

UNGER, CASTORIADIS, AND THE ROMANCE OF A NATIONAL FUTURE

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Roberto Mangabeira Unger is a Brazilian philosopher. “Brazilian philosophy” has as little resonance as “American philosophy” did a hundred years ago. But in 1882 Walt Whitman, comparing Carlyle’s “dark fortune-telling of humanity and politics” with “a far more profound horoscope-casting of those themes—G. F. Hegel’s,” wrote as follows:

Not the least mentionable part of the case, (a streak, it may be, of that human with which history and fate love to contrast their gravity) is that although neither of my great authorities [Carlyle and Hegel] during their lives consider’d the United States worthy of serious mention, all the principal works of both might not inappropriately be this day collected and bound up under the conspicuous title: *Speculations for the use of North America, and Democracy there, with the relations of the same to Metaphysics, including Lessons and Warnings (encouragements too, and of the vastest,) from the Old World to the New.*¹

Try pasting that title on your copy of Unger’s *Politics*, having first altered “North America” to “South America,” “Old World” to “Northern Hemisphere,” and “New” to “Southern.” It is not inappropriate. Though few of our great authorities presently consider Brazil worthy of serious mention, spaces left blank in the minds of one century’s authorities often get filled in, quite quickly and surprisingly, during the next. Try beginning your reading of Unger’s book with pages 64–79 of the first volume (“The Exemplary Instability of the Third World” and “A Brazilian Example”).² Remember that Unger—though he has put

¹ W. WHITMAN, *Carlyle from American Points of View in PROSE WORKS* 171 (1900) (emphasis in original).

² The three volumes of Unger’s three-volume *POLITICS: A WORK IN CONSTRUCTIVE SOCIAL THEORY* (1987) are titled *SOCIAL THEORY: ITS SITUATION AND ITS TASK* [hereinafter *SOCIAL THEORY*], *FALSE NECESSITY: ANTI-NECESSITARIAN SOCIAL THEORY IN THE SERVICE OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY* [hereinafter *FALSE NECESSITY*], and *PLASTICITY INTO POWER: COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL STUDIES ON THE INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS OF ECONOMIC AND MILITARY SUCCESS* [hereinafter *PLASTICITY INTO POWER*]. All three volumes were published simultaneously by Cambridge University Press. Unger’s previous books are: *KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICS* (1975), *LAW IN MODERN SOCIETY* (1976), *PASSION: AN ESSAY ON PERSONALITY* (1984), and *THE CRITICAL LEGAL STUDIES MOVEMENT* (1986). Unger was born in Brazil in 1947, was educated there and in Europe, and has been Professor of Law at Harvard since 1972. Citation to Unger’s work in this article will conform to the style established in the Unger Symposium issue of the *Northwestern University Law Review*, 81 Nw. U.L. Rev. (1987).

in many years of hard work here in North America, changing the curricula of many of our law schools and the self-image of many of our lawyers—is a man whose mind is elsewhere. For him, none of the rich North Atlantic democracies are home. Rather, they are places where he has gathered some lessons, warnings, and encouragements.

Whitman prefaced *Leaves of Grass* with a comparison between the closed-down character of Europe and the openness of the American future:

Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted, and their eras and characters be illustrated, and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative, and has vista.³

In *Democratic Vistas* he urges that psalm has barely begun:

Far, far, indeed, stretch, in distance, our Vistas! How much is still to be disentangled, freed! How long it takes to make this American world see that it is, in itself, the final authority and reliance!⁴

As his book goes along, Whitman continually looks from the gloriously possible to the sickeningly actual—from the American future to the facts of the Gilded Age—and back again. His naive hope invariably prevails over his sophisticated disgust. Compare Unger on Brazil in 1985:

Indefinition was the common denominator of all these features of the life of the state. . . . All this indefinition could be taken as both the voice of transformative opportunity and the sign of a paralyzing confusion. At one moment it seemed that new experiments in human association might be staged here; at the next, that nothing could come out of this disheartening and preposterous blend of structure, shiftlessness, and stagnation.⁵

Again,

At this time in world history, an attitude once confined to great visionaries had become common among decent men and women. They could no longer participate in political struggle out of a simple mixture of personal ambition and devotion to the power and glory of the state. They also had to feel that they were sharing in an exemplary experiment in the remaking of society. A person who entered Brazilian politics in this spirit wanted his country to do more than rise to wealth and power as a variant of the societies and polities of the developed west. He wished it to become a testing ground for . . . the options available to mankind.⁶

To get in the right mood to read passages like these, we rich, fat, tired North Americans must hark back to the time when our own democracy was newer and leaner—when Pittsburgh was as new, prom-

³ W. WHITMAN, *Preface, 1855, to first issue of Leaves of Grass*, in *PROSE WORKS*, *supra* note 1, at 264.

⁴ W. WHITMAN, *Democratic Vistas*, in *PROSE WORKS*, *supra* note 1, at 226.

⁵ *SOCIAL THEORY* at 69–70.

⁶ *Id.* at 75–76.

ising, and problematic as São Paulo is now. Irving Howe describes “the American newness” of one hundred and fifty years ago as a time when “people start to feel socially invigorated and come to think they can act to determine their fate.”⁷ He continues bleakly: “What is it like to live at such a time? The opposite of what it is like to live today.”⁸

Howe’s bleakness, which I and many of my contemporaries share, comes from the fear that what Unger calls “the cycles of reform and reaction” that make up politics in the United States are simply not up to the demands of the times. This bleakness is increased by our inability to imagine any better goal than the next cycle of reform. On the one hand, we recognize that, for example, “Automation is progressing much more rapidly than the decretinization of American senators.”⁹ On the other hand, we see these cycles of reform and reaction as the operation of free institutions—institutions it took two hundred years of hard work, and lots of good luck, to construct. These institutions, increasingly rickety and ineffectual as they are, seem to be all we have got, and all we can really imagine having. So we content ourselves with saying that, as institutions go, ours are a lot better than the actually existing competition. Unger has us dead to rights when he speaks of “the rich, polished, critical and self-critical but also downbeat and Alexandrian culture of social and historical thought that now flourishes in the North American democracies.”¹⁰ Our high culture, at the end of the twentieth century, resembles the culture that Whitman saw at the end of the nineteenth when he looked toward Europe.¹¹

In *Politics*, Unger is reacting against this bleak defensiveness and resignation. He sometimes thinks of the tragic liberalism of us Alexandrians as an inexplicable failure of imagination, and sometimes as an exasperating weakness of will. What makes him different from most theorists who are critical of American liberalism is his orientation toward the future rather than the past—his hopefulness. Most radical critics of American institutions (for example, the admirers of Althusserian, Heideggerian, or Foucauldian social thought—the people for whom Harold Bloom has invented the sobriquet “The School of Re-

⁷ I. HOWE, *THE AMERICAN NEWNESS: CULTURE AND POLITICS IN THE AGE OF EMERSON* 17 (1986).

⁸ *Id.* at 17. At the end of this book, Howe bravely says that “‘The newness’ will come again. It is intrinsic to our life.” *Id.* at 89. Maybe it will, but I would not know how to write a scenario for its return.

⁹ C. CASTORIADIS, *THE IMAGINARY INSTITUTION OF SOCIETY* 83 (K. Blamey trans. 1987).

¹⁰ *SOCIAL THEORY* at 223. The term “Alexandrian” carries connotations of decadent scholasticism and of political impotence.

¹¹ There was, in fact, more in Europe to see than Whitman, who was not very well-informed, saw. See, for example, James Kloppenberg’s account of the social democratic intellectuals in France, Germany, and Britain in the 1880s. J. KLOPPENBERG, *UNCERTAIN VICTORY: SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND PROGRESSIVISM IN EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN THOUGHT, 1870–1920* (1986). I am not sure there is more in contemporary North Atlantic culture than Unger sees.

sentment"¹²) would not be caught dead with an expression of hopefulness on their faces. Their reaction to American inertia and impotence is rage, contempt, and the use of what they call "subversive, oppositional discourse," rather than suggestions about how we might do things differently. Whereas people like Howe and myself would love to get some good ideas about what the country might do (and dream of the election of, if not another Lincoln, at least another FDR), the School of Resentment washes its hands of the American experiment. Since these people have also been disappointed, successively, in Russia, Cuba, and China, they now tend to wash their hands of *all* "structures and discourses of power" (the Foucauldian term for what we used to call "institutions").

By contrast, when Unger is not berating us for our lack of hope and failure of nerve, he is sketching alternative institutions—a rotating capital fund, a government department of destabilization, and so on. He predicts, accurately, that the people who still take Marxism as a model of what a social theory should look like will reject his suggestions as reformist tinkering, as inadequately oppositional. With equal accuracy, he predicts that we downbeat, Alexandrian, social democratic liberals will view them as utopian. Still, the distance between the Unger of *Politics* (as opposed to the Unger of a dozen years back, the author of *Knowledge and Politics*¹³) and us Alexandrians is a lot less than that between Unger and the School of Resentment. For our reaction is, more accurately: "Utopian, but, God knows, worth trying; still, you'll never get it into a Democratic, much less a Republican, platform."

This is where Brazil comes in. If Unger were your ordinary universalizing social theorist—as he sometimes, alas, makes himself out to be—names of particular countries would not be relevant. But he is rather (as the caption of an early, nasty review of *Politics* put it) "a preposterous political romantic"¹⁴—as preposterous as Whitman, albeit better read. Being a political romantic is not easy these days. Presumably it helps a lot to come from a big, backward country with lots of raw materials and a good deal of capital accumulation—a country that has

¹² Conversation with Harold Bloom, Professor of Humanities, Yale University.

¹³ For the difference between the two books, see Unger's postscript (written in 1983) to the second edition of *KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICS*. As Unger says there, he had become "much less anxious to emphasize the dependence of liberal ideas upon certain basic conceptions of modern speculative philosophy that first took recognizable form in the seventeenth century," and much more ready to grant that "the classic nineteenth-century forms of liberalism" represent "one of the great modern secular doctrines of emancipation." *Id.* at 339. This decreased emphasis on "philosophical presuppositions" seems to me an important step forward. For an example of the over-philosophized description of "liberalism" which, alas, many readers took away from *KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICS*, see Ryan, *Deconstruction and Social Theory: The Case of Liberalism in DISPLACEMENT: DERRIDA AND AFTER* 154 (M. Krupnick ed. 1983).

¹⁴ Holmes, *The Professor of Smashing: The Preposterous Political Romanticism of Roberto Unger*, *The New Republic*, Oct. 19, 1987, at 30.

started to lurch forward, even though frequently falling over its own feet. It must also help, ironically enough, to come from a country that cannot hope to achieve what the North Atlantic has achieved in the way of equality and decency by the same means: reliance on a free market in capital and on compromises between pressure groups. As Unger says, "For many third world countries the route of empowered democracy [that is, something like Unger's own alternative institutions] may represent less the bolder alternative to social democracy than the sole practical means by which even social-democratic goals can be achieved."¹⁵

Unger writes that

Much in this work can be understood as the consequence of an attempt to enlist the intellectual resources of the North Atlantic world in the service of concerns and commitments more keenly felt elsewhere. In this way I hope to contribute toward the development of an alternative to the vague, unconvinced, and unconvincing Marxism that now serves the advocates of the radical project as their *lingua franca*. If, however, the arguments of this book stand up, the transformative focus of this theoretical effort has intellectual uses that transcend its immediate origins and motives.¹⁶

I am interpreting *Politics* in the light of the first two sentences of this passage. I have doubts, however, about the third sentence. As a pragmatist, I think philosophy is at its best when it is content to be "its own time apprehended in thought" and lets transcendence go.¹⁷ As a Kuhnian,¹⁸ I have doubts about whether argument plays much of a role in scientific or political Gestalt-switches. Arguments (whose premises must necessarily be phrased in familiar vocabularies) often just get in the way of attempts to create an unfamiliar political vocabulary, a new *lingua franca* for those trying to transform what they see around them. If Unger is able to supply future leaders of Third World social movements with a non-Marxist and non- "behavioral science" *lingua franca*—one that will help them brush aside the conventional wisdoms offered by the KGB and the CIA—he will have done something so important as to dwarf argumentation. He will have done for Third World leaders of the next century what Dewey tried to do for the North American intelligentsia of the first, more optimistic, half of the twentieth. Among other things, he will have helped make them aware that, as Dewey put it, "philosophy can proffer

¹⁵ FALSE NECESSITY at 395.

¹⁶ SOCIAL THEORY at 223–24.

¹⁷ The phrase comes from the Preface to G. F. Hegel's PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT 11 (Knox trans. 1942). Hegel continues: "It is just as absurd to imagine that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes." *Id.*

¹⁸ T. S. Kuhn, in THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS (1962), emphasizes the importance of the adoption of new vocabularies, as opposed to the use of arguments phrased in old vocabularies, for scientific progress.

nothing but hypotheses, and that these hypotheses are of value only as they render men's minds more sensitive to the life about them."¹⁹

Realizing that Unger is a *Brazilian* philosopher lets us Alexandrians convert our initial reaction to his book to something more like, "We hope to Heaven these imaginary institutions do sell in Brazil; if they should actually *work* there, maybe then we could sell them here. The Southern Hemisphere might conceivably, a generation hence, come to the rescue of the Northern." This amounts to saying that if there is hope, it lies in the Third World. But this is not to say, with Winston Smith, "If there is hope, it lies in the proles."²⁰ For the Third World is not an undifferentiated mass of immiserated men and women. It is a set of diverse nations, and if it is ever to have hope it will be for a diverse set of national futures.

The School of Resentment sometimes suggests, following Lukács and Foucault, that the immiserated share a common "consciousness"—which can be set over against all "discourses of power" or "ideologies."²¹ This suggestion that there is something "deep down"—something ahistorical and international under what we powerful, discursive types have been inscribing on the bodies of the weak—makes this school feel justified in toying with anarchism, with the idea that everything would be all right if we could just get "power" off everybody's backs.²² Members of this School will be shocked and indignant to find that Unger does not assume that the initial agents of transformation in the Third World will be workers and peasants. He thinks they will be petty-bourgeois functionaries:

In countries with a strong statist tradition the lower rungs of the governmental bureaucracy constitute the most likely agents for the development of such floating resources. For example, in many Latin American nations whole sectors of the economy (e.g., agriculture) are closely supervised and coordinated by economic bureaucrats: public-credit officers and agronomists. . . . But the bureaucracies are typically mined by a multitude of more or less well-intentioned, confused, unheroic crypto-leftists—middle-class, university-trained youth, filled with the vague leftist ideas afloat in the world. The ambiguities of established rules and policies and the failures of bureaucratic control can supply these people with excuses to deny a fragment of governmental protection to its usual beneficiaries and make it available to other people, in new proportions

¹⁹ J. DEWEY, *RECONSTRUCTION IN PHILOSOPHY* 22 (1948).

²⁰ See G. ORWELL, 1984, in *THE PENGUIN COMPLETE NOVELS OF GEORGE ORWELL* 783 (1951).

²¹ See Habermas' discussion of this link between Lukács and Foucault. J. HABERMAS, *THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY* 280 (F. Lawrence trans. 1987).

²² For an acute analysis of the sources of such fantasies, see B. YACK, *THE LONGING FOR TOTAL REVOLUTION: PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES OF SOCIAL DISCONTENT FROM ROUSSEAU TO MARX AND NIETZSCHE* (1986) (discussing Rousseau, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche).

or in new ways. . . . The result is to create a floating resource—one the transformers can appropriate or fight about.²³

“Well-intentioned, confused, university-trained young crypto-leftists” is a reasonable description of the thousands of recently graduated lawyers who, influenced by Unger and other members of the Critical Legal Studies Movement, are now helping make institutions in the United States slightly more flexible and decent. It is also a good description of the only allies Gorbachev is likely to have in his effort to restructure Russian institutions—namely, the more Winston-like members of the Outer Party.²⁴ If Unger’s description of his hoped-for allies seems wry and self-mocking, it is. He would *like* to identify himself with the victimized masses. Who, two thousand years after Christ and a hundred years after Zola, would not? But in *Politics*, the romanticism of *Knowledge and Politics* is balanced by a calculation of current possibilities.

Toward the end of *The Critical Legal Studies Movement*, Unger admitted that

there is a disparity between our intentions and the archaic social form that they assume: a joint endeavor undertaken by discontented, factious intellectuals in the high style of nineteenth-century bourgeois radicalism. For all who participate in such an undertaking, the disharmony between intent and presence must be a cause of rage. We neither suppress this rage nor allow it the last word, because we do not give the last word to the historical world we inhabit. We build with what we have and willingly pay the price for the inconformity of vision to circumstance.²⁵

This paragraph is typical of Unger at his best, and illustrates what separates him from the School of Resentment. He does not give the last word to the time he lives in. He also lives in an imaginary, lightly sketched, future. That is the sort of world romantics *should* live in; their living there is the reason why they and their confused, utopian, unscientific, petty bourgeois followers can, occasionally, make the actual future better for the rest of us.²⁶

The School of Resentment, made up of people who can single-handedly deconstruct a large social theory faster than a Third World

²³ FALSE NECESSITY at 410. Compare SOCIAL THEORY at 76:

It was also vital [in the Brazilian context] to avoid the path toward isolation that had helped defeat or tame the European leftist parties and to renounce the preconceptions about feasible class alliances underlying that path. You could not, for example, assume that the only alternative to a politics of unremitting hostility to the petty bourgeoisie or the salaried middle classes was an alliance with the national entrepreneurs and landowners against the foreigner.

²⁴ For Orwell’s distinction between the Inner Party and the Outer Party, see his 1984, *supra* note 20, at 863.

²⁵ THE CRITICAL LEGAL STUDIES MOVEMENT at 118–19.

²⁶ See N. ROSENBLUM, ANOTHER LIBERALISM: ROMANTICISM AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF LIBERAL THOUGHT (1987) for a good account of the relation between liberalism and romanticism.

village can construct a small elementary school, does not take kindly to romance. These people are modernists, maybe even *postmodernists*. They have celebrated all the eras and characters, and they *like to* finish their verses with a dying fall, for example:

While this America settles in the mold of its vulgarity,
heavily thickening to empire
And protest only a bubble in the molten mass, pops and
sighs out, and the mass hardens,
I sadly remember that the flower fades to make fruit,
the fruit rots to make earth.²⁷

When these people do social theory, they push aside the tradition of Locke, Jefferson, Mill, Dewey, and Habermas and turn to a tradition that began with Hegel and is continued in Heidegger's downbeat story of the destiny of the West. Hegel made bud-flower-and-fruit his archetypal dialectical triad. His idea of a social theory was a retrospective narrative, written by someone whose "shape of life had grown old."²⁸ Such a scenario either ends with the present (as Hegel and Heidegger prudently ended theirs) or else forecasts (as Marx and Mao did) a new kind of human being—someone on whose body "power" has inscribed nothing, someone who will burst the bounds of all the vocabularies used to describe the old, tattered palimpsests. Since the School of Resentment is, nowadays, mostly "post-Marxist," it tends to favor the former sort of scenario. So it relishes phrases like "late capitalism," "the end of the metaphysics of presence," "after Auschwitz," and "post-X (for any previous value of X)." Its members outdo each other in belatedness. They tend to accept some version of the story of the West as a long slide downhill from better days (the time of "organic community" or "the *polis*" or some such—a time before "structures of power" started scrawling all over us). They see no redeeming features in the present, except perhaps for their own helpless rage. When Heidegger describes the West as successively discrediting the notions of "the supersensory world, the Ideas, God, the moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, civilization,"²⁹ they nod in recognition. Ah yes, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number"—at least we now see through *that* pathetic apology for the Panoptic State.

If my criticism of this School seems harsh, it is because one is always harshest on what one most dreads resembling. We tragic liberals are ourselves easily seduced by the lines I quoted from Jeffers' "Shine,

²⁷ R. Jeffers, *Shine, Perishing Republic*, in *READING POEMS* 582 (W. Thomas & S. Gerry ed. 1941).

²⁸ See G. HEGEL, *supra* note 17, at 13.

²⁹ Heidegger, *The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead*, in *THE QUESTION CONCERNING TECHNOLOGY AND OTHER ESSAYS* 65 (W. Lovitt trans. 1977).

Perishing Republic.”³⁰ We are continually tempted by the urge to sit back and grasp our time in thought rather than continuing to try to change it. Even though we can still manage two cheers for America—even America under Reagan—a romantic like Unger sees little difference between us and the School of Resentment. For the only difference between us and the Resenters is that we regret our lack of imagination, whereas they make a virtue of what they think a philosophico-historical necessity.

Our only excuse is, once again, to appeal to national differences—to say, in effect, “Maybe it’s easier in Brazil, but it’s pretty hard here.” Political imagination is, almost always, national imagination. To imagine great things is to imagine a great future *for a particular community*, a community one knows well, identifies with, can make plausible predictions about.³¹ In the modern world, this usually means one’s nation. Political romance is, therefore, for the foreseeable future, going to consist of psalms of *national* future rather than the future of “mankind.” Officially, to be sure, we are all supposed to be “past” nationalism, to be citizens of the human race. We are all supposed to believe, with the Marxists, that nationalism is just “mystification.” But Castoriadis gives this pretense the treatment it deserves:

To say: ‘The proof that nationalism was a simple mystification, *and hence something unreal*, lies in the fact that it will be dissolved on the day of world revolution,’ is not only to sell the bearskin before we catch the bear, it is to say: ‘You who have lived from 1900 to 1965 and to who knows when, and you, the millions who died in the two wars . . . all of you, you are *in-existent*, you have always been *in-existent* with respect to true history. . . . True history was the invisible Potentiality that *will be*, and that, behind your back, was preparing the end of your illusions.’³²

Castoriadis and Unger are willing to work with, rather than deconstruct, the notions that already mean something to people presently alive—while nonetheless not “giving the last word to the historical world they inhabit.”³³ That is another way in which both differ from the School of Resentment. The latter School is interested not in building with what we have, but in penetrating to the “repressed” reality behind the “ideological” appearances. Resenters admire in Marxism precisely what Unger and Castoriadis distrust: the insistence on getting the “underlying realities” right, on doing theory first and getting to

³⁰ See *supra* text accompanying note 27. Consider, for example, Gore Vidal’s account of America’s transition from Republic to Empire in his historical novels and polemical essays. Vidal is a paradigmatically Alexandrian figure, still trying to be a liberal, but unable to repress his excitement over the rumors about the barbarians.

³¹ Consider the nationalism that runs through E. P. Thompson’s discussion of Perry Anderson in his *THE POVERTY OF THEORY* (1978), as well as through Orwell’s *THE ROAD TO WIGAN PIER* (1937).

³² C. CASTORIADIS, *supra* note 9, at 149 (emphasis in original).

³³ See *THE CRITICAL LEGAL STUDIES MOVEMENT* at 119.

political utopias later. Though members of this School accept in meta-theory the Heidegger-Derrida view—that the reality-appearance distinction is the archetypal “binary opposition” from whose clutches we must escape—in their theoretical practice they wallow in it.³⁴

Castoriadis and Unger escape this temptation because they adopt the attitude toward philosophy which I earlier quoted from Dewey. The “anti-naturalism” of Unger’s book comes down to the least common denominator of Hegel, Marx, and Dewey: the claim that “the formative contexts of social life . . . or the procedural frameworks of problem solving and interest accommodation . . . [are] nothing but frozen politics: conflicts interrupted or contained” plus the desire “to deprive these frameworks or contexts of their aura of higher necessity or authority.”³⁵ This anti-naturalism fits together nicely with Castoriadis’ claim that “the imaginary—as the social imaginary and as the imagination of the psyche—is the logical and ontological condition of ‘the real.’”³⁶ Just as in the individual psyche, moral character is “conflict interrupted or contained,” so is the moral character of a society—that is, its institutions.

Unger urges the “thesis that everything in our ideas about the world, including our conceptions of contingency, necessity, and possibility, is sensitive to changes in our empirical beliefs.”³⁷ This holistic, Quinean thesis provides what he calls “the philosophical setting of an antinaturalistic social theory.”³⁸ “Setting” is the right word. It is not so much a “foundation” for such a theory as an excuse not to take philosophy as seriously as the Marxists or the Resenters take it. That thesis helps one accept Unger’s claim that “everything is politics”—that if politics can create a new form of social life, there will be time enough later for theorists to explain how this creation was possible and why it was a good thing. Quinean holism helps assure romantics that we humans are lords of possibility as well as actuality—for possibility is a function of a descriptive vocabulary, and that vocabulary is as much up for political grabs as anything else.³⁹

³⁴ See the (by now vast) literature on how to combine the “totalizing” aims of Marxism with the anti-totalizing aims of “post-modernism.” See, e.g., Jay, *Epilogue: The Challenge of Post-structuralism*, in *MARXISM AND TOTALITY* 510–37 (1984).

³⁵ *SOCIAL THEORY* at 145.

³⁶ C. CASTORIADIS, *supra* note 9, at 336.

³⁷ *SOCIAL THEORY* at 180.

³⁸ *SOCIAL THEORY* at 170, and compare *id.* at 223.

³⁹ I have developed this point about Romanticism in *The Contingency of Language*, *LONDON REV. OF BOOKS*, May 8, 1986, at 11, by reference to Donald Davidson’s radicalization of Quine’s holistic philosophy of language, especially his treatment of metaphor. Castoriadis makes the same point when he describes *legein*, the use of one vocabulary rather than another, as a “primordial institution,” and says that “at this level identitary logic cannot seize hold of the institution, since the institution is neither necessary nor contingent, since its emergence is not determined but is that on the basis of which and by means of which alone something determined exists.” C. CASTORIADIS, *supra* note 9, at 258 (emphasis in original).

This latter point—the least common denominator of Quine, Wittgenstein, and Dewey—provides the backup for Castoriadis' claim that what matters in a social thinker is the bits to which argumentation is irrelevant:

What the greatest thinkers may have said that was truthful and fecund was always said *despite* what they thought of as being and as thinkable, not because of what they thought or in agreement with it. And, to be sure, it is in this *despite* that their greatness is expressed, now as ever.⁴⁰

In other words, if there is social hope it lies in the imagination—in people describing a future in terms which the past did not use. “The *only* thing that is not defined by the imaginary in human needs,” Castoriadis says, “is an approximate number of calories per day.”⁴¹ Every other “constraint” is the fossilized product of some past act of imagination—what Nietzsche called “truth,” namely, “[a] mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms . . . a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people.”⁴²

Certain constraints may come to seem so firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people that their sense of themselves as a community will not outlast the elimination of those constraints. This is what we tragic liberals fear may be the case in the contemporary United States—and, more generally, in the rich North Atlantic democracies. The institutions that empowered our past (for example, inheritable private property) may strangle our future—with the poor and weak getting strangled first, as usual. The institutions that are our only protection against quasi-fascist demagogues may also be the constraints which prevent us from renouncing our insolent greed. The only way to fight off the Pat Robertsons or the Militant Tendency may be to cooperate with the George Bushes and the Kenneth Bakers. The only way to elect a Democratic President or a Labor Prime Minister may be to promise spoils to corrupt trade unions. Maybe North Atlantic politics have frozen over to such a degree that the result of breaking the ice would be something even worse than what we have now. That, at least, is the specter that haunts contemporary North Atlantic liberals.

We tragic liberals realize wistfully that back in the 1880s we too might have seen illimitable vistas. We might have been the young John Dewey rather than the aging Henry Adams. We might have read Carlyle without discouragement, Whitman without giggles, and Edward Bellamy with a wild surmise. Nowadays, despite our fears, we still insist that it was lucky for the United States—not just for its poets and professors

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 200 (emphasis in original).

⁴¹ *Id.* at 265.

⁴² F. NIETZSCHE, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, in THE VIKING PORTABLE NIETZSCHE (W. Kaufmann trans. 1954).

but also for its miners and sharecroppers—that our predecessors *did* read them that way. For in the intervening hundred years things actually got a *lot* fairer, more decent, more equal. People who had read those books had a lot to do with *making* them so. A century after Whitman's death it may seem that, as Orwell said, "the 'democratic vistas' have ended in barbed wire."⁴³ But we covered a lot of ground before our century, and our hope, began to run out. Maybe the Brazilians (or the Tanzanians, or *somebody*) will be able to dodge around that barbed wire—despite all that the superpowers can do to prevent them.

Unger's book offers a wild surmise, a set of concrete suggestions for risky social experiments, and a polemic against those who think the world has grown too old to be saved by such risk-taking. It does not offer a theory about Society, or Modernity, or Late Capitalism, or the Underlying Dynamics of anything. So, if Unger is going to have an audience, it may not be in the rich North Atlantic democracies. The intellectuals here may continue to find him "preposterous," because he does not satisfy what we have come to regard as legitimate expectations. He does not make moves in any game we know how to play. His natural audience may lie in the Third World—where his book may someday make possible a new national romance. Maybe someday it will help the literate (that is, the petty-bourgeois) citizens of some country to see vistas where before they saw only dangers—see a hitherto undreamt-of national future instead of seeing their country as condemned to play out the role that some foreign theorist has written for it.

One of the most helpful ways to think about such a possibility is given by Castoriadis' analogy between the individual psyche and the social whole:

There comes a time when the subject, not because he has discovered the primal scene or detected penis envy in his grandmother, but through his struggle in his actual life and as a result of repetition, unearths the central signifier of his neurosis and finally looks at it in its contingency, its poverty and its *insignificance*. In the same way, for people living today, the question is not to understand how the transition from the neolithic clans to the markedly divided cities of Akkad was made. It is to understand—and this obviously means, here more than anywhere else, to act—the contingency, the poverty and the insignificance of this 'signifier' of historical societies, the division into masters and slaves, into dominators and dominated.⁴⁴

From Castoriadis' angle, the efforts of nineteenth-century German philosophers (and of their ungrateful heirs, the contemporary School of Resentment) look like attempts to discover the primal scene, or to unmask grandmother's penis envy (and, more recently, grandfather's

⁴³ G. ORWELL, *Inside the Whale*, in *COLLECTED ESSAYS* 127 (1966).

⁴⁴ C. CASTORIADIS, *supra* note 9, at 155.

womb envy). The same doubts arise even about relatively unphilosophical social theory—social theory that ignores local (and, in particular, national) differences in favor of “underlying dynamics.” Given Castoriadis’ analogy, it is hard to believe that patient study of Man, or of Society, or of Capitalism, will tell us whether the division into dominators and dominated is “natural” or “artificial,” or which, if any, contemporary societies are “ripe” for the elimination of this division, or what “factors” will determine whether or not this possibility will be realized. Such discussion seems as remote from the project of imagining a new national future as are hydraulic models of libidinal flow from what actually happens on the couch. Such models may help the analyst to make an incisive diagnostic remark, but they are of no help in predicting the wildly idiosyncratic and unpredictable incident in the “struggle of actual life” that suddenly permits that endlessly repeated remark to mean something to the patient. Nor do they help in predicting the course of the analysis from that point onward.

Both Unger’s slogan “everything is politics” and Castoriadis’ analogy help us see why, insofar as social theory declines to be romantic, it is inevitably retrospective, and thus biased toward conservatism. As Hegel said, it typically tells us about the rise of a form of life that has now grown old—about possibilities which are, by now, largely exhausted. It tells us about the structure of what, with luck, our descendants will regard as our neurosis, without telling us much about what they will regard as “normal.” It abstracts from national histories, which is like abstracting from the particular family in which a particular patient grew up. It tends to dismiss as “irrational” whatever purely local factors falsify its generalizations and predictions. This is just as unhelpful as telling the patient that his resistance to the analyst is “irrational.”

Liberal social theorists resist Unger’s and Castoriadis’ suggestion that release from domination, if and when it comes, will come not in the form of “rational development” but through something unforeseeable and passionate. Most of the twentieth century’s political surprises, liberals rightly point out, have been unpleasant ones. Romanticism, after all, was common to Mussolini, Hitler, Lenin, and Mao—to all the leaders who summoned a nation to slough off its past in an act of passionate self-renewal, and whose therapy proved far worse than the disease—as well as to Schiller, Shelley, Fichte, and Whitman. So it is tempting for us liberals to say that the slogan “everything is politics” is too dangerous to work with, to insist on a role for “reason” as opposed to “passion.”

The problem we face in carrying through on this insistence is that “reason” usually means “working according to the rules of some familiar language-game, some familiar way of describing the current situation.” We liberals have to admit the force of Dewey’s, Unger’s, and Castoriadis’ point that such familiar language-games are themselves nothing more than “frozen politics,” that they serve to legitimate, and

make seem inevitable, precisely the forms of social life (for example, the cycles of reform and reaction) from which we desperately hope to break free. So we have to find something else for “reason” to mean. This effort to reinterpret rationality is central to Habermas’ work, and culminates in his distinction between “subject-centered reason” and “communicative reason”—roughly, the distinction between rationality as appeal to the conventions of a presently-played language-game and appeal to democratic consensus, to “argumentative procedures” rather than to “first principles.”⁴⁵

But the idea of “argumentative procedures” for changing our description of what we are doing—for example, changing our political vocabularies from Mill’s to Marx’s, or from Althusser’s to Unger’s—seems inapplicable to the way in which patients grasp the contingency, poverty and insignificance of the central signifiers of their neuroses. To say that the aim of social change should be a society in which such procedures are all that we need—in which passionate, romantic, only retrospectively arguable breaks with the past are no longer necessary—is like saying that the aim of psychoanalysis should be “normal functioning.” Of course it should, but that does not make psychoanalysis a less hit-or-miss, a more rational, procedure. Of course we should aim at such a society, but that does not mean that the only sort of social change we should work for is the kind for which we can offer good arguments. Unger has no more idea than do his readers whether his rotating capital fund will work—any more than Madison had of whether the separation of powers would work, or than an analyst has of whether a given remark will get through to a given patient. The only “argument” such people can give for such experiments is “Let’s give it a try; nothing *else* seems to work.”

This was, to be sure, also Hitler’s and Mao’s “argument.” But we should not use this resemblance between Unger and Mao to make Unger look bad or Mao good. Rather, we should realize that the notion of “argumentative procedures” is not relevant to the situation in which nothing familiar works and in which people are desperately (on the couch, on the barricades) looking for something, no matter how

⁴⁵ As Habermas explains:

Subject-centered reason finds its criteria in standards of truth and success that govern the relationships of knowing and purposively acting subjects to the world of possible objects or states of affairs. By contrast, as soon as we conceive of knowledge as communicatively mediated, rationality is assessed in terms of the capacity of responsible participants in interactions to orient themselves in relation to validity claims geared to intersubjective recognition. Communicative reason finds its criteria in the argumentative procedures for directly or indirectly redeeming claims to propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness, and aesthetic harmony.

J. HABERMAS, *An Alternative Way Out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative versus Subject-Centered Reason*, in *THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY*, *supra* note 21, at 294, 314.

unfamiliar, which might work. What remains relevant is, roughly, freedom of speech. Whether a given romantic, once in power, allows such freedom (of newspapers, universities, public assemblies, electoral choices, and so on) is, though not an infallible index, the best index we have of whether he or she is likely to do his or her nation some good. To my mind, the cash-value of Habermas' philosophical notions of "communicative reason" and "intersubjectivity" consists in the familiar political freedoms fashioned by the rich North Atlantic democracies during the last two centuries. Such notions are not "foundations" or "defenses" of the free institutions of those countries; they *are* those institutions, painted in the philosopher's traditional "gray on gray."⁴⁶ We did not learn about the importance of these institutions as a counterweight to the romantic imagination by thinking through the nature of Reason or Man or Society; we learned about this the hard way, by watching what happened when those institutions were set aside.

More generally, I doubt that any philosophical reworking of the notion of "rationality," or of any similar notion, is going to help us sort out the de Sades from the Whitmans, the Heideggers from the Castoriadis, ⁴⁷ or the Hitlers from the Rosa Luxemburgs. "Everything is politics," in this context, means that what political history cannot teach, philosophy cannot teach either. The idea that theorizing, or philosophical reflection, will help us sort out good from bad romantics is part of the larger idea that philosophy can anticipate history by spotting "objectively progressive" or "objectively reactionary" intellectual movements. This is as bad as Plato's idea (recently resurrected by Allan Bloom⁴⁸) that philosophers can distinguish "morally healthy" from "morally debilitating" kinds of music. We cannot hope to avoid

⁴⁶ See G. HEGEL, *supra* note 17, at 13.

⁴⁷ Habermas describes Castoriadis as combining the "the late Heidegger [and] the early Fichte in a Marxist fashion." J. HABERMAS, *supra* note 21, at 329–30. The description is accurate enough as far as it goes. It will also do for Unger, for like Castoriadis, he can make good use of the late Heideggerian idea of "world-disclosure." Were Habermas to criticize Unger, he would, I should imagine, do so along the same lines as he criticizes Castoriadis in his *Excursus on Cornelius Castoriadis: The Imaginary Institution*, in *THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY*, *supra* note 21, at 327–35. He would say that, like Castoriadis, Unger "assimilat[es] intramundane praxis to a linguistic world-disclosure hypostatized into a history of Being." *Id.* at 332.

A full reply to these pages of Habermas would require a separate paper. Here I can only remark that Castoriadis no more *assimilates* these two than the psychoanalyst assimilates the patient's day-to-day "struggle in his actual life" to the unconscious fantasies that dictate the terms in which the patient describes that struggle. It is one thing to say that the language we currently use for describing our individual or social situation is an imaginative product—one that may, with luck, be replaced by another such product—and another to say that recognizing this fact is incompatible with taking this language seriously. It is just not the case that such recognition "prejudices the validity of linguistic utterances generally," *id.* at 331, nor that on Castoriadis' view "social praxis disappears in the anonymous hurly-burly of the institutionalization of ever new worlds from the imaginary dimension." *Id.* at 330.

⁴⁸ See A. BLOOM, *THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND* 68 (1987).

risky social experiments by discerning the presence or absence of dubious overtones (for example, “bourgeois ideology,” “authoritarianism,” “irrationalism,” “the philosophy of subjectivity”) in the discourse of those who advocate such experiments.

In order to conclude on a concrete note, I shall discuss one such experiment. Suppose that somewhere, someday, the newly-elected government of a large industrialized country decreed that everybody would get the same income, regardless of occupation or disability. Simultaneously, it instituted vastly increased inheritance taxes and froze large bank transfers. Suppose that, after the initial turmoil, it worked: that is, suppose that the economy did not collapse, that people still took pride in their work (as streetcleaners, pilots, doctors, canecutters, Cabinet ministers, or whatever), and so on. Suppose that the next generation in that country was brought up to realize that, whatever else they might work for, it made no sense to work for wealth. But they worked anyway (for, among other things, national glory). That country would become an irresistible example for a lot of other countries, “capitalist,” “Marxist,” and in-between. The electorates of these countries would not take time to ask what “factors” had made the success of this experiment possible. Social theorists would not be allowed time to explain how something had happened that they had pooh-poohed as utopian, nor to bring this new sort of society under familiar categories. All the attention would be focused on the actual details of how things were working in the pioneering nation. Sooner or later, the world would be changed.

Castoriadis, like Edward Bellamy a hundred years ago, advocates such an experiment, but he sensibly declines to offer an argument for it:

If . . . I have maintained for twenty-five years that an autonomous society ought immediately to adopt, in the area of “requittal”, an absolute equality of all wages, salaries, incomes, etc., this springs neither from some idea about any natural or other “identity/equality” of men, nor from theoretical reasoning . . . this is a matter of the imaginary significations which hold society together and of the *paideia* of individuals.⁴⁹

The success of such an experiment would be the analogue of a patient getting better as a result of coming to see, “in his actual life and as a result of repetition,” the “contingency, poverty and insignificance” of “the central signifier of his neurosis.” The French had heard incisive diagnoses many times, but one summer morning in 1789 they woke up conscious of the contingency, poverty, and insignificance of the three Estates, the lilies of Bourbon, and the Catholic Church—of the imagi-

⁴⁹ C. CASTORIADIS, *CROSSROADS IN THE LABYRINTH* 329 (K. Soper & M. Ryle trans. 1984). The equalization of incomes was central to the imagination of the so-called Old Left here in the North Atlantic. No passage in *Animal Farm* did more to create ex-Communists than the one about how the Pigs managed to monopolize the milk and the apples. But it is the sort of option that the more up-to-date, theoretical, and resentful Left rarely discusses.

nary significations that had been holding their social life together, had been essential to the meaning of "France." Things in France did not work out very well at first, but the world was, eventually, changed for the better. European national neuroses began to have different sorts of central signifiers.

A large part of the irrelevance to the Third World of the Cold War, and of talk about "capitalism" and "socialism," is that the obstacles to equalization of income, and to a *paideia* that is *not* centered around the attainment of wealth, are pretty well the same in the United States and in Russia.⁵⁰ More broadly, the imaginary significations that hold society together are pretty much the same in both places. No single change could do more to expose the contingency, poverty, and insignificance of some of the central signifiers of the national neuroses of both superpowers than some third country's success at equalizing incomes. To say, as I have been saying here, that if there is hope it lies in the imagination of the Third World, is to say that the best any of us here in Alexandria can hope for is that somebody out there will do something to tear up the present system of imaginary significations within which politics in (and between) the First and Second Worlds is conducted. It need not be equalization of incomes, but it has to be something *like* that—something so preposterously romantic as to be no longer discussed by us Alexandrians. Only some actual event, the actual success of some political move made in some actual country, is likely to help. No hopeful book by Unger or Habermas,⁵¹ any more than one more hopeless, "oppositional," unmasking book by the latest Resenter, is going to do the trick. Unger, however, has an advantage over the rest of us. His advantage is not that he has a "more powerful theory," but simply that he is aware of "the exemplary instability of the Third World"⁵² in a way that most of us are not. His theoretical writing is shot through with a romanticism for which we Alexandrians no longer have the strength. His book has a better chance than most to be linked, in the history books, with some such world-transforming event.

⁵⁰ This is the kernel of truth in all the loose, resentful, Heideggerian talk about Russia and America being "metaphysically speaking the same" and in all the loose, resentful analogies between the Gulag and the "carceral archipelagos" of the democracies. See Foucault's discussion of the latter analogies in *POWER/KNOWLEDGE: SELECTED INTERVIEWS AND OTHER WRITINGS* 134 (C. Goodeon ed. 1980).

⁵¹ Habermas ends *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* with an expression of "the dream of a completely different European identity . . . taking shape at a time when the United States is getting ready to fall back into the illusions of the early modern period under the banner of a 'second American revolution.'" *The Normative Content of Modernity*, in *THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY*, *supra* note 21, at 366. I think Habermas is too pessimistic about the United States and probably too optimistic about Europe, but I suspect such differences of opinion merely reflect the local patriotisms of different suburbs of Alexandria. Presumably the boundaries between these suburbs are invisible from Brazil.

⁵² See *SOCIAL THEORY* at 64.