

OPEN SOURCE PRESS

WEST &
UNGER

Cornel
Roberto

March 23rd, 2017



“Down in the dumps, still doping out the contradictions of Billionaire Populism, in a country feeling out of sorts, maybe ‘out of itself.’ Who’s to explain? Roberto Unger is a Brazilian philosopher and lawyer; Cornel West is a lay preacher in the African-American tradition. Every 20 years or so, Professors Unger and West teach a course together at Harvard. This Spring it’s called “American Democracy.” They bring a reading list but no notes to the stage, and they are not teaching political science. They’re teaching a compound of American wisdom literature, theology, history and their own lifetimes’ experience. They’re giving us a taste of it in conversation this week at Harvard Divinity School.”

-Christopher Lydon

LYDON

You gentlemen are teaching—to my mind—the college course of the hour in American Democracy—and it's not political science. To me, it's a kind of existentialism of the collective. It's history. It's theory. It's a theory of everything, but—first off— is it one theory of everything or two theories of everything? The Brazilian, the American, the legal, the theological...where are we?

WEST

I'm just blessed to be in the class with Roberto Unger. I think he's one of the towering social theorists and leading philosophers of our time. We taught this course over 20 years ago. We read deTocqueville; we read a number of texts having to do with not just American democracy but the American empire and whether in fact we're wrestling with a culture of decay and a political lethargy and escalating wealth inequality that's sucking much of the Democratic energies out of the empire. How do we revitalize the Democratic possibilities within the empire? And that's very much what the course is about, but I want to defer to my dear brother Roberto Unger.

UNGER

So, we engage in this course—with the American

experience and the American prospects— always with a view to exploring the future, the alternatives, the next steps for the American people. My view throughout has been that the most important attribute of the United States is its extraordinary vitality. It seethes with human energy and hope. And its historical tragedy has been the historical tragedy of all the other great democracies of the world: the denial of the equipment and opportunities to the majority of ordinary men and women. The instruments that they need to transform this human energy into constructive action. The understanding of that problem and the exploration of a solution to it is the main theme of our course.

LYDON

What's the intersection of your thinking, of your histories? Of your fields? Of your visions?

UNGER

Well, I'm not sure that Cornell and I have fields.

LYDON

That's the best kind.

WEST

Cows have fields. We have ideas.

UNGER

So, the premise of the orthodoxies of the university culture is the naturalisation of a marriage between method and subject matter. So, for example, economics is not the study of the economy. It's the study of a certain method pioneered by economic theoreticians at the end of the 19th century. All serious thought requires divorce. That is, the separation of this false marriage of method and subject matter, the jumbling up of the cards and the insistence on attempting to speak and think the almost unspeakable and the almost unthinkable. So, the division of culture into these reified disciplines and methods is the enemy of thought.

LYDON

Cornel?

WEST

I just say ditto. I mean, it was said by a prophet, said by someone who's highly suspicious of the division of knowledge and late-capitalist professional managerial sites. That's what the universities are. They're professional managerial sites with the formation of an educated class—at Harvard of course a ruling class—and our aim is to try to shatter the assumptions and presuppositions upon which so many of those disciplines rest. And so, to be prophetic is to try to unleash Socratic

energy and try to unleash utopian possibilities to engage in the world as it is in light of a vision of the not yet. And so, Roberto Unger is an exemplary prophetic, not just thinker, but figure. Now, he's from Brazil. Of course, that's still America, but that's down south. And so, he looks at the American empire from a particular vantage point. Brazil has its own very rich history as well as its own deep sufferings and inequalities. We have a rich history in the United States as well as deep suffering and inequality. I mean, Roberto and I love to go at it because there's a sense in which he's much more tied to Emerson and Whitman, and I'm tied to Melville and the Blues. Melville's much darker. He's much bleaker. *Moby Dick* is the exemplary American novel, *Confidence Man*, *Pierre*. We can go on and on. *Benito Cereno* was probably the finest piece of literary depiction of the complex dynamics of a structural domination right there on the boat.

LYDON

On the slave ship.

WEST

Right on the slave ship, with Babo, and I say that because we do have magnificent overlap as thinkers who are trying to unleash utopian possibilities and Socratic energies that stay in contact with the vitality and the culture but also to be very, very attuned to greed and resentment and

the envy and revenge.

LYDON

How do you wrap yourself Roberto in Emerson and Whitman? Is that fair?

UNGER

Well, the American prophets—and they are among the American prophets—had as their central message the idea of the greatness of the ordinary man and woman. The central faith of democracy—

LYDON

—“The infinitude of the private man,” as Emerson said—

UNGER

—is that there are unlimited depths within the ordinary and that we can ascend to a higher life. It’s the idea of a shared bigness. That’s the central idea, and our interest, our shared interest is to ask under what conditions this idea can be made real. And that requires the reconstruction of institutional arrangements, but it also requires the transformation of consciousness. Tocqueville once remarked that every great revolution is both a political revolution and a religious revolution, by which we can understand that it must involve both the change of the institutional structure and the

change of the way people think and feel.

LYDON

Can I ask did the American giants think we could reach that greatness together? I'm not sure Emerson did, and certainly the moral of Moby Dick is and Herman Melville is No. The Pequod went down, and it was the model of America.

WEST

That call for lifeboats is the only thing keeping Ishmael up all by himself after the Pequod goes down, after Ahab's monomaniacal behavior leads toward the crushing of both the crew, given his obsession with the whale and the whiteness of the whale. You're absolutely right. There's no doubt about that.

UNGER

So indeed, the message of the American prophets, it's not beyond criticism. The purpose must not be simply to enact this message. It must be to criticize it and to change it. In general, in the dominant currents of consciousness in the United States, the line between the alterable conditions of social life and the inalterable circumstances of human existence has been drawn in the wrong place. The tendency of Americans has been to understate the mutability of society but to overstate the extent to which the individual can rescue himself as a

little Napoleon placing the crown upon his own head. So, it is one of the aims of our course to evaluate this message and to change it. That's one major direction of our concern. The other is the confrontation with the institutional arrangements of the country. Our interests and ideals are always nailed to the cross of the institutions and arrangements that represent them in fact and therefore we have to confront the structure and subject it to the experimentalist impulse, which on the whole the Americans have refused to subject their institutions to.

LYDON

And we don't see the institutions forming themselves in real life, including empire, Cornel, as you speak of it—or even the ruling class, which is a kind of cliché now but I didn't know it growing up. For listeners who've just landed each of you two, three, four, not more than five earmarks and leading indicators of American democracy today. Describe it, for history Cornel. Where are we? What is it today, 2017?

WEST

I think American democracy resides in the best of the hearts and souls of citizens, but we have an oligarchic economy. We have plutocrats reigning. We have a citizenry being amused to death and therefore implicitly consenting to its own subordination, feeling helpless, feeling hopeless,

feeling impotent, and we have a ruler who is not just narcissistic but is tied to those plutocratic and oligarchic elites because he has no ideas of his own for the most part. He is, as you write in your powerful formulations brother Chris, he's all theater, he's all spectacle, he's all image.

LYDON

Reality T.V.

WEST

He's a product of a market-driven American culture. He's a product of the worst of the American empire when it comes to white supremacy, male supremacy. I've said quite explicitly that brother Donald Trump is a gangster in character. Grabbing women's parts, that's gangster. Taking the oil from Iraq, that's gangster. We've seen the gangsterization of the culture at work for a while. Now, it's spilled over into the political sphere where you actually have the head of the Empire an explicit gangster and not that many people wanting to call it for what it is. In a way, it is the neoliberal chickens coming home to roost because they have been in the back pocket of Wall Street. They've been in the back pocket of the advanced, what Roberto calls "advanced vanguard of the economy" with Silicon Valley and company. That's where innovation, experimentation, unbelievable creativity is taking place, but it's taking place under the aegis of the

1 percent running things. And it doesn't spill over into the actual economy where concrete working people and poor people have to inhabit every day of their lives. So, there's not a whole lot of democracy left. It's just, somehow we've got to revitalize it. I think Melville is still full of at least an attempt to be a hope. There's not a whole lot of hope in Melville, but he himself never succumbs to despair. He comes close to suicide and refuses to do it. Of course, his son commits suicide, 1867. So, in that sense there is still an overlap between Roberto's very mature, Emersonian sensibility tied to futurity and Melville's much more sober reading of the darkness and bleakness of the American empire.

LYDON

That's a lot of earmarks. Roberto, the things you notice if you just landed?

UNGER

Well, in the recent historical period the limit of the ambitions of the progressives has been to humanize the project of their conservative adversaries, rather than to propose another project that would equip people with the economic opportunities and educational instruments that they need to build a greater life. So, one concern is the insularity of the advanced practice of production in the United States. There is a new style of production that is emerging in

the world. It is nowhere more developed than in the United States. It is a knowledge-intensive, radically experimental and innovative economy—

LYDON

—Digitized, I presume?—

UNGER

—but it is confined. It is confined to insular vanguards. A major agenda of the progressives would be to establish this vanguardism in socially inclusive form, and that can only be done by governmental activism to reshape the arrangements of the market economy rather than to just regulate the market or to compensate for its inequalities by progressive taxation and social entitlement.

LYDON

Be very specific if you can, Roberto. Vanguard workers, old-time workers. Who are we talking about?

UNGER

There is a new form of production. We often associate it with high technology, but it has no exclusive relation to high technology. In principle, it could apply to any part of the economy, and it exists in these contemporary economies as a

fringe in every sector of economic life. It exists in services as well as manufacturing. It exists in agriculture, precision and scientific agriculture, but the vast majority of the labor force is excluded from it. What we should want is an inclusive vanguardism. That inclusive vanguardism has to have as one of its counterparts a radical change in the character of education in the United States, a form of education that privileges the mastery of analytic and synthetic capabilities, that prefers selective depth to encyclopedic superficiality, that organizes teaching and learning on the basis of cooperation— rather than the combination of individualism and authoritarianism—and that approaches every subject dialectically by contrasting points of view to liberate the mind. There you have two beginnings of a new life for the country.

LYDON

I'm trying to visualize exactly what you're talking about: Inclusive Vanguardism. MIT can find talent anywhere in the world and help bring it to fruition. How far short of inclusive vanguardism is MIT, that model?

UNGER

Well that's an academic component, but what I'm saying—

LYDON

The serving industry and serving even the Empire.

UNGER

Yes, but what we want is for this form of experimental, flexible, innovative production to be widely disseminated in the economy so that increasing parts of the labor force have access to it. Now, that industrial reconstruction, that change in the institutions of the market economy accompanied by this educational redirection I describe has to have as another condition to enable it an increase in the financing available to American government. So, there is no progressive alternative feasible in the United States without a substantial increase in the tax take.

LYDON

What would be the test of it being democratic, to the point you'd say "ah-ha," it's getting more open and more available?

UNGER

One test is that more people in more parts of American life, in more classes have more access to the devices of what is most advanced to create, to construct, to invent, to innovate, to treat the American people not just as a bunch of

beneficiaries of entitlements but as agents. What we now have in the United States, and in many contemporary societies, is that the right has come to embody the cause of energy, of dynamism, of creation and the left of the sugarcoating, of the savage form of energy that the right proposes. That's a formula for defeat in politics—

LYDON

Spell it out.

UNGER

—We want the left to represent the cause of energy, and that's what this inclusive vanguardism and this educational change are about.

LYDON

Hmm, but spell out the sugarcoating of what?

UNGER

The sugarcoating of the present form of economic organization. So, if you ask “What's the project of the progressives today?” the simple answer is it's the project of their conservative adversaries with a humanizing discount. They're the people who bring the sugar. For example, at election time instead of proposing a structural alternative they genuflect to progressive taxation just to show whose side they're on, even though they know

that progressive taxation has only a marginal effect on the distribution of economic opportunity and advantage.

LYDON

What would have more effect than taxing the trillionaires?

UNGER

The examples I began to give, of changes in the economic organization of the country and in the character of education. Now, we have to understand the more distant future. What do we want? For example, what do we want as an economic future? Not for the next steps but for the later on because the later on defines the direction. So, one thing we want in a progressive political economy is that no worker should have to work as if he were a machine. Everything that we've learned how to repeat we express in a formula and then embody in a physical contraption: the machine. In Henry Ford's assembly line or Adam Smith's pin factory, the worker acts as if he were a machine, but the purpose of the machine is to do for us what we have learned to repeat so that we can reserve our time for the not yet repeatable. Again, what we want is that economically dependent wage labor over time cease to be the predominant form of free labor and give way to the higher forms of free labor, which are self-employment and cooperation. That was

what the 19th century liberals and socialists all thought, John Stuart Mill and Abraham Lincoln as well as Karl Marx, and it's only in the late 19th century that we began to accept the predominance of economically dependent wage labor as the supposedly natural and necessary form of free labor. Well, I'm giving you examples of the remote future because what I'm saying is that the idea in American democracy should be that economic life is not simply instrumental. We do not engage in our economic activities simply to solve our material needs. It's a potential terrain of liberation, but for it to be a terrain of liberation we have to re-imagine the form of economic life. To do that, we need to change education, and we need to create a high-energy democracy that does not need crisis to make change possible.

LYDON

Mmm. You've ticked off a lot of symptoms. One that bothered your predecessor Alexis de Tocqueville in the study of democracy in America was—I think it was his phrase—“equality of condition,” not necessarily of output or wealth or maybe not even happiness, but a sense of we're in it together, we're all strivers, we're all American, we're all citizens, a certain equality of standing. What has happened to that? Can I say, that's what distresses me. We are careening toward a two-tier society that's embedded almost forever, generation after generation. That wasn't the way in a thoroughly unequal America that Tocqueville

saw in the 1830s, 40s.

WEST

Yeah. I mean, Alexis de Tocqueville is still one of the most acute observers and analysts to the American empire, but he writes in the 1830s and he's primarily writing about European immigrants making their way here. The most important chapter in that two-volume work is the last chapter of volume one where he talks about the three races that inhabit this land. He talks about indigenous peoples and their land itself being taken. This is right at the time of Andrew Jackson who is the hero, of course, of Donald Trump and the Trail of Tears on the Cherokee and indigenous peoples. Of course, Andrew Jackson himself being a very wealthy slaveholder. In the last chapter of volume one de Tocqueville goes on to talk about the African slaves that he's already talking about America as an empire within the continent. We're on the way to the Mexican War which was nothing but gentrification writ large. It was a land grab. It was a power grab against Mexicans taking their land at the point of a gun. So de Tocqueville has a sense of an incipient empire we are now in the 21st century seeing the decay and decline of that empire that has forty eight hundred military facilities, almost a thousand outside of the country. For every dollar of 54 cents goes to that military industrial complex. We've had five wars since 1990 and nobody knows it's in the trillions of Iraq and Afghanistan and Libya let alone the

drone strikes in Yemen in Pakistan and Somalia and so forth so that any time you talk about domestic policy you have to bring in the Imperial dimension of the social experiment called the USA, and it reminds one very much we talk about this in our class of what Gibbon had to say about Rome writing imperial overreach the corruption of the elites and the cultural decay of the citizens and it led to the internal collapse with the external of foreigners those outside moving in. Of course, history doesn't repeat itself in that way, but it's very clear that de Toqueville only had a vague sense of the imperial preconditions that allowed for that relative equality of condition for European immigrants who came here voluntarily. We're in a very very different situation.

LYDON

But he foresaw extreme peril.

WEST

He said in fact if America ever had a revolution it would emanate from the race question. I think he was wrong about that in terms of rebellions and social chaos emanating from the race question but it's clear that black leaders for the most part have been bought off by the economic elites. Black leadership that was prophetic has been either assassinated or incarcerated, so you end up with polished professionals not warriors for justice. The days of Martin and Malcolm and so forth you

no longer see unless they're in the studio making hip hop artists, Kendrick Lamar or somebody. But in terms of leader and other leaders like Jessie Jackson and Al Sharpton and so forth I mean they're a joke compared to Martin and Malcolm and Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer in terms of being love warriors. They have already become appendages to a neoliberal Democratic Party that has milquetoasts that is more of a... How did Brother Bernie Sanders put it the other day? He said that the Democratic Party elites want first class seats on the Titanic. That's where it's headed. That's pretty sad, as you don't impose on it. I don't know how long you go staying on it. We got to get a new third party. So I said that. So no I've just I don't know how long I don't know. Let's see how long he can hold on because he's a man of integrity and he sees that complicity. When you begin to adjust yourself and normalize a neofascist in the making like Donald Trump and vote for a number of his appointees and so forth it's already clear that you lost your fight. And when my brother Roberto says the energy and dynamism of vitalism associated with the right rather than the left was a sign of left barren empty vacuous, imitative, derivative. And if there is no creative breakthrough on the left, then left is over. It's already weak and feeble. Then it's over and it's just a matter of isolated voices that goes down swinging as the Titanic hits the iceberg, and we don't know what form you know nuclear catastrophe ecological catastrophe or even.

UNGER

It's important to understand how we got to this position-

LYDON

I want to open that up. Would you want to speak on this matter of an aspirational equality in this country?

UNGER

The historical objective of the Progressives of the leftists, of the socialists, of the liberals is not equality of outcome. The historical objective is bigness, what I call 'a shared bigness'. It's our ascent. It's the bringing up of human life of the life of the ordinary man and woman to a higher plane of intensity, scope, and capability and the method is change in the structure of society in its institutions and in particular in the institutions of the market economy and of democratic politics. It's only when we naturalize the existing structure that we then resign ourselves to a diminished ideal of equality as a kind of compensation, as a consolation for the ordinary experience of life, which is an experience of constraint of humiliation and belittlement. The central ideal of the Progressives must be an ideal of the enhancement of agency, of the ability to act in the world and to set one's mark on the world, and to turn the tables against one's circumstance. That's what we

want, and all of the ideas about institutions and consciousness are subservient to that goal.

LYDON

Roberto, on a Tocquevillian scale of extreme peril. Give us a number 1 to 10 today on the total scale of extreme peril in a democracy.

UNGER

Danger is created by abdication, by programmatic abdication. So how did the United States get to this point.

LYDON

Just quickly, extreme peril? What does that mean today? Where are we on the chart?

UNGER

Danger is disorientation. Day to day danger arises from being lost. So that's not just the situation in the United States. Let's let's begin one step back. That's the situation in the world. Humanity has been living through a long revolutionary period, at least since the early 19th century, and it has had a political wing represented by the projects of liberalism, socialism, and democracy. And it has had a personal wing represented by romanticism and the worldwide popular romantic culture. We happen to be living in a counter-revolutionary

interlude in this long revolutionary period in the history of humanity. This revolutionary project, the project of raising the ordinary up, is paradoxically strong and weak. It is strong because throughout the world it continues to command the agenda. All the other projects in the world respond to it, but it is weak because it's champions, it's supporters no longer know what its next steps should be. And there's no better place to see that situation played out than the United States today. That's why it's dangerous. It's dangerous because it's disoriented, and because it's disoriented it could do anything.

LYDON

On a simple scale, as as you can make it Cornel the American peril today. How grave?

WEST

Out of ten? I would say we're at about eight point five in terms of danger and peril measure, about 8.5.

LYDON

That gives room, room for work.

WEST

There's always room for bearing witness and having some fortitude which is a fusion of moral

courage and magnanimity greatness of character. The problem is that we don't have institutional capacity to translate it into the kind of alternative programmatic things that Roberto talks about. There's always a possibility for the artists, for the journalists or for the writer for one and one family. You can do that in a fascist context.

UNGER

Danger is the reverse side of possibility. Remember Whitehead's remark, the philosopher Whitehead: "The business of the future is to be dangerous." Danger comes from openness.

LYDON

You subtitle part of your course as the genealogy of our condition. I love that: how we got here. How far back do we go, to Adam or to World War Two? How do you describe the genealogy here? The family tree of this mess ...

WEST

Well, Roberto has a wonderful story about the progressive movement, the populist movement and the New Deal liberalism. I tend to zero in on 1973. That was the relative death of the social movement. You had the unbelievable overflow of democratic energy from below: working people, black people, anti-war movement, feminist movement, anti homophobic movements. '73

you get structural crisis in the global economy the competition from Japan at that time West Germany at that time. Arabs move toward monopoly of oil production contesting Texas and others. And the response is this neoliberal response which is a major transfer of wealth from poor and working people to the top 1 percent. You privatize, you financialize and you militarize. The military Keynesianism under Reagan where he expanded the state in the name of a limited state but it was for military. It was cut backs. It was speedups at the workplace. It was major major undermining of social programs for the weak and vulnerable. But the military industrial complex expanded in a major way in the context of that cold war, and Reaganism has set the tone for the 40 years. And Bill Clinton comes in and what does he do. He has to steal the thunder from the right. He's tough on crime. He's a different kind of character the same way Tony Blair you know a very different...

LYDON

Era of big government was going to be over.
Cornel before you used the word—

WEST

Which was a joke too because his military also increases on Imperial fronts.

LYDON

Before you use the word again Cornel we collect definitions of neoliberalism. What does it mean to you?

WEST

Privatize, financialize, militarize: state and prisons and its schools criminalizing poor people especially people of color in which bad behavior more and more means you're on the way to the mass incarceration regime. That's part of the militarizing of street of school of everyday life for poor and working people to contain them as in fact we shift from industrial Senate capitalism where we had American Motors producing products to now Wall Street hedge funds. Private equity entities would produce deals not products. So they do very well but it doesn't translate at all when you end up with this hemorrhaging of billions and billions and billions of dollars in private pockets. The level of obscenity and spiritual profanity of wealth and greed in the last 40 years is waiting for Theodore Dreiser or Thomas Pynchon or Virginia Woolf to tell the full story. It's really it's a crime against humanity given the fact that one out of two children of color under six in America live in poverty. I mean that's the level of social pathology that we're talking about. And it reminds one of the rule of kings and queens in the early modern period.

LYDON

You're right. Something comes to mind from George Romney to Mitt Romney in a family American Motors, American innovation.

WEST

That's true. they just see that's true but just the same.

LYDON

Roberto, what's your genealogy of this condition?

UNGER

So let's take three moments in American history and show us how the country got to where it is now. So first, what built the country in the first half of the 19th century? It was the combination of two sets of initiatives. On top, there was a Hamiltonian project of mobilizing the resources of the country financial, physical and human to build the country. But that combined with the movement from below to democratize the economy in at least two crucial sectors agriculture and finance. And that's what really built the United States. It was this combination of massive mobilization by the government from on top. With Democratization their particular sectors below. Then comes a second moment. The two major traditions of progressive reform in the United

States. There's the tradition of defending the US the small guy against the big guy small business against big business from Jefferson to Brandeis and there's the tradition of accepting the control of the economy by the big but subjecting the big to strong regulation by the national government. What these two traditions have in common is that they failed to challenge the institutional organization of the market economy and to reinvent that dynamic that had built the country in the first place. Democratization below and mobilization of resources above. Then we come to a third moment the New Deal. The last great period of institutional renovation in American life. There was an early period of institutional experimentalism mainly focused on the orchestration of competition on concerted action between government and big private business not the radicalization of competition. Then, there was a second period of the development of antidotes to economic insecurity like Social Security, and then finally it ended in a narrow focus on the popularization of consumption: a market in mass consumption goods. Now, the Democratic Party and the other supposedly progressive entities in the United States have failed to come up with a sequel to Roosevelt's New Deal. That's what made possible this vacuum into which right wing populism came. Now we need something completely different.

LYDON

You often mention the other great event post-New Deal was World War Two and a mobilization of war industries that have come in every different way of organizing the economy.

UNGER

Yeah, exactly, a war with massive mobilization of resources and radical institutional innovation quarantined in the conditions of the war economy treated as if it had no pertinence to the subsequent organization of the peacetime economy.

LYDON

Exactly. No more world wars please, but how would that model serve the crisis?

UNGER

It's the same principle. It's the same principle that I attributed to the early formation of the United States. The combination of institutional innovation in particular sectors with resource mobilization on top.

LYDON

Imagine. Imagine they had one. Other approaches to this crisis slash opportunity?

UNGER

If they had one then they would begin to build it up develop it collectively in the country to develop its doctrine. To translated into a prophetic message—

LYDON

Give us a shape or size— a rough you know bigger than a bread box.

UNGER

A movement. A movement that has to be established in politics including inside the Democratic Party but outside it as well looking for power not just national power but power in the States. But at the same time making proposals for the reorganization of every aspect of American life. In other words it can't just be a project about the change of institutions. It has to be a project also about the change of consciousness. As you suggested before in your remark about Emerson, there has been in the United States a disturbance in the imagination of how self construction by the individual relates to solidarity. No one saves himself. The first question on each of our lips has to be: where are the others? We cannot in the attempt to devise answers to this question allow ourselves to surrender to an idolatry of the established institutions as the Americans often have. You know you to include

in the Constitution. Yes because they they have been tempted to believe that the United States discovered at the time of its foundation the definitive formula of a free society, which needs only to be adjusted from time to time under the pressure of crisis and that the rest of humanity must either subscribe to this formula or continue to languish in poverty and despotism.

LYDON

Everybody can see that in the Electoral College for example that this is antiquated, senescent. Where else for example in the Constitution would you be bold?

UNGER

Well, we have to distinguish between criticism and the perception of what is feasible change in the short term. So now we're speaking about another area of institutional change which is the reorganization of Democratic politics: What should we want? We should want first to raise the temperature of politics that means to organize the conditions for greater popular engagement in political life through public financing of electoral activity and through free access to the means of mass communication in favor of organized social movements as well as political parties. Second, we need to hasten the pace of politics to create constitutional mechanisms for the rapid resolution of impasse. There are two distinct principles in

the American Constitutional design: There is a liberal principle a fragmentation of power and there is a conservative principle of the slowing down of politics: make it hard to change things through politics. We should want to reaffirm the liberal principle but to repudiate the conservative one. If there is a deadlock a comprehensive programmatic plebiscite or referendum or an ability to call early elections that either of the two political branches would have. Now, there is a third domain for institutional change in Democratic politics and that is the reinvention of federalist that the federal system is supposedly a device for experimentation. The states are described as laboratories of experimentation.

LYDON

Anvils of democracy works.

UNGER

And yet, the rigid form of federalism that prevails in the United States makes it almost impossible to experiment for the different levels of the federal system to cooperate or for there to be horizontal cooperation among the states and the towns. If you ask me where to begin, I would say in the United States the most plausible place to begin is the reinvention of federalism, to create a vast storehouse of experiments of counter models of the national future because that would be acceptable to the right as well as to the left.

LYDON

Cornel, can I ask: do you hear as I keep hearing little hints of Trumpism in what Roberto is saying, you know, heat it up speed it up? Open up communications. Twitter-ize it make it a show. Talk about greatness. Of course we ended up with a reality TV star as president and we can't quite believe it, but you know the Trumpian—

WEST

No, when Roberto talks about “heated up,” he’s talking about Demos as agent with energies flowing from below. When Trump talks about heated up he’s talking about manipulating corporate media. He played CNN, MSNBC all the way Paganini played the violin two billion free hours of media. That’s not heatin’ anything up. All that is is a whole lot of activity of manipulation that allows him to be visible so he can get 60 minutes every 25 seconds that my dear brother Bernie Sanders got. That’s not hitting anything up at all. That’s actually dominating the colonizing consciousness, consciousness of a deeply frustrated and anguished citizenry who have been the losers under corporate globalism been the losers on the neoliberal politics of Clinton and the Bushes and Obama.

UNGER

But there is a legitimate element in Chris's remark which is this: Populism whether it's right wing populism or left wing populism is in politics a kind of liquefaction. It's melts down the structures. It's a fluid moment, and its future is then determined by whether it has or not and the institutional legacy because the waves of enthusiasm of liquid action come and go, and they only persist if they leave an institutional legacy. Now I am saying that this right wing populism in the United States has no institutional program, and because of this it is fragile and because it is fragile it offers the Progressives an immense opportunity.

LYDON

I think that's what we keep hearing in you, that there's some moment, some some example here to be seized and repurposed.

UNGER

Exactly. But for that we need ideas and we need movement.

WEST

But the appearance of the slices of the Demos especially primarily vanilla Demos on a theater and a culture of superficial spectacles is not populism at all. See, populism going back to

the 19th century was actually people engaged in self organization against elites - farmers coming together. The early Thomas Watson—and now we know he ended grant ended up in the Ku Klux Klan—but the early Tom Watson was self-organization of the Demos from below against lead for the empowerment of the very principle that Roberto was talking about which is to find the miraculous and the everyday and find the extraordinary in the ordinary that he has a democratic sensibility. But I understand part of the contact's of Chris's question to be this: the conventional conservative view of politics is that there are basically two kinds of politics: There is a cold institutional politics, politics within the ground rules within the institution that both parties latch that that's the dominion of the technocratic center. Right. And then there's a hot extra institutional or or anti-institutional politics. That's Caesarism, that's the person or leader who liquifies things against the institution. Now what we desire is a politics that is both hot and institutional. That's the miraculous alchemy that we have to perform in the transformation of democratic politics. And that is the partial affinity between a progressive view in politics and this populism.

LYDON

But that doesn't mean that there's a Trumpist element in what you're saying.

UNGER

I understood that as a joke and a provocation.

WEST

But I do want to get back to the first movement though because I agree what is going on with the white supremacist slavery was the foundation of the American economy that the value of slaves in 1862 was higher than all of the manufacturing units factories and railroads. So that is not just a matter of race as a fact. We talk about this in our class, and de Tocqueville understood this because in the last chapter again of volume 1 he says these are the non-democratic anti-democratic, illiberal pre-conditioned of American liberalism and its barbarism. These are crime against humanity that we're talking about. Now jump forward. Okay, the New Deal. Why did the New Deal exclude agricultural laborers and domestic maids? Well, 65 percent of black women were domestic maids and the vast number of black workers were agricultural laborers in the southern elites who were part of the New Deal wanted to make sure that this building of a new middle class was still deeply racist and white supremacist. So again, even when we're talking about progressive movements we have to talk about the crucial ways in which male supremacy, white supremacy and other forms of discrimination were operating as mechanisms not just of exclusion but of domination. You see Jim Crow wasn't just

excluding black people from the mainstream. It was terrorizing black people, lynching black people it was psychic terror. Teaching children that you're not worth a dime and so forth and so on. And part of the challenge and we've talked about this with Brother Bernie Sanders again I keep coming back to him because there is a sense in which all of the things that brother Roberto's talking about had to be translated in terms of institutional capacity, and at present if we can't have a radical democratic multi-racial coming together against Wall Street, against empire, against vicious patriarchal domination AND the treatment of gay lesbians and bisexuals and trans folk—homophobia is not just a PC category right. It's a way of demonizing and demeaning human beings, and as a Christian I'd say human means made in the image and likeness of God. So, in that sense the one addition I would make which is fundamental to brother Roberto's story is the ways in which this slavery and Jim Crow, which was slavery by another name and now Jim Crow Jr. The New Jim Crow which is another form of a vicious domination in regard to the hyper incarceration regime that's been at work. What is it 300,000 in the 1970s up to two and a half million today? How does that become part and parcel integral constitutive of the new kind of radical Democratic politics we must have.

UNGER

By solving a series of practical problems. So

we have to trust the practical ingenuity of the American people. Let's take an example. I was speaking before about education. It's one of the bridges between the transformation of the economy and the transformation of Democratic politics. The principle must be—and it is I assume universally accepted in the United States—that the quality of the education the child receives should not depend on the happenstance of where it is born. In a country that is very large, very unequal and federal in structure like the United States that means reconciling the local management of the schools with national standards of investment and quality and to do that three instruments are required: first a national system of assessment of performance of each school so we know what works. Second, a mechanism to redistribute resources and if necessary staff from richer places to poorer places, thus the reinvention of federalism. And third, a procedure for corrective intervention. When a local school system repeatedly fails despite all support, take it over through cooperative action within the Federation, fix it and return it fixed. That's an example of an arrangement that should appeal to a very broad part of the American population, but it comes to life only in the context of a more inclusive progressive project for the transformation of both the economy and politics.

WEST

I think what the challenge there is that usually

the history of federalism reinforces the white supremacist, and I would add male supremacist practices. That's precisely why states rights for Ron Reagan which Philadelphia Mississippi 1980 and caucus states rights was endorsed by the Klan. That same night. States rights historically has been domination of black folk keeping control of black folks when it comes to schools and the big fight. Brown v. Board and so forth right. Boston, South Boston, Louise Day Hicks and what have you when it comes to localism and state levels without federal intervention. You get the reproduction of unprecedented opportunities on the white side of town. Unbelievable social misery and mechanisms of exclusion discrimination on the black and brown sides of town. And I would add when it comes to women without the federal support if it were just up to the local and the state, and this is certainly true when it comes to gays and lesbians, that we'd be in a world trouble. The cultural conservatism and cultural contempt of women and people of color and gays and lesbians and so forth on the local level requires some kind of federal intervention or you end up with the Demos and all of its flaws.

UNGER

So we can tell ourselves a thousand stories about why structural changes are—if not impossible—almost impossible. I know that's not the spirit of your comment, but let's let's go back to

the example you mentioned Chris of the war economy. So it was sensational in its effect in four years from 1941 to 1945: GDP in the United States doubled, and not only was there a massive mobilization of resources, not only did the top marginal rate of the personal income tax go above 90 percent, now unbelievable to Americans living today, but the whole economy was run on principles that contradicted the supposedly sacrosanct dogmas of the American free market order. So in other words when the Americans wanted to and when they needed to they discarded their dogmas as if they were a mask and they organized things in a completely different way.

LYDON

It wasn't just America. The ruling class did that. It just went from where it left that speech.

WEST

But with the support of the country that shows that their commitment to a natural allies inevitable free market is nothing but shallow when their priorities shift things shift. Yes we still got a permanent war economy since 1945 at this very moment. Why? Because that's their priority. That's true for Democrats to Republicans across the board. For Elizabeth Warren with all her magnificent critiques of Wall Street. She's still a militarist. She's still tied to military industrial complex. That's true from almost every Democrat

in that Democratic Party. Why? Because you don't get elected you don't reproduce yourself without adjusting to that lie and you can't tell the truth like dealing with the Israeli occupation. You can't tell the truth about the suffering of Palestinians within the narrow electoral political context and yet everybody knows there's vicious things going on. Why? Because nobody wants out of courage and integrity to cut radically against that grain within the narrow parochial context of American electoral politics.

LYDON

Well, I wonder about it all the time. How did the military and the Imperial tendencies take profound root in this country and change it radically?

WEST

At the end of the age of Europe, 1945 right? That age is over. Europe is devastated divided and we got a Soviet empire, an American empire and we're the only ones left carrying that liberal legacy. And the military able to do basically what it wanted to.

LYDON

But The UN had just been founded -- there was another dream too. Franklin Roosevelt is thought to have promised Ho Chi Minh in a free Vietnam

after the war. How would we get back on that kind of relationship with the world?

WEST

Du Bois wrote about this in 1945 in “Color and Democracy.” The U.N. itself became an instrument of American Empire. It wasn’t concerned about decolonization in Africa and that’s the reason why the Soviet empire plays such an important role. We know the Soviet Union was regimented, repressed, played a fundamental role. That’s why Mandela when he got out of jail he went straight to Russia and then Cuba. He didn’t come the United States initially because we were on the side of counter-revolution. The U.N. gets used by US imperial aegis to ensure that those voices are not heard in a serious way it’s only when the victories take place and the neocolonial elites in Asia and Africa become adjusted to the global economy that the U.N. all of a sudden now has these 192 nations concerned about some kind of internationally public conversation. But the U.N. itself became an extension of the US imperial empire. Noam Chomsky has been telling this story and he is right for a long time.

LYDON

What about those other American prophets—Melville and Emerson? Melville, Emerson the best of them saying about this Empire we stuck ourselves with...

UNGER

You know, I don't idealize these prophets.

LYDON

Why not?

UNGER

They were great men but their message is not beyond criticism. That's what we were talking about.

LYDON

What would their critique be of this global counter-revolutionary imperial system that we're now managing from Mosul to Pyongyang.

UNGER

That it corrupts the Republic, and one of the forms of the corruption has been the change to a so-called volunteer army which is a mercenary army, an army of poor people paid to undertake the military expeditions of the United States. That should be unacceptable to everyone who is a defender of republican institutions. The army must be the people and arms the nation in arms not part of the nation paid by the rest to defend them.

LYDON

It's a 40 year habit now of the mercenary army...

UNGER

Indeed so it can be done in order to untie the hands of the people in power. Because when the children of the elite were in the Army in which hard to undertake these military expeditions now it's much easier. That's an example of the fundamental problem of missing debate in American life.

WEST

Well, it is no doubt that Walt Whitman's "Democratic Vistas" if read in public today would be viewed as a revolutionary document. There's no doubt about that. In the same way Melville's Confidence Man, Bartleby read that right in front of Wall Street. "I prefer not." I know what's going on here. I resist the great refusal that Marcuse talked about in that essay on liberation. You see, so I mean we've got a number prophets. Muriel Rukeyser. We've got Eugene O'Neill. Tennessee Williams. August Wilson. They're primarily artists. Artists are the vanguard of the species.

UNGER

I have the impression that an undercurrent in our

conversation is the theme of realism— the theme of constraint. But the situation is this: it's like there's a balance. On one side of the scales are the constraints. There's always in the world the path of least resistance—what's the way of doing things that minimizes disturbance to the ruling interests and to the entrenched preconceptions. But how strong are these constraints? The only way you can know is by determining what's weighing on the other side of the scales. Now, the problem now is that the other side of the scales is largely empty. The transformative will, the transformative imagination, the project that is struggling against the constraints. Until you determine the content and nature and force of that project you can't measure the constraints. The constraints are infinite. And that's the situation that the country is now in. So I wouldn't forget about this language of constraints and deal with the project—

WEST

I don't know about that though. The project of national security state, the surveillance, the police, the FBI the CIA — those are constraints that are very real. Anybody who's speaking fundamental truths about the depth of corruption in this society tied to wealth inequality, tied to white supremacy and male supremacy is subject to character or literal assassination. That is a constraint, or the movement itself is subject to massive repression. That is a constraint. It doesn't mean that constraint is inevitable. It can be pushed,

but you have to be mindful of it if you love your family, you've got to be mindful of it if you love the people you're trying to struggle with and you have to be like Melville committed to a struggle for human dignity and decency regardless of what the constraints are because that's the kind of choice you decide to make as a human being, as an artist. You're selling 75 copies, 89 copies, 112 copies, he didn't give a goddamn. He's going to speak his truth. Emerson is on the board of overseers at Harvard at the same time—we got to throw that out there.

LYDON

Melville was out of print when he died too.

WEST

Melville was broker than the ten commandments but he remained a revolutionary until the end. Emerson grand as he was—and he is a towering figure. He couldn't set foot at Harvard for 30 years after the Divinity Address. He ends up on the board. He goes the establishment. Melville never.

UNGER

The sum of all these constraints fails to explain the abdication of the progressives.

WEST

I agree.

UNGER

They have abdicated because they have abdicated.

WEST

No, they have advocated because they have chosen complicity, complacency, conformity, cowardice. That's why they abdicated. Because people they get scared; they get intimidated; they do get weary; they don't want to fight anymore. It's a human thing but it needs to be rendered accountable.

LYDON

Speak to and speak about your students. Hundreds of black, white, brown, male, female, every sort of student sits rapt at your conversations every week. I keep thinking I went to college during the Kennedy administration. John Kennedy himself spoke to our graduating class. We knew—we thought we knew—what public life was all about and how it worked. What are those students making of the situation today and what are they asking from you, for guidance about American democracy?

WEST

I just feel blessed to be in a place where even giving its ruling class constraint you have robust conversation about some of the most crucial issues so that the young people get the chance to have access to Brother Roberto. They've never seen anybody like him before. Not at all. The law school Roberto was is about as atypical a law professor as one could imagine. And they have all the undergrads that go under the undergrad gaining access to that kind of analysis of what is in it and so forth.

LYDON

What is that thing to come for?

WEST

He a genuine thinker, a genuine thinker, an organic intellectual one who has not been blinded by the disciplines one who is willing to think against the grain to be iconoclast to be. In many ways idiosyncratic in the best sense that we're in. And he's old school, as much as he talks about the future. He actually represents the best of the past and that's Socrates as Jesus as Amos that is Whitman that is the latest Lincoln that's Martin Luther King Jr.. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and that Edward Said that's what you get with Roberta Unger, and thank God Harvard still is a place for this kind of thing takes place and it's a

beautiful thing.

UNGER

Chris, many of these young people are are oscillating between between two and two. So one attitude is that the only thing that it's possible to do in the world is to mitigate evil to make things less bad, to diminish the quotient of cruelty in social life the humanization of the inevitable and the program of the program is. The other attitude is that there is hope there's an alternative. Now, people used to believe in alternatives in the form of these blueprints that the classical liberals and socialists peddled, and now no one can believe in these blueprints. So, the search is for some other way of imagining the alternatives. Does it exist? That's what they're asking, and as all of us in the know in the world like Thomas, we have to touch the wound to believe and we don't know whether we can believe or should believe.

WEST

So it's this drama of spiritual oscillation that is being played out. In voice or silently in our classroom and I would like to see it play out more generally in the country.

LYDON

I'm so happy to be hearing it on the radio. Thank you. Thank you, Roberto Unger. Thank you,

Cornel. Cornel, do you want the last word?

WEST

Well I think we're going to wrestle with this issue of hope. I think it's something that we have to come to terms with again because I think about Thucydides. Remember in the Melian Dialogue when he talks about hope? It provides comfort in danger but it leads toward ruin if it's not done in the right way. And this is where hope and optimism have to be distinguished; where costly and mature hope has to be distinguished from cheap hope and immature hope. And it might be that the hope language itself has been colonized. I mean Obama colonized it and led us up against a wall and now the wall is even worse. So that maybe you can no longer talk about hope, just be a hope without invoking hope. And that's where we are in terms of how some of our most precious virtues have been so thoroughly turned against us. You see, the marketisation of hope, the commodification of hope makes it difficult at times to talk about the kind of hope Roberto's talking about it or Whitman was talking about or the Blues was talking about.

UNGER

As Cornel said: hope is not optimism. Optimism is just prediction and prediction is the position of the fatalist and the ironist. Hope is an existential orientation.

WEST

Absolutely.

UNGER

It's the shadow and the reward of transformative action.

WEST

And joy—it's not about pleasure. It's about joy.

LYDON

Don't forget St. Paul: "We rejoice also in tribulations for out of tribulations comes experience. Out of experience, patience. Out of patience, hope."

WEST

But Paul had an apocalyptic imagination. He's like the diggers. He thought that the world could be turned upside down very quickly. You say to Paul: that your Savior has come and gone and the world is still a dark cruel place.

UNGER

Now we on the other hand believe in turning the world upside down, little-by-little, step-by-step.

LYDON

Roberto Unger. Cornel West. Thank you.

