhaps even more apparent today in the international monetary, trade, and strategic relations between nations and power blocks, *see* R. KEOHANE, *AFTER HEGEMONY: COOPERATION AND DISCORD IN THE WORLD POLITICAL ECONOMY* (1984); M. OLSON, JR., *THE LOGIC OF COLLECTIVE ACTION* (1965); *ORDER AND CONFLICT IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM* (J. Goldthorpe ed. 1984), which Unger on the whole ignores, than it is in the domestic reform cycles of the capitalist democracies and communist regimes which he considers with some care in *FALSE NECESSITY*.

n8 P. BRACKEN, *THE COMMAND AND CONTROL OF NUCLEAR FORCES* (1983).

n9 PLASTICITY INTO POWER at 212.

n10 P. BRACKEN, *supra* note 8.

n11 J. DUNN, *RETHINKING MODERN POLITICAL THEORY: ESSAYS 1979-83*, at 171-89 (1985) [hereinafter J. DUNN (1985)].

n12 PLASTICITY INTO POWER at 211-12.

n13 *Id.* at 212.

n14 *Cf.* Raynor, *Philosophy into Dogma: The Revival of Cultural Conservatism*, 16 *BRIT. J. POL. SCI.* 455-73 (1986).

n15 J. DUNN (1980), *supra* note 4, at

243; *cf.* B. WILLIAMS, *MORAL LUCK: PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS 1973-1980* (1981).

n16 It is one of Unger's principal theses that there never have been, are not, and never will be any such warrants.

n17 *See* Q. SKINNER, *THE FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT* (1978) (esp. vol. 1: *THE RENAISSANCE* 44-45).

n18 *Cf.* N. BOBBIO, *QUALE SOCIALISMO?: DISCUSSIONE DI UN' ALTERNATIVA* (1976). One possible construction of his programmatic volume *False Necessity* is to see it as a revitalization of Utopian socialism, inserted firmly into what Unger himself hopes and believes to be a realistic understanding of world history. Unger thereby hopes to rescue the suppressed promise of petty commodity production: *Proudhon Redivivus*. *Cf.* C. SABEL & J. ZEITLIN, *HISTORICAL ALTERNATIVES TO MASS PRODUCTION, PAST AND PRESENT* 108, 133-76 (1985).

n19 Compare the more despondent tone of Barrington Moore's musings on the human capacity to become adjusted to the abominable. B. MOORE, *INJUSTICE: THE SOCIAL BASES OF OBEDIENCE AND REVOLT* (1978).

n20 J. DUNN (1985), *supra* note 11, at 68-102.

n21 H. PUTNAM, *REASON, TRUTH AND HISTORY* (1981); Jardine, *"Realistic" Realism and the Progress of Science*, in *ACTION AND INTERPRETATION: STUDIES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SOCIAL*

SCIENCES 127 (C. Hookway & P. Peltit eds. 1978). For those who are not professional philosophers the most influential exponents of this viewpoint in the last two decades have probably been the historian T. S. Kuhn, the philosophers Paul Feyerabend and Ian Hacking, and the more turbulent influences of Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida.

n22 See R. RORTY, *PHILOSOPHY AND THE MIRROR OF NATURE* (1980).

n23 J. DUNN (1985), *supra* note 11, at 119-38.

n24 R. RORTY, *CONSEQUENCES OF PRAGMATISM: ESSAYS 1972-1980* ch. 11 (1982).

n25 A. MACINTYRE, *AGAINST THE SELF-IMAGES OF THE AGE* 263 (1971).

n26 This implicitly rejects part of MacIntyre's judgment. *Compare id.*

n27 Cf. MacIntyre, *Ideology, Social Science and Revolution*, in 5 *COMPARATIVE POLITICS* 3, 321-42 (1973).

n28 It is not wholly clear whether Unger believes that this is literally true or whether he merely believes that, for all we can ever know, it always may be; a less exciting possibility and one which would lend less sustenance to the radical project in conditions of adversity.

n29 Frankfurt, *Identification and Externality*, in *THE IDENTITIES OF PERSONS* 239 (A. Rorty ed. 1976).

n30 See B. MOORE, *supra* note 19.

n31 One example is the modern communitarian Charles Taylor. See C. TAYLOR, *PHILOSOPHY AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES*, 2 *PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS* (1985).

n32 Compare the more systematic presentation of his conception of individual psychology in *PASSION*.

n33 Compare Unger's own misgivings over "the fatal mania of meetings," *FALSE NECESSITY* at 588.

n34 T. HOBBS, *DE CIVE: THE ENGLISH VERSION* 136 (H. Warrender ed. 1983). Unger's evocative preoccupation, especially in *Plasticity into Power*, with the emancipation of men's powers to destroy and with the central historical role of the quest for military efficacy, make Hobbes's challenge all the sharper.

n35 See *THE CRITICAL LEGAL STUDIES MOVEMENT*.

n36 M. OLSON, JR., *supra* note 7. *But cf.* R. HARDIN, *COLLECTIVE ACTION* (1982).

n37 See *FALSE NECESSITY* at 586-87.

n38 B. CONSTANT, *DE LA LIBERTE DES ANCIENS COMPAREE A CELLE DES MODERNES*, 4 *COURS DE POLITIQUE CONSTITUTIONELLE* 238-74 (1820). Compare Unger's uncharacteristically insensitive account of Constant's views in *THE CRITICAL LEGAL STUDIES MOVEMENT* at 41. Unger's reading of the implications of the civic republican tradition echoes the contrast between

David Hume's and Adam Smith's "Disdain for all Dependency," J. DUNN (1985), *supra* note 11, at 13, 32, and the social order commended, for example, by Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, Hont & Ignatieff, *Needs and Justice in the Wealth of Nations: An Introductory Essay*, in WEALTH AND VIRTUE 1 (I. Hont & M. Ignatieff eds. 1983). The best overall presentation of civic republicanism as a tradition of thought and sentiment remains J. POCOCK, THE MACHIAVELLIAN MOMENT (1975).

n39 Cf. J. DUNN (1980), *supra* note 4, at 243-99.

n40 Of course, like Hobbes, he also fully recognizes social plasticity's potential, along with the potential of any other scheme of orienting beliefs that extends beyond the rational imperatives of self-preservation, for spawning an endless sequence of bitter quarrels. But, unlike Hobbes, Unger revels in this prospect. Also unlike Hobbes, Unger cannot afford to dispense with the potential of the radical project for fusing and inspiring a collective agency that is often self-endangering or even self-sacrificial for each particular individual. Compare, however, D. BAUMGOLD, HOBBE'S POLITICAL THEORY (forthcoming), on Hobbes's difficulties in dispensing with analogous degrees of commitment.

n41 See SOCIAL THEORY; FALSE NECESSITY.

n42 Unger has a wonderful ear for leftist cant. But it is in fact hard to imagine an exponent of any strand of modern political faith who could read his work through without occasional twinges of acute discomfort.

n43 FALSE NECESSITY at 415-19.

n44 *Id.* at 419.

n45 *Id.* at 418.

n46 This is not an especially novel line of thought, let alone sentiment.

n47 See F. FAGIANI, NEL CREPUSCOLO DELLA PROBABILITA: RAGIONE ED ESPERIENZA NELLA FILOSOFIA SOCIALE DI JOHN LOCKE (1983); I. HACKING, THE EMERGENCE OF PROBABILITY (1975); B. SHAPIRO, PROBABILITY AND CERTAINTY IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND (1983).

n48 FALSE NECESSITY at 503.

n49 J. DUNN (1985), *supra* note 11, at 75, 77-78; T. SKOCPOL, STATES AND SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS (1979).

n50 Warr, *The Corruption and Deficiency of the Laws of England*, in 3 THE HARLEIAN MISCELLANY 241 (1744-46), *quoted in* C. HILL, THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN 219 (1972).

n51 Cf. J. DUNN (1985), *supra* note 11, at 68-102; J. DUNN (1980), *supra* note 4, at 217-20; J. DUNN, MODERN REVOLUTIONS (1972).

n52 Cf. J. DUNN, THE POLITICS OF SOCIALISM: AN ESSAY IN POLITICAL THEORY (1984); A. PRZEWORSKI, CAPITALISM AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY (1985).

n53 Cf. D. LEWIS,

COUNTERFACTUALS (1973).

n54 However "negative capability" is to be understood, it scarcely possesses the stabilizing and orienting potential of Plato's Form of the Good. *See* THE REPUBLIC OF PLATO (F.M. Cornford trans. 1941).

n55 *Contrast* B. WILLIAMS, *supra* note 15.

n56 FALSE NECESSITY at 590; *cf.* J. DUNN (1985), *supra* note 11, at 119-38.

n57 Dunn, *Trust and Political Agency*, in TRUST (D. Gambetta ed. forthcoming 1988).

n58 *Compare* G. SOREL, REFLECTIONS OF VIOLENCE (1961).

n59 FALSE NECESSITY at 595.

n60 JOURNAL DE LA LIBERTE DE LA PRESSE, no. 19 (8 vende miaire, an III) at 4, *quoted in* R. ROSE, GRACCHUS BABEUF: THE FIRST REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST 161 (1978).