

## Symposium on Roberto Unger's *Politics*

# Preface

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The publication of Roberto Unger's three-volume *Politics: A Work in Constructive Social Theory* is an important intellectual event, one that, as this Symposium attests, has begun an energetic and productive conversation. In the work Unger addresses a very broad range of issues: in social and political theory, political economy, history, and philosophy. n1 Because of this breadth, many readers, perhaps most, will find it helpful in evaluating the work to have available to them a collection of essays on *Politics* by scholars working in the various disciplines implicated in Unger's arguments. Robin Lovin of the University of Chicago n2 agreed to join me in organizing such a collection.

This Symposium issue of the *Northwestern University Law Review* is the first phase of our project. Next year the Cambridge University Press will publish the contributions to this Symposium, along with others completed too late to be included here, as a book.

The list of persons who agreed to contribute essays to the collection is strong evidence of Unger's stature in the larger scholarly community -- the scholarly community beyond the

sometimes too-insular and too-dismissive legal-academic community -- and of the seriousness with which his work is regarded by many. n3

Of course, many persons will ultimately reject rather than accept some or many of Unger's basic arguments. Some persons (I am one of them) will lament Unger's failure, and indeed the failure of virtually all participants in contemporary secular political-moral discourse, to risk elaborating and defending a substantial and concrete vision of what it means to be human -- truly human, fully human.

Contemporary secular political-moral discourse -- especially, perhaps, in Anglo-American precincts -- has often been conspicuous in its failure to address questions of human good, much less to risk elaborating and defending a substantial and concrete vision of what it means to be human. Consider, in particular, liberal political philosophy of the neo-Kantian variety. Such philosophy has not merely neglected to address questions of human good; a central, animating ambition of such philosophy is to avoid such questions as much as possible. But, as I have explained elsewhere, n4 such questions cannot be bracketed, though, of course, they can be ignored or repressed.

Questions of human good -- and in particular the deep question of what it means to be authentically human -- are too fundamental, and the answers one gives to them too determinative of one's politics, to be marginalized or privatized. Although Unger is certainly no neo-Kantian liberal, he, too, largely fails to deal with the question of the human except to extol the human capacity for transcending self and context. n5

Neo-Kantian talk about "autonomy" or "freedom" doesn't begin to compensate for the studied inattention to the question of the authentically human. Discourse about autonomy or freedom often seems impervious to the fact that autonomy/freedom is at most a *political* category, not an *ontological* one. (I am not using "political" in any narrow sense. A patriarchal family structure, for example, is a system of political constraints from which one can be free. In talking about the political we must be wary of the public/private distinction, which often functions to obscure the political dimension of the so-called private realm.) The relevant ontological category is not autonomy but authenticity. To have achieved some degree of (political) freedom is not necessarily to have achieved any degree of (human) authenticity. Political freedom or liberty is certainly a very great value, but its value derives ultimately from the extent to which it serves the more fundamental value of the authentically human.

Contemporary theorists on the secular left often seem scarcely more interested than neo-Kantian liberals in dealing with the question of "the human." And secular leftists who are interested in dealing with that question often seem ill

equipped, because of their reductionist attitudes to religious thought -- reductionist attitudes of either a materialist or a psychoanalytic sort -- to explore some of the richest resources for thinking about the human: the resources of the great religious traditions. n6 I think here of liberation theology, which has been such a potent theoretical *and practical* force in some Third World countries. n7 Perhaps these descendants of the Enlightenment have more important, more productive things to do than consult religious thought about the human, but I am skeptical. n8 (I do not mean to suggest that Unger is a secular leftist. A plausible argument can be made, I think, that his work is more fairly assimilated to the religious left.)

There is at least one bright spot on the horizon of political-moral theory, however: Feminist thought is an important discursive space where the question of the human is not invariably marginalized -- where, indeed, that question is often a central concern. At its best and at its root, feminist theory is perhaps best understood as an effort to struggle with the question of what it means to be authentically human. n9 In *Politics* Unger seems, on the surface at least, oblivious to feminist concerns and thinking.

Whatever the shortcomings of Unger's multivolume project, we should be appreciative that he has stimulated an important conversation by addressing fundamental questions of widespread concern with a systematicity and passion rarely encountered in contemporary intellectual life, including (especially?) contemporary intellectual life in the legal-academic community.

The editors of the *Northwestern University Law Review* have worked both long and hard on this Symposium. Robin and I are deeply grateful to them. We are especially indebted to Jonathan Turley (who has written an introduction for the Symposium) and Elizabeth Mertz, the Symposium Editors of the *Review* during 1986-87 and 1987-88, respectively.

**FOOTNOTES:**

n1 See SOCIAL THEORY at 216-39; FALSE NECESSITY at 596-631; PLASTICITY INTO POWER at 96-100.

n2 Lovin is Associate Professor of Ethics and Society in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

n3 Of course, not everyone takes Unger's work seriously. See Holmes, *The Professor of Smashing: The Preposterous Political Romanticism of Roberto Unger*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Oct. 19, 1987, at 30. (The tone of Holmes' review is, in a word, contemptuous.) In an article to be published next spring by the *Yale Law Journal*, William Ewald argues that in *Knowledge and Politics* Unger's understanding of the relevant philosophical materials and his philosophical arguments are both woefully inadequate.

n4 See M. PERRY, MORALITY, POLITICS, AND LAW ch. 3 (forthcoming 1989).

n5 Does Unger's earlier work, *Passion*, present a vision of what it means to be fully, truly human? *Passion* is, in the main, an abstract phenomenology of the dialectic of human emotions. Putting aside the question whether *Passion*, thus

understood, is sound (or, if sound, original), *Passion* does not seem to me to present a substantial or concrete vision of "the human," understood not as psycho-anthropological category but as a moral/religious/existential ideal. Is *Passion* perhaps prologue to such a vision?

n6 See PASSION at 47-48:

The most important repositories of enacted social visions are the actual normative orders -- especially the legal systems and the traditions of legal doctrine -- that make a social world into something more than an arena of violent and unlimited struggle. The most significant articulation of existential projects can be found in the major religions and religiously inspired ethics of world history. Far more than the abstract doctrines of moral and political philosophers, these legal and religious traditions embody visions and projects that have withstood the test of experience, enabling large numbers of people over long periods of time to make sense of their experience.

See also H. PUTNAM, THE MANY FACES OF REALISM 60-62 (1987).

n7 See L. BOFF & C. BOFF, INTRODUCING LIBERATION THEOLOGY (1987).

n8 Cf. Rorty, Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein 12 (unpublished manuscript) (on file with *Northwestern University Law Review*):

To my mind, this genre -- unmasking bourgeois ideology -- is overworked, and has by now turned into self-parody. It has convinced a generation of idealistic

young leftists in the First World that they are contributing to the cause of human freedom by, for example, exposing the imperialistic presuppositions of Marvel Comics, or by campaigning against the prevalence of "binary oppositions". It has resulted in articles which offer unmaskings of the presuppositions of earlier unmaskings of still earlier unmaskings. It has created the contemporary equivalent of the self-involved Trotskyite discussion groups of the 1930s.

n9 Women who take seriously religious thought about the human have been playing an important role in the development of feminist theory. For but one recent example, see C. KELLER, *FROM A BROKEN WEB* 20 (1986).