

Lunch with the FT **Roberto Mangabeira Unger**

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The philosopher and occasional politician talks about being radical, and personal transformations

John Paul Rathbone OCTOBER 3 2014



It is a late summer day of gentle sun and high scudding clouds when I push open the gate at Roberto Mangabeira Unger's house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and walk up his garden path.

A radical philosopher who won Harvard tenure in 1976 when he was aged just 29, Unger has, since then, developed a reputation as a public intellectual unafraid to pick a fight. Two years ago, he posted a much-viewed [YouTube video](#) in which he upbraided Barack Obama, one of his former students, for bailing out Wall Street. Obama, he said, did not deserve a second term.

To his supporters on the left, Unger is a restless visionary. Other world leaders inspired by his fertile philosophising include Ed Miliband, the British Labour party leader, and Vicente Fox and Ricardo Lagos, former presidents of Mexico and Chile, respectively. His ideas are wide-ranging but essentially amount to a passionate call to stop thinking about everything in terms of economics and finance, what he calls “the dictatorship of no alternatives”. Instead, Unger insists on the need to refocus on what really matters, the human spirit. Critics, not all of them from the right, deride him as a preposterous romantic.

What makes Unger particularly interesting, though, is that he is also an occasional politician. A native Brazilian, in 2007 he was invited by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil’s then president, to serve as minister of strategic affairs – even though Unger had recently criticised the government as being “the most corrupt in Brazil’s history”. Unger held the post for two years.

I ring the doorbell, feeling apprehensive. Unger had initially resisted the lunch invitation, disarmingly describing himself as “too awkward and formal for such a performance”. But he had agreed to entertain at home as that would allow for deeper conversation – a forbidding prospect as Unger once remarked that even his “conversation is not very conversational”. His books are not easy either. He made his name with a three-volume opus, *Politics: A Work in Constructive Social Theory* (1987); among the latest are *Free Trade Reimagined* (2007) and *The Left Alternative* (2009), two sallies in his long guerrilla war against received ideas.

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To jolly things along I have brought two bottles of red wine and I am looking forward to Unger’s reflections on this weekend’s hotly contested Brazilian presidential election that pits Marina Silva, a former rubber tapper from the Amazon, against [Dilma Rousseff](#), Lula’s handpicked successor, who is generally viewed as a disappointment. I am also curious about how such a bookish man found the practice of politics; while a minister, Unger was known to dip into Milton’s *Paradise Lost* between meetings.

Footsteps sound inside the clapboard house and the door swings open. “Come in,” Unger urges me. The 67-year-old’s silver hair is cropped short, his eyes glitter behind rimless spectacles, and he wears black trousers and a light grey summer jacket with a golden seal of the Brazilian Republic in his buttonhole and a silver fob watch and chain pinned to his white shirt.

He leads the way in from the porch, which is cluttered with recycling bins. Inside, there are prints of colonial Brazil on the walls, and neat stacks of old Times Literary Supplements in the corridor.

“First things first, let’s decant the wine,” he says. We pop a bottle in the kitchen, carry plates of vichyssoise soup with sides of salad and cheese into a dining room that overlooks a shady garden, and settle around a large table.

Despite his earlier reticence, Unger seems eager to begin. So, I ask him, what next for Brazil? Unger begins to roll out phrases honed at his lectern. Over the past decade, he says, Brazil has enjoyed huge advances. Higher wages, consumer credit and the social policies of Lula and Rousseff’s Workers’ party have lifted 30m people into the middle class – a remarkable transformation in a country of 200m. Brazil has also gained “an imaginative advance” by losing its sense of inferiority. “It accepts itself,” he says.

The problem is on the supply side. The past decade’s Chinese-driven commodity boom created an illusion of prosperity that allowed Brazil to follow a “strategy of evasion”, whose limits are now apparent. The economy is in recession and last year Brazil erupted into massive street protests.

“The country seethes with frustrated potential,” he says. Brazilians, especially its new middle class, “need to be addressed as economic agents and producers, not just beneficiaries of social programmes,” he fumes.

Roberto Mangabeira Unger’s house

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Vichyssoise soup, Brie and green salad

Salmon steaks, fried rice and vegetables

Pineapple custard tart Gratis

Bottle of Clos de los Siete x 2
\$37.98

Total \$37.98

Such criticism is unusual from a thinker celebrated by the left, and I say it seems as if he is proposing the kind of centre-right policies he has long opposed.

Unger juts out his chin and pushes away his food. “This is where one must break with neoliberal discourse,” he insists. “I think it requires a radical innovation in the institutional arrangements of the market economy.”

This is classic Unger: provocative yet slippery. In his books he criticises neoliberalism for being “second-hand American economics and social science”. Yet he also despairs over the traditional left, both the “calamitous authoritarian versions and Europe’s well-behaved social democracy”. What, I ask, does he propose instead? Unger responds with a question of his own. “What is it to be a progressive today?”

Answering his own question, he continues: “Today’s imagination is split two ways. There are those who consider themselves radical, believe in dogma and blueprints, and are dangerous fantasists and revolutionaries. And then there are the majority, understandably disillusioned with such thinking, who believe the only thing left is to muddle through and achieve marginal advances in equity and efficiency. I completely disagree with this division because I am a radical, yet I don’t believe in dogmas or blueprints.”

The soup is hearty but Unger has barely touched his plate. A cloud passes over the sun and the room darkens into a library-like gloom but he is still on an intellectual roll, bolt upright in his chair, electric with eloquence.

He cites technology as an example of the need to rethink the world. During the industrial revolution, he says, new technology disseminated rapidly, even into agriculture. Today, by contrast, “the vanguard is quarantined”. Fewer people work in the higher-paid and more productive segments of the economy, while the rest struggle to find equivalent employment elsewhere. The result is rising social inequality.

This leads him on to Thomas Piketty, the celebrated French economist and author of *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. Unger says the book “touches on the wound of inequality” – although that is as far as the endorsement goes. “Its shortcoming is that it proposes nothing about how to change the institutions that produce this inequality: it merely corrects the market through retrospective compensatory redistribution [ie taxes]. My idea,” he says, “is to change the market itself.”

This is radical stuff: but what changes, and how? Unger takes a gulp of wine and then unleashes a hurricane of abstract ideas. He quotes Hobbes, Marx and Mill. He lists the small business networks of northern Italy and southern Germany as successful examples of “the post-Fordist industrial era”. He stresses the importance of education. He insists on the need for constant experimentation and “high energy politics”, of using technology to move employment towards the “frontier of advance practice” but also “beyond the mind-numbing automation of Adam Smith’s pin factory”. He articulates all these thoughts with the relentless force of a mallet, and I shrink slightly into my chair.

The clouds pass, the room brightens and Unger relaxes his jaw and assumes a more meditative pose. “The essential thing, the ultimate goal of politics and thought, is a bigger life for the individual,” he concludes. “A bigger life – that remains the main objective . . . to increase our divine attributes, to have more life.” I suggest this sounds as much a religious project as a political one. Unger, who was educated at Jesuit schools, does not disagree. “The prophetic voice, sadly, has lately fallen silent in the US,” he muses.

He swallows a spoonful of soup, pushes the plate aside, and suggests we move on. “How do other interviewees cope with this mix of talking and eating?” he asks.

Politics and the intellect were always prized in Unger’s family. He was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1947 but raised in New York where his Brazilian mother, a poet, read him Plato’s *Republic* when he was just eight. (Unger recalls it was Benjamin Jowett’s posthumously published 1894 translation). When his father, a successful German-American lawyer, died of a heart attack in 1958, the family returned to Brazil. There Unger learnt Portuguese and developed his second love, politics, which he cultivated alongside his academic career: postgraduate studies at Harvard in 1969 and, eventually, full professor. Unger has stayed in “this garden” ever since, with occasional forays into Brazilian politics.

This is almost a tradition in Brazil, where senior politicians often come from unusual backgrounds – Gilberto Gil, the musician, recently served as minister of culture. Unger’s own inspiration was his maternal grandfather, Octávio Mangabeira, a professor of astronomy who launched his own political career with a speech about why Halley’s comet was not the end of the world. Octávio (“probably the only person to enter politics via the stars,” Unger tells me) became foreign minister in the 1920s, until the Getúlio Vargas dictatorship pushed him into exile.

Unger’s own political career, while spirited, has been less successful, and in São Paulo he is seen as a brilliant oddball who campaigns in accented Portuguese. In 1990, he tried for congress; in 2000, he ran for São Paulo mayor; in 2006, he even tried for the presidency. All the bids failed.

A microwave pings in the kitchen, and Unger returns with plates of seared salmon and fried rice with vegetables. I refill our glasses. Why did he become a minister in Lula’s administration after criticising it so fiercely, and even calling for the president’s impeachment?

Unger draws a breath and says he accepted the invitation (“a sign of Lula’s political generosity”) partly to advance his own ideas. “One of the classic failures of philosophers is a belief someone else will do it for you.” Yet, says Unger, politics was also a journey of personal transformation amid the “bubbling anarchy and mysteries of Brazil”.

It was a way “of forcibly removing my protective armour and opening myself to the arrows of failure, derision, defeat . . . and thus transformation,” he says. “Without that, you die slowly – and I believe you should only die once.”

At this, a key turns in the front door: it is Tamara Lothian, his wife and mother of their four children. “Are you properly crediting my ideas?” teases Lothian, who teaches law at Columbia University, before heading upstairs.

I ask Unger if he learnt any practical political lessons. “That there is no limit,” he replies unblinkingly. “Politics is not a medieval battle where the herald comes on at the end and says, ‘You have won, you have lost’. No. You can say, ‘I have not lost,’ and continue the battle.”

‘I don’t know how to recreate the world of politics, the global debate that existed in the 19th century,’ he laments. ‘Do you?’

Despite this high-minded attitude, Unger’s biggest ministerial initiative was surprisingly down-to-earth. Concerned about Amazon deforestation, he discovered that only 4 per cent of private land in the rainforest had clear title. “The result was chaos: nobody knew who owned what, with the result that pillage was more attractive than preservation or production.” Lula approved Unger’s plan to set up a formal land register and co-ordinate a sustainable Amazon initiative. Yet, Unger

says, it only worked up to a point. “We produced a law but execution was weak,” he says with a sigh.

He looks despondent at this, so I ask him about his recent work in Rondônia, an Amazon state in the northwest of the country where he is helping to design a new educational curriculum that ditches the usual Brazilian syllabus based on rote learning. His face lights up. “It is very rewarding, because it is tangible. But I do have to ask myself if it amounts to very much.”

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He returns to the kitchen to fetch dessert, and comes back with two pineapple custard tarts. They are delicious, although that seems to do little to lift his mood. “I don’t know how to recreate the world of politics, the global debate that existed in the 19th century,” he laments. “Do you?”

I suggest we head outside to enjoy the day and Unger seems to relax under the trees. We gossip about the Bric countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), part of his portfolio under Lula, and Unger swings his legs over the side of his chair. “The Russians were the only ones willing to be daring,” he says. “The Chinese and Indians were timid.” He credits himself with pushing Beijing to internationalise the renminbi currency as a way of unseating the US dollar’s pre-eminence, although he is no fan of the Chinese.

“Chinese speeches are so saccharine; we had to sit through so many. Beijing once propounded a conference of Bric NGOs. Ours, they said, will be the Chinese Communist party.” Unger guffaws with infectious mirth. “So absurd.”

While Unger seems in no hurry, two hours have passed and my host, unfailingly courteous, offers to drive me to a taxi rank. On the way, I ask who he will vote for in Brazil’s election. Unger calls the contest an enigma. Although Rousseff’s centre-left government has lost support, the usual right-of-centre opposition, led by [Aécio Neves](#), has so far failed to make much headway.

Instead, it is Marina Silva, backed by the Socialist party and described by Unger as “an exemplary person”, who is riding the popular mood of protest – although this support is, he says, “undeserved”, as many of her proposals are “devoid of institutional content”.

Surprisingly, Rousseff is his choice, despite his harsh criticisms of her first term. “She is a good person, and partial to my ideas. I think she can best deliver the programmatic change Brazil needs. That anyway is my hope, although I have no illusions.”

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Illustration by James Ferguson

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