

## *Postscript: Preface to the German-language edition*

This book is a proposal to change the world, and each part of it, right now, through a series of steps that would carry forward the historical program of the Left. It would carry that program forward by reinventing it. Although this argument reaches out to the whole world, it has a special meaning for Europe and for Germany.

European social democracy has represented, in the eyes of much of mankind, an alternative to the model of social and economic life established in the United States. This alternative still exercises immense attraction even as it has been increasingly emptied of its

distinctive content on its home ground. It is in the interest of all humanity as well as of Europe that the European nations continue to embody for the whole world the image of a different way. They are ceasing to do so.

European social democracy has retreated to the last-ditch defense of a high level of social entitlements, giving up one by one many of its most distinctive traits, both good and bad. The ideologists of this retreat have tried to disguise it as a synthesis between European-style social protection and American-style economic flexibility.

There are now two European Lefts. One of these Lefts accepts this retreat, with alacrity or with resignation. The other Left tries to slow it down, with little hope of reversing it. These two bodies of opinion are adversaries but they are also allies, complicit in the same costly and unnecessary diminishment of the historical ambitions of the Left. Europe needs another Left.

It is a Left that will not be able to accomplish its task within the limits of the institutional and ideological settlement that came to define social democracy in the course of the twentieth century. The cornerstone of that settlement was the abandonment of attempts to reshape politics and production. The Left gave up such efforts in exchange for a strong power to moderate inequality and insecurity through social rights

and redistributive policies. European social democracy is faced with problems that cannot be solved within the limits of this settlement.

There is the need to base both economic growth and social inclusion on broader access to the advanced practices and sectors of production. Without such broader access, economic growth and social inclusion must continue to rest on compensatory measures. These measures provide an insufficient antidote to the deep inequalities and exclusions resulting from the division between the more advanced and the more backward parts of each national economy.

There is the need to establish social solidarity on the basis of people's real responsibility to care for one another beyond the boundaries of the family. Without such direct connection, social solidarity must continue to depend on the inadequate cement of money.

There is the need to give ordinary men and women a better chance to live larger lives. Without such a chance, war will be for some the terrible device by which they can be lifted above "the long littleness of life." Peace will threaten to bring stupefaction and belittlement.

Even the part of the work of European social democracy that can begin to be carried out within the limits of established institutions cannot be completed within those restraints. Two such undertakings for the European Left would serve as bridges between

what needs to be done now and what should be done next – the effort to deal with the problems enumerated in the preceding paragraphs.

The first such bridge is the reorientation of economic policy. Vulgar Keynesianism is not the answer today – if it ever was – to the illusions of the false orthodoxy whose domination of European public finance has been shaken but not broken by the crisis of 2008/2009. Europe's problems of economic reconstruction and economic opportunity cannot be solved by a policy of easy money. Neither, however, should the sacrifices needed to achieve fiscal realism be used, as they repeatedly have been in Europe, to serve the interests and the whims of the capital markets. The additional room for maneuver that governments have created through fiscal sacrifice and monetary discipline should be used instead to change the institutions of finance themselves. For example, public venture capital, conducted on decentralized and competitive market principles and mobilizing some of the accumulated savings of society in the pension, insurance, and banking systems, should be tapped to invest in start-up enterprises and to afford groups of workers and entrepreneurs the technological and financial means with which to innovate.

The second such bridge is the radical reform of education, health, and welfare services. Europeans should refuse to choose between the mass provision

of low-quality, standardized public services by governmental bureaucracies and the privatization of public services in favor of profit-driven firms. It must be part of the role of the state to train, to equip, and to finance new groups and firms in civil society so that they can participate in the reshaping of such services. In addition to monitoring these service providers, and intervening when they fail or abuse, government should experiment with the new and the difficult in the offering of public services. When it operates directly, it should work at the ceiling rather than at the floor of quality. Its approach to public services should be revolutionary.

What unites all these projects – both those that can begin to be accomplished within the frontiers of the historical framework of European social democracy and those already beginning outside those frontiers – is a shift both in method and in vision. The shift in method is the effort to renew and to enlarge the repertory of institutional arrangements now defining representative democracies, market economies, and free civil societies in the rich North Atlantic world. The shift in vision is a focus on building people rather than just on safeguarding them.

The central appeal of such a program for the remaking of Europe must be its appeal to an ideal of restless constructive energy. The greatest historical achievement of European social democracy – the array of social protections with which it has provided

the ordinary citizen and worker – should be drawn into the service of this project of empowerment and liberation.

European social democracy cannot accomplish this work within the limits of the settlement that shaped it. The work to be done demands exactly what that settlement abandoned: the reorganization of economic and ultimately of political life. Relief is not enough; the point is reconstruction.

Moreover, the advancement of such a project implies a reversal of the principle that has so far governed the development of the European Union. According to that principle, everything that has to do with the organization of society and of the economy is increasingly centralized in Brussels. Everything that concerns the economic or educational endowments of individuals remains the prerogative of the member states or of local communities.

For the program of the other Left to go forward in Europe, this principle would have to be turned upside down. The primary responsibility of the government of the Union would be to guarantee all its citizens the economic and educational endowments needed to lift them up and to strengthen their capacity for initiative. By contrast, the national and subnational levels of the Union would enjoy the broadest possible scope for experimentation with the forms of social and economic organization.

Neither of the two existing European Lefts is up to this task; it falls outside the horizon of their beliefs, attitudes, and experience. Europe would have to create another Left: a Left equipped with a clear idea of alternatives, disentangled at last from the nineteenth-century prejudice that alternatives appear, when they appear at all, in the form of sudden and revolutionary substitutions of one system (“socialism”) for another (“capitalism”). The truth is that this fantasy has become an excuse for its opposite. If real change is total change, and total change is either inaccessible or perilous, then all we can do is to humanize a world that we no longer know how to reimagine or to remake.

There is a potential constituency for this reconstructive Left. It would have to bring together the orphans of the classical social-democratic settlement – whether petty bourgeois or poor – and some of the organized but weakened interests that provided European social democracy with its historical base. It would also need to reverse the single greatest mistake made by the European left in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – a mistake at once strategic and programmatic: to have identified the petty bourgeoisie as its adversary.

Today, in Europe as in most of the world, the majority of men and women nourish the longing for modest prosperity and independence that has traditionally been associated with the small-business class.

The task of the Left is not to oppose them or to repudiate their aspirations but to help fashion the arrangements and ideas that would rescue these ambitions from their narrow reliance on the traditional forms of independent, small-scale property and family selfishness.

The building of such a constituency represents, for the European Left, a difficult but indispensable achievement. It requires a vision of unrealized possibilities to come to the assistance of the cold calculus of class interests. It demands that the anguish about economic insecurity now spreading in Europe not be allowed to degenerate into a contest between insiders and outsiders in which both are likely to lose.

One difficulty overshadows all others in the achievement of this change. Modern social thought, including the intellectual traditions that have exercised the greatest influence on the Left, have looked to a logic of development and transformation, supposedly immanent in history – an unchosen fate – to provide the necessary and sufficient opportunity for change. Marx's theory of society and history was only the most important example. These ideas, however, were mistaken. The most powerful immediate inducements to social reconstruction have come mainly from the external traumas of economic collapse and war. In no part of the world has this truth been more evident than in Europe.

The direction I propose in this book has as one of its major goals to make change less dependent on crisis. The trouble is that the institutional and ideological innovations that would promote this goal are themselves hard to bring about without help from trauma. The spread of fear about economic insecurity may not easily suffice to take the place in Europe of the terrible events that in the European past brought transformation at the cost of suffering.

For this reason, the calculus of interests, in a politics of disillusionment, is not enough. It is necessary to heat politics up: to raise the level of sustained popular mobilization and to combine the languages of interest and of vision. Not everyone in Europe has forgotten how to perform this operation: the Right has repeatedly shown that it knows how to do so, by playing on fear. It will be harder for the Left to do so by playing on hope. Yet this is what the Left must do if it is to undertake its work.

To state the problem of the redirection of the European Left in these terms is to see that it transcends the realm of party politics. It is not just a contest over institutions and preconceptions; it is also a struggle over personality and experience. It must therefore be carried out in every realm of culture and social life, as well as through every aspect of politics.

A tenet of classical liberal philosophy is the stark division between the right and the good in public life.

The legal order of a free society should, according to this conception, be made as impartial as possible among conflicting views of the good. It is a false idea. No ordering of social life, through institutions and practices, can be neutral among forms of experience; every such ordering will encourage some varieties of experience and discourage others. The mirage of neutrality serves the interests and beliefs entrenched under the present regime. It gets in the way of the true and vital substitute for this dangerous illusion: openness to alien experience, to invention, to resistance, to reconstruction, including reconstruction of the institutional arrangements defining a democracy, a market, and a free civil society.

Toward the beginning of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Pierre Bezuhov looks up at the sky and sees Halley's Comet: a presage of Napoleon's invasion and, with the invasion, of the storm that will lift people out of the spiritless routines in which they sleepwalk through their lives. What happens when – for worse as well as for better – our lifetimes happen to fall during one of the long intervals between the visitations of the comet?

We should all rebel against needing the comet. For Europeans, and for the European Left as an agent of their self-transformation, the meaning is clear. They must reject the choice between a humane narrowing of their focus in peace and a savage broadening of their

sights in war. They must seek in every area of society and culture to shorten the distance between the ordinary moves we make within the established social and cultural order and the extraordinary moves by which we change pieces of this order. They must develop a politics that moves outside the two historical categories of a mobilizing politics of energized majorities, led or misled by the marriage of leaders and catastrophes into the reconstruction of social life, and a demobilized politics of deals and disenchantment. They must deepen democratic politics by combining traits of representative and direct democracy. They must radicalize the freedom to combine people, ideas, and things – the central promise of a market economy – and turn that liberty as well into a freedom to reinvent the institutions that define what a market economy is. They must, above all, seek to equip ordinary life with the means to be not so ordinary after all.

This book speaks to Germany and its future. It argues for a vision of enlarged possibility in a country whose leaders and thinkers defend and embody a diminished vision of the nation and its prospects.

Little time has passed since the events took place by which the transformative opportunity of the Reunification was squandered. It was an opportunity for the reconstruction of the West through the reencounter with the East. Instead, it became an occasion for the

elites of one part of the country to bribe the people of another part into prostration and passivity.

During the years in which this calamitous and revealing episode in German history took place, the national intelligentsia betrayed Germany. It did not betray Germany by supporting the particular way in which the West dealt with the East; many fought for something better. It betrayed Germany by failing to seize the Reunification as an opportunity to define and to build a different future for the country, compatible with the realities of Europe and of the world.

The German Left, within and outside the Left and Center-Left political parties, is divided along the lines I earlier described when referring to the whole of Europe. Some of the most influential political thinkers and philosophers in the country had long acquired the habit of promoting Anglo-American liberalism and a chastened, stunted social democracy in a Marxist-Hegelian vocabulary, using the words of ideological battles long finished to disguise new surrenders.

Germany, however, need not remain bowed under the dictatorship of no alternatives prevailing in the world. There are features of the national life, in the organization of its economy, in the structure of its society, and in the character of its culture, that lend special relevance to the proposal presented in this book.

The heart of Germany's economic vitality does not lie in a handful of giant firms employing a tiny fraction

of the German labor force. It lies in countless small and medium-sized firms, in the vast periphery of subcontracting and of services that has sprung up around this decentralized productive activity, in the ancient traditions of craft labor that sustain this economy, in habits of discipline and self-sacrifice that have not been wholly lost, and in the depth of knowledge and of skill that, despite the poor quality of much education in Germany, continues to benefit the nation.

The question is: What use will Germany make of this historical legacy? Will its fate remain tied to the future of the declining mass-production industries? Or will it reinvent itself in the model of the experimentalist practices that have become central to economic advance – the mixture of cooperation and competition, the attenuation of stark specialization, the recasting of production as permanent innovation, and the use of the operations that we have learned how to repeat – expressed in formulas that are in turn embodied in machines, the better to shift more time and energy to those activities that are not yet repeatable? Will its strengths and opportunities remain encased within a separate vanguard, weakly linked to other sectors of the economy?

Germans will not be able to give affirmative answers to these questions without taking up, within their politics as well as within their economy, the reconstruction of the economic order and of the ways

in which government and private enterprise can relate to each other. The arm's-length regulation of business by government and the traditional regimes of private property and contract are just as insufficient to the accomplishment of this goal as are the governmental direction of the economy and the suppression of the market. The Left in Germany, as elsewhere, should propose to reorganize the market economy, the better to make economic opportunity available to more people in more ways, rather than just to regulate it or to compensate, through retrospective redistribution, for the inequalities and the insecurities to which the workings of the market give rise.

In every country in the world, most people work outside big organizations. In a few countries— notably the Scandinavian social democracies — the arrangements of political and economic life have allowed the big organized interests of labor and business, under the watchful eye of the state, to do a half credible job of representing the interests of the unorganized as well as of their own members. In most countries, no one supposes that big organizations are anything different from what they seem to be: the organizational tools of insiders, frightened or grasping, trying to hold out against all the outsiders.

What distinguishes Germany in this respect is that the big organizations retain some measure of legitimacy without, however, displaying any of the solidaristic orientation — responsibility to the outsiders — that might

justify their power and their authority. Therefore, the country needs to free itself from their stranglehold. The aim is not to assert the power of a free-floating market. It is to attack, through the reorganization of the economy and of politics, the divisions between insiders and outsiders. The watchword must be opportunity – and capacity-ensuring endowments – for everyone rather than privilege for some.

What has always characterized German culture is oscillation between extremes of romantic subjectivity and rebellion and of hopeless surrender to the world as it is. The cultural life of the German people is now dominated, with a vengeance, by the anti-romantic side of this polarity. Many leading German intellectuals have hailed this shift as a sign of growing up. It is, however, an expression of giving up. The whole country has been led to confuse disillusionment with realism. It has been taught to forget that the worldly are unable to change the world.

Germans should never have been content, in the course of their traumatic national history, to sing in their chains. Best of all is to sing unchained. However, it is better to sing in one's chains than not to sing at all; the unchaining, never complete, cannot continue without the singing.

The solution to this problem is not a return to the romantic pole of the alternation between romanticism and anti-romanticism in German culture. The solu-

tion is to attack the alternation itself, and to reestablish the poetry of vision within the prose of reality.

A central flaw of romanticism, in all its forms but especially in its political manifestations, is its despair about structure and repetition. Spirit, authentic feeling and life, can, according to the romantic view, exist only in interludes of rebellion against repetition, embodied in the compulsions of character – the hardened form of a self – or in the rules of institutions – the hardened form of a society.

Contrary to both the romantic and the anti-romantic views, we can change our relation to the arrangements of society and culture. We can create a social and cultural world that allows us to engage without surrendering our powers of resistance and transcendence. It is a large project, and it invokes an old story: in Christian language, that spirit be incarnate in the world rather than floating, disembodied, above it. Stated in such abstract terms, it is a story that may seem almost empty. However, it can acquire, in a particular historical setting, a definite programmatic content, connected with struggle over the way to realize our recognized interests and our professed ideals.

The promising answer to the perils and illusions of political romanticism is not, as the political, business, and intellectual elites of contemporary Germany would have the Germans believe, to seek refuge in coarseness, made tolerable by lack of imagination. It is

to change the world, our world, piece by piece. We cannot change the world without changing our ideas.

The reader should understand that this book forms a small part of a large intellectual program: a struggle\* against fate through thought, an effort to give new meaning and new life to the projects of individual and social liberation that for the last two hundred years have shaken and aroused the whole world, a fight to imagine the forms that those projects can and should take if they are to have a future.

I have pursued this intellectual program by building a radical alternative in social theory to Marxism,<sup>†</sup> by recasting legal thought as an instrument of the institutional imagination,<sup>‡</sup> by proposing particular institutional alternatives for the organization of the economy and the state,<sup>§</sup> and by developing a philosophical conception

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\* Much of my work, published and unpublished, is accessible online: [www.robertounger.net](http://www.robertounger.net).

† See *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* (Verso, 2004); *False Necessity: Antinecessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (Verso, 2001); *Plasticity into Power: Comparative Historical Studies on the Institutional Conditions of Economics and Military Success* (Verso, 2004).

‡ See *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* (Harvard University Press, 1986); *What Should Legal Analysis Become?* (Verso, 1986).

§ See *Democracy Realized: The Progressive Alternative* (Verso, 1998); *What Should the Left Propose?* (Verso, 2005).

of nature and mankind within which history is open, novelty is possible, and the divinization of humanity counts for more than the humanization of society.\*

No influence on this body of thought has been greater than the influence of German philosophy, with the exception of the yet greater influence of Christianity. This book may fall on deaf ears in the Germany of today. In it, however, a foreigner addresses German readers in the name of universal ideals and with the help of German ideas.

I belong to the generation of 1968, which, throughout the world, hoped to recast society on the model of the imagination. I have tried to learn from disappointment and defeat, but I have not despaired. "If the fool would persist in his folly," wrote William Blake, "he would become wise."

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\* See *Passion: An Essay on Personality* (Free Press, 1984), or the German edition of the same book, *Leidenschaft: Ein Essay über Persönlichkeit*, translated by Michael Bischoff (S. Fischer, 1984); *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound* (Harvard University Press, 2007).