The future of the left
James Crabtree interviews Roberto Unger

Roberto Unger is one of the most innovative and interesting thinkers of the modern left. A philosopher, political theorist, legal scholar, political activist, adviser to world leaders and unashamed romantic, Unger's thought provides an at once difficult and refreshing perspective on attempts to reinvent democratic socialism. The following interview, conducted earlier this year in Unger's offices at Harvard University, is part of an ongoing series of Renewal interviews with leading left thinkers.

Born and educated in Brazil, Roberto Unger left to study law at Harvard University, staying longer than expected when his home country returned to dictatorship. Having been appointed to Harvard's faculty in his mid-twenties he became one of the leading lights in Critical Legal Theory, a movement that used the insights of post-modernism to unpick the underlying assumptions of legal doctrine. For the last thirty years he has mixed an original contribution to law and politics with political activism throughout Latin America and beyond. He is an adviser to various political leaders, including President Fox of Mexico and Ciro Gomes, a Brazilian presidential candidate ultimately defeated by Lula da Silva in 2002. He is currently planning a presidential run in Brazil, himself, claiming not to have been taken in by the promise of President Lula. 'When the woodsman enters the forest,' he said during one of our interviews, 'the trees examine the axe and claim "the handle is made of wood. The woodsman is one of us!"'

Unger's political writings are both impressive and intimidating. His style is not easy to follow. During the course of his interview with Renewal he mentioned an article he had been asked to submit to the London Review of Books laying out a new agenda for the left. The magazine, not noted for its chatty style or low-brow register, returned the piece saying it was 'insufficiently conversational'. Unger returned the note with a letter saying that 'even in conversation my style would never be considered conversational'. He writes with a mix of social theory excess and everyday bluntness. On the one hand his conversation is peppered with (often baffling) talk of 'context smashing', 'programmatic orientation' and political alliances that are 'transformative and solidaristic'. Yet on the other, his vision for the left he often describes simply as 'bigness', or human beings being able to reach their potential.

Unger's taste for complexity is seen most clearly in his mammoth trilogy - Social Theory, False Necessity and Plasticity Into Power – known collectively as Politics: a work in constructive social theory. His project in these works, what he describes as an 'anti-necessitation social theory', is nothing less than a universal theory of the left to fill the gap left by Karl Marx. Marxism, for Unger, is a busted

Renewal Vol.13 No.2/3 2005
flush. It is practically dangerous and theoretically flawed. Those who try to excavate fossils of truth from this dead theory will find nothing useful. In particular those who follow Marx in trying to divine a system of thought based on 'necessity' - historical laws that say one thing necessarily follows another - are going to get it wrong. But liberalism, with its timid acceptance of things as they are, is little better. Instead Unger proposes a theory in which people make the decisions, politics is all, everything is up for grabs, institutions can be changed fundamentally, and the only obstacle in achieving a more equal society is imagination. His two big themes - the need completely to restructure political economy, and to do so by re-imagining democratic institutions - run throughout the work.

More recently Unger's concern has been less about an all-encompassing post-marxian social theory, and more about a practical reinvention of the political philosophy of the left. In Democracy Realized: a progressive alternative he outlines in more detail many of the themes touched on in the following interview: the nature of modern global capitalism, the possibility of replacing social institutions, and the need for radical democratic experimentalism. This is not to say that his later work lacks the ambition of the earlier. One reviewer, for instance, said of Democracy Realized that it aims merely to reach a stage where 'a decisive shift occurs which destroys the fundamental inequalities of society, breaking the traditional linkage between wealth, heredity, education and power'. More recently still his book The Future of American Progressivism, co-written with African-American scholar Cornell West, provides the most accessible introduction to what Unger calls 'the dictatorship of no alternatives' facing the modern left.

Throughout the last year he has taught the course on the future of the left at Harvard Law School, and plans to publish a forthcoming book on the same subject. In both he deals explicitly with the need to reinvent 'the left' as a coherent body of thought with a programme for government. Richard Rorty, among America's leading contemporary leftist philosophers, wrote glowingly of Unger's attempts. Rorty thinks that Unger's work could begin to breathe new life into a western philosophical left-liberalism that had run its course. Unger, says Rorty, 'doesn't make moves in a game we know how to play'. Instead his heritage in the developing world provides a fresh perspective, one in which 'we fat, tired, North Americans must hark back to a time when our democracy was newer and leaner - when Pittsburgh was as new, promising and problematic as Sao Paolo is now'.

The left, for Unger, is caught in a bind. If it proposes changes that are radical they are interesting but utopian. If they propose changes that are incremental they are achievable but trivial. He claims that 'the reason why we think that every programmatic proposal is either utopian or trivial is that we have no confidence in any view of how structural transformation happens in history, or how alternatives are made and imagined'. While he thinks that change can be 'radical in direction but piecemeal in form', he contends that the left lacks both the method and the direction to establish this coherent vision for the future. 'If you don't know the port to which you sail,' he says, 'no wind helps.' In Unger's works the modern left might just find glimpses of the forward direction it seeks.
The state of the left

You have described contemporary politics as a ‘dictatorship of no alternatives’. Could you explain what you mean?

The adventures of the twentieth century are spent. No global ideology with the worldwide authority of classical liberalism or state socialism has arisen to take their place and to contest the arrangements now associated with the rich North Atlantic democracies. With this surprising silence of the intellect and with the consolidation of the American ascendency, an unquiet order has descended upon the world. There are no alternatives. The self-described ‘progressives’ appear on the stage of contemporary history as the humanisers of the inevitable: their programme has become the programme of their conservative adversaries with a falling discount. They disguise surrender as synthesis – for example, of social cohesion with economic flexibility. Their ‘third ways’ are the first way with sugar: the sweetener of compensatory social policy and social insurance making up for a failure to achieve any fundamental broadening of opportunity.

Do you rule out European welfare state democracy, the fundamental achievement of half a century of social democracy, as a viable vision for the future?

European social democracy has seemed to provide an alternative to the harshness of the American model. If the world could vote it would vote to become Sweden rather than the United States. It would choose a Sweden of the imagination. Yet you must understand European social democracy as a historical compromise in which those who wanted to radically reorganise the economy and the state called off their attack. In exchange the state was given the power to manage the economy, to even out the worst of economic insecurity, and to protect citizens against the market. There would be a protected sphere of social life, protected against the volatility of the market. There would be a supremacy of the social. In the end the compromise was that social democracy withdrew from economic production and instead took up redistribution.

The core of this compromise, in nations like Sweden, had three elements. First, it protected insiders against outsiders, by protecting a core of relatively privileged workers against the effects of instability in the labour market while also protecting businesses from instability in capital markets, for instance by making corporate take-overs less interesting. Second, it involved the protection of established business against big business, and the protection of family business against takeover. Third, it involved an agreement between business and labour on the running of the economy, an ongoing negotiation between ‘social partners’ which ensured a high level of social entitlements.
Why has this compromise become less valid? Have you specifically ruled out the ongoing viability of traditional social democracy as an answer to the left's quest for renewal?

The heart has been going out of historical social democracy. It is everywhere in retreat. Under the disguise of an effort to reconcile European-style social protection with American-style economic flexibility, social democracy has given up, one by one, all of these traditional traits, and retreated to the last-ditch defence of a high-level of social entitlements. In so doing it has surrendered not compromised. It has given up the rings to keep the finger. This eviscerated version of social democracy can neither address the problems of contemporary European societies nor bear the weight of humanity's hopes.

In particular, there are three problems which are currently outside the competence of traditional social democracy and which require more radical alternatives. First, social democracy cannot alter the narrowness of access to the gateways of access to the advanced sectors of the economy. This is a fundamental problem, and redistribution is not even a partial solution. The second problem beyond the limits of social democracy is the weakening of the basis of social cohesion, the thinning of the social cement. The practice of compensatory transfer payments has left the residual meaning of social solidarity as the movement of cheques through the mail. This means there is a third problem, namely that no institution, other than war, is big enough to bring people together. There can be no lifting up the individual out of the littleness of private life. Social democracy does not give people a better chance to live a big life, transfigured by ambition, surprise, and struggle.

The 1990s saw the introduction of a new generation of leaders of the left in developed nations. You said that their 'third ways are the first way with sugar': Do you think these leaders have achieved nothing of significance?

I don't diminish or deny the significance of current efforts – however ineffective – to broaden opportunity, to maintain a high level of social entitlements, to preserve a higher level of social spending, and to retain the commitment of the state to the provision of universal social services. All of this seems to be a real accomplishment.

As a political project, however, it suffers from many defects. The first defect is that it is still in the spirit of the historical compromise of social democracy, anchored in the sphere of redistribution and not in any attempt to reshape either production or politics. For this reason it remains vulnerable to the downswings of the domestic and world economy. Second, the fundamental problems of the advanced economies – economic disempowerment, social disconnection and personal belittlement – can no longer effectively be addressed within this sphere of redistribution. Third, as a political project, it suffers a crucial defect in its defensive character. It is not a project which is associated with energy or novelty. My view is that any political project, be it
right or left, that connects itself with restless and productive energy will control
the agenda of the near future.

One of the most distinctive claims you make in your works is that the
future of the left involves abandoning the link with the industrial working
class in favour of a link with what we used to call the petit bourgeoisie. Isn't
this just what Tony Blair and Bill Clinton tried to do?

The mass of ordinary humanity now has an imaginative horizon that is much
more petit bourgeois than it is proletarian. They dream of a small business or
independent professional existence, but they are still the working class. They
live off their labour. They do not command but are commanded. They are not
propped up hereditary transmission of either property or educational
advantage. The left must meet them on their own terms and help broaden the
repertoire of economic instruments and institutions that might respond to
their aspirations.

One view is that, if we abandon the link with the industrial working
classes, we must then have a post-ideological 'quality of life' politics addressed
vaguely to everybody. I say no. The special connection of the left to the working
class remains potent, and indispensable. But we have to re-interpret what is the
working class. The working class is today whoever is outside the charmed circle
of symbolic manipulation and discretionary power. This is where not only
wealth and income but increasingly discretion and fun are concentrated.

How do you reconcile this politics which speaks to the individual
aspirations of citizens with a politics which seeks collective change?

There cannot be this simple division of individualism and collectivism.
There must instead be an ever broadening circle of sympathy and
engagement. It is not realistic to oppose individualism with individuals as
soldiers of humanity in a collective enterprise. Instead we must think of
trying to take people the position they are in, often in despair and
concerned only for their immediate communities and families, and provide
them with a broader repertoire of institutions of engagement and sympathy.
Our current set up is much too narrow.

I give two examples. First, in production, government must engage
actively in the propagation and support of advanced experimentalist practices of
production outside the advanced sector of economy, the high-tech knowledge
intensive sectors. Broad parts of the economy would be broken open to these
advanced forms of experimentalist innovative forms of production. This could
create the basis for a whole range of forms of production that offer people
something beyond isolated, small-scale family business.

Second, from the caring economy, government should help form social
groups – teams of technicians and service providers – who would be able to
provide social services paid for by the state. They would not just provide standardised services under formula. They would innovate in the competitive provision of services, but they would be equipped, supported and monitored by the government. Every individual should be required to have responsibilities within the caring economy also.

The economy and the market

Part of your theory deals with economic reform. You argue that the productivity and practices currently found in the ‘vanguard’ of economic life should be expanded to the ‘rearguard’. What would you say to those who think that the practices of ‘vanguard’ capitalism are those which cause social inequality in the first place?

I think that is a misunderstanding. The high-tech companies of Silicon Valley, for instance, are quite egalitarian, anti-hierarchical and co-operative. I think what is difficult is to imagine these characteristics of production extended beyond the currently favourable terrain in which they now flourish. The high-tech elite looks around and says: ‘Why aren’t the rest like us?’ They imagine that the surrounding economic and social space can be transformed by a horizontal extension. But it isn’t that way, because their area characteristically depends on special features: high education, social capital, traditions of craft labour and so on. It is necessary to create functional equivalence of these prerequisites of the advanced forms of production. This cannot be done spontaneously by the market which now exists.

The left remains suspicious of the market, as if it is not ‘one of us’. How should the left view the market?

The quarrel of the left cannot be with the market. The horizon of the left cannot be limited to the regulating the market, or compensating for its inequalities through redistribution. Instead the left must deny the natural and necessary character of the existing form of the market. The same principle must be carried over, too, to civil society and democracy. We see this in all of the thinkers of the left – and none more clearly than Marx. Marx said the English political economists portrayed as universal laws of the economy what were in fact laws only of what he called the capitalist economy.

In the same way, today, that which others treat as universal and eternal we understand to be ephemeral and local. That is the basic impulse. In Marxism itself, and most of the basic forms of thought which serve the left, this impulse was obscured and perverted by its association with a host of deterministic assumptions. Now we must free it and radicalise it from those assumptions. The basic impulse of the left should be: market yes, free civil society yes, representative democracy yes. But this form that we now have of each of those is just the starting point. The right accepts these institutions as
horizons; the left takes it just as a point of departure. I think one of the most fundamental criticisms of the current generation of social democratic leaders – Clinton, Blair, Schroeder – is that in this crucial division they are on the side of the right.

**Reform of public services**

*You have also argued for a fundamental reshaping of the way the state provides services. Do you see the current social state as a workable model?*

My basic view is that the direct public provision of services should be the ceiling, not the floor. The present situation in the wealthy social democratic countries is this. The state provides standardised, relatively low quality services for the mass of the people. The rich people can opt out and get customised services.

What I propose then is that the state has the three functions. First, it should form in civil society the groups and agents that can provide new services. It is important not just to go to the market as it now exists and subcontract the services, but instead to help to produce new social agents who can provide those services competitively and differentially in a form which is both customised and innovative. Second, the state monitors and helps propagate the most successful practices, accelerating the process of experimental winnowing out of what does not work. Third, the state provides directly only those services which are too innovative, too difficult or too unrewarded by the market to be provided directly. The overall idea is then that the direct provision of social services becomes the ceiling, not the floor.

*Much as with your conception of economic reform, some might see your prescription as the same as that offered by the new right. Why is it different?*

It is true that what I propose has a superficial resemblance to the neoliberal idea of the privatisation of public services. Its basic impulse, however, is fundamentally different. The basic idea, and the sense in which it resembles the neo-liberals, is that the provision of public services should not be the welfare equivalent of Fordist mass production. Nothing now in the world develops that way. It is a backward form of production. It only produces low quality, dissatisfaction, suppressed innovation and a minimum standard of service.

Instead the state should organise the provision of public services so that they can be customised for everyone. The provision of public services must be an innovative collective practice, moving forward the qualitative provision of the services themselves. That can no longer happen in our current understanding of efficiency and production by the mechanical transmission of innovation from the top. It can only happen through the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below.
Do you think that other non-state agents and institutions can deliver public services with the same values and standards as state providers?

The crucial method here is not to take the market as it now exists. We have a project, and the agents for it do not exist. So you must form those agents. You must say that we will not play out this script with the agents currently on the stage. The ones we need don’t exist. So we will make them. The changing of the agents, and the forming of the next horizon, is the crucial distinction between my orientation and the neo-liberal orientation.

That point should be generalised. In the advanced societies, and especially in Europe, there should now be a three-way debate. One side of the debate should be those who are simply trying to hold the fort of the mid-twentieth-century social democratic settlements, those who say let us try to keep as many of the different entitlements of the left as we can. Second, the debate should include the compassionate neo-liberals who want only as much social entitlement as is compatible with the draconian discipline of competition, both domestic and international. Third, the debate should include those who recognise that the historical settlement of twentieth-century social democracy is not good enough, but who are not resigned to be merely the formulators of a softer version of the neo-liberal agenda. Their objective must be the reconstruction of the institutional repertoire of contemporary societies. That, I believe, is the forward vision.

You argued earlier that social solidarity had to be more than ‘cheques in the mail’, and you have previously argued for a form of social service. How would this differ from the conception of national service currently employed in Germany?

It is fundamentally important that every able bodied adult should have a position in both the production system and the caring economy. But I don’t think it makes sense to have a single dogmatic formula. We have to try different things. It can be weekend work. It can be a month in the year. It can be two years in everyone’s life. It will depend on their professional specialisation, on what they have to contribute and on what can be further developed for them to contribute. But the principle must be that this service is part of everyone’s life. Everyone must be responsible for other people outside their immediate social circle.

Immigration, security and internationalism

You have argued elsewhere that the left must press for increased immigration. This is a controversial view in contemporary European societies, where the left is struggling to find a compromise between economic solidarity and social diversity. It was also a controversial issue in the recent UK election. Why do you see it as so important?
I see immigration as a problem for the left especially within the context of the reformation of the global economic order. This order is based on three principles. First, the maximisation of free trade. Second, the imposition of a single version of economic order on the whole world in the name of free trade. Third, freedom of movement for capital and goods but not labour. All of these three should be replaced. The third principle – that capital is free and labour is unfree – should be replaced by the principle that labour and capital gain freedom together in small, gradual steps.

Why? For two main sets of reasons. First, greater labour mobility, achieved by gradual advances not a sudden leap, overshadows in its practical consequences anything else which could be done throughout the world to diminish inequality among nations. It produces formidable problems, not least threats to labour rights and social entitlements in the receiving countries. But all of these problems can be dealt with by gradualism, so long as we understand what the correct direction is.

The second reason is moral. Nations in the future should not be tribes, organised on a quasi-biological or quasi-familial principle of generational succession. Nations should be a form of moral specialisation within humanity. Humanity develops by developing its powers and possibilities in different directions, embodied in different institutional arrangements throughout the world. It is intolerable that an individual be born into one society yet to be unable to escape it.

Do you think that modern nations can ensure a commitment to social equity when their identities are increasingly in flux?

I see reform of immigration not only a guarantee for the individual. It is a fundamental guarantor of the moral character of the nation. The nation must become increasingly a form of life which is organised around affinities of experience and commitment, and not tribal connections. This is not a moral transformation which can be produced by fiat, in one big leap. But it is a transformation that is already taking place. If we look at the democratic societies today they are already at some point of departure from the two old ideas of the nation. It is very clear that the sympathies of the left must lie along the line of accelerating this passing of tribalism.

Fear of immigration is often characterised as part of a wider problem of insecurity in modern societies. How should the left counteract the view that it is less able than the right to deal effectively with a range of issues from domestic security against crime to domestic and international security against terrorism?

This spectrum of crime, security and terrorism represents important opportunities for the left. First, you have ordinary or episodic crime. The most
important thing we have learned here is that the biggest difference arises when there collaboration between the police and local organisations, especially local community organisations.

Is the same true in the international arena? Can a combination of community empowerment and effective policing counter the threat of terrorism? Indeed, is terrorism and security a political issue for the left?

The problems of international security are precipitated by the security problems of the United States. There I believe it is crucial not to accept uncritically the discourse about security and terrorism, but to understand that what is called international terrorism is largely a war of certain insurgents against the United States and its allies. The problem of international security then becomes entangled with the question dealing with the American hegemony. The American ascendancy is now a fact. It is no good to deny this under the cover of the juridical fantasy of the equality of states. But the American ascendancy in its present form presents an immense danger to the world. It suppresses the emergence of alternatives. The concern of democrats and experimentalists must now be to contain and transform the American ascendancy. The combat of international terrorism is simply one of the domains on which this will take place.

For a long time, even before it had consolidated its current hegemonic position, the foreign policy objectives of the United States have been to assert undisputed hegemony in the western hemisphere and to prevent any regional hegemon in another hemisphere from so consolidating its regional power that it can then make a bid for world hegemony. The interest of the world, however, is to prevent the United States from confusing its legitimate security interest with its insistence of transforming the whole world in its own image.

Reform of politics and democracy

You have argued for what you call a 'high energy politics'. Is this an attempt both to breathe life into political processes and make radical reform more possible at the same time?

Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain. Its organisation determines in the end the terms on which all of the other terrains can be made. The basic idea can be explained by a physical metaphor of structure. A structural politics has as its object not simply marginal redistributive changes, but changes of the structure of things themselves, including the structure of the market, civil society and the state. Such a politics is necessarily a high temperature politics.

This type of politics, as we have known it throughout history, is one occasioned by trauma especially in the form of war. It is also extra- or anti-institutional. What do I want for the left? I want a politics that is high
energy: not dependent on war or economic crisis, but one that makes
transformation endogenous. I also want a politics in which this
transformation is not anti-institutional, but is institutionalised. We don’t
have to choose between Madison and Mussolini. We can have a form of
acceleration of political life itself.

Would not such a politics be inherently unstable? Isn’t it in the interests of
the left to be able to build institutions which then are very difficult for the
right to remove, like the British NHS?

It is interesting to compare complaints of potential instability to nineteenth-
century debates about universal suffrage. At that time the right and the left
both believed that the introduction of a universal suffrage would precipitate
European society into a period of revolutionary change and instability. Both
thought that if the propertyless masses were given the vote they would
dispossess the people who did have property. Of course this is not what
happened. Universal suffrage was instituted and, basically, nothing happened!

It is no good to contrast a simple image of stability and instability. If you
have a building which is able to sway in the wind so that it is less vulnerable to
an earthquake is it less stable? No, it is more stable. It can change. And we must
make it possible to have this reform without crisis. This will not be a kind of
permanent flux but the transformation of political experience into a process of
iterated but unthreatening reforms. The whole caste of the leftist imagination
associates this iteration of small-scale reform with the abandonment of large
ambition to re-shape things. One of the points which I think is most difficult to
grasp about my ideas is the claim that it is possible to associate decomposition
of large projects into small pieces yet with the preservation of an impulse to
radical transformation.

How do you make a radical politics popular? If you seek to change society
fundamentally, how do you take the people with you?

A false dilemma paralyses programmatic thought. A proposal that is distant
from present ways of doing things is derided as interesting but utopian. A
proposal that is close to established practice is dismissed as feasible but trivial.
Lacking a credible conception of structural transformation, we fall back to a
false criterion of political realism: proximity to the existent. This has lead to
the view now dominant in Europe that we have grown up, that we are no
longer children or romantics, that the great ideological adventures of
humanity are spent. They say must colonise the existing space and make the
best of it. Politics will be a cold affair, until there is another crisis or war. I
think this is a diminished view of human life within which we can not realise
any of our higher ambitions. Paradoxically it means we cannot even solve our
practical problems.
Within that view all of our understandings of agency become congealed and frozen. A leftist cannot accept it. The basic impulse must be to unfreeze things. This unfreezing always must happen through two manoeuvres. It has to speak in the cold calculus of interest, the appeal to people's present understandings of their interests such as the appeal to the petit-bourgeois aspirations. And then it must also speak in the tongue of the prophetic anticipation of another world of unrealised human potential.

In the realm of the calculus of interest the leftist must promote a conception of a group interest which is transformative and socially solidaristic over one which is socially exclusive and conservative. Second, this must be combined with a visionary impulse that finds a language in which to translate the vision that things might be different. It is very difficult to be both a ruthless calculator and an intransigent prophet. But that combination is the mark of a statesman of the left. No word should be more sacred to the left than hope. Any discourse of the left built on hopelessness is a form of the right disguised as the left. My most fundamental complaint against these contemporary social democrats – Blair, Clinton, Schroeder – is that they hope for too little because they understand and see too little.

James Crabtree is a Fulbright scholar at Harvard's John F Kennedy School of Government.