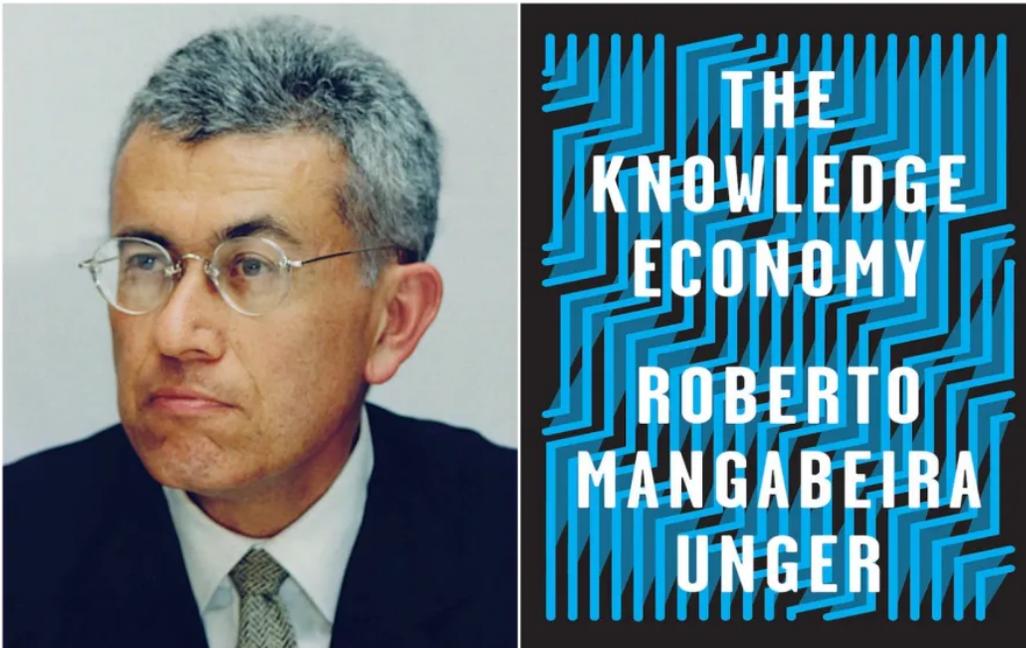


## Roberto Mangabeira Unger's Alternative Progressive Vision

*We spoke to the Harvard law professor and philosopher about his incisive articulation of a different kind of progressivism.*

By [Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins](#)

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*(Courtesy of Verso)*

**W**hat is the way forward for progressives in a time when it seems both centrism and authoritarianism are resurgent? What should be the character and scope of a national program that progressives in and outside the Democratic Party can and should embrace? There are many places to look for answers to these questions, and no doubt the answers will have many inspirations.

One of the most incisive articulations of an American progressive alternative is that of Roberto Mangabeira Unger, a Harvard Law professor, philosopher, and former Brazilian politician. He has written over two dozen books

addressing an unusual diversity of topics, including critical legal theory—which he helped develop—economics, philosophy, and religion. Given this range, it would be unfair to reduce Unger’s work to one core idea. But perhaps the major theme of his work is summed up in his argument that “society is made and imagined, that it is a human artifact rather than the expression of an underlying natural order.”

What this means is that nothing in our society—the economy, liberal democracy, the legal order, etc.—is predetermined toward some definitive end. They are human creations, artifacts whose forms can therefore be challenged, transcended, and ultimately reoriented for the purpose of greater human liberation, individually and collectively.



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What makes Unger’s progressive vision of society unique are its religious and prophetic elements. He sees human beings as having a divinelike capacity to transcend their societal circumstances to achieve greatness. What prevents them from doing so is the false assumption that there can be no substantial alternative to inherited political institutions. His work exposes this false necessity while providing progressive social, political, and economic alternatives to it. In this regard, his work can offer progressives key resources for exposing the false necessity of the American liberal status quo and thinking constructively about a different progressive vision for the United States.

*The Nation* recently spoke with Unger about his proposal for an alternative progressive track for American politics. Along the way, we discussed racial injustice in the United States, Donald Trump’s election, democratizing new

technologies, the future of education, and progressive taxation. Of pressing importance is the topic of structural economic and political change, and in turn, whether Unger's vision is impractical. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

—*Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins*

**DANIEL STEINMETZ-JENKINS: Right now the streets are filled with protesters demonstrating in the aftermath of George Floyd's brutal killing by Minneapolis police. Progressives have long struggled to confront and overcome racial injustice in the United States. You have criticized their approach, the dominant approach, to racial oppression. What is your understanding? And what is your proposal?**

**ROBERTO MANGABEIRA UNGER:** To grasp the meaning of this moment for the future of the country, it is useful to begin by distinguishing the immediate background—the failure of the established approach to racial injustice in the United States—from the larger context of which this failure forms a part: the disorientation of American progressives and the long-standing absence in American politics of any program responsive to the needs, interests, and aspirations of the working-class majority of the country, white or black.

The prevailing response to racial injustice in the United States has been the integrationist orthodoxy. It treats racial injustice as a threshold issue, to be addressed before all problems of economic equality and opportunity. Its signature expression is affirmative action. It has done little for those who most require protection, the vast number of black people who languish in prisons and dead-end jobs. This approach has offended the white working-class majority, who believe themselves to be victims of a conspiracy between sanctimonious white elites and the representatives of black workers. And it has provided a model for the identity politics that has addressed legitimate demands for respect and recognition only by diverting the country from engagement with its structural problems.

There is an alternative. The alternative is to distinguish individualized racial discrimination from the advancement of the unequipped, the excluded, and the impoverished. Individualized racial discrimination should be criminalized, as it is in many countries. Social advancement should be predicated on real disadvantage or exclusion, wherever it is found. Racial stigma should serve as only one of the standards that, together with other forms of disadvantage, trigger such advancement. Race should be combined with class rather than separated from it.

**DSJ: How did the country arrive at its present situation, with the presidency in the hands of Donald Trump, after decades in which millions of working-class voters abandoned the Democratic Party?**

**RMU:** The principal vehicle of American progressives, the Democratic Party, failed to come up with a sequel to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The sequel would have had to be very different from the original, which focused on economic security rather than economic empowerment and offers no model for how to bring more American workers into the good jobs of the most productive parts of today's economy.

Let us look coldly at what has happened since then. Having begun under Lyndon Johnson by treating the poor as an insular minority in need of support and blacks as another insular minority in need of rights, progressives offered nothing to the working-class majority of the country other than later to dissolve them into a series of group identities and special interests. Conservatives responded with the formula by which, under Democratic as well as Republican administrations, they won and wielded power for half a century: combining material concessions to the moneyed class with moral concessions to the moneyless classes. For this whole period, the United States has had no economic growth strategy other than cheap money, delegated by the federal government to the central bank, and productivity growth has stagnated. The majority of American workers have felt—and been—abandoned.

Into the expanding vacuum that resulted from these successive abdications came the plutocratic populism of Donald Trump: a big fat hoax, given that it has done nothing for the abandoned majority other than to wage war against low-skill immigrants while continuing—it must be acknowledged—to get high employment, with relatively few good jobs, on the basis of the cheap-money policy. What an opportunity for the progressives, if they had a program. They don't.

**DSJ: What, then, should be the character of a national alternative that progressives in and outside the Democratic Party can embrace?**

**RMU:** The progressive program the country needs would address the supply as well as the demand sides of the economy, production as well as consumption. It would seek to innovate in the economic, educational, and political arrangements that shape the primary or fundamental distribution of advantage and opportunity rather than devoting itself solely, as the

humanizers of the supposedly inevitable have, to the after-the-fact correction, through progressive taxation and redistributive social spending, of market-generated inequalities. More generally, the individual should be secured in a haven of capability-assuring educational and economic endowments and of safeguards against private and governmental oppression. Society all around him, however, should be opened up to contest, experiment, and innovation. In that storm, the individual, once safe and equipped, can move unafraid. The storm does not arise spontaneously. It needs to be arranged.

The true aim of the progressives should be a deep freedom, achieved by changing the structure of social life, rather than a shallow equality. The struggle against entrenched and extreme inequality is subsidiary to the larger goal, to become bigger together. And the method should be structural change—the criterion of depth—change in the established institutional arrangements and ideological assumptions. Real structural change is not the replacement of one indivisible, predetermined system—socialism for capitalism—by another. It is fragmentary but cumulative. The goal of shared empowerment and the refusal to take the established institutional form of society as an unsurpassable horizon are what together oppose the progressive to the conservative.

These generalities mark a direction. They do not excuse us from proposing the initial steps by which to begin to move in that direction in a particular society and time. A combination of innovations in the economy, education, and democratic politics would start to give shape to the alternative that the country lacks.

**DSJ: You have argued in your most recent book, *The Knowledge Economy*, that progressives need an approach to the supply side of the economy. What does such an approach entail for the future of the American economy and the situation of American workers?**

**RMU:** At the heart of the economic part of a progressive program must be the attempt to develop a socially inclusive form of today's most advanced practice of production, the knowledge economy, informed by science and devoted to perpetual innovation. It exists in every sector of the American economy—in intellectually dense services and even in precision agriculture, as well as in the high-tech industry with which we tend, too narrowly, to identify it. In every sector, however, it appears only as a fringe, a series of insular vanguards of production excluding the overwhelming majority of businesses and workers. Practices, more than technologies, are what set the knowledge economy apart. These practices bring production closer to discovery. The insularity of the

knowledge economy results in both economic stagnation and economic inequality. It causes economic stagnation by denying the most advanced practice to most economic agents. And it roots economic inequality in a lengthening chasm between the advanced and backward parts of production.

To move toward an inclusive knowledge economy, the country needs to develop a 21st century equivalent to the 19th century system of agricultural extension by which it created, on its agrarian frontier, family-scale agriculture with entrepreneurial attributes. That would require establishing between the government and the producers an intermediate cadre of support centers, with wide autonomy and professional management and financed by a combination of subsidies and fees, to give a wider range of small- and medium-size enterprises broader access to advanced practice and technology, as well as to capital, and to identify and disseminate best practice.

But it is not enough to lift up businesses. It is also necessary to reach out, by analogous means, to people who have little or no relation to business organizations. The best place to begin is the middle part of the job structure—the part most hollowed out by the economic changes of recent decades—improving the equipment and skills of people such as machine repair technicians and nurse practitioners. The goal would be to turn them into technologically equipped artisans. From there, it is possible to move, with similar methods and intentions, both up and down the job hierarchy.

This second wing of the productive uplift effort in turn merges into initiatives designed to strengthen labor in its relation to capital. No dynamic of inclusive rise in productivity can flourish against the background of low-wage and insecure labor. In the United States, as around the world, stable employment is ceasing to be the norm. More and more jobs are temporary, part-time, or otherwise insecure. The reality of labor performed under decentralized contractual arrangements, rather than as part of a stable labor force assembled in large productive units, cannot be reversed. It results from changes in the forms of production. But it can be mastered by the law to prevent flexibility from meaning insecurity. The free-for-all gig economy must not become the rule. The counterpart to productive uplift is new labor law—to organize, represent, and protect unstable labor.

**DSJ: Progressive politicians like Bernie Sanders and progressive academics like Thomas Piketty have emphasized the role of redistributive taxes—including taxes on wealth—in diminishing inequality. Why do you resist? And what do you see as the proper place of taxation in a progressive program?**

**RMU:** No progressive program is feasible without a substantially higher tax than the United States now implements. Comparative fiscal experience reveals the truth about taxes. Structural or institutional change reshaping the fundamental distribution of opportunity and advantage decisively overshadows anything that can be achieved by retrospective redistribution through tax and transfer. Moreover, in determining the overall impact of the budget on both its revenue-raising and spending sides, the aggregate level of the tax take and how it is spent count for more than the progressive profile of taxation. A tax that is neutral toward relative prices may make it possible to raise much more public revenue with much less economic trauma, as the European social democracies do through heavy reliance on the avowedly regressive value-added tax, and then to spend it on redistributive public services.

That is not a reason to reject the steeply progressive taxation of both individual consumption and wealth, so long as we understand that the redistributive effects of these taxes are likely to be modest unless we have the power and will to radicalize them and to tolerate the resulting economic disruption. Evidently, many progressive politicians prefer pietistic gestures to transformative effects. Bereft of a structural program, they simply want to show on whose side they are. And some of them are now distracted by the pleasant thought that, regardless of special circumstances, they can evade the whole problem by printing money instead of raising it.

**DSJ: The economic changes that you propose, including a socially inclusive knowledge economy, seem to have far-reaching implications for education. What are they, and how can they be reconciled with a class divide that is also an educational divide in America?**

**RMU:** The United States suffers from a severe form of educational dualism. Its schools are some of the best and the worst among high-income countries. There are two tasks. The first task has to do with the institutional setting of the school system. In this vast, unequal country, organized as a federation, the priority is to reconcile the local management of the schools with national standards of investment and quality. Such a reconciliation is incompatible with the exclusive dependence of the schools on local public finance. And it requires cooperation within the federal system to take over failing schools and school systems, fix them, and return them fixed.

The second task is to recast education on a model of teaching and learning that gives primacy to the acquisition of analytic and synthetic capabilities over the mastery of information. That does so by preferring selective depth to encyclopedic superficiality in dealing with content. That puts teamwork among students, teachers, and schools in the place of individualism and authoritarianism in the classroom. And that deals with every subject from contrasting points of view. This approach is no less suitable to practical, vocational training than to general education, once the focus of such training shifts from job-specific and machine-specific skills to the higher-order capabilities required by the knowledge economy and its technologies. But it does depend on the creation of a nationwide teaching career through cooperation within the federal system.

The school under democracy should not be the instrument of either government or the family. It should be the voice of the future and recognize in each young person a tongue-tied prophet.

**DSJ: Can these alternatives in the economy and in education advance unless we remake our political institutions? Our democracy was not organized to facilitate structural change unless crisis forces transformation.**

**RMU:** A deepening of democracy must accompany, in a progressive project, the economic and educational changes for which I have argued: Political institutions set the terms under which change in all other areas can happen. The mark of such a deepening is to strengthen our collective ability as citizens to master the shape of society rather than to have it imposed on us by history or necessity. As a result, it diminishes the need for crisis to serve as the enabling condition of change and weakens the power of the past to determine the future.

Here there are three major focal points for institutional innovation. The setup of the government, as defined in the Constitution, which powerfully shapes our ability to change society through politics: the pace of politics. The arrangements that influence the level of popular engagement in political life: the temperature of politics. And the relation of the national government to the states and towns: the federal system.

A defining feature of the constitutional architecture of the United States is its combination of a liberal principle of fragmentation of power with a conservative principle of the slowing down of politics, expressed in Madison's plan. Americans believe mistakenly that these two principles are naturally and

necessarily bound together. They are not. They are connected by design to inhibit the transformation of society by politics. We can reaffirm the liberal principle but repudiate the conservative one, for example, by allowing either of the political branches to call early elections for both branches in the presence of an impasse. But it is futile to raise this issue in the United States now. The constitutional setup is revered as part of the national political identity. Those who have dissented from this view, beginning with Thomas Jefferson, have gone unheard.

Of the other two areas of possible innovation in the arrangements of democracy—the level of participation and the reshaping of federalism, progressives have given priority to the first and dismissed the second as marginal to their aims. The initiatives that would raise the level of organized popular engagement in political life would reform the relation between money and politics, the terms of free access to the means of mass communication by political parties and organized social movements, and the electoral regime. They are indispensable to a progressive program. Placing them first, however, is a misjudgment. All are highly contentious, legally as well as politically. By contrast, the reenergizing of federalism has immense potential appeal, cutting across divisions between left and right and offering a wonderful device for developing the economic and educational alternatives the country needs.

Cooperative federalism, vertically among the three levels of the federal system and horizontally among the states and municipalities, can serve as the initial stage of determined and broad-based experimentation in American public life. Contrary to common prejudice, strong initiative by the national government and the empowerment of state and local government are not opposites. It is possible to have more of both at the same time, so long as we define clearly which responsibilities of each part of the federal system are exclusive and which are concurrent. Later on and within limits designed to prevent oppression and abuse, parts of the United States should be able to diverge from the predominant policies and arrangements in the country and create countermodels of the national future. Without such a dialectic of dominant and dissident solutions, no vital democratic experimentalism can take hold.

**DSJ: Aren't you demanding and expecting more than political reality allows? Can't your views be dismissed as utopian? For a leftist or any sort of progressive, isn't there a choice in the end between inadequate reform and impossible revolution?**

**RMU:** I am a revolutionary by conviction as well as by temperament. I believe it is likely that I am living in a counterrevolutionary interlude in a long revolutionary period in the history of humanity. I am determined that my thoughts and actions not be controlled by the biases of the interlude. But I understand that revolutionary change today must differ in form and method as well as in substance from what it was in the past. For any program, the direction and the choice of the initial steps are crucial. It does not matter that the steps are longer or shorter. It matters that they be the right moves in the right direction. My criticism of the American progressives is not that the steps they take are too small. It is that they are steps in the wrong direction, taken under the influence of bad ideas about the future, the present, and even the past. The notion of a sudden leap into another regime of social life is a fantasy. Its practical role today is to serve as an excuse for its opposite. Once its fantastical nature has been exposed, what remains for the disappointed fantasists is to sweeten the world that they have despaired of reimagining and remaking.

**DSJ:** For the alternative you defend to advance, step by step, it needs a social base, a coalition, that doesn't yet exist. What base does your program imply? And how can it become a majority coalition without winning support from groups, such as the small-business class, that have been mainstays of American conservatism?

**RMU:** Every consequential agenda for change in society builds its own base over time. But that effort has to begin by engaging the classes, communities, and forces that exist. It must move them to revise, little by little, their imagination of the possible as well as their understanding of their interests and identities. A program like the one that I have outlined must go in search of a transracial progressive majority. That convergence needs to include large parts of the blue-collar and white-collar working class, of the racially stigmatized underclass, of the small-business class, and even of the restless aspirants of the professional and business class. Such a majority is within reach. Nothing in the alternative direction that I have described is incompatible within any part of this majority. The single most dangerous bias of the left is its prejudice against the small-business class, which has always had an outsize influence on the country's self-understanding. That class now shades into the growing legions of the self-employed. To give up on it and on them is to prepare defeat.

**DSJ: Even when you deal with economic and political practicalities, your ideas have a prophetic undertone. Another recent book of yours is called *The Religion of the Future*. The country has had its prophets. Does it really need new ones?**

**RMU:** When politics is most serious, it is also about who we are and what we can and should become. It turns into a struggle over consciousness as well as over institutions. The message of the American prophets—including Emerson, Whitman, and Lincoln—was that the individual shares in the divine attribute of transcendence over context and becomes more human by becoming more godlike. Under democracy, which puts its faith in the constructive genius of ordinary men and women, this idea comes down to earth and informs the organization of society.

It is not good enough to say that the message has failed to be enacted and that the country should return to its founding ideals. The message itself should be rethought. From the outset, it bore a double taint, which compromised and corrupted it. It misrepresented the relation between self-construction and solidarity, failing to do justice to the presence of the latter within the former. As a result, it tempted Americans to think of themselves as little self-crowned Napoleons. The second stain on the prophetic teaching was to exempt American institutions from the reach of challenge and change and hold them up as the definitive form of a free society. The exemption amounted to a species of idolatry, for which the American republic has paid and continues to pay a terrible price. The prophetic voice must speak again in the United States. In breaking its silence, it must also correct its message.

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