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# TEMPORARY COLUMNS: OBAMA, UNGER AND I

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I sat in on a class that Obama also attended at Harvard Law School. I believe it was the Spring or Fall of 1991. The class was called, "Re-inventing Democracy,". It was taught by Roberto Unger, who dresses like an undertaker, lectures like a prophet, and thinks like a philosopher in a hurry. At the time, I was doing my doctorate in political science at MIT. Students at MIT and Harvard were permitted to take classes at each other's institution.

Unger is now the "minister of strategic affairs," in Lula's government in Brazil. His colleagues call him "the minister of ideas,". Unger belonged to what is known as the critical legal studies movement in law. They are leftist, foucauldian, postmodernish, multiculturalist critics of how law has traditionally been approached in the academic (primarily), professional and political worlds. Critical legal scholars have had more success with changing academia than the "real world". Still, their views are important to understand the role of power (racial, class, gender, heterosexual, among others) in law. In fact Unger's first (and I believe his best) book is called Politics and Knowledge.

Roberto Unger's own work goes beyond critical legal studies. He has been describing a new world full of political possibilities and economic opportunities for quite some time. He described this world then as an alternative to liberalism and Marxism. While the world he describes remains the same, the alternatives he critiques have changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe. He goes after neo-liberalism on the right, and on the left he attacks what he calls - "the populist authoritative nationalist version of Latin America," associated with Chavez, and the "well behaved version of Western Europe," associated with social democratic parties of the north Atlantic. He criticises both lefts for stifling individual and institutional creativity. He argues instead for a world of economic and political experimentation, where the state's function is to first provide the social and political tools (including insurance for individual and collective failures) to encourage innovation, and then to get out of the way. Innovate and experiment, till things get stuck, either because the strategy has failed, or you have come to a fork in the political road. Then let the people decide how to get unstuck through a plebiscite. The

heroic class of his theory are the petty bourgeoisie, dismissed by marxists, and disregarded by liberals. He believes they are the wellspring of innovation as the classic boundary crossing group, finding new ways of surviving in an institutional and ideological environment that is inhospitable to them. But their innovations are disregarded, dismissed or suppressed by a combination of ignorance (among those who seek emancipation through Marxism) and enmity (among those who seek wealth through capitalism). The result is a failure to harness and increase innovations that can help society progress. Instead, Unger argues those dissatisfied with the world moving towards a divide between rich, fat and comfortable white people, and poor, hungry and uncomfortable black ones, are left with authoritarian Third Worldism and phlegmatic North Atlantic social democracy as the only available alternatives.

While it is easy to be sceptical about Unger's capacity to translate his ideas into practical policies, there is no doubt that his work captures the disaffection many of us feel with the failures of the dominant neo-liberal model, and the uninspiring alternatives that have been presented to us. It says something appealing about Obama, that he attended this class, instead of one on say corporate tax law that many other Harvard law students planning to pursue another career route probably did. Dissatisfied with the world we inhabited, he too was struggling with ideas for a better future one.

One day in the midst of all this high minded theorising, students in this class staged a (mini) "revolt" against Unger. I do not recall exactly what sparked it off, but a student (planned or unplanned) took on Unger's own commitment to democracy. Since this was a class about re-inventing democracy in radically new ways, Unger did not discourage challenges to his ideas and queries about his approach. This attack, however, went beyond the realm of Unger's ideas, but to his personal commitment to implementing them in the very sphere he had control over, the class room. The attack was that while Unger talked about re-inventing democracy in the world, the class was taught in a hierarchical manner, like any other. In short, his class was run like a Latin American fiefdom, while he posed as a radical democrat.

He behaved like he knew more than we did, so the critique went. He taught by lecturing, and we, "the students, learned by trying to digest what he said. The point, at least to the extent I can recall one - was that Unger was not engaging the class in a manner that enabled them to participate more fully. He set the agenda, the content and the tenor of the discussion. And the students had to fall in line. More over, those revolting charged that some students seemed to speak more than others, implying that Unger was permitting a select few to domineer class discussion. And so one student after another piled on repeating variations of the same critical theme and accusing Unger of hypocrisy. The class ended in the middle of the uproar.

I was bemused by the whole incident walking back. And by the time I got to my flat the supercilious attitude I had assumed towards my fellow students, rich and privileged members of the corporate elite-in-waiting who were posing at radicalism, had turned into disdain. What do they expect they teach and the professor listens? How could these students be so naïve about what a classroom is? Or who a professor is? How else is he to teach other than lecture in a class with seventy odd students? And they are the ultimate hypocrites taking a class on re-inventing democracy, while interviewing for jobs with corporate law firms.

I had never felt that Unger or for that matter any other professor, however authoritarian and hierarchical in the class room, was necessarily smarter than me, just by being my professor. Certainly, I acknowledged that some were. But the reason they were the professor and I the student, was more pragmatic. They had already struggled with questions I was struggling with. And they (probably) had read far more books than I had, in doing so. So their experience and possibly wisdom might help me navigate a little quicker my own struggle with ideas. Did this mean that they were smarter? I was loathe to admit it of those who were, and happy to deny it of those who weren't.

The following week, I returned to class expectantly for the second act in the drama. I was not the only one. There were many new faces in class, along side the regulars. Word had spread there was going to be a showdown in Unger, classroom. So the cheap stalls were full. And Unger began as he always uncannily did, from the very word where he left off the previous week. He acknowledged the mini revolt and then proceeded to express his disagreement with its rationale.

He said that for him the, form, of the class was dictated by practical aspects. He disagreed that just because a professor lectured and students listened, they ought to feel less smart or agree with his views. In fact, he claimed that he always did think he was smarter than his lecturers even though he had to listen to them. And as a student who never spoke in class, he certainly felt that those who did usually made fools of themselves, rather than actually dominate discussion. He also argued there was nothing about the nature of the classroom that precluded students from disagreeing with his ideas, forming their own, or simply dismissing his altogether. And finally he came up with the most brilliant summary of teaching approaches (in a large lecture classroom) I had heard. Here is what he said:

There are three forms of pedagogical discourse. The first is the no-holds-barred philosophical discourse. The chief requirements of which are infinite amounts of time and a willingness to waste it. The second is the pseudo socratic method, with the illusion of freedom and the reality of structure. Here the professor asks a question. Joe responds, "I'm wrong" in the view of the professor. The professor says that was a very interesting answer Joe, now can we please get on with the discussion. The third is what I do. I present my own ideas. You then develop and sharpen your own, by arguing against and critiquing mine. I do not expect that the outcome of this process will be that you come over to mine.,

Unger then opened up the class for more comments and suggestions about what to do. He had a little trick up his sleeve, but he wanted to first give everyone hankering for a showdown an opportunity to have a say. One supporter piped in from the gallery saying that Unger should not be discouraged (as if he were when he was quite enjoying himself), but that, he should know, in the words of Nixon, that a silent majority was with him. After the tumult had settled down a bit, Obama took the stage. He captured the mood of the outspoken minority in the class, idealistic (even if naïve) outrage about hierarchy in the university. Without losing the realistic view of why we go there in the first place there are people who know more than we do about books at a University and spend more time thinking about them than most others. He was good, really good. Though not succinct, he was eloquent. Students quietened down and listened. So did I. For a moment I even suspended my cynicism about Harvard law students in the class, as corporate elite-in-waiting posing as radical democrats. He finally ended his speech.

There were few other comments afterwards. But they seemed superfluous after Obama's.

Finally Unger came in with his denouement. He invited the students to take over the class. He asked any interested group of students to develop a syllabus, an agenda and a reading list, and visit his office and discuss it with him. He assured them that he would not just consider this input but actually work with it. It may have been this that put students off. But in any case, anyone who has had to teach knows that developing an agenda and content for a class in a coherent, interesting and pedagogically useful way takes time and/or

experience. The students had neither. None showed up in his office and we returned the next week to business as usual, much to my relief.

This minor episode (or at least my reaction to it) prefigures my response to Obama as a Presidential candidate sixteen years later. I recall verbatim Unger's brilliantly succinct summary of pedagogical approaches. While I remember the tenor of, I struggle to recall a single word in Obama's eloquent intervention. He is inspiring as a speaker on change. But, however much I would like to, I cannot quite shake off my doubts about him as a maker of it. ■

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## A SCHOLARSHIP IN MEMORY OF BERNADEEN SILVA

As you know we are making every effort to inaugurate a scholarship fund in memory of Bernadeen Silva who played a pivotal role in the women's movement in Sri Lanka.

In the light of this background Women's Education and Research Centre WERC wants to initiate a scholarship fund and make an award in her memory. As Ms Bernadeen was a personality who worked to empower people and to create an environment where everyone has equal opportunity, we thought it would be ideal to inaugurate a scholarship fund, and make an award in her name as means of continuing her dream.

Writings, plays and performances that seek to give a feminist message to the society need support. These artistic expressions designed by enthusiastic individuals in our society, often go unnoticed due to the lack of recognition. The scholarship fund we propose to inaugurate will encourage young people to come out and prove their skills. It will also motivate them to create a violence free society with equal opportunity for all. There has been no award of this nature

specifically meant for feminists and women in Sri Lanka. As personal friends and colleagues of Bernadeen with whom she has worked in various organizations, we wish to approach you for help, either you as individuals or your organizations. We hope to receive contributions in the range of Rs.10,000 from about nine organizations, which we have identified, as having been closely associated with her.

We propose to inaugurate this fund before her first death anniversary, which falls in February 2008. We shall be grateful if you could please forward your cheques in favour of Women's Education and Research Centre. We shall be thankful if you could please let us have your response to this request as soon as possible.

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