

# PROGRAMMATIC THOUGHT AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE SOCIAL DISCIPLINES

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*In Politics*, Roberto Unger seeks to transform the social disciplines and reorient the relationship between the study of society and the struggle to transform social life. One of the boldest and most controversial claims made in *Politics* is the assertion that programmatic thought must be made an integral and essential aspect of all social inquiry. This assertion challenges the current practices of most social researchers in the modern university.

Much of *Politics* is devoted to the program of “empowered democracy.” This program, which includes ideas for a radical revision of individual and collective rights, proposals for reorganizing state and economy, and the sketch of a new constitutional system, has a two-fold significance. First, it demonstrates some of the concrete implications of Unger’s broadest ideas about personality and society. Second, it makes a basic methodological point, illustrating Unger’s contention that an adequate *theory* of society must include efforts to reimagine social arrangements. By insisting that programmatic thought is not just a by-product or “application” of social knowledge, but an essential element in its production, Unger makes his broadest challenge to current practices of social inquiry and illustrates the deepest roots and most ambitious goals of his project. I believe Unger’s call for programmatic thought is one we must heed.

## I. THE RADICAL PROJECT

No idea is more important to *Politics* than the concept of a “radical project.” Unger wants to remake social thought because the existing disciplines, whether Marxist, postmodern, or positivistic in inspiration, hinder the accomplishment of “radical” aims. But at the same time the existence of a radical project—an actual embodied practice of conflict and struggle in thought and society—helps support the normative position from which existing social practices and disciplines are critiqued and on which the programmatic ideas of *Politics* are developed.

There is some irony in Unger’s use of the term *radical project* and a real chance for misunderstanding what he means. Where the uninformed reader might conjure up the vision of this project as a marginal

enterprise of visionary agitators, Unger means to evoke fundamental tendencies in modern civilization which, he asserts, embody basic truths about personality and society. From these truths, reflected in the wide range of doctrine and practices which are described as the radical project, Unger both mounts his critique of the social disciplines and develops his program of social reconstruction.

Unger describes the radical project as the continuation of the Christian-Romantic tradition, revised in light of the insights of modernism and classical social theory. His idea of a radical cause draws on a conception of the self which was developed in an earlier study entitled *Passion: An Essay on Personality* (1984). In *Passion*, Unger first makes the claim that we can develop a concept of personality which has normative weight for social theory. He then develops what he calls the "modernist view of the self." In this conception, the personality is "an infinite imprisoned within the finite,"<sup>1</sup> The self always contains capabilities and demands disproportionate to the social and personal circumstances in which it is embedded. Yet only within these constraining contexts—modes of thought and perception, forms of personal attachment, social and political institutions—can we realize ourselves. Finally, although we are dependent upon our contexts, these contexts are always conditional, imperfect, and transformable.

Unger's concept of the self seems to rest on a paradox: There is no self outside of social contexts, but no context exhausts the possibilities of the self. But it is the resolution of this paradox that gives Unger's view of the self normative force for the social disciplines. This resolution comes from his notion of the relative "plasticity" of all social contexts, including discourses, relationships, and institutions. The more a context is plastic, the more easily it can be *revised*, the more it will permit self-realization, given the infinite possibilities and contextual nature of the self. The radical project, as Unger conceives it, involves the search for ever more revisable bodies of knowledge, personal relations, and social institutions, for these will free us *from* bad contexts and free us *for* good relations.

*Radicalism* then, means the quest for more self-realizing contexts. Unger argues that the radical cause has its roots in Christianity and the Romantic movement, left politics, and modernist literature. While radicals of many stripes have in the past contributed to this idea of human potential, Unger thinks they have failed to carry through on, or integrate, their varied visions.

*Politics* seeks to bring together disparate aspects of the radical project. Unger highlights the separate leftist and modernist strands within radicalism. Leftists have emphasized political and economic barriers to emancipation: They want to dissolve structures of power

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<sup>1</sup> PASSION at 4.

and hierarchy in economic and political relations. Modernists have focused on the fine grain of private life and the constraints private life places on the development of the self. He wants to draw these strands together: *Politics* offers a social theory adequate for a “unified version of the radical cause.”<sup>2</sup>

## II. FALSE NECESSITY

The central volume is called *False Necessity* because that’s what is wrong with social thought and thus with radical politics. Unger thinks our modes of understanding the world have failed fully to recognize the plasticity of society and thus the possibilities for transformation. He offers three concepts—*formative contexts*, *negative capability* and *history without a script*—which embody the theme of liberation from false necessity. Formative contexts are the institutional and imaginative practices that shape a society’s routines. Formative contexts are structures—like the modes of production in Marxism—that limit what can be imagined and done. Unger wants us to recognize the importance of such contexts, but also grasp their mutability. No formative context is necessary or inevitable and contexts can be changed in many ways and in many directions. Moreover, not all contexts are equal: Some are more easily revised and thus made more likely to realize human potential. Unger uses the term *negative capability* to measure the degree of revisability, or the absence of entrenched power, in any formative context. To complete the radical project, Unger tells us, we must grasp the mutability of formative contexts and work toward contexts with greater negative capability.

These efforts must be guided by a recognition that there is no reordained path in history. Unger rejects the idea that history has a script, i.e., that the outcome of social struggle is determined by forces the contenders cannot master or restraints they cannot alter. Unger thinks most contemporary social thinkers, from Marxists to positivist social scientists, fail to grasp the mutability of contexts, the possibility of more revisable contexts, the “it could always have been otherwise” nature of historical outcomes. In doing this, the social disciplines have succumbed to false necessity and betrayed the radical project.<sup>3</sup>

## III. THE SITUATION OF SOCIAL THEORY

*Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* critiques the social disciplines. Marxism, neo-classical economics, and positivist social science are singled out for detailed analysis. All three have failed fully to

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<sup>2</sup> SOCIAL THEORY at 13.

<sup>3</sup> See *Id.* at 117, 223–24.

emancipate themselves from the idea that society has a natural order. All succumb to the vice of false necessity. Another strand of radical thought, called *ultra-theory* and associated with existential radicalism and postmodernism, is dealt with as well. This doctrine is criticized for merely appearing to have freed itself from false necessity, while actually succumbing to the idolatry of existing social structures.

*Social Theory* critiques all forms of social theory which make the following “deep structure” assumptions: (1) We can draw clear distinctions between the frameworks (formative contexts) of society and the routines these frameworks shape; (2) such frameworks (like the capitalist mode of production) are indivisible and repeatable; and (3) they must succeed each other in a predetermined sequence (e.g., capitalism must follow feudalism). Unger argues that deep structure theory disempowers radical politics. By insisting on indivisibility and sequence, it “disorients political strategy and impoverishes programmatic thought.”<sup>4</sup> Committed to false necessity, deep structure theory obscures the relationship between structure and agency, and limits our ability to grasp transformative possibilities. To escape from these limits, Unger insists, we must rework the notion that frameworks shape social routines, removing any determinist implications of the “framework” idea. And we must jettison ideas of indivisibility and sequence altogether.

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

Since Unger indicts Marxism for reifying structure and thus paralyzing radical politics, one might expect him to applaud those who want to move away from structure altogether. But he doesn’t: *Politics* also includes an attack on the ultra-theorists who are accused of not taking structure seriously enough.<sup>5</sup> Unger is more charitable to ultra-theorists than to the Marxists. Since, like Unger himself, the ultra-theorists recognize that “everything is politics,” they are allies in his struggle against necessitarian social thought. But he sees their wholesale rejection of all notions of structure as equally dangerous to the radical cause. Unger thinks the ultra-theorists (he has in mind Michel Foucault and some radical thinkers in the Critical Legal Studies movement) cannot produce the explanatory accounts and programmatic

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 93.

<sup>5</sup> *See Id.* at 165–69.

ideas he believes are needed for radical politics. Ultra-theory, he suggests, tends toward the existential, modernist heresy that “. . . true freedom consists in the perpetual defiance of all settled structure.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, while ultra-theory initially seems liberating, it actually leaves the *status quo* intact.

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

The critique of the social disciplines is a prelude to the exposition of Unger’s own social theory. These are set out in *False Necessity*, which has two missions. First, Unger sets forth an explanatory theory of society, which he labels *super theory* and describes as a “radical alternative to Marxism.”<sup>7</sup> Second, he outlines a program for social reconstruction which, he argues, could push the radical project beyond social democracy. Unger sees social democracy as the only real programmatic idea which the radical cause in the West has produced so far: He tells us we can and must do better. *Politics*’ explanatory theory is rich in ideas about the current situation in advanced industrial societies, and its program is replete with novel notions for reorganization of state, society, and economy. He offers an account of the current stasis in politics in the West and a parallel sketch of similar processes in the socialist bloc. He sets forth a rather detailed program which provides an alternative both to bureaucratic socialism and laissez-faire capitalism, while incorporating attractive features of both. *Politics* argues that no false necessity stands in the way of our realizing such a program.

Looked at from the perspective of current work in the social disciplines, Unger’s juxtaposition and close linkage of explanatory and programmatic argument is striking and far from accidental. Rather, the dual commitment to social explanation and the development of relatively detailed ideas for large scale social transformation is an essential part of what he calls *constructive social theory*. By arguing that programmatic thought and social explanation are *inseparable*, Unger presents a clear alternative to most current styles of academic work.

Unger devotes almost half of *False Necessity* to the “program of empowered democracy.”<sup>8</sup> He feels this detailed outline for a reform of economy, individual rights, government and the constitution are essential to his project, and he is right for two reasons. First, the juxtaposition of explanation and program gives both parts of his constructive social theory a vitality that either might lack in isolation. Second, the

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 169.

<sup>7</sup> FALSE NECESSITY at 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 341–595.

juxtaposition reflects Unger's most fundamental views about humanity and society. If one accepts the radical project as Unger restates it, one is forced to recognize that programmatic imagination is an essential element of social theory.

Unger's discussion of rights illustrates how the explanatory and programmatic aspect of *Politics* enrich each other. In his analysis of the formative context of the modern West, Unger highlights the current private rights complex of property and contract. In the program of empowered democracy he outlines an alternative concept of rights. The two discussions are closely related. The genealogy of modern private law draws out suppressed values which help form the basis of the new system of rights. The fuller development of a transformed concept of rights makes it easier to see the normative perspective underlying the critique of our existing "private rights" complex.

Unger's account of the role of private rights in the formative context of the West illustrates many of the most basic themes of *Politics*. He wants to show that ideas of absolute property and freedom of contract have played a significant role in Western history, but not the one their most ardent defenders would claim. The defenders of absolute property and unrestricted freedom of contract contend that these institutions are both desirable for the realization of liberty and necessary for economic efficiency. In the conventional account, the emergence and development of these institutions shows functional economic necessity at work, while efforts to preserve them reflects both economic prudence and liberal zeal.

Unger recognizes that the private rights complex plays an important role in maintaining the *status quo* in the West:

It gives bosses and investment managers the authority to organize labor in the name of accumulated property. It sets the basic terms on which disinvestments can frustrate reform. And it denies would-be reformers a tangible picture of an alternative style of economic organization.<sup>9</sup>

Unger shows how this rights complex plays a hegemonic role in our current formative context. But he wants to demonstrate that this hegemony is not based on true social necessity, pragmatic effectiveness, or moral superiority.

Unger attacks the necessitarian "mythical history" of the rise of the private rights complex. "Liberals and Marxists alike," he says, "view the private-law arrangements and ideas of early modern Europe as necessary points on the continuum that led to current contract or property law, a law that could in turn be seen as an indispensable prop to the market system."<sup>10</sup> His alternative genealogy of the origins of the private rights complex seeks to demonstrate that our current institu-

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 71.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 197.

tions of property and contract only work because they are linked with other arrangements (like hierarchical power in the workplace) that negate the liberal ideals they seem to encode, and have been preserved only by dint of complex intellectual maneuvers that mask structures of domination and present adventitious and jerry-built arrangements as accommodations to functional necessity.

A key feature of this genealogy is the argument that, in the course of defending the private rights order, apologists for the system have been forced to introduce a series of exceptions and counter doctrines which, taken together, prefigure a radically different form of social organization. "Contract law," he argues, "included deviant elements that pointed toward a private-rights order that gave legal force to relations of reciprocal dependence."<sup>11</sup> He thinks that these deviant tendencies, originally introduced as justificatory moves within conventional legal discourse, would, if more fully developed, form the basis for a radical alternative to existing economic relationships and institutions. In the program of empowered democracy, Unger develops these "deviant" strands, articulating such novel concepts as a right to solidarity, grounded on reliance and trust, a right to destabilization, grounded on the necessity to constantly revise institutional contexts, and a right to immunity, grounded on the individual's need for security as a precondition to participation in transformative politics.<sup>12</sup>

By juxtaposing explanation and program, Unger argues, we can both better understand our situation and identify elements in the present—like the deviant tendencies in contract doctrine—which prefigure the future we aspire to. But *Politics* makes a further, more fundamental claim for the essential unity of programmatic and explanatory thought. The need to imagine the future as we explain the past is grounded in Unger's most basic ideas about the relationship between self and society, and his view of the true nature of transformative work.

Unger stresses two aspects of the self: its unlimited potential and its necessary contextuality. His concept of empowerment rests on the constant struggle to revise contexts which do not foster the full potential of the self. Self-realization does not come about, however, by passive contemplation or solipsistic withdrawal. Rather, we must realize the self through active, usually collective, engagement in the endless task of context revision. Ultimate self-realization (to the extent there is such a thing) requires contexts with greater negative capacity than those we live in today. We can only become ourselves, he argues, to the extent that we are engaged in struggles to create such contexts and come to live in contexts of greater plasticity. Unger wants to free us

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<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 207.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 508–37.

from existing relations, not so we can exist as isolated individuals, but so we can exist in better relationships.

The struggle for plasticity, however, occurs in a social situation that is always made and imagined. Imaginative structures—the models of possible and desirable association that we work with—form part of the glue that holds society together, and constitute one of the arenas of struggle for those who espouse the radical cause and accept its ideal of a transformative vocation. One of the main obstacles to this struggle, Unger notes, is the lack of credible alternatives to our present situation. Without these, we remain imprisoned in our existing imaginative structures or discourses. The only way to break this impasse, and to release energy for self-realization and institutional revision, is to devise alternative ideas about social, political, and personal life. *Politics* argues that we can and must do this work, and charges the social disciplines with this essential task of imaginative reinvention. Since history has no script and societies obey no deep logic, we *can* devise alternative futures without fear that they will be irrelevant. Since the only way we can revise the institutions that contain us is first to imagine how they could be otherwise, we *must* engage in programmatic thought or give up on the radical cause altogether.

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

## V. CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

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

The first of these is the relationship between Unger's concept of the self and his theory. Unger denies that the former is the grounding of the latter; in *Passion* he says, "[W]e cannot hope to deduce views of the self and of society from each other,"<sup>13</sup> and in *Social Theory* he characterizes the relationship between those two aspects of his theory as merely "mutually reinforcing."<sup>14</sup> Yet the argument of *Politics* draws on the Christian Romantic modernist idea of the self to such a degree that the book lacks persuasive force if one rejects this account of personality. This suggests that the ultimate impact of *Politics* depends, in no trivial sense, on Unger's ability to persuade us that his theory of the self is one to which we are prepared to assent. Critics have argued that Unger's conception fails fully to grasp the modernist's recognition of the decentered nature of the self and is insufficiently attentive to communitarian considerations. Moreover, readers of *Passion* may wonder if this book really does more than set forth, as opposed to fully support, the conception argued for. While I think these criticisms can be answered, Unger needs to address them. Hopefully, the promised future volumes of *Politics* will do this.

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

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

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<sup>13</sup> *PASSION* at 85.

<sup>14</sup> *SOCIAL THEORY* at 223.

bilities for social life; the same could have been done for a full account of the state of social theory today.

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