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**ANALYSIS
ROBERTO UNGER**

TRANSCRIPT OF A RECORDED CONVERSATION

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AUDIENCE APPLAUSE

FIDGEN: Welcome to the London School of Economics and Political Science. I'm Jo Fidgen. And, as you've heard, I'm joined by an audience for this week's special edition of *Analysis*. I'm going to be talking to Professor Roberto Mangabeira Unger. He taught Barack Obama at Harvard Law School and stayed in touch with him after that. Yet last year, he declared that President Obama had to be "defeated" in the 2012 election; and, earlier this year, he warned the British Labour Party that progressives like its Leader, Ed Miliband, must have something new to say. So Roberto Unger, what is a progressive in your view?

UNGER: A progressive is someone who wants to see society reorganized, part-by-part and step-by-step, so that ordinary men and women have a better chance to live a larger life.

FIDGEN: We'll hear more about that in a moment. Now to join in the conversation, the hashtag tonight is #lseprogressive. Roberto Unger, you first appeared on *Analysis* earlier this year in a documentary about the economic alternatives advocated by progressives, and it was clear to us then that we needed more time to explore your many passions—which range across economics, legal theory, sociology, philosophy. It's your political vision that we want to talk about tonight. And I stress the word "vision" because what you want is a re-imagining of who we are and the institutions that support us. Now that's rather abstract. I wonder if you could tell us what is at the heart of that vision?

UNGER: The desire to die only once. [*laughter*]

FIDGEN: By which you mean?

UNGER: That each of us will not die many small deaths and squander our supreme good life—with its characteristic attributes of surfeit, spontaneity and surprise; that each of us will come into the fuller possession of life and conduct ourselves and arrange society in such a way that we can die only once.

FIDGEN: Now, it's very striking when you set out your vision on how this is to be achieved that you say to the left—to your own side, to the progressives—you have to abandon equality. Now, this has been a central aim of the progressives and yet you say it's liberty that we need. That has the ring of a project of the right.

UNGER: No, I never defended abandoning equality. When I say... [*overtalk*]

FIDGEN: [*interrupting*] I have here your latest article: *Why the Left Should Abandon Equality* is the title.

UNGER: With a subtitle that is not of my invention! [*laughter*] So what I argue is that, in the present form of ideological debate, the right appear to be those who accord priority to freedom and, the left, those who give priority to equality within the established institutional framework. What must distinguish a progressive today is a willingness to resist and to revise the institutional organisation and the ideological assumptions of society.

FIDGEN: And what part will equality play in that institutional innovation?

UNGER: So once we begin to revise the institutional background, it makes no sense to suppose that our commanding objective is to achieve a rigid equality of outcome or of circumstance. The real objective is a larger life - a life of greater intensity, of greater scope, and of greater capability for the ordinary man and woman; and the struggle against entrenched inequality is subsidiary to that more inclusive objective.

FIDGEN: So the aim is a larger life. You talk about the “bigness” of human beings. That is very reminiscent of a great nineteenth century liberal, John Stuart Mill, who also talks about “experiments in living”, the same kind of language that you were talking about—the chance to innovate within your own life and within society.

UNGER: The aim is the expansion of our humanity. We become more human by becoming more god-like, but the method is the piecemeal and cumulative transformation of the structure of society. Only because the left has abandoned its structural ambitions has it settled for the idea of humanising the established regime, especially through compensatory redistribution by tax and transfer. That’s not good enough. None of the fundamental problems of contemporary society can be solved or even addressed within the limits of the present institutional and ideological settlement.

FIDGEN: So you are completely opposed to tax and transfer redistribution of benefit payments? [*overtalk*]

UNGER: No, it’s just entirely... No, I’m not opposed to it. It’s just entirely secondary to transformation of the institutional background. So, for example, we cannot settle for the low energy democracies that exist.

FIDGEN: By which you mean what?

UNGER: I mean, democracies that are organised in a form that inhibits the transformation of the structure, that makes change depend on crisis, and that perpetuates the rule of the dead over the living.

FIDGEN: And what does that mean in practical terms if you want a high energy democracy?

UNGER: It means a whole series of institutional innovations. First of all, innovations that raise the temperature of politics; that is to say the level of organised popular engagement in public life.

FIDGEN: But how do you get people interested in public life when we are faced with so much apathy in the political system?

UNGER: By demonstrating the power of politics to transform pieces of the structure. So the only antidote to the experience of the impotence of politics is persistence in the use of politics to change parts of the structural background.

FIDGEN: A British comedian, Russell Brand, wrote an article recently, which was very widely read, where he describes something not unlike what you're talking about, which chimes with one of the phrases that you use of "a dictatorship of no alternatives". He says in this article: 'Total revolution of consciousness and our entire social political and economic system is what interests me, but that's not on the ballot.' And his reaction to that is well I'm not going to vote and I don't think you should either. Is that the correct conclusion for him to come to?

UNGER: No, it's not the correct conclusion. In the first place, it's not the correct conclusion because if we fail to be disenchanted with disenchantment, if we simply abandon the attempt to develop collective solutions to collective problems and withdraw into private life, we establish a self-confirming prophecy of the impotence of politics and we make ourselves smaller. In the second place, it's not the correct response because there is a solution. The solution is to take small initiatives that prefigure big changes, to use little things to break big things. And in the third place, it's not the correct response because it's a betrayal of who we really are. We are the beings who are shaped by context, but who always have more inside us, inside each of us individually and inside all of us collectively, than there is or ever can be in these regimes that we inhabit.

FIDGEN: Now, I mentioned in the introduction that ahead of the 2012 election in the United States, you called for President Obama to be "defeated" at that election. Why did you do that?

UNGER: Because the Democratic Party has failed to come up with a progressive sequel to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Obama and his collaborators have been complicit in this surrender.

FIDGEN: "Surrender" is a strong word.

UNGER: A strong word for a national calamity. *[laughter]*

FIDGEN: The American people disagreed with you though by voting for

Barack Obama. I'm guessing from what you said *vis à vis* Russell Brand, you weren't exhorting people not to vote. Were you asking them to vote against the Democrats?

UNGER: There's in fact very little difference programmatically between the two parties and no chance of creating a real alternative except in the circumstance of defeat.

FIDGEN: Did you get a chance to put your views in person to Barack Obama?

UNGER: No. [*laughter*]

FIDGEN: Would you have enjoyed it, do you think?

UNGER: No, I don't think I would have enjoyed it because I don't think I would have had any success! [*laughter*] I think that the President and his chief collaborators confuse conformism with realism. They have given themselves over to the established world.

FIDGEN: But you have got closer to the Leader of the British Labour Party, Ed Miliband. You've met him during this visit to London. Did you give him a kicking, too? [*laughter*]

UNGER: I had a discussion [*laughter*] with members of the Labour Party, as I attempt to have discussions with progressive parties around the world.

FIDGEN: What was the key point you made to Ed Miliband? I'm guessing it was you making the points?

UNGER: No, there was a genuine discussion—a discussion about how to give content to a productivist alternative. One example concerns the relation between labour and capital. It's not good enough to raise the nominal wage. Labour now, in the wake of the decline of mass production, is being reorganised in the form of decentralised networks of contractual relations. The progressive parties, a Labour Party must have a project to address this situation—a way of protecting, organising and representing this unstable labour.

FIDGEN: I want to come back to what you say about labour and capital in a different context. You talk about the need for labour to be able to move as freely as capital—which raises lots of very interesting questions—which we'll come to after we've had hopefully some questions from the audience. Anybody like to raise a point? Several hands going up.

LLOYD: My name's Lloyd. You've often been described as a pragmatist and for me there's no higher praise! I was wondering what we could do. We've got the end point, but a tactic that maybe we could do to bring about these small victories that you talk of would

maybe be *en masse* people stop paying their bills to these large companies. I mean, we seem to be governed by fear to make us pay these bills. If we stop paying our bills to Orange or our gas companies who are charging us through the roof, surely that would be a small victory and a step in the right direction? What do you think?

UNGER: Disruption is often interesting [*laughter*], but it is fertile only when it has some transformative sequel. I'm all in favour of disruption, if it is then associated with forms of collective action that are carrying a message of reorganisation. So I can't evaluate your proposals to stop paying bills until you tell me the other part of what comes next! [*laughter*]

FIDGEN: Another question?

ELISE: Hi, my name's Elise. I wanted to ask you what gives you any confidence that small changes will prefigure big changes when capitalism usually has the power to hijack and transform such chances and use it to its own ends—for example, YouTube?

UNGER: With the sole possible exception of cosmopolitan finance, I do not believe that there is any major interest in Britain that is irreconcilable to an alternative like the one that I am defending. To my mind, the resource that we mainly lack is the one that is always scarcest and most important: imagination.

FIDGEN: Professor Paul Kelly of the LSE.

KELLY: I was intrigued by your opening point about politics, transformative politics providing for a kind of human redemption. But what about those forms of life, the private elements, that are actually challenged by this kind of continual, transformative politics that many real people find the basis of that sort of human redemption—family, private pursuits? What about those? Where do they fit into your world?

UNGER: Let me make an analogy precisely to personal experience. A parent says to a child, "I love you unconditionally regardless of what you do, and my love assures you of an unconditional place. Now go out and raise a storm in the world." So it's this security in the haven that then gives us licence to throw everything else open to reinvention. That relation between the love of the parent and the storm raised by the child is the relation that a democratic state should have to its citizens. That is, it should secure them this space in which they can retreat, as it were, into the private sublime; but that rather than being the antithesis of plasticity, of openness in society is the condition of that openness. And that's what I want.

FIDGEN: One more question in this section.

- BUCH:** Prateek Buch from the Social Liberal Forum. How do we bridge the gap between the institutional framework we are in today and that re-imagined market economy or re-imagined state that we wish to see without risking being hung out to dry?
- UNGER:** The old focus of ideological conflict was the state against the market. Now, a different focus of ideological controversy begins to emerge in the world—a contest about the alternative forms of the market economy, of democratic politics, and of independent civil society. Its aim is equipment and opportunity for the ordinary man and woman to do more with his or her life.
- FIDGEN:** So more market and more government?
- UNGER:** At the same time. Not as the opposites of each other.
- FIDGEN:** A reminder that you're listening to a special edition of *Analysis* from the London School of Economics and Political Science, in conversation with the political theorist, Professor Roberto Unger. To join in the conversation, the hashtag tonight is #lseprogressive. Now intrinsic to your vision is that labour should be as free to move as capital, which would mean opening borders. Now obviously, this has economic consequences, which you recognise, although it's the economic consequences that often concern electorates the most. But your bigger vision is of nations as "moral specialisations".
- UNGER:** Yes.
- FIDGEN:** What does that mean?
- UNGER:** Consider the distinctive and poisonous character of contemporary nationalism. Two nations living close together come to hate each other not because they are different but because they are becoming alike and they want to be different. What then is the correct solution? The correct solution is to equip different societies to create real difference and then to allow an individual born in one society to escape to another if he wants to join another form of social life. Right now the nations that exist in the world are in an intermediate situation. They are ceasing to be tribes governed by a principle of quasi-biological succession as if they were big families, and they are in the process of becoming something else—which is a form of moral specialisation within humanity.
- FIDGEN:** So the idea is if I'm born here but want to live in a theocracy, prefer theocratic values, for example, I should be able to move to Iran, say?
- UNGER:** You should be able to escape. You should be able to escape from where you are. Now clearly the freedom of labour to move, to

cross national borders cannot be established instantaneously. It would produce dramatic consequences and tremendous backlash. But what is intolerable in the world is that we should embrace a form of globalisation in which things and money acquire freedom to roam the world and people are imprisoned in the nation state or in blocks of relatively homogeneous nation states such as the European Union. Things, money and people must gain freedom together in small, cumulative steps. The other aspect is that as ethnic and cultural homogeneity diminishes through the movement of labour, the inadequacy of money transfers as a social cement becomes more apparent. Money transfers organised by a redistributive state are not a sufficient basis for social solidarity. The only adequate basis of social solidarity is direct engagement in helping to take care of other people beyond the boundaries of one's own family.

FIDGEN: And this is something that you think everybody must do as well as holding down another job?

UNGER: Either in a voluntary or in a mandatory form as some form of social service. But there's no way to have real social solidarity in a pluralistic society simply by sending cheques through the mail. Solidarity can only exist when we overcome the boundaries of family selfishness.

FIDGEN: I want to clarify this because it is such an extraordinary thought: that everybody must have a job, doing whatever they do, but they must also care for someone outside their family.

UNGER: Every able-bodied adult in a society that is solidaristic as well as democratic should have at least two positions: a position in the system of production or of learning; and a responsibility to take care of other people for part of the working year or part of his life as an aspect of our membership in society. And without such an engagement, how can there be real solidarity?

FIDGEN: Do you do this? Do you have a job in the caring economy too?

UNGER: Er... [*laughter*] I attempt... I attempt to engage in different ways beyond the realm of my own family, but my attempts to do so are mixed up with my political troubles and adventures and this is not the moment to describe them! [*laughter*]

FIDGEN: [*laughs*] But, I mean, it is a difficulty, isn't it? We're all busy and the economy is busy working as hard as we possibly can.

UNGER: Yes.

FIDGEN: You're asking a lot of people here.

UNGER: But time expands, right? So this gets us back to the beginning of

our conversation when you asked me what I considered most important and I answered to die only once. So the supreme good is life. The only thing we ever really have is now, life in the present, and so our highest objective—both personal and political—must be to awaken and to come into the fuller possession of life and to rearrange society so that it discourages us from slumbering, from squandering this supreme good.

FIDGEN: I want to draw together two of the things you've just been talking about—the appeal of diversity and the effect on solidarity, in your words. Now, you've mentioned the caring economy and if people don't volunteer to take part in it, you would be happy for it to be mandatory. That's not the only time in your writing that you talk about forcing people to do good things or, more broadly, forcing people to be free. For example, you want people to have to save their money for certain purposes; you want certain benefits to be deliverable only through membership of certain associations. There is underlying this, isn't there, perhaps a recognition that we're not selfless citizens? You would force us to be free, would you?

UNGER: The element of obligation has to be seen as subsidiary to the larger attempt to develop freedom.

FIDGEN: I think this will be alarming to many people in Britain, a country where suspicion of the state runs deep. I mean we won't even carry ID cards, whereas you're perfectly willing to in the United States, for example. What's the feeling in the audience? Hands up for people who are willing to take the kind of compulsion that Roberto Unger is talking about? [*laughter*] I'd say that's fifty-fifty!

UNGER: Now, I protest against this allusion to the idea of compulsion!

FIDGEN: What would you call it if not compulsion?

UNGER: No, no, it's a requirement! [*laughter*] Let's take another example. Let's take an example of a system that exists in many countries—not in Britain or in the United States—which is the obligation to vote. Many democracies around the world require voting. If you fail to vote in a system of mandatory voting, you pay a fine. An abstention is immensely more eloquent in a system of mandatory voting than it is in a system of optional voting. So are we to describe such an arrangement as compulsion? I think this is a complete misdescription. I think that by introducing elements of obligation of requirement, we deepen the system of freedom.

FIDGEN: Having heard that defence of mandatory voting, I wonder if there's anyone in the audience who would still support Russell Brand and think that actually we have a duty *not* to vote at the next election?

FAROUK: Rafi Farouk, student at the LSE. Abstaining from voting, I'm not sure whether I would support that. But certainly the underlying principle of empowering everyone to express their unrest at the current political system, I think that is the main point.

FIDGEN: Having heard an alternative from Roberto Unger this evening, are you persuaded that actually it would be better to participate?

FAROUK: I think certainly we need to participate to cause change.

FIDGEN: Anyone got any points they'd like to raise possibly in opposition to Roberto Unger?

MAZOR: My name is Joe Mazor. I'm a political philosopher at the LSE. What evidence is there that large numbers of people with the right education would become the kind of human beings that you think they will become?

UNGER: It's not a sudden transformation of what we are like now. It's a progressive making bigger of ordinary life and of ordinary people, and that seems to me to be entirely realistic and our overriding goal in the transformation of society.

FIDGEN: Let me cut in there because I know we have time for just one more question from the audience. Gentleman here.

ALI: Shara Ali. Isn't there a formal contradiction or conflict at the heart of your vision—that between diversity within or across societies, engendered, if you will, by individuals taking ownership of their destinies—between that and universalism? So can you will the means without predetermining the end?

UNGER: We take a risk, we democrats and experimentalists. We believe that a larger life is irresistible, but we subject our conjecture to the test of historical experience. Now, humanity may try it out and then reject it, as you suggest, but that's the gamble that we make—that no one who has tasted a larger life will then want to abandon it.

FIDGEN: Well, that feels like a good point at which to end. It just remains for me to thank you all very much for coming to the London School of Economics and Political Science tonight, and my special thanks to Professor Roberto Mangabeira Unger. From all of us here at the LSE, goodbye.

AUDIENCE APPLAUSE