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RUMMAGING THROUGH THE EMPEROR'S WARDROBE

*Don Herzog**

POLITICS: A WORK IN CONSTRUCTIVE SOCIAL THEORY. 3 Volumes. By *Roberto Mangabeira Unger*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1987. VOLUME 1: SOCIAL THEORY: ITS SITUATION AND ITS TASK. Pp. vii, 256. Cloth, \$39.50; paper, \$12.95. VOLUME 2: FALSE NECESSITY: ANTI-NECESSITARIAN SOCIAL THEORY IN THE SERVICE OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY. Pp. xiii, 653. Cloth, \$59.50; paper, \$18.95. VOLUME 3: PLASTICITY INTO POWER: COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL STUDIES ON THE INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS OF ECONOMIC AND MILITARY SUCCESS. Pp. vi, 231. Cloth, \$37.50; paper, \$10.95.

The publication of *Politics* is officially a major event. Rumors of its impending explosion on the intellectual and political scene have been swirling through the academy for some time. Prized typescript copies of various chunks of it have been circulating. Thanks in part to Unger's legendary status as shadowy guru of the Critical Legal Studies movement and in part to the prestige assured by publication in three volumes by Cambridge University Press, *Politics* isn't just another book to read. After all, we have all too many mere books already: we are caught in a crisis of overproduction, in a prisoner's dilemma brought on by everyone's frantic desires to enlarge her own *vita* and the failure of presses to insist that bulky manuscripts actually have something worth saying. Now it's true that *Politics* is bulky: it weighs in at over one thousand pages of text. And regardless of whether it has something worth saying, it will be avidly consumed. For again this is no ordinary book, and Unger is no ordinary author. Still, I want to treat *Politics* as, well, just another book. Just as Marx shouldn't be adored or reviled out of hand, but (like everyone else) read with a judicious mixture of sympathy and criticism, so too Unger.

Not that Unger writes as though his is just another book. He writes as though *Politics* is destined to become a classic of social theory, a natural continuation in the line marked out by Smith, de Tocqueville, Marx, Simmel, Weber, and Durkheim. The text is sprinkled with jarring comments that make a mockery of mere chronology: Unger tells us what economists were doing "[b]y the close of the twen-

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tieth century” (vol. 1, p. 125), and what theory of contract undergirded legal doctrine “by the end of the twentieth century” (vol. 2, p. 204). The past tense here is weird; but it’s one way, I suppose, to make one’s work look timeless. The text is sprinkled too with bits of shameless self-promotion: Unger never tires of claiming that his arguments are surprising, even astonishing, for instance that “[h]owever familiar this conception may seem in the abstract, its historical applications go beyond belief” (vol. 3, p. 101).

These affectations aside, Unger’s prose style will make actually reading these volumes strenuous work even for his disciples. (This is not a book for the fainthearted, not a book for a lazy Sunday afternoon or a day on the beach. Better to wield it nonchalantly in a smoke-filled café while sipping cappuccino.) Sometimes the writing is simply opaque: I don’t know what to make of constructions like “airy, murky promises” (vol. 2, p. 465), or “the puns of calculation, mastery, and love that run through every aspect of social life” (vol. 2, p. 136). And for the life of me I can’t figure out why someone would want to refer to “the stishness of states” (vol. 3, p. 80), what sounds like a droll locution rejected by Donald Barthelme, and then add that that just refers to their strength. Some of Unger’s distinctions matter, but are hard to keep in mind: he distinguishes super-theory, ultra-theory, anti-theory, and proto-theory. (Actually, I think ultra-theory and anti-theory are the same thing, but I wouldn’t bet on it.) Other apparent distinctions are just synonyms, introduced despite Fowler’s perfectly sensible strictures against elegant variation: so presuppositions, forms, contexts, structures, and frameworks refer here to the same thing.

More often, the writing is at once bombastic and florid. Unger loves long sentences and disdains punctuation. Combined with his often eccentric word choice, that leaves the reader contemplating such Orphic formulations as these:

Theoretical insight and prophetic vision have joined ravenous self-interest and heartless conflict to set the fire that is burning in the world, and melting apart the amalgam of faith and superstition, and consuming the power of false necessity. [vol. 1, p. 215]

Or again:

[T]he Western way of life so coveted by the propaganda of self-fulfillment has gone further than its predecessors in liquefying entrenched structures of social division and hierarchy and in creating the institutional and imaginative conditions for a more free-floating experience of exchange, attachment, and subjectivity. [vol. 2, p. 544]

Quite.

But what’s the book about? *Politics* celebrates the contingency of social life. History, Unger assures us, hasn’t got a plot or a script; there’s no sense appealing to alleged causal laws to tell us how things are bound to unfold. Unger dwells lovingly for hundreds of pages on

this open secret, and from it draws two implications. First, people trying to explain what has happened must show how deeply contingent the outcome was, and resolutely refuse even to insinuate that it was necessary. Second, radicals pursuing exotic programs needn't be discouraged by those who say their goals are impossible. For whether the naysayers are conservatives trying to invest the current regime with an aura of false necessity, or Marxists insisting that only one forward path is possible, they miss how remarkably loose-jointed historical change is.

That's it, in a nutshell. If you want to join the army of intellectuals who will discuss these volumes without actually slogging through them, that's all you really have to know. One might well suspect that it doesn't require a thousand-plus pages of fulminations to make those two points. That's right; but there is a bit more to be found here. And of course there are some intriguing — make that surprising or astonishing — twists and turns to be found as Unger unpacks his insights.

MANNING THE BARRICADES

"Imagine, reader, that you were involved in the politics of . . . say Brazil, around 1985" (vol. 1, p. 67). So Unger ushers the hapless reader into an apparently hypothetical example that I take to offer the motivation for this gargantuan project. If "you" were involved in Brazil, "you" would have found a regime seesawing "between mock liberalism and controlled mobilization" (vol. 1, p. 67), with spates of harsh military rule thrown in for good measure. "You" would have found a partly unsettled political order, lurching uncertainly from one ugly set of policies to another. And "you" would have noticed that the standard mapping offered by Marxists just didn't fit: it didn't make sense of radical commitments among the petty bourgeoisie, or indeed of how amorphous class interests seemed to be; nor did it make sense of a lively struggle over the identity of God.

"Now imagine, reader, that you threw yourself into the Brazilian situation just described. Suppose that you were one of those many people who looked on politics as both an insider and an outsider" (vol. 1, p. 75). If "you" weren't going to be paralyzed, if "you" weren't going to fall into familiar political traps that led nowhere, "you" had to realize how deeply everything might be up for grabs. But "you" would find other leftists staggering around "like men wandering around in a daze: their doctrines were dreams" (vol. 1, p. 78). Many of them clung to the outmoded slogans of Marxism, what Unger elsewhere derides as "the pompous subtleties of a hairsplitting scholasticism" (vol. 2, p. 417). Misled by their own categories, they failed to come to terms with their situation, failed too to offer any incisive political programs.

Caught in this position, what did "you" want to do? Unger an-

swers for “you”: “You wanted to write a book to set things straight” (vol. 1, p. 79). Imagining all that I might do as a frustrated activist in Brazil, I couldn’t quite imagine myself doing that. But in fact the example isn’t hypothetical. As many already know, and as both the back covers of these volumes and Unger himself (vol. 1, pp. 227-28) remind us, Unger has maintained a role in Brazilian politics. The example is so transparently autobiographical that Unger doesn’t even manage to keep the rhetoric of addressing “you” straight. There I was, busily trying to picture myself in this hastily sketched situation, when I was jarred to read this: “Try to understand, reader, by an act of imaginative empathy, the bitterness a person in such a circumstance might feel” (vol. 1, p. 78).

I wouldn’t write a ponderous tome in social theory to deal with my dilemmas as a Brazilian activist. (Not that I think ideas are irrelevant in politics: quite the contrary. But big fat books are, shall we say, a chancy vehicle for advancing them. Let alone big fat books in foreign languages.) And maybe “you” wouldn’t either. But Unger apparently would: I take these volumes to be his response to his political failures. The “you” of his example is himself, a point worth insisting on only as another clue to the perplexing style of the work. These pages are haunted by a solipsistic absorption. Often, as here, Unger is clearly writing notes to himself, not a book to an outside audience. At any rate there’s something fetching about the thought of writing three English volumes on social theory “to set things straight” in Brazilian politics. Stranger things have happened, I suppose. Lenin consolidated his ascendancy partly by churning out unreadable works in the philosophy of science. (History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce?) Maybe Brazilian political activists are all fluent in English. Or maybe the book has been translated. And maybe — I don’t know — the activists of Brazil are being transformed by reading these volumes even as I write. But somehow I doubt it.

Unger also makes an unmistakable bid to find compatriots in the academy. He wants “to enlist the reader’s help in the theoretical campaign that this work initiates” (vol. 1, p. 9) (rumor has it more volumes of *Politics* are on the way), “to recruit and to help co-workers in a common endeavor by sharing with them elements of a study plan” (vol. 2, p. 596). These co-workers will share the double commitment that *Politics* advances, and the Brazilian example makes clear. In their academic work, they will reveal over and over that things could have gone differently; in their political work, they will use that demonstration to slap their less contingently minded comrades in the face and wake them up. A bit disarmingly, Unger accompanies his invitation (call to arms?) with an instruction: “When the larger argument falls into confusion and obscurity, when I stagger and stumble, help me. Refer to the purpose described in this book and revise what I say in the light of what I want” (vol. 1, p. 9). So I propose to do here. It’s

not exactly the sort of assistance Unger probably had in mind. Then again, as he'd have to agree, things don't always work out as intended.

EXPLANATION AND CONTINGENCY

In a now notorious 1942 article, Carl Hempel argued that explanation in history is no different from explanation in physics. To explain something, he urged, is just to subsume it under some causal law. If historians are actually explaining anything, they must be doing that, or at least offering compressed explanatory sketches that could in principle be amplified into such nomological-deductive subsumptions. If they're not doing that, he announced, they can't claim to be explaining anything.

This account of explanation has a number of striking features. Chief among them, for my purposes here, is this: Explanation and prediction, as Hempel knew full well, become mirror images of one another. Suppose I'm about to boil some water to make some coffee. Then you can predict the water's boiling in this way: set out the relevant causal laws as the major premise of a syllogism, the relevant description of the pot and its heat source as the minor premise, and deduce the prediction as a conclusion. Suppose now that you're asked after the event to explain it. Then you do the very same thing. "Explanation" is just the name of nomological-deductive subsumptions done after the fact, "prediction" the name of the very same subsumptions done before the fact. Both show that the event had to happen, given the antecedent conditions and the governing causal laws.

Quite a few historians found Hempel's argument baffling. Take a historical event, say Lyndon Baines Johnson announcing that he wouldn't stand for reelection as president. This looks anomalous: many of us take for granted that the powers and prestige of the presidency are deeply attractive, and surely many politicians aspire to the office; but here's a man who walked away from it, who walked away from a race in which he'd have been equipped with the considerable advantages of incumbency. But it's not an impenetrable mystery. After the fact, many historians would say, we can construct a perfectly lucid explanation for Johnson's withdrawal. We can point to the "Dump Johnson" movement spearheaded by liberals like Al Lowenstein, and increasing popular disaffection with the Vietnam War, and the heavy toll that being president in such bitterly heated circumstances had taken on LBJ. But contemporaries knew all of that, and still many of them were surprised (some overjoyed) when Johnson made his announcement. Here, it seems, we have an account which does function as an explanation, but couldn't possibly have provided a reliable prediction. Here explanation and prediction aren't symmetrical. We want to say that after the fact we can explain why LBJ with-

drew, but his withdrawing wasn't in any way necessary, so it couldn't have been predicted before the fact.

What shall we make of this explanation? One could be a stern positivist, and insist that if it doesn't meet Hempel's standards it's not really an explanation at all. A more sensible option would be to articulate an account of how such explanations work: Hempel gives us no reason to surrender our firm intuition that indeed such accounts do perfectly good explanatory work. So Jack Hexter did, in a brilliant book-length response to Hempel's strictures. Such explanations, he urged, tell stories. They exhibit the unfolding events as intelligible responses to what has already happened. Given a rich enough description of the context and the actors, we understand what otherwise would be an anomaly or a mystery.

Take another example. A man accosts someone in a subway station and asks his opinion of D.H. Lawrence's unpublished correspondence. The other man is baffled, a bit uncomfortable, and edges away uneasily, muttering dark imprecations about the perils of life in the big city. Onlookers will share his puzzlement. Even if they know full well who Lawrence is, they will wonder why anyone would ask a stranger such a question. So the event cries for explanation. We can't explain it by subsuming it under some causal law; I take it there are no causal laws that provide the necessary and sufficient conditions under which people will ask weird questions in subway stations. We explain it by embedding it in a narrative. So, for instance, it might be that the questioner is a KGB agent with a stupidly chosen contact line; or that (spacy academic that he is) he mistakes the other man for an English professor he just saw at a conference; and so on.

If Hexter's account is right — I think it is — we have explanations that aren't just "postdictions," or predictions that happen to be generated after the event. And we have explanations that are wholly compatible with contingency. Johnson chose to withdraw; here's why; still he could have done something else. A Hempelian might try to thrust into the heartland of the enemy: Okay, she might ask, but why did Johnson choose to withdraw? If he could have done something else — if he could have gotten out of Vietnam, or gritted his teeth and forged ahead regardless of his critics — why didn't he? But the parry is easy. We needn't undergird the story with the "real" explanation, the causal theory that underlay it all along. Instead we can just tell more stories, stories to which withdrawing from Vietnam or defying his critics would be increasingly unlikely conclusions. Not impossible, not ruled out causally, just unlikely.

The Hempelian might urge that the story works by providing reasons for Johnson's action, and go on to argue that reasons are just one kind of cause. There's a knotty debate there I happily leave aside, since Hexter and other writers have offered another, devastatingly

conclusive point about narratives, one hanging on what philosophers of science call “collocations.”

Here’s a story that has nothing to do with reasons. In a grade-B horror movie, a mad scientist builds a machine to blow up the fair community of Freeville, New York. The machine is just a collection of three devices, wired together in series. The first device is triggered if and only if the temperature is sixty-five degrees. The second is triggered if and only if the current noise level is thirty-five decibels. And the third is triggered if and only if it picks up the strains of the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil.” Since the machine is in series, it will blow up Freeville if, and only if, all three events happen at once. Our mad scientist leaves it in the high school teachers’ lounge, chuckles fiendishly, and heads off into the swamp to catch his dinner.

In the movie, let’s imagine, Freeville blows up at midnight during the high school prom. Why? Well, the temperature was hovering at sixty-five degrees; at the same time, the machine picked up just thirty-five muffled decibels from the band playing in the gym downstairs; and — you guessed it — they were playing “Sympathy for the Devil.” The causal laws of physics, together with a correct description of the wiring of this machine, dictate that whenever those three things happen at once this machine will trigger an explosion. But of course there is no causal law that dictates when or whether they will happen at once. It’s just an unlucky coincidence that all three do take place together the night of the senior prom. The deterministic workings of the machine provide the essential backdrop to the explanation. But the machine may have been in place for weeks, months, even years, without ever going off. The explanation for why it goes off when it does is quirkily contingent. It just so happens that on this mild spring evening this band happened to play this song at this volume level. In another universe, one with causal laws identical to ours but a slightly different arrangement of objects, the machine never would have gone off.

These themes are already quite familiar in the literature on explanation. That’s why I called the contingency of social affairs an open secret. But it’s not just the contingency of social affairs: our imaginary machine explodes at a contingent time, and evolutionary biology and geology, historical sciences both, are chock full of explanations that leave room for the possibility that things could have gone differently. In social theory, Weber long ago insisted on objective possibilities, and worked out an account of how they arise.

But Unger wants very much to be saying something new here. So he insists that “[i]t is not enough to invoke the idea of a mode of narrative explanation that accounts for events merely by placing them in a rich context of sequence and by appealing to vague criteria of plausible connection” (vol. 1, p. 191). The pejoratives aside, why isn’t it

enough? And what should we say when we find Unger himself offering just these sorts of explanations? Like Charles Sabel, Michael Piore, and other recent writers, Unger is enchanted by what he calls petty commodity production. True, he agrees, it crumbled in the face of large-scale industrialism. But it didn't have to. We could have had a different kind of market, one preventing a few players from holding all wealth but promoting innovation and free trade nonetheless; we could have had a different kind of democracy, one not hampered as the state once was from explicit restructurings of the economy. So the triumph of Fordism, the decline of skilled artisans working in small teams, was contingent. But this is nothing but (the outline of) a narrative, as Unger himself notes: "The preceding narrative accounts for the defeat of the petty bourgeois alternative without appealing to deep-structure explanations of why petty commodity production was doomed to failure from the start" (vol. 2, p. 227).

Unger's text holds out a bold promise: no one yet, he insists endlessly, has fully worked out the implications of social contingency; and, from his summary dismissal, one would think he had something up his sleeve far removed from "mere" narration. But the promise isn't redeemed; what we get are IOUs for the same old stuff. Not that there's anything wrong with that: good stories are hard to come by and a pleasure to find. But Unger shouldn't pretend he's offering something apocalyptically new — or even mildly different. He's not, as far as I can tell. Antinecessitarian explanation, while an imposing mouthful, is in place already. Despite the shrill rhetoric of a handful of positivists, it's what we actually do, day after day, the "we" referring to us ordinary academics, the mere mortals whom Unger seems to loathe. Despite the rodomontade with which Unger surrounds his position, it looks in the end very much like business as usual.

RADICAL POLITICS?

If Unger's descriptive project ends up endorsing a banal commonplace, his prescriptive agenda seems breathtakingly radical. For Unger, politics is the art of the impossible. Less pithily but more accurately, it's the art of transforming our sense of what's possible, of loosening the constraints that bind us so that we can plunge headlong into what is now unimaginable territory. Unger bewails "the tedious, degrading rhythm of history — with its long lulls of collective narcolepsy punctuated by violent revolutionary seizures" (vol. 2, p. 1; temporarily narcoleptic readers who miss the point will find it reiterated not quite verbatim at vol. 2, p. 6).

What makes history so relentlessly repetitive? Why do we go on day after day playing out the same prefabricated roles? Because we are caught in the very social settings that we constructed. We forget that they're our constructions, that we could have constructed them

differently, that we could move to change them. They take on all the unassailable appearance of the laws of nature, and we don't acknowledge their "makeshift, pasted-together, and alterable character" (vol. 2, p. 8). These themes too are old hat in social theory. Marx, Simmel, Weber, Durkheim: all insist that, whatever we may think, our social institutions aren't necessary. Indeed one wonders who *didn't* know this: Fustel de Coulanges did; Hume and Smith did; Vico did; Plato did Regardless, once we awaken to Unger's antinaturalistic insight into contingency, we will be free to entertain all kinds of political programs we don't take seriously now.

Not that we need to master the intricate windings of his discussion to get the point. It is, he thinks, built into our everyday experience already. There are always glimpses of alternative possibilities, moments of incipient disorder that we could seize on and use as levers to transform the world. We don't, though; narcoleptic ourselves, I suppose, like the leftist comrades whom Unger hates, we drift by them unconsciously.

So we can turn the world upside down. Together we can hurl ourselves into the exuberant business of social transformation. There are glimmerings here of a particular political agenda, a direction Unger would like us to move in. It is, he says, a "superliberalism" more than a continuation of civic humanism: Unger has no truck with recent arguments for a community of people sharing fundamental ends. Such a communitarian polity, he asserts, would lead to a "paralysis of the power to innovate," worse yet to "self-conscious austerity" (vol. 2, p. 587).

At this point in his argument (I use the term loosely), Unger repeatedly makes a characteristic error. We have to escape our binding contexts, he urges, to become "the originals we all know ourselves to be" instead of mere "placeholders in a system of group contrasts" (vol. 2, p. 564). Or again: insofar as he transcends his current contexts, "[t]he citizen becomes more and more an individual rather than a puppet of collective categories of class, community, or gender, or a player in a historical drama he can neither understand nor escape" (vol. 2, p. 471). Or again: "We can construct not just new and different social worlds but social worlds that more fully embody and respect the creative power whose suppression or containment all societies and cultures seem to require" (vol. 2, p. 1).

Social institutions of all sorts here are constraining, never enabling. Unger's "superliberalism" is really romanticism, no more. In doggedly maintaining that "we are an infinite caught within the finite" (vol. 2, p. 12), Unger misses how deeply we are constituted by the very social routines he detests. It's not, surely, that we begin life as enormously rich and multifaceted individuals, and then the walls come closing in. No doubt we begin with the *potential* to do many different

things. But that's just to say that who we will become depends on our social experiences. Those experiences, though, don't choke off the wonderfully rich persons we were already on the verge of becoming. They make us the persons we are: without them we'd be nothing.

There are of course ways in which the weight of history is a horrible burden. There's nothing delightful about growing up in a world that already has nuclear arms, dioxin, terrorists, starvation, and all the rest. But history also bequeaths us plenty of lovely possibilities. When I go home today, I will play Bach and Strayhorn on my piano; and when I come back to work tomorrow I will in fact earn a living by teaching undergraduates American political thought and thinking about consent theory. I am born into a world where Bach and Strayhorn have already lived, where pianos are for sale in a marketplace, where there are universities that hire political theorists. But those facts aren't lamentable constraints: they make possible activities that wouldn't be conceivable without them. And insofar as I am a musician fond of baroque and jazz, or a political theorist, my identity isn't just something that escaped getting squashed by society; it wouldn't have been possible without society.

Romantics are no different: their identities, their characteristic aspirations, are also made possible by a particular history and a particular set of social roles. That "[i]n their better and saner moments men and women have always wanted to live as the originals they all feel themselves to be" (vol. 1, p. 214) is of course false. The suspicion that one's social roles are phony, that one's reality lies apart from them, has a history: it is, for instance, in the hands of Rousseau a savage critique of the stylized interactions of court society. I know of no evidence that men and women before the rise of romanticism entertained any such suspicions. (Did Socrates? or Augustine? or Aquinas? Do Kwakiutl Indians? or Nepalese farmers? or Palestinian refugees? Or are all these people simply insane?) And I'd argue that romanticism depends as well on a differentiated society, where one occupies different roles. For only then can one distance oneself from any particular role; and so only then can one imagine distancing oneself from all of them at once.

Authors too, just for example, rely on social institutions. Picture a man sitting on the top floor of Radcliffe's Hilles Library, piles of yellow legal paper stacked neatly in front of him, writing at breakneck pace. That man easily makes a number of assumptions about the social world he inhabits: that libraries will go on holding resources for writing books, that others will respect his property rights in the precious unique copy of his manuscript and not seize it to train puppies, that he will still be a tenured professor when he wakes up the next morning, that academic publishers will still be in the business of publishing esoteric tomes, and on and on. Those continuities shouldn't be

derided as ruts that constrain the infinite force of his personality. They make possible his writing a book, something no one could do in a world of perpetual flux. True, Unger sometimes tacks on a sober afterthought: “[W]e can never perform the act of defiance often enough or relentlessly enough to save ourselves from having to settle down in a particular social order” (vol. 1, p. 13). But this locution makes it sound like a regrettable fact. It’s not that, alas!, we have to settle down. We should want to: a life composed of nothing but radical turmoil couldn’t conceivably be choiceworthy.

Unger is so ecstatic about smashing whatever we inherit that he doesn’t bother with some rudimentary distinctions. Often his text suggests that it doesn’t matter if some institution is good or not, or better than what seem to be the available alternatives. Regardless, it’s a paralyzing routine that turns us into puppets, and so we should smash it. (Why doesn’t smashing itself become a rut, a despicable routine that we engage in mechanically, so betraying our authenticity?) And we always know that we can smash it. Even while social institutions are lulling us into narcolepsy, Unger reminds us, they’re also murmuring that radical change is possible. At key moments of conflict and uncertainty, we realize that things could be up for grabs.

That’s right, but it hardly follows that putting them up for grabs would be a good thing. Take our imaginary author again. He knows that formally the business of academic publishing is a brutal meritocracy of texts, where the fame of the author is wholly irrelevant. But he also knows, or should know, that fame may make a world of difference. University press reviewers are anonymous, but they know whose work they’re reviewing. And editors may tip their hands, covertly or not so covertly telling the reviewers what verdict they’d like them to reach. So the manuscript that our famous author submits will be published by a top-notch university press with all sorts of hoopla. The very same manuscript, submitted by an anonymous assistant professor at Washtenaw Community College, wouldn’t have a chance. We can always glimpse the corrosive force of celebrity on the routine; we can always sense that presses want to make money, and may be willing to publish an overblown and incoherent book if they think that the fame of the author will make it pay off. But what follows? Surely not that we ought to demolish the claims of meritocracy, and instead focus explicitly on celebrity. Wrenching ourselves free of the compulsive publishing routines that we’ve taken for granted would shake things up. And it might reward the fantasies of some personalities. But it would be a stupid thing to do.

Again, Unger does seem bent on change for its own sake. He even proposes — I see no reason to doubt that he’s in earnest — that we create a new branch of the state whose job is to unsettle all other social institutions, even the other branches of government. Lest this sound

loony or unattractive, Unger hastens to assure the reader that this system needs control, though not the "banal system of checks and balances" (vol. 2, p. 454). He would empower extrapolitical institutions to fight back, and arm individuals with an apparently immutable set of immunity rights (vol. 2, pp. 524-30). These rights are so important that he proposes each one should be legally demarcated by a "bright line" (vol. 2, p. 530) — a drily amusing touch, coming from the Unger who has long intimated deeply skeptical sentiments about law.

Unger might have reflected profitably on the contradiction between his intoxicated celebration of a world of radical contingency, where everything may be up for grabs, and his sensible instinct to put limits on that change. Then again, if sometimes the text signals caution about its own thrust, sometimes Unger goes out of his way to flirt with danger, to show just how radical and daring he can be. Here is intellectual and political life at the edge of the cliff: "Just as the quest for empowerment through plasticity may enable us to live out more fully our context-transcending identity, so, too, it may subject us to a despotism less messy or violent but more thoroughgoing than any yet known" (vol. 2, p. 592). Or again: "The radical project," he says proudly,

is morally perilous. . . . At worst, the practical and imaginative strife it unleashes overshadows the attempt to promote and to reconcile the different facets of human empowerment. At best, many loyalties embedded in established contexts of social life must be betrayed, and many passionately held views about the requirements of happiness must be overturned. [vol. 1, p. 214]

Even so, he adds, "The radical project is not enough" (vol. 1, p. 214). One wonders what further dangers need to be added.

Daredevilry — motorcycle stunts, skydiving, and the like — has its place in life. But trying to model politics on it, recommending a "look-ma-no-hands" approach to our basic social institutions, is zany. Unger's enthusiasm invites what he would no doubt dismiss as tiresome and pedestrian reminders about the value of civil liberties, that banal system of checks and balances, and the other familiar baggage of liberal democracy. No doubt such practices can be reformed, and no doubt some of them should be. But exhilaration about change for the hell of it is exotic at best. Maybe Unger's activist friends in Brazil disappointed him because of their misbegotten belief in false necessity. But maybe they decided that his political crusades were flighty and irresponsible. Worse decisions have been made.

THE IMPERATIVES OF PLASTICITY?

I want to return to the double commitment of *Politics*. As a matter of fact, political outcomes are deeply contingent; and we ought to celebrate that contingency, to transform society endlessly. Unger im-

plores us to recognize the appeal of “plasticity,” of social relations that don’t bind us quite so relentlessly into monotonous routines. He doesn’t like the familiar distinction between fact and value, is and ought. So he takes some pains to insist that the two strands of his double commitment are intimately intertwined. I am no great defender of the is/ought gap: I think that indeed normative statements can’t be deduced from purely factual ones, but I also think that it doesn’t matter. Still, Unger’s own stumbling about the issue leads him to a wonderfully absurd exposition. To close, I want to consider that exposition.

Once we agree that it’s all up for grabs, Unger says, we have two choices. We can side with the ultra-theorists — he names Dewey (!) and Foucault (vol. 1, p. 237), but I think he really has in mind Kelman and Tushnet — and spend our time puncturing any claims about necessity, revealing over and over how contingent particular outcomes were. Or we can engage in super-theory. That is, we can affirm our “extravagant theoretical ambitions” (vol. 1, p. 150) and strive to develop sweeping generalizations that don’t deny contingency. Unger wants to go the route of super-theory. (Surprised?)

So emerge some transhistorical generalizations. “Each model of human association that helps constitute a plan of civilized life includes three elements: a group of ideals, slogans, and dogmas; a set of practices that, better or worse, stand for these ideals in fact; and an area of social experience to which the application of these principles remains confined” (vol. 2, p. 104). “Particular arrangements cannot easily coalesce within an institutional complex nor can these arrangements coexist over time if they embody very different degrees of the breaking open of society to politics” (vol. 2, p. 126; on why, see vol. 2, p. 166). “The enacted version of human association always has two aspects, which correspond to the two faces of human sociability” (vol. 2, p. 144), passionate attachment and instrumental exchange. “In all but stateless societies the disturbance of the relation between governmental power, on one side, and the system of social roles and ranks, on the other, is an indispensable part of context-transforming conflict” (vol. 2, p. 266). Most implausibly, even if limited to agrarian bureaucratic societies: “The ambition of every bureaucrat is to become a landholding aristocrat in his own right” (vol. 3, p. 14).

One might well wonder how all these claims square with a picture of social change as forever surprising us with new possibilities. Even if some of these claims are relatively formal or abstract, how can Unger be confident they’ll continue to hold true in the future? But leave that aside. For one strand of Unger’s super-theory offers a perfectly familiar way of bridging the fact/value gap: wishful thinking. One example: “The more entrenched [“formative contexts”] are . . . the steeper, more rigid, and more influential the social divisions and hierarchies to

which they give rise" (vol. 2, p. 61). A guarantee in the face of radical contingency: the more plasticity we attain, the more charmingly egalitarian our lives will be. Never fear the prospect that we will discover new contexts, at once extremely plastic and wildly inegalitarian. Unger takes considerable pains to distinguish his own brand of super-theory from theories that deny radical contingency. At moments like this, though, the distinction becomes vanishingly fine.

Nor is this (nearly) the only moment. Unger's text is peppered with other examples of wishful thinking. "Nothing succeeds like plasticity," (vol. 1, p. 198) proclaims our bold revolutionary; "no society can resist the imperative of plasticity without risking failure in the race for economic advantage and military security" (vol. 1, p. 214); "worldly success requires self-transformation" (vol. 3, p. 101). A society stuck in a rut is a sitting duck, just waiting for some boldly innovative economic or military competitor to overtake it.

How does Unger know this is true? Presumably from reflecting on historical evidence, which he apparently has mastered on a colossal scale. *Politics* casually parades what looks like an extraordinary knowledge of world history, what might put even Weber to shame. On just two pages (vol. 3, pp. 22-23), Unger tosses off comments about Chinese statecraft, the imperial unification of 221 B.C., the Ottoman palace system, European absolutism, *pomestye* land and *votchina* tenure from Ivan the Terrible to Peter the Great, early Yi policy in Korea, and the kongsin. "Remember," he mutters parenthetically — this academic use of that verb is beautifully snobbish — "Remember the Byzantine *ktemata stratiotika*, the Ottoman *timariots*, the Mughal *zamindars*, and the Aztec military life-tenants" (vol. 3, p. 22). On we go, hurtling through world history at a dizzying pace, through Romanus Lecapenus and Basil II, China's Toba Wei Empire and the early T'ang dynasty, the late Roman Empire, the Islamic Abbasid regime in the Near East and northern Africa.

I confess that I have absolutely zero knowledge of any of these historical episodes. Nor am I proud of this ignorance. But I confess too that I don't trust Unger's assessment of them. For I do know something about Tudor and Stuart England. And just a few pages before this imposing display of erudition, Unger refers as readily to "late sixteenth century England (. . . the time of Thomas Cromwell and Somerset)" (vol. 3, p. 19). How's that? Thomas Cromwell was put to death in 1540, Somerset in 1552. Late sixteenth century? Later on, Unger says, "[I]n the course of the English Civil War, the New Model Army almost got out of hand and jeopardized the country's basic institutions" (vol. 3, p. 175). Almost? The New Model refused to be disbanded, and was responsible for eliminating the House of Lords, purging the membership of the Commons, and having King Charles put on trial and executed. Isn't that jeopardy enough?

What are we to make of these errors? Some will be inclined to forgive Unger for what they will view as minor empirical mistakes. They will be enamored of his bold vision, of a sweeping panorama which enchants even if it's not quite accurate. Others, with a more sober regard for getting the facts straight, will seize on these mistakes as howlers. They will suspect that Unger's dazzling erudition is a sham. Sometimes Unger seems perversely bent on promoting the delights of being cavalier about facts. "A little curiosity," he comments on his own research, "goes a long way" (vol. 3, p. 96). Maybe too long a way.

Appearances aside, the imperatives of plasticity don't depend on Unger's reading of the historical evidence. They are nothing but a plausible a priori argument summoned up by the imagery of ruts and flexibility. But we shouldn't take that imagery for reality. (Does superior plasticity explain the enduring success of the Roman Catholic Church, surely one of the great institutional success stories of history? Doesn't the church's strength stem in part from its resolutely sticking to its core doctrines and roles?) Here's the nub of the wishful thinking that ties fact and value together: The endless and unpredictable churning of radical social change is possible, *and* it's good for individuals (since it allows them to express new facets of their inexhaustible personalities), *and* it's imperative for societies (else they'll be overtaken by lean and hungry competitors). *Politics* unwittingly endorses a secular theodicy: a Darwinian competition will go on rewarding the more plastic, punishing those caught in ruts, who happen to be nasty inegalitarians anyway. All's well that must end well. History turns out to have a plot after all, and Unger knows what's coming next. He is the social theorist as Merlin, less wise than magical, peering into a crystal ball. No fraud, no con man out to gull the rubes, he actually believes in his own vaunted powers: his is a marvelously innocent pose. No positivist, no "deep-structure theorist," he nonetheless confidently predicts the future.

From these dizzying heights, though, our brave super-theorist occasionally remembers his own strictures about the contingency of all things, his emphatic rejection of all "deep-structure" theories that pretend to offer such predictions. He realizes that his argument seems shot full of puerile contradictions. Then he retreats. He says, a bit lamely, that he only wants to endorse the claim that there is "a possible progression, which presents the radical project with its chance" (vol. 2, p. 281), that there is a "*possibility* of a certain precarious, indeterminate, reversible but nevertheless cumulative and momentous change in the character of our formative contexts as well as in their content" (vol. 2, p. 304; emphasis in original). Unger's ambivalence, his shifting uneasily between a vision of guaranteed success and one of endless contingency, shows up beautifully in this claim: "[T]he repeated practice of institutional dissociation and recombination is not a

random walk. It has — at least, it has often had — a direction” (vol. 3, p. 206). The inserted concession is devastating.

All Unger is entitled to, of course, is the more modest, contingent claim. The open secret that haunts these volumes, that history has no plot, haunts his own project to demonstrate the coming victory of plasticity. In the end, all he can say is that things might get better. So they might. But we knew that, surely, before opening these turgid pages. Save your money.