

Between Dewey and Gramsci: Unger's Emancipatory Experimentalism

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Roberto Unger's distinctive contribution to contemporary social thought is to radically deepen and sharpen John Dewey's notion of social experimentation in light of the crisis of Marxist theory and praxis. Unger's fundamental aim is to free Marxist conceptions of human society-making from evolutionary, deterministic, and economic encumbrances. He seeks to accomplish this by building upon Deweyan concerns with the plethora of historically specific social arrangements and with the often overlooked politics of personal relations between unique and purposeful individuals. Unger's fascinating effort stakes out new discursive space on the contemporary political and ideological spectrum. This space is neither simply left nor liberal, Marxist nor Lockean, anarchist nor Kantian. Rather, Unger's perspective is both post-Marxist and post-liberal; that is, it consists of an emancipatory experimentalism that promotes permanent social transformation and perennial self-development toward ever increasing democracy and individual freedom.

Yet, in contrast to most significant social thinkers, Unger's viewpoint is motivated by explicit religious concerns -- such as kinship with nature as seen in romantic love, or transcendence over nature as

manifested in the hope for eternal life. In this way, Unger highlights the radical insufficiency of his emancipatory experimentalism -- though it speaks best to penultimate human matters. For Unger, ultimate human concerns are inseparable from, yet not reducible to, the never-ending quest for social transformation and self-development.

In this Essay I shall argue three claims regarding Unger's project. First, I shall suggest that his viewpoint can best be characterized as the most elaborate articulation of a *Third-Wave Left romanticism* now sweeping across significant segments of the First World progressive intelligentsia (or what is left of it!). Second, I will show that this Third-Wave Left romanticism is discursively situated between John Dewey's radical liberal version of socialism and Antonio Gramsci's absolute historicist conception of Marxism. Third, I shall highlight the ways in which this provocative project -- though an advance beyond much of contemporary social thought -- remains inscribed within a Eurocentric and patriarchal discourse. This discourse not only fails to theoretically consider racial and gender forms of subjugation, but also remains silent on the feminist and anti-racist dimensions of concrete progressive political struggles.

In reading Unger's work, one is most struck by his unabashedly pronounced romanticism. By romanticism, I mean quite simply a preoccupation with Promethean human powers, a recognition of the contingency of the self and society, and an audacious projection of desires and hopes in the form of regulative emancipatory ideals for which one lives and dies. Unger's romanticism is both refreshing and disturbing in these postmodern times of cynicism and negativism: after the unimaginable atrocities of Hitler, Stalin, Tito, Mussolini, and Franco; the often forgotten barbarities committed in Asia, Africa, and Latin America under European and American imperialist auspices; and, during the present period, the rise to power of Khomeini, Pinochet, Moi, and Mengistu in the Third World, bureaucratic henchmen in the Second World, and Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl, and Chirac in the First World.

The ameliorative energies and utopian impulses that inform Unger's work are refreshing in that so many of us now "lack any ready way to imagine transformation." n1 We feel trapped in a world with no realizable oppositional options, no actualizable credible alternatives. This sense of political impotence -- "this experience of acquiescence without commitment" n2 -- yields three basic forms of politics: sporadic terrorism for impatient, angry, and nihilistic radicals; professional reformism for comfortable, cultivated, and concerned liberals; and evangelical nationalism for frightened, paranoid, and accusatory conservatives. Unger's romantic sense that the future can and should be fundamentally different and better than the present not only leads

him to reject these three predominant kinds of politics, but also impels him to answer negatively "[t]he great political question of our day . . . : Is social democracy the best that we can reasonably hope for?" n3 Unger believes we can and must do better.

Yet Unger's Third-Wave Left romanticism is disturbing in that we have witnessed -- and are often reminded of -- the deleterious consequences and dehumanizing effects of the first two waves of Left romanticism in the modern world. The first wave of Left romanticism -- best seen in the American and French Revolutions -- unleashed unprecedented human energies and powers, significantly transformed selves and societies, and directed immense human desires and hopes toward the grand moral and credible political ideals of democracy and freedom, equality and fraternity.

Two exemplary figures of this first wave of Left romanticism -- Thomas Jefferson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau -- would undoubtedly affirm the three basic elements of Unger's conception of human activity: namely, the contextual or conditional quality of all human activity, the possibility of breaking through all contexts of practical or conceptual activity, and the need to distinguish between context-preserving (routinized) and context-breaking (transgressive) activities. n4 Furthermore, both Jefferson and Rousseau would agree with Unger's romantic conception of imagination as a human power that conceives of social reality from the vantage point of change and for the purposes of transformation. n5 In this regard, Unger is deeply set within the North Atlantic romantic

tradition. Why then should we be disturbed?

Despite the great human advances initiated and promoted by First-Wave Left romanticism, its historical and social embodiments reinforced and reproduced barbaric practices: white supremacist practices associated with African slavery and with imperial conquest over indigenous and Mexican peoples; male supremacist practices inscribed in familial relations, cultural mores, and societal restrictions; and excessive business control and influence over the public interest as seen in low wages, laws against unions, and government support of select business endeavors such as railroads. These noteworthy instances of the underside of First-Wave Left romanticism should be disturbing not because all efforts to change the status quo in a progressive direction are undesirable, but rather because any attempt to valorize a historically specific form of human powers must be cognizant and cautious concerning who will be subjected to those human powers.

The second wave of Left romanticism -- following upon the heels of profound disillusionment, disenchantment, and dissatisfaction with the American and French Revolutions -- is manifest in the two great prophetic and prefigurative North Atlantic figures: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Karl Marx. Both were obsessed with the problematic of revolution -- that is, with specifying and creating conditions for the possibility of transforming context-preserving activities into context-breaking ones. Both had a profound faith in the capacity of human beings to remake themselves and society in more free and democratic

ways. And both looked toward science -- the new cultural authority on knowledge, reality, and truth -- as an indispensable instrument for this remaking and betterment.

A number of Emersonian themes loom large in Unger's work: the centrality of a self's morally laden transformative vocation; the experimentation of the self to achieve self-mastery *and* kinship with nature; and, most importantly, the idea of self-creation and self-authorization. In fact, the penultimate paragraph of Unger's Volume One reads as if it comes right out of Emerson's *Nature*:

In their better and saner moments men and women have always wanted to live as the originals they all feel themselves to be, and they have sought practical and passionate attachments that express this truth. As soon as they have understood their social arrangements to be made up and pasted together they have wanted to become the coauthors of these arrangements. Some modern doctrines tell us that we already live in societies in which we can fully satisfy these desires; others urge us to give them up as unrealistic. But the first teaching is hard to believe; the second is hard to practice.

n6

Similarly, Marxist motifs -- the centrality of value-laden political struggle; the fundamental transformation of present-day societies *and* of control over nature; and, most pointedly, the notion of human powers reshaping human societies against constraints always already in place -- play fundamental roles in Unger's project. Indeed, the last paragraph of Volume One invokes the same metaphors, passions, and aims as Marx's *1844*

Manuscripts and 1848 Manifesto:

The constraints of society, echoed, reinforced, and amplified by the illusions of social thought, have often led people to bear the stigma of longing under the mask of worldliness and resignation. An antinecessitarian social theory does not strike down the constraints but it dispels the illusions that prevent us from attacking them. Theoretical insight and prophetic vision have joined ravenous self-interest and heartless conflict to set the fire that is burning in the world, and melting apart the amalgam of faith and superstition, and consuming the power of false necessity. n7

The second wave of Left romanticism was dominated by Emersonian ideas of America and Marxist conceptions of socialism. From roughly the 1860s to the 1940s, human desires and hopes for democracy and freedom, equality and fraternity around the globe were divided between the legacies of Emerson and Marx. Needless to say, European nation-building and empire-consolidating efforts -- the major sources of Second-Wave Right romanticism -- violently opposed both the Emersonian and Marxist legacies. Yet by the end of the Second World War, with the defeat of Germany's bid for European and world domination at the hands of Allied forces led by the United States and USSR, the second wave of Left romanticism began to wane. The dominant version of the Marxist legacy -- Marxist-Leninism (at the time led by Stalin) was perceived by more and more Left romantics as repressive, repulsive, and retrograde. And the major mode of the Emersonian legacy -- Americanism (led then by Truman and Eisenhower) was viewed by many Left romantics as racist,

penurious, and hollow.

The third wave of Left romanticism proceeded from a sense of deep disappointment with Marxist-Leninism and Americanism. Exemplary activist stirrings could be found in the Third World or among people of color in the First World -- Gandhi in India, Mariátegui in Peru, Nasser in Egypt, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States. Yet principally owing to the tragic facts of survival, myopic leadership, and limited options, most of Third World romanticism swerved away from the third wave of Left romanticism and into the traps of a regimenting Marxist-Leninism or a rapacious Americanism. The major attempts to sidestep these traps -- Chile under Allende, Jamaica under Manley, Nicaragua under the Sandanistas -- have encountered formidable, usually insurmountable, obstacles. Needless to say, similar projects in Second World countries -- Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland in 1970 -- are tragically and brutally crushed.

The two great figures of the third wave of Left romanticism are John Dewey and Antonio Gramsci. Dewey extended and deepened the Jeffersonian and Emersonian viewpoints into the concrete historical and social realities of our century. Similarly, Gramsci sharpened and revised the Rousseauist and Marxist perspectives into these realities. In numerous essays, articles, reviews, and -- most importantly -- texts (*The Public and its Problems*, n8 *Individualism: Old and New*, n9 *Liberalism and Social Action*, n10 and *Freedom and Culture*, n11 Dewey advanced a powerful interpretation of socialism that built upon yet went beyond liberalism. This

interpretation highlights a conception of social experimentation that "goes all the way down"; n12 that is, it embraces the idea of fundamental economic, political, cultural, and individual transformation in light of Jeffersonian and Emersonian ideals of accountable power, small scale associations, and individual liberties.

In various fragments, incomplete studies, and political interventions -- as in works such as *The Prison Notebooks* n13 and *The Modern Prince* n14 -- Gramsci set forth a penetrating version of Marxism that rested upon yet spilled over beyond Leninism. This version focuses on a notion of historical specificity and a conception of hegemony that precludes any deterministic, economic, or reductionist readings of social phenomena. In this way, Dewey and Gramsci partly set the agenda for any acceptable and viable third wave of Left romanticism in our time.

Unger's provocative project occupies the discursive space **between Dewey and Gramsci**; it is the most detailed delineation of Third-Wave Left romanticism we have. Unger stands at the intersection of the Jefferson-Emerson-Dewey insights and the Rousseau-Marx-Gramsci formulations. Ironically, as an intellectual with Third World origins and sensibilities (Unger in Brazilian), and First World academic status and orientations (Harvard law professor), Unger is much more conscious of and concerned with his Rousseau-Marx-Gramsci heritage than his Jefferson-Emerson-Dewey sentiments. In fact, his major aim is to provide an alternative radicalism to Marxism -- at the levels of method and of political and personal praxis -- in light of his Third World experiences and First

World training:

Politics is also the product of two very different experiences. One experience is exposure to the rich, polished, critical and self-critical but also downbeat and Alexandrian culture of social and historical thought that now flourishes in the North Atlantic democracies. This social-thought culture suffers from the influence of a climate of opinion in which the most generous citizens hope at best to avert military disasters and to achieve marginal redistributive goals while resigning themselves to established institutional arrangements. The other shaping experience is practical and imaginative engagement in the murky but hopeful politics of Brazil, a country at the forward edge of the third world. There, at the time of writing, at least some people took seriously the idea that basic institutions, practices, and preconceptions might be reconstructed in ways that did not conform to any established model of social organization.

Much in this work can be understood as the consequence of an attempt to enlist the intellectual resources of the North Atlantic world in the service of concerns and commitments more keenly felt elsewhere. In this way I hope to contribute toward the development of an alternative to the vague, unconvinced, and unconvincing Marxism that now serves the advocates of the radical project as their lingua franca. If, however, the arguments of this book stand up, the transformative focus of this theoretical effort has intellectual uses that transcend its immediate origins and motives. n15

In this sense, Unger privileges Marxist discourse. On the one hand, Marxism's

"institutional and structure fetishism" n16 -- its tendency to impose historical and social scripts in the name of deep-structure logics of inevitability, inexorability, or inescapability -- stands as the major impediment to Unger's radical project. On the other hand, Marxism contains the resources and analytical tools -- more so than any other social theory -- to resist this tendency and thereby aid and abet Unger's work.

Much of this book represents a polemic against what the text labels deep-structure social analysis. The writings of Marx and his followers provide the most powerful and detailed illustrations of the deep-structure moves. Yet Marx's own writings contain many elements that assist the effort to free ambitious theorizing from deep-structure assumptions. People working in the Marxist tradition have developed the deep-structure approach. Yet they have also forged some of the most powerful tools with which to build a view of social life more faithful to the antinaturalistic intentions of Marx and other classic social theorists than Marx's original science of history. n17

Unger associates his project even more closely with a particular group of Marxists (whom he dubs "political Marxists"), though he by no means affirms their efforts to stay within the Marxist explanatory framework. The major figure in this group is Antonio Gramsci. Indeed it can be said with assurance that Gramsci's flexible Marxism, which emphasizes and explores "*the relative autonomy of class situations and class consciousness* from the defining features of a mode of production like capitalism," n18 serves as the principal springboard for Unger's

work. His explicit acknowledgement of his debts to political Marxists such as Gramsci -- a rare moment in Unger's self-authorizing texts -- bear this out:

At times the political Marxists have sacrificed the development of their insights to the desire to retain a connection with the central theses of historical materialism. To them these tenets have seemed the only available basis for theoretical generalization and for critical distance from the arrangements and circumstances of the societies they lived in. At other times, the political Marxists have simply given up on theory. . . . They have then paid the price in the loss of ability to convey a sense of sharp institutional alternatives for past, present, and future societies. The constructive theory of *Politics* just keeps going from where the political Marxists leave off. It does so, however, without either renouncing theoretical ambitions or accepting any of the distinctive doctrines of Marx's social theory. n19

Unger believes it necessary to go beyond Gramsci not because Gramsci is a paradigmatic Marxist "super-theorist" who generates theoretical generalizations and schemas that fail to grasp the complexity of social realities. Rather, the move beyond Gramsci is necessary because Gramsci -- despite his Marxism -- is an exemplary "ultra-theorist" who attempts to avoid broad explanations and theoretical systems in order to keep track of the multifarious features and aspects of fluid social realities. n20 As an unequivocal super-theorist who tries to avoid the traps of positivism, naive historicism, and deep-structure logics, Unger criticizes ultra-theorists like Gramsci and Foucault for

rejecting explanatory or prescriptive theories. In Unger's view, this rejection ultimately disempowers effective emancipatory thought and practice. According to Unger, the ultra-theorist sees a deep-structure logic inside *every* theoretical system, confuses explanatory generalizations with epistemic foundationalism, and runs the risk of degenerating into a nominalistic form of conventional social science. In short, the major lesson Unger learns from Gramsci is to be a more subtle, nuanced, and sensitive super-theorist than Marx by building on elements in Marx and others.

Despite the prominence of certain Deweyan themes in his project, Dewey is virtually absent in Unger's text. Furthermore, Unger's one reference to Dewey is a rather cryptic and misleading statement. After alluding to Foucault and Gramsci as major ultra-theorists, Unger adds:

Moreover, it would be wrong to associate ultra-theory solely with leftist or modernist intellectuals. Why not, for example, John Dewey (despite the gap between the commitment to institutional experimentalism and the slide into institutional conservatism)? n21

This passage is perplexing for three reasons. First, is Unger implying that Dewey was neither a leftist nor a modernist intellectual? Second, is Unger drawing a distinction between his social experimentalism and Dewey's institutional experimentalism? Third, how and when did Dewey slide into institutional conservatism? If Unger answers the first question in the affirmative he falls prey to the misinformed stereotypical view of Dewey as a vulgar Americanist. Yet

Dewey's sixty-five year political record as a democratic socialist speaks for itself. And no argument is needed as to whether Dewey was a modernist intellectual -- when he stands as the major secular intellectual of the twentieth century United States. Furthermore, Unger cannot distinguish his form of experimentalism from that of Dewey unless he remains fixated on Dewey's educational reform movement, neglecting the broader calls for fundamental social change put forward during the years when Dewey focused on progressive education -- and especially afterwards (for example, in the late 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s). Finally, the implausible notion that Dewey slid into institutional conservatism holds only if one wrongly views his brand of anti-Stalinism in the 1940s as conservatism -- for his critique of American society remained relentless to the end.

I do believe Unger has simply slipped in his brief mention of Dewey. Yet this slippage is significant because Dewey could provide Unger with some enabling insights and tools for his project. These insights and tools will not be comparable to those of Marx -- for Dewey was not a social theorist. Yet, as with Gramsci, Dewey's own brand of ultra-theory could chasten and temper Unger's super-theory ambitions.

For example, Unger's attempt to work out an analogical relation between scientific notions of objectivity and social conceptions of personality is prefigured -- and rendered more persuasive -- in Dewey's linkage of scientific temper (as opposed to scientific method) to democracy as a way of life. The key notions become not

so much objectivity -- nor even Rorty's ingenious reformulation of objectivity as self-critical solidarity n22 -- but, more fundamentally, respect for the other and accountability as a condition for fallibility.

Similarly, Dewey's brand of ultra-theory does not exclude, downplay, or discourage explanatory generalizations. In fact, Dewey holds that we cannot get by without some form of super-theory -- for the same reason Unger invokes -- that is, it is necessary for explaining and regulating our practices. Yet Dewey admonishes us to view super-theories as we do any other instruments or weapons we have. We use them when they serve our purposes and satisfy our interests; and we criticize, reject, or discard them when they utterly fail us. The significant difference between Gramsci and Dewey is not that the former accepts Marxist theory and the latter rejects it, but rather that Gramsci tenaciously holds on to Marxist theory even in those areas where it is most problematic, such as politics and culture. Dewey accepts much of the validity of Marxist theory; he simply limits its explanatory scope, circumscribes its area of application, and rejects its imperial monistic and dogmatic versions.

Dewey's radical liberal version of socialism might dampen the fires of Unger's utopian quest; Dewey recognized that authoritarian communisms and liberal capitalist democracies were and are the major *credible* options in the First World and Second World. And social experimentation in the Third World remains hampered by these limits. This is not to say we ought not dream, hope, live, fight, and die for betterment. Yet

such romantic longings and yearnings, even when dressed up in sophisticated social thought, do not alter the severe constraints of international capital coordination in the West or of the bureaucratic stranglehold in the East. In this sense, Dewey's petty bourgeois radicalism -- which is no tradition to trash despite its vast shortcomings -- could not but be an incessant effort at radical reform in the West, and a beacon light on repression in the East. Similarly, Gramsci's communist party leadership -- whose legacy now resides principally in Italy and Sweden -- could not but be an audacious attempt at democratization in the East and a beacon light on socially induced misery such as poverty and racism in the West. The fundamental challenge to Unger is whether there is any historical maneuvering possible -- any space for his emancipatory experimentalism -- **between Dewey and Gramsci**, between petty bourgeois radicalism and Marxian socialism.

This query should be approached on two levels: that of highbrow academic production and consumption, and that of popular political organization and mobilization. Both levels have their own kinds of significance. Humanistic and historical studies in universities, colleges, and some professional schools -- though shrinking in the age of hi-tech and computers -- still provide one of the few institutional spaces in liberal capitalist democracies in which serious conversation about new ideologies can take place. Indeed, it is no accident that much of the legacy of the New Left from the 1960s now resides in such places. Most of the consumers of Unger's project are these progressive professional-managers who exercise some degree of cultural authority in and

from these educational institutions. Their importance -- especially as transmitters of elite cultural values and sensibilities -- should not be overlooked.

But neither should their influence be overexaggerated. In fact, what they produce and consume of a Left political orientation remains largely within the academy. Despite Unger's admirable efforts to write in a relatively jargon-free language, this will probably be true of his own texts. So his attempt to put forward a Left project **between Dewey and Gramsci** will more than likely remain the property of the very disillusioned and disenchanted progressives he chastises. Yet to influence the Left sectors of the "downbeat Alexandrian" intellectual culture of our time ought not to be minimized. Nevertheless, Unger wants to do more than this -- he wants to make a significant programmatic intervention in the real world of politics.

This brings us to the level of political organization and mobilization. Unlike Dewey and Gramsci, Unger pays little attention to the burning cultural and political issues in the everyday lives of ordinary people -- issues such as religious and nationalist (usually xenophobic) revivals, the declining power of trade unions, escalating racial and sexual violence, pervasive drug addiction and alcoholism, breakdowns in the nuclear family, the impact of mass media (TV, radio, and videos), and the exponential increase of suicides and homicides. Unger invokes a politics of personal relations and everyday life, yet he remains rather vague and amorphous regarding its content.

When I claim that Unger's discourse

remains inscribed within a Eurocentric and patriarchal framework, I mean that his texts remain relatively silent -- at both the conceptual and the practical levels -- on precisely those issues that promote and encourage much of the social motion and politicization among the masses. I am suggesting not that Unger write simple pamphlets for the masses, but rather that his fascinating works give more attention to those issues that may serve as the motivating forces for his new brand of Left politics. To read a masterful text of social theory and politics that does not so much as mention -- God forbid, grapple with -- forms of racial and gender subjugation in our time is inexcusable on political and theoretical grounds. n23 To do so is to remain captive to a grand though flawed Eurocentric and patriarchal heritage. More pointedly, it is to miss much of the new potential for a post-liberal and post-Marxist Left politics. Needless to say, to take seriously issues such as race and gender is far from any guarantee for a credible progressive politics -- but to bypass them is to commit the fatal sin of super-theory: to elude the concrete for the sake of systematic coherence and consistency.

In conclusion, Unger's ambitious project warrants our close attention and scrutiny. It is, by far, the most significant attempt to articulate a Third-Wave Left romanticism that builds on the best of the Jefferson-Emerson-Dewey and Rousseau-Marx-Gramsci legacies. Unfortunately, he remains slightly blinded by the theoretical and practical shortsightedness of these grand North Atlantic legacies. Yet Unger would be the first to admit that all prophets are imperfect, and that all emancipatory visions and programs are subject to

revision and transformation.

FOOTNOTES:

n1 SOCIAL THEORY at 41.

n2 *Id.*

n3 *Id.* at 14.

n4 *Id.* at 18-22.

n5 *Id.* at 43.

n6 *Id.* at 214.

n7 *Id.* at 214-15.

n8 J. DEWEY, THE PUBLIC AND ITS PROBLEMS (1927).

n9 J. DEWEY, INDIVIDUALISM: OLD AND NEW (1929).

n10 J. DEWEY, LIBERALISM AND SOCIAL ACTION (1935).

n11 J. DEWEY, FREEDOM AND CULTURE (1939).

n12 The phrase "all the way down" is my own way of highlighting the radical implications, *i.e.*, democratic socialist ones, of Dewey's social experimentation.

n13 A. GRAMSCI, THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS (L. Lawner trans. 1973).

n14 A. GRAMSCI, THE MODERN PRINCE AND OTHER WRITINGS (L. Marks trans. 1957).

n15 SOCIAL THEORY at 223-24.

n16 *Id.* at 200.

n17 *Id.* at 216.

n18 *Id.* at 233.

n19 *Id.* at 219 (citation omitted).

n20 *Id.* at 165-69.

n21 *Id.* at 237.

n22 Rorty, *Solidarity or Objectivity?*, in POST-ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY 3-19 (J. Rajchman & C. West eds. 1985).

n23 For a preliminary effort in this regard pertaining to race, see West, *Race and Social Theory: Towards a Genealogical Materialist Analysis*, in THE YEAR LEFT 74-90 (Sprinker et al. eds. 1987).