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On Progressive Alternative: Unger versus Žižek

Abstract

*In the paper we discuss the question of the future of democracy within some current projects of the emancipatory politics. We first critically approach Žižek's and Badiou's well-known revitalization of the idea of communism and link their projects to the burning issues of inequalities in the world system. Following this approach we elaborate on R.M. Unger's recent book *The Self Awakened* and both defend his version of radicalized pragmatism and enlarge some of his uses of pragmatism (divinization, awakening of the self) to wider politico-ethical contexts.*

Key words

pragmatism, democracy, emancipatory politics, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Roberto Mangabeira Unger

I

In his recent book *The Self Awakened*, Roberto Mangabeira Unger presents the reader with the *credo* of his radicalized pragmatism as a program of social reconstruction. He writes:

“A radicalized pragmatism is the operational ideology of the shortening of the distance between context-preserving and context-transforming activities. It is thus a program of permanent revolution – however, a program so conceived that the word ‘revolution’ is robbed of all romantic otherworldliness and reconciled to the everydayness of life as it is.”¹

For the pragmatist Unger, “the shortening of the distance” is a mark of practical progress as needed in times of economic and social instability. It is thus related to the inequalities as perceived within the broadest social reality. Moreover, it is a mark of a “permanent revolution”, taking place in the midst of our lives, a “revolution” robbed of its historico-ontological necessities. It is interesting in this respect to read Cornel West's concluding chapter from his excellent study *American Evasion of Philosophy* – namely, for West, Unger's philosophy is “the most detailed delineation of third-wave left romanticism we have.”² Despite Unger's reservations about Dewey's ‘naturalistic’ version

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Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Self Awakened* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 57.

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Cornel West, *American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin

Press, 1989), p. 218. West identifies three waves of left romanticism in their respective American and European contexts: Jefferson and Rousseau – Emerson and Marx – Dewey and Gramsci. For West, Unger stands at the intersection of both strands.

of pragmatism (I will briefly approach his criticism of Dewey later), I agree with West that it is the romantic spirit that prevails in Unger's thoughts but I disagree with the point expressed by West when discussing a supposed lack of care and attention for "burning cultural and political issues in the everyday lives of ordinary people" in Unger's project.³ I believe Unger's proposal is both ethically and religiously connected to those issues, as I will try to show later. I also agree with West that it is the case of his third-world origins (Brazil) and first-world academic status (Harvard Law professor) that fuels his important romantic project of social reconstruction and consequently the imagination for future socio-political praxis.

If we recall Unger's phase on a "permanent revolution" then it is necessary to define the locus of attitudes that will be a viable alternative to the extant system. So I would first like to pay attention to Žižek and Badiou and their 'anti-democratic' endorsement of communism which in their view is the only option for a radical or alternative political thinking or radicalized political praxis in today's world. The criticism of this case will help me to illuminate the pressing need for a significantly different approach I will defend in the second section of my paper, following Unger's insightful and radical pragmatist imagination.

We can argue with Unger that any revolutionary attempt should be robbed of its historico-ontological burden. Žižek's approach in his recent books *In Defense of Lost Causes* and *The Parallax View* seems to follow this 'detachment' in an extreme way: Žižek argues for opening up the emancipatory place exactly from Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" way of "passive aggression as a proper radical political gesture".⁴ I recognize this move as a Žižek's 'Middle way' – parallax gap, tension, noncoincidence; an existential withdrawal as the most radical intervention; the dialectical materialism proper⁵ – between two alternatives that fuel his revolutionary temper, alternatives I find rather obsolete for addressing today's pressing issues concerning inequality. Žižek diverts from historical materialism precisely from the perspective of the gap "between humanity and its *own* excess".⁶ But I do not think that the battle lines are drawn between the camp of "democracy-to-come" idealists (Lévinasians and others, including pragmatists and myself, of course) on one side, and different (post)revolutionary subjects (class struggle) on the other. There is a much broader spectrum of alternatives existing in the world of today. I would say Žižek finds his dialectical position as an enlightened/*corrected* Buddhist nonduality mode (the Middle way) of detachment (disengagement) from the illusory Reality (the Real).⁷ In terms of political economy, the ultimate parallax gap for Žižek, it means that we shall restrain from both "everyday material social life" as well as the "speculative dance of Capital (...) which seems to be disconnected from ordinary reality".⁸ Everyone today could agree with this double move away from the so called 'neoliberal' program. But why do I still find this constellation false, even if I share most of Žižek's observations and applaud his detachment from historical necessities as mentioned earlier? I can answer by referring to Badiou – his presence and influence in Žižek's recent books is substantial.

At times it is difficult to decide which thinker is more radical: either Žižek in his idiosyncratic (sympathetic) analyses of a revolutionary terror, or Badiou in his absolute critique of democracy as a political system and as an idea. But both share one important thing, which, in my view, still prevents both of them to release themselves from the heavy ontological burden of historico-ontological necessities. Let me illustrate the point with Žižek's favourite example – the Soviet Communism under Stalin:

“... in contrast to Nazism and American capitalism, it was only Soviet Communism which, despite the catastrophe it stands for, *did* possess true inner greatness (...) Here we should follow Badiou, who claims that, despite the horrors committed on its behalf (or, rather, on behalf of the specific form of these horrors), Stalinist Communism was inherently related to a Truth-Event (of the October Revolution) while Fascism was a pseudo-event, a lie in the guise of authenticity. Badiou refers here to the difference between *désastre* (the Stalinist ‘ontologization’ of the Truth-Event into a positive structure of Being) and *désêtre* (the Fascist imitation/staging of a pseudo-event called ‘Fascist Revolution’): *mieux vaut un désastre qu’un désêtre* (...) Stalinism did not sever the last thread that linked it to civilization. The lowest Gulag inmate still participated in the universal Reason: he had access to Truth of History.”⁹

I find this Badiou-Žižek ontologization of Stalinism’s historical necessity to be a key obstacle for the understanding of politics I would like to offer as an example of emancipatory potential. Badiou claims “that *communism is the right hypothesis*”¹⁰ and that everyone that abandons this hypothesis immediately resigns himself to the market economy. In the line of previous attempts Badiou thinks of “a new modality of existence of the hypothesis to come into being”.¹¹ According to Žižek (and Badiou), we have to begin from the beginning – i.e. we have “to descend to the starting point and choose a different path”.¹² It is a Nietzschean-Heideggerian legacy that I find resonating in this thought (Žižek finds Nietzsche as being attuned to his parallax view and interprets Heidegger’s elaborations of *polemos* as being not entirely coherent); the Nietzschean idea of eternal recurrence thus resonates both in Badiou and Žižek.

II

Let me now outline some of the key features of the transformative and experimentalist potential in Unger’s recent thought. Unger contends that the person with whose teachings the ideas of his book (*The Self Awakened*) have the closest kinship is Nicholas de Cusa. For a pragmatist this is a very rare contention indeed. One could compare it with Lévinas’ famous ‘presence’ of *Talmud* in *Totality and Infinity*. For example, Dewey wrote his *A Common Faith* only to

³ Ibid., p. 222. West refers to race, gender etc.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 342. Cf. also his *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) and Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (London: Verso, 2008).

⁵ Cf. *The Parallax View*, p. 6f.

⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

⁷ See: *ibid.*, p. 384.

⁸ Ibid., p. 383.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 285 f. and 291. Behind this “privileged” historico-ontological experience from Gulag, as a “proof” for Žižek’s claim, lies a weird story (it sounds crazy and tasteless even

for Žižek!) about inmates sending birthday telegrams to Stalin “while one cannot even imagine Jews from Auschwitz sending Hitler a telegram for his birthday” (p. 291). For an ex-citizen of an ex-Communist state (like myself) the observation is really tasteless: I find it as a testimony for Žižek’s uncertainty about ethics as *prima philosophia*, more precisely, I find it as a serious rupture within his political constellation.

¹⁰ A. Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, p. 97.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 115. Cf. also: Slavoj Žižek, “How to Begin from the Beginning”, *New Left Review* 57 (May–June 2009), pp. 43–55 and his elaboration of Negri’s and Hardt’s notion of ‘commons’.

¹² S. Žižek, “How to Begin from the Beginning”, p. 51.

complement his social thought with some pressing religious issues: God for Dewey is a growing tradition, and the new meaning of God is being revealed through the human imaginative faculty. Imagination is thus treated by Dewey as the entry of as-yet-unachieved things into the horizons of our existence. For Dewey, the idea of God is that of unity of all the ideal purposes determining our actions. But nowhere in his writings is there an explicit demand towards “infinity” in us. One could say that Dewey is thus a once-born soul.¹³ In one of his last essays, Rorty also contended that, in his pragmatism, there is a mysterious sense of the holy, “bound with the hope that someday, any millennium now, [our] remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law”.¹⁴ But – analogously – Rorty is still closer to Dewey’s religious outlook here. On the other hand, Unger’s principal goals are the radicalization of democracy and the divinization of the person and it is within this constellation that his radicalized pragmatism operates in a way unknown to pragmatists before him.

What does Unger tell us with the notion of divinization of the person? First we have to understand that Unger harshly criticizes James and Dewey for their naturalistic bias that only leads to limited interventions in the world. Dewey’s transformative potential in his communitarian democracy is not radical enough. For Unger, both thinkers stay close to what we already have. But hope must outreach experience. Unger’s criticism of Dewey’s naturalism is not in line with Rorty which, quite inversely, found in Dewey traces of metaphysics: according to Rorty, in Dewey there still is a “standpoint from which experience can be seen in terms of some ‘generic traits’...”¹⁵ This also means, of course, that a communitarian democracy as proclaimed by Dewey unfortunately is controlled by this standpoint and Rorty’s solution is only logical – we have to replace the talk about “experiences” with conversation. For Rorty, democracy is now comprised in a series of gradual re-descriptions of practices, habits etc. – according to different sets of vocabularies of his liberal ironies and their respective personal and public re-descriptions. We can have both in us – Nietzsche and Mill, for Rorty. But Rorty’s melioristic version of political or social pragmatism is far from being radical. Now we have Unger, which, according to West is a representative of a third-wave left romanticism, and which is criticising his pragmatist forerunners (and others as representatives of a so called “perennial philosophy”) and talking about the “divinization” of the person – about the “the idea of the infinity of the human spirit”.¹⁶ I would only like to point here for the moment to Jean-Luc Nancy, for whom the community also is to be found in the vicinity of sacred.¹⁷ To return to Unger: the key to his thought in my opinion lies between the prospect of our shared future (i.e. infinity in us which in its practical sense is close to Dewey’s common faith and Rorty’s eschatological projection of the sacred) on one side and the prospect of our finitude/death on the other.¹⁸ The task of pragmatism thus lies in

“... reconciling the two projects (...) the empowerment of the individual – that is to say, his raising up to godlike power and freedom – and the deepening of democracy – that is to say, the creation of forms of social life that recognize and nourish the godlike powers of ordinary humanity, however bound by decaying bodies and social chains.”¹⁹

Only on this ground it is possible to imagine a transformative making/unmaking/remaking of society. The “revolutionary” project then unites both social reconstruction and our self-transformation, later being also called the “spiritual” awakening of the self.²⁰ It is gradualist (and melioristic) in its method but revolutionary in the outcome.

I have so far tried to present the basics of Unger's pragmatist constellation and of his transformative project in philosophy (and politics). Now I would like to turn to the politico-ethical part of my paper. The question could be raised with Unger, namely, if there is an ability in us to *see beyond the limits* (of a class, caste, inequality or the excluded) then this ability springs from the rich reservoir of our imagination. What does it mean to *see beyond the limits*? What consequences will this *spiritual-transformative* vision have for politics?

Unger defines openness to new experience and openness to the other person with the term 'divinization'.²¹ Like the pragmatist historicists, Unger thinks that God mysteriously needs us (our shared future) – as we need Him (our finitude). Various past historical narratives, such as Marxism (which, for Unger, "inspired and misdirected transformative politics"²²), were also a part of redemptive projects (i.e. within different narratives of salvation). But if we are to preserve the ethical core of this *democratic* process it is only the logic of divinization that for Unger has the power to transform our respect into compassion, fairness into mercy and forbearance into self-sacrifice.

Let me in this short reflection turn to Unger's notion of deepening the democracy and culture. I have already pointed to the fact that two of Unger's principal goals are the "radicalization of democracy and the divinization of the person". The virtues of divinization consist of a pragmatico-ethical "openness to new experience and openness to the other person".²³ For the second part of this constellation I have tried to identify/indicate its ethical core in my previous analysis; for the first part I would like to point to some consequences of the proposed "deepening" of democracy. Let us for this purpose recall that for Unger the task of pragmatism lies in

"... reconciling the two projects (...) the empowerment of the individual – that is to say, his raising up to godlike power and freedom – and the deepening of democracy – that is to say, the creation of forms of social life that recognize and nourish the godlike powers of ordinary humanity, however bound by decaying bodies and social chains."²⁴

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See: Robert B. Westbrook, "An Uncommon Faith", in: Stuart E. Rosenbaum (ed.), *Pragmatism and Religion* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 192. This of course is a paraphrase of the distinction James makes (after F. W. Newman) in Lecture IV of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* – "the once born" are those who "have no metaphysical tendencies" (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, in: William James, *Writings 1902–1910* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), p. 93).

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Santiago Zabala (ed.), *The Future of Religion / R. Rorty and G. Vattimo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 29–41.

15

Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 72–89 ("Dewey's Metaphysics").

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R. M. Unger, *The Self Awakened*, p. 26.

17

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (P. Connor (ed.); Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 31.

18

R. M. Unger, *The Self Awakened*, p. 26.

19

Ibid., p. 27f.

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For Unger spirit is "a name for the resistant and transcending faculties of the agent" (*ibid.*, p. 38).

21

Ibid., p. 229.

22

Ibid., p. 215.

23

Ibid., p. 239.

24

Ibid., p. 27f.

According to Unger, for the majority of working men and women the present situation simply means that they are hopelessly tied to the routine reality of the “instrumental attitude toward their work”.²⁵ This means that there is not enough initiative in societies to address the ethico-political core of our shared experience as a community. The creation of forms of social life that will nourish the *godlike powers of humanity* is therefore related to the problem of a social bond: in its present state it is “thinned to the point of breaking.”²⁶ This means that even within present “social” (liberal) democracies almost only existing solidaristic link between different sectors consists within various social transfers. Is this all that our democracies today can offer us? The notion of the deepening of democracy is thus closely related to the raising of new alternatives *qua* initiatives to the extant neoliberal political system. The concrete program and a manifesto for a socio-political change needed within the world of democracies has already been presented in Unger’s *Democracy Realized*.²⁷ It is a conceivable plan for politicians and economists if inspired by his idea of democratic experimentalism. With his method, he strives to identify the most pressing problems of contemporary democratic societies (such as issues of social cohesion, economic and social differences etc.), while avoiding ideological labels that hindered considerations of the experience of democratic coexistence in the traditional social and political thought. Unger thus strives to create conditions and room for credible alternatives to the neo-liberal economic and political system/s. At a time when in political speech, the old and traditional divisions to the left and right are yielding to an utilitarian politico-economic reality, Unger’s consideration of a progressive alternative is worthy of a detailed analysis. But again, what could in the politico-ethical sense the notion of “deepening” of democracy mean for us? How is it related to the “divinization” of humanity, as conceived by Unger in *The Self Awakened*?

Since Rorty the vast majority of (neo)pragmatist philosophers has been highly disturbed by the presence of the so called “vertical” metaphors of the social life in philosophy – metaphors like ‘deep’, ‘spiritual’, ‘divinized’, etc.²⁸ They have rather been replaced by the horizontal ones – namely those by which we simply “extend” our sympathies to ever larger groups of people. For example, in his essay “Ethics Without Principles”, Rorty claims that moral progress is “a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things”. It is also in his view that the “idea of something nonhuman luring us human beings on should be replaced with the idea of getting more and more human beings into our community”. Finally, for Rorty, “moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy”.²⁹ Clearly, these ideas work within the perspective of Western Enlightenment liberalism, as Rorty so often freely and directly admitted. But to speak of a community as found in the vicinity of the sacred, *always* already revealed to others, as a demand for the infinite within us – a shift in our thinking is needed. Unger is arguing for our ability to love and for solidarity derived from our ability to recognize and to accept the otherness of other people. The path of practical philosophy and ethics as related to political theory is devoted to the questions of holding society together, of trust, fellow feeling and ultimately love.

It is then not enough to discuss community from some of the well-known communitarian points of view, nor from the point of view of Rorty’s famous model of liberal ironic. As I have tried to explain in the first section of my essay, the same holds true for the radical projects such as Badiou’s or Žižek’s theoretical work on the idea of communism reclaimed. I do not think Unger is really related to any of these three aspects. On a contrary – according to him

we have to imagine the new ethical constellation needed for the recognition of a deeper, divinized view of humanity and democracy. In this perspective, deepening the democracy delinks itself from any usage associated with the above mentioned traditional metaphors of depth. This “spirit” of democracy does not point to any remains of metaphysical or perennial philosophy, somehow transformed into a new ethico-political strategy. Rather it is

“... a view of the wonderful and terrible disproportion of that spirit to everything that would contain and diminish it, of its awakening to its own nature through its confrontation with the reality of constraint and the prospect of death, of its terror before the indifference and vastness of nature around it, its discovery that what it most shares with the whole of the universe...”³⁰

To conclude – against the backdrop of Žižek–Badiou emancipatory constellation, this is also an ethical attempt to secure the democratic conditions for avoiding the “extreme inequalities of opportunity, respect and recognition”.³¹ The effort thus reveals itself as a true *spiritual* task of humanity – i.e. the task proposed within the imagined horizon when democracy, in a universal voice, and ethically, will mean a priority of dignity over disrespect, or, with Unger, ultimately, priority of “life over everything”.³²

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O progresivnoj alternativni: Unger versus Žižek

Sažetak

U ovom radu razmatramo pitanje budućnosti demokracije unutar nekoliko aktualnih projekata emancipatornih politika. Prvo kritički pristupamo Žižekovoj i Badiouovoj poznatoj revitalizaciji ideje komunizma i povezujeemo njihove projekte s gorućim pitanjima nejednakosti u svjetskom sistemu. Slijedeći ovaj pristup, raspravljamo o R. M. Ungerovoj novijoj knjizi The Self Awakened te branimo njegovu verziju radikaliziranog pragmatizma i proširujemo neke njegove primjene pragmatizma (divinizacija, buđenje sebstva) na širi političko-etički kontekst.

Ključne riječi

pragmatizam, demokracija, emancipatorna politika, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Roberto Mangabeira Unger

25

Ibid., p. 202.

26

Ibid., p. 204.

27

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Democracy Realized: The Progressive Alternative* (London: Verso, 2001).

28

Cf. R. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 83 and 86f: “This switch from metaphors of vertical distance to metaphors of horizontal extent ties in with the pragmatists’ insistence on replacing traditional distinctions of kind with distinctions in degree of complexity (...) As I remarked earlier, they [pragmatists] like to replace traditional metaphors of depth or height with metaphors of breadth and extent.”

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Ibid., pp. 81 and 82. I will not discuss the possible implications of Rorty’s notion of ‘our community’ here and his idea of being “more frankly ethnocentric, and less professedly universalist” (see: R. Rorty, *Philosophy As Cultural Politics* (Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 55).

30

R. M. Unger, *The Self Awakened*, p. 26.

31

Ibid., p. 175.

32

Ibid., p. 237. Cf. the etymological sense of ‘spirit’ as related to the Indo-European root **(s)peis-* (“to blow”), primarily being *energy* present in all living beings.

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Über die progressive Alternative: Unger versus Žižek

Zusammenfassung

Die Absicht dieses Artikels ist, zu erklären, wie man die Zukunft der Demokratie in Rahmen der Projekte der zeitgenössischen emanzipatorischen Politik versteht. Wir fokussieren uns erst auf eine kritische Fragestellung der emanzipatorischen Projekte von Žižek und Badiou und verknüpfen ihre Projekte mit der politisch-ethischen Frage der Ungleichheiten im Weltsystem. In dem zweiten Teil verteidigen wir das Projekt des radikalisierten Pragmatismus von R. M. Unger gegenüber Žižek und Badiou und erweitern seine Version des radikalisierten Pragmatismus auf weitere ethische Kontexte des zeitgenössischen politisch-ethischen Denkens.

Schlüsselwörter

Pragmatismus, Demokratie, die emanzipatorische Politik, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Roberto Mangabeira Unger

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De l'alternative progressiste: Unger versus Žižek

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous traitons de la question de l'avenir de la démocratie dans le cadre de certains projets politiques émancipateurs actuels. Nous critiquons d'abord la revitalisation de l'idée du communisme de Žižek et de Badiou. Conformément à cette approche, nous nous intéressons à un livre récent de R.M. Unger; The Self Awakened. À la fois nous défendons sa version du pragmatisme radicalisé et étendons certains de ses usages à un contexte politico-éthique plus large.

Mots-clés

pragmatisme, démocratie, la politique d'émancipation, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Roberto Mangabeira Unger.