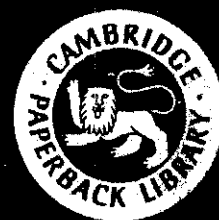


Roberto Mangabeira
Unger

Plasticity into Power
Comparative-Historical
Studies on the Institutional
Conditions of Economic
and Military Success

Variations on Themes of
Politics, a Work in
Constructive
Social Theory



POLITICS: A WORK IN CONSTRUCTIVE
SOCIAL THEORY

by Roberto Mangabeira Unger

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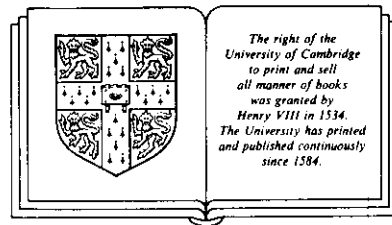
PLASTICITY INTO POWER

*Comparative-Historical Studies on the
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Economic and Military Success*

VARIATIONS ON THEMES OF
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A WORK IN CONSTRUCTIVE SOCIAL THEORY

ROBERTO MANGABEIRA UNGER



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Introduction

THE three convergent essays that make up this book advance a revised practice of historical explanation. They explore through comparative-historical analysis a series of related problems in our understanding of the institutional conditions of economic and military success.

These three studies do not imply a particular social theory. They are nevertheless meant to further both a negative and an affirmative theoretical endeavor.

The negative work is the criticism of the intellectual traditions, including orthodox Marxism and modernization theory, that have dominated our most ambitious efforts at social and historical explanation. This book denies that there must be tightly drawn correspondences between levels of development of practical capability and particular institutional arrangements. It denies also that such arrangements come as stage-ordered sequences or indivisible packages, such as "capitalism" or "the market economy."

The affirmative task is to supply materials for a less necessitarian practice of social and historical explanation. This practice resembles in some ways the theories it criticizes but differs from the positivist social science and historiography that have largely replaced such theories. The approach taken here acknowledges the central importance of the distinction between the formative institutional arrangements and imaginative preconceptions of a society and the routine practical or mental activities that these structures help shape. It recognizes that such institutional and imaginative frameworks cannot be adequately explained as the cumulative results of a society's normal episodes of conflict and compromise. It shows that we do not need to predefine possible trajectories of large-scale, discontinuous structural change in order to understand what happens in history. It severs the link between our ability to explain past or present situations and the premise that these situations were or are necessary. It enlarges our sense of the real and the possible. It places explanatory ambition on the side of an acceptance of contingency and an openness to novelty.

A unifying substantive theme emerges hand in hand with this methodological campaign. In one statement the theme is that social plasticity brings wealth and power to the societies and the groups

that achieve it. The benefits of practical opportunism and flexible work relations soon override the advantages of rigid schemes of social control and coercive surplus extraction. But the plasticity that counts is not just anarchy or indefiniteness. Particular institutions and ideas are needed to attain it. In another, complementary statement the theme is the relation between failures of institutional invention and constraints on collective conflict. Plasticity-producing and power-bringing institutions have usually resulted from runaway social warfare. They have built opportunities for conflict and innovation into the routines of social life.

A subsidiary substantive theme is that the subjection of factional privilege to challenge and conflict has been the single most important spur to social plasticity. Plasticity develops when central governments cease to play their familiar role of helping established elites hold on to entrenched positions. But, historically, the antielitist intentions of the occasional masters of the state have been secondary. More important are the unforeseen institutional experiments that take place when a government-supported structure of social control breaks down and when the powerless, the propertyless, and the prostrate can fight on more equal terms with their immediate social superiors – bosses, landowners, and local notables. A less halting pursuit of the goal of plasticity requires the invention of institutions that turn economies and politics into machines for the ongoing destruction of all privileged claims on the resources – of capital, power, and expertise – with which we make and remake society.

The methodological and the substantive concerns of the book come together. The more successfully we learn and practice the gospel of plasticity, the less suitable we become as subjects of the necessitarian styles of social and historical analysis that the great social theorists have taught us. We can, in fact, raise a storm in the world and still understand and explain ourselves. All we need is a better approach.

Studies like these must depend almost entirely on secondary sources. I see no point in exhaustively rehearsing these sources in notes. The controversial aspects of this book have to do less with historiographic details than with ideas about the connections and the implications of familiar facts. Notes acknowledge direct, individualized debts for insights or observations and signal places where the argument shades into more focused historiographic disputes. Two books published simultaneously with *Plasticity into Power* work out the perspective from which these exercises are written – *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* and *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy*.