

"We Go To Sleep And Drown Our Sorrows In Consumption"

Roberto Unger — October 24, 2011

Roberto Unger is a renowned political and social theorist who has also served as Brazil's Minister of Strategic Affairs. He sat down with Cora Currier to discuss what he considers the tragic narrowing of political imagination and the need to generate change without crisis.



The European: For many years now, you have been calling for an alternative to the reigning economic ideologies on the left and the right. Does the economic crisis of recent years create opportunities for political and economic experimentalism?

Unger: The horizon of programmatic debate in the whole North Atlantic world has been increasingly narrowed for a very long time, to the point that most of it has to do with a single organizing theme: how to reconcile American-style economic flexibility and European-style social protection within the horizon of the inherited institutional framework. My view is that all the fundamental problems of the European societies, and the world as a whole, require the reinvention of the conventional institutional arrangements for the organization of democracies, market economies, and civil societies. The financial and economic crises beginning in 2007 and their long sequel of halting or failing recovery presented an immense transformative opportunity. The opportunity for change has already been largely squandered. But the opportunity for insight, not yet, and insight today can mean transformation tomorrow.

The European: Can you give me some concrete examples?

Unger: In the treatment of the crisis, one suppressed theme is the reorganization of the relation between finance and production. In all of the major market economies of the world, the truth is that production is largely self-financed on the basis of the retained and reinvested earnings of private firms. This provokes the disquieting question: what then is the point of all that money in banks and stock markets?

Theoretically, it is to finance production. In fact, the vast majority of financial activity under the current arrangements has only an oblique or episodic relation to the funding of production. It is not enough to regulate finance; it is necessary to reshape the arrangements governing the relation between finance and production so that finance becomes the servant rather than the master of the real economy. So that the accumulated saving of society is in fact channeled into its productive agenda, rather than being wasted in a casino. A second suppressed theme in the debate is the link between recovery and redistribution. All of these societies organized in the course of 20th century around a market in mass consumption goods. Mass consumption requires popularization of purchase power, which requires progressive redistribution of wealth, but above all of opportunity and capability. For the most part what happened was the opposite. You had an over-weening expansion of credit and debt. The consequence is a fake credit democracy instead of a property holding democracy. So there you have two huge opportunities to democratize the market economy in the context of the crisis, which have not been seized. One might have expected the left to advance as a result of the crisis, when in fact on the whole its situation is worse than it was before. And so that reveals what the basic underlying problem: the absence of a real progressive project. The truth is that the project of the left in the U.S. and Europe is basically to sugarcoat a reality that they despair of reimagining or reshaping. The humanization of the inevitable is the leitmotif of their politics.

The European: What is a true progressive or leftist today?

Unger: Someone who understands that the goal of greater equality is subordinate to the goal of raising the ordinary man and woman up to a greater life. No one wants rigid equality as an end in itself. We combat entrenched inequality as a restraint on this much more important objective of enhancing the capabilities and intensifying the experience of ordinary humanity. We also do not to accept the established institutional structure as the horizon. It is contingent, just a moment in history. This combination of the idea of the devotion to the greatness of the ordinary and the disposition to experiment with the institutional arrangement is what defines a progressive or a leftist. But by that criteria there are almost none! This has to change. There has to be a struggle. And before there can be a struggle in politics, there has to be struggle in ideas.

The European: Let's take labor as an example. For many, the labor movement seems to be an example of a force on the left that has lost its vision, and is desperately trying to sugarcoat the inevitable, to borrow your phrase. How should the progressive envision labor's struggle?

Unger: The first problem is the denial to the majority of the labor force, even in the richest and most even countries, of access to the advanced sectors of learning and of production. Solving this problem requires a form of strategic coordination between governments and firms which is decentralized, pluralistic and experimental. A second step would be to innovate in the legal and institutional arrangements of the market economy so that it is not fastened to a single version of itself. Alternate regimes of property and contract coexisting in the same economy to the end that more people have more access to more markets in more ways.

And then, as the horizon, a fundamental change in the nature of work and production. All the liberal and socialist thinkers of the 19th century understood that wage labor is a compromise, and retains many of the aspects of slavery and serfdom. There are two other forms of labor, self-employment and cooperation, and combined in some way they could help solve the problems of scale and wage labor could become the residual rather than the dominant form of free labor. The other aspect of this yet distant change in the nature of work is a shift in the relation between people and machines. The whole purpose of having machines is that people can be different from machines. We ought to use machines to do for us anything that is repeatable, so that the whole of our lives can be reserved for the not yet repeatable.

The European: That runs against virtually anything that has dominated labor policy over the past few decades.

Unger: The whole historical basis to what we think of as the classical organization and protection of labor has been Fordist mass production: the concentration of large stable labor forces in large production units, owned and managed by large corporate entities. We have to remember that that way of organizing work prevailed from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, and was preceded by several centuries of decentralized organization. Now we have reason to think that another form of this reorganization on the basis of decentralized contractual networks may again be emerging.

The European: A reorganization that could also break the idea of comparative advantage, or the idea that certain countries or regions fulfill certain roles in the global economy. You're imagining a degree of national self-sufficiency.

Unger: Yes. The production of partial inputs to this decentralized organization can happen all over the world. Then there's the question: will this reorganization of work, which undermines the classic basis for the protection of labor, result in a position of precariousness? So that everyone becomes insecure? There has to be a legal and institutional invention for this increasing workforce of self-employed, temporary or subcontracted workers. The traditional form of collective bargaining is inadequate. It's important not just for reasons of equality and inclusion. It's important because what is at stake is the access of the ordinary man and woman to the instruments of effective agency, of doing something with their lives, being at the cutting edge, and that is the essential point about democracy. The core creed of democracy is faith in the constructive genius of ordinary men and women, which has to be given practical content through institutions.

The European: Do you still see the nation state as the locus of these institutional experiments?

Unger: Despite the idea that the nation state is passé, it remains the main focus of innovation and power in the world. The problem with in European society is they have not created institutions that internalize the impulse to change. With the way things are organized, transformation continues to depend on crisis. Throughout the 20th century the only way they have been able to change is by slaughtering one another. When they're at peace they go to sleep and drown their sorrows in consumption, in a depressive materialism. Sleepy democracies in which no one wants to sacrifice anything, no one believes very much in anything except for extremists on the left and the right. This is a disaster. The centrist technocrats, the cold calculators, all like Europe. Everyone who is young, restless, and rebellious is

opposed to the European project. The power to shape the forms of economic and social life is increasingly centralized in the bureaucratic apparatus and the definition of social entitlements and endowments is delegated to the local national authorities. It ought to be exactly the opposite. The primary responsibility of the union is to ensure the capability and endowments of its citizens so that they can raise a storm of experimentation and try things differently and try this and try that.

The European: But propositions of change, especially in a moment of crisis, often generate a fear-based, conservative, reaction as well. There is the sense that we do have something to lose.

Unger: Of course, and you are left with no alternatives. One of the themes connecting the calamities of 20th century European politics to today is the attitude of the progressives toward the small business class, the petit bourgeoisie. They demonize them. The truth is that there are more petit-bourgeois in the world and certainly in Europe than there are industrial proletarians, and if the criteria is subjective rather than object, that is, the aspiration towards economic independence, it is the majority of the population, and what they fail to do is to meet that aspiration on its own terms and provide it with instruments so that it doesn't have isolated independent family business as its only form of expression.

The European: You talk a lot about economic empowerment, but not too much about economic policy. Is this, in the end, a question of politics rather than economics?

Unger: To solve this problem of continuing dependence of change on crisis, there would need to be major political innovation, the creation of high energy democracies that raise the temperature of politics, hasten the pace of politics, the engagement of the electorate, exploit the experimentalist potential of decentralization so that local authorities can create counter-models of the future, establish a power capable of rescuing insulated groups from circumstances of exclusion or subjugation, and enrich representative democracy with elements of participatory and direct democracy. But the horizon of the social democrats and progressives of Europe is still entirely within the terms of the 20th century and this is a tragedy for Europe and the world. Because the form of life represented by North Atlantic democracies has always presented itself with an American face and European face, but the two faces are merging and becoming alike. The social democrats are retreating, to narrower and narrower lines of defense. But the reality is that whatever force most plausibly embodies the cause of agency, vitality, and bold experimentation, whether it is the right or the left, will control the political agenda tomorrow, and today the left is on the defensive. To the extent that there is energy in Europe, it is on the right.

The European: but in both Europe and the U.S., the main thrust of political energy is towards the dismantling of government, and the denigration of its role. How do we re-elevate politics?

Unger: Without prophecy and without vision politics is nothing. This has to begin in a rebellion that is at once intellectual and spiritual. Now, what happens in the whole field of historical and social studies is the prevalence of these rationalizing, humanizing, escapist tendencies, which amount to a chorus of fatalism. And the vital link between insight into the actual and imagination of the possible has been severed and none of the thinkers who are most celebrated today really attack this situation, they all float on top of it, provide different vocabularies in which to ornament it. So there's an immense role for thought informing and inspiring a new kind of transformative politics.

The European: you've written yourself that this kind of political change requires "an extreme and almost paradoxical voluntarism."

Unger: It appears to be voluntarism. But history does not conform to a script, and every historical moment is surrounded by a penumbra of adjacent possibles. There is a deep affinity between our cognitive interest in understanding society and our practical interest in changing it. As in science, you understand the state of affairs by understanding what it might become under certain interventions. And if you don't do that you're not seeing, you're just staring. That's the situation in the prevailing forms of social and historical thought. It's low-energy. The stage before death is what Europe seems determined to present, other than when there are these atavistic conservative reactions to the political pieties of the day. This has to change. And it can't be what now happens—the social democrats participate in the economic consensus and the alternative is a formulaic statist Marxism and all of this retreat is justified by the idea that the sublime has to be privatized and the public world is appropriate only for a materialist vulgarity. It has to be resisted. There has to be a struggle to defeat this poisonous view which represents the end of the national project.

The European: and what of the argument that it is the democratic process itself that is messy and slow and laborious and tends towards stagnation?

Unger: Democracy is like the market. It has no obvious institutional form. And one of the questions raised by my allusion to the problem of the relation between crisis and change is how we can organize democracies so that we are not required to accept the established social world on a take it or leave it basis. The way that politics and culture are organized, you have to wait for a crisis. The crisis is like the meteor visiting the world and suddenly life becomes alert, then it goes away and you go to sleep again. We don't live in historical time; we live in biographical time and we have to ask ourselves, what should we do if we don't happen to have been born at the time when the meteors visit the earth? Do we say too bad for us? Or do we rearrange our ideas and our practices so that we don't need the meteor and the fire comes from within? I don't believe that this transformation can be realized simply on the basis of a conflict over state power. It must have a manifestation in party politics, but also a struggle over thought, culture, forms of consciousness. It must be waged in every department of national life.



About the Author

*Roberto Unger is the Roscoe Pound Professor at Harvard Law School, where he has studied or taught since 1969. From 2007 to 2009, he served as Minister of Strategic Affairs in the Brazilian government. Unger is one of the most prominent advocates of critical legal theory. Unger has written many books of legal and social thought, including *Passion: an Essay on Personality*, *Democracy Realized*, and *The Left Alternative*.*