

Professor Unger, Social Frontiers Speech

Speaker Key

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RO I propose to speak of social innovation as a transformative movement in the world and not simply as a field for academic study. Now, there are two basic approaches to social innovation as a movement that one might distinguish; let me call them the minimalist and the maximalist approaches. According to the minimalist view of the social innovation movement, social innovation is a movement within civil society and about civil society. It does not directly engage in the politics of state power and it renounces the hope of proposing a comprehensive project for society. The minimalist approach to social innovation has the attraction of modesty and apparent realism.

According to the maximalist view of social innovation, the social innovation movement, although headquartered in civil society, is not simply about civil society, but about everything, and therefore, must engage the politics of state power and must have a comprehensive proposal for society. In my intervention now, I propose intransigently to defend the maximalist view, but I will do so not by arguing for it in the abstract, but by seeking to exemplify what its content would be because its content is far from being self evident.

I divide my remarks into the following steps; first, the situation in the world of the social innovation movement today. Second, it's task. Third, it's direction. And fourth, it's methods. The situation of the social innovation movement; the world today lives under a dictatorship of no alternatives. There is a very limited repertory of live institutional options available for the organisation of different domains of social life. And this restricted repertory of institutional alternatives has become the fate of the contemporary societies. Our interests and ideals are always nailed to the cross of the institutions and practises that represent them in fact.

In the rich North Atlantic world, the hegemonic project of the governing elite, coming from all the major political parties, is almost entirely confined to the attempt to reconcile American style economic flexibility and European style social protection within the limits of the institutional and ideological compromise established in the wake of the Second World War. The fundamental problems of the contemporary societies cannot be resolved or even addressed within the limits of that compromise.

Among these problems are the following; first, the hierarchical segmentation of the economy, which now takes a new form. In the wake of the decline of traditional mass production, a new form of production emerges in the world, characterised by permanent innovation, but almost entirely confined to isolated vanguards of each national economy, from which, the majority of the labour force remains excluded. Second, the disconnection of finance from the real economy. Finance, rather than serving the

productive agenda of society, is allowed to serve itself. Third, the non-existence of any promising way to enhance the quality of the provision of public services. What exists in the world is the bureaucratised provision of standardised, low-quality public services by the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. And the only apparent alternative to that administrative fordism, as one might call it, is the privatisation of public services in favour of profit driven firms. Fourth, the absence in these societies of an adequate basis of social solidarity. Money transfers organised by the state in the form of compensatory redistribution are not an adequate social cement. And fifth, the flawed and relatively impotent character of democratic politics, which leaves the basic structure of society unchallenged and largely unchanged, perpetuates the rule of the dead over the living and makes change depend upon crisis. None of these problems can be solved within the restraints of the social democratic compromise established in the middle of the last century.

What, then, is the work of the social innovation movement viewed in the spirit of the maximalist approach that I propose? The work is to resist and subvert the dictatorship of no alternatives. To do so in the direction of an enhancement of agency in all domains of social life of the capacity for invention and self-direction. To mobilise in the support of this effort the multitude of small-scale innovations, of little epiphanies that exist all around the world. To represent them as down payments on larger transformative possibilities. And to provide everywhere and all the time an alternative to what one might call the path of least resistance. Every time there is an exogenous shock, an opportunity, a change induced, for example, by the evolution of technology, the tendency is to accommodate the change or to realise the potential in the form that least disturbs the predominant interest and this is what one might call the path of least resistance.

The task of the progressives, in general, and of the social innovation movement, in particular, is to create an alternative to the path of least resistance. That is the work, but the question is; can it be achieved? Now I argue that the enabling conditions for the execution of this work are already at hand. The first enabling condition is the existence of a vast array of small-scale innovations coming from the grass roots, from the bottom all over the world. A kind of ceaseless, Brownian motion that we can discern throughout the world. The transformative potential of these small-scale innovations is, however, squandered because they commonly fail to be received and understood. As anticipations of alternative directions, they fail to be enlisted in the service of accumulative transformative projects.

The second enabling condition for the achievement of this work is that the functional imperative of success, for example, the ability to seize on the potential of a technological innovation, are always indeterminate in their social and institutional implications. There is always more than one way of achieving the functional advantage.

A third enabling condition for implementing this work is that there are always alternative ways of defining and defending group or class interest. There is always family of ways of defining or defending the interest of a class or by a certain segment of the labour force

that is institutionally conservative and socially exclusive, defining the neighbouring groups as the enemies.

And another set of ways that is institutionally transformative and socially solidaristic. Now, the functional indeterminacy of the practical advantages or imperatives and the duality of ways of defining or defending a group interest have, as their consequence, that it is always possible to establish an alternative to what I earlier called the path of least resistance and that is the goal of the social innovation movement.

I come now to the third and fundamental step in my argument; the direction and I propose a direction. Now, I do not argue that the social innovation movement should commit itself to a particular comprehensive programme for society. Rather, what I argue is that it should be a space in which alternative, such visions, can contest for ascendancy. And, in that spirit, I propose one such vision; here are four connected, large projects that, in their convergent effect, could help define such a direction. The first project would be described as vanguardism outside the vanguard. A new way of working, a new form of production emerges in the world. And this new form of production characterised by permanent experimentalism is typically relegated to isolated advanced sectors of each national economy. The task is to associate the state with small and medium sized firms and to develop regimes of cooperative competition among these firms to the end of disseminating the advanced practises through large sectors of the economy and the society rather than allowing them to be isolated within disconnected vanguards.

The second project is the project of radically transforming the character of education, and, thus, through education, of changing the predominant content of consciousness. A form of education that is analytical, rather than informational. That rejects encyclopaedic superficiality in favour of selective deepening. That embraces cooperation in teaching and learning against the combination of individualism and authoritarianism. And that deals with every subject dialectically, through contrasting points of view. Such a form of education can only become central through institutional innovations that reconcile the local management of schools with national standards of investment and quality.

A third project is the project of innovating in the provision of public goods. The goods by which we make people, we make them bigger. The state must provide universal minima operating, as it were, at the floor, and it must, at the same time, work at the ceiling of the provision of public services, developing the services that are most complicated, expensive and experimental. But in the broad middle range between the floor and the ceiling, the state can and should engage civil society, prepare it, equip it, finance it, so that it can share, together with the state, in the experimental and competitive provision of public services not for profit. That is the best way of enhancing the quality of the public goods and of provoking the independent self-organisation of civil society outside the state.

The fourth project is the project of energising or deepening democracy, creating a high-energy democracy. That project requires first, institutional innovations that raise the temperature of politics. The level of organised popular engagement in public life, that

hastens the pace of politics through the rapid resolution of impasse. That exploit experimentalist potential of federalist regimes to create counter models of the future in particular localities. And that, in unitary states, combine democratic centralism with democratic devolution not as opposites, but as compliments. That establish in the state an independent power to come to the rescue of groups that are caught in circumstances of exclusion or disadvantage, from which, they are unable to escape, by the forms of collective action that are available to them. And that progressively enrich representative democracy with elements of direct or participatory democracy. A high-energy style of democratic politics that allows democracy to do its work of mastering the structure that diminishes the dependence of change on crisis and that subverts the rule of the dead over the living.

Now, what is the unifying spirit, the animating impulse of a project characterised by these four sets of initiatives that I have just outlined? The unifying spirit can be described in two complementary ways. On the one hand, such a project is the solution to a problem. The problem is that like the liberals and socialists of the 19th century, we must have structural ambition. The ambition to change the background structure even if we change it piece-by-piece and step-by-step. Without structural ambition, transformative politics comes to nothing. However, unlike the liberals and socialists of the 19th century, we can no longer subscribe to dogmatic blueprints. How, then, can we have structural ambition without structural dogmatism? Only by institutionalising in every area of social life, a radical experimentalism and that is the unifying point of these initiatives.

The alternative way of describing the spirit that animates this project is to emphasise its goal, rather than its method. Its method is the progressive transformation of the structural background, of the institutional and ideological settlement. Its goal is not simply a marginal increase of equality; it is the achievement of a larger life with greater intensity, broader scope and higher capabilities for the ordinary man and woman.

Now, by what methods is the social innovation movement to advance in the pursuit of such a project? I propose that there are two main methods. The first method is the method of the interpreted foreshadowings. Small-scale transformations coming from the bottom can be represented as down payments on a larger project when viewed under the lens of a general conception. And it is that combination of tangible practicality with prophetic vision that must distinguish the social innovation movement if it is to do its work throughout the world.

The second method is the method of the exemplary incurrence. Although headquartered in civil society, outside the state and outside the market, the social innovation movement must go out from civil society and engage. Engage the politics of the state. Engage the corporate world. Engage the realm of media and culture. Engage the third sector of philanthropy. It must engage every area of social life, although beginning from its seat within civil society.

Now, finally, a word about the obstacles and about the opportunities. In the pursuit of this maximalist vision of the movement, the constraints are formidable. The path of least

resistance prevails almost everywhere. There is a hegemonic project in the richest part of the world, hostile to any structural innovation. And the only salient alternative to that project outside of the rich North Atlantic, is a state capitalism with meagre transformative potential. The high academic culture of the rich countries fails to defy this surrender to fate. Across the whole field of the social sciences and humanities, what we witness is the predominance of rationalising, humanising and escapist tendencies. In the positive social sciences, economics first among them, a right wing Hegelianism, the rationalisation of the existent. In the normative disciplines of political philosophy and legal theory, a humanising impulse, the pseudo philosophical justification of the ameliorative practises of compensatory redistribution and legal idealisation. And in the humanities, consciousness embarks on a roller coaster of subjectivist adventurism, disconnected from the remaking and the re-imagination of the social order. The votaries of these humanising, rationalising and escapist tendencies pretend to be antagonists, when they are, in fact, allies in the disarmament of the transformative will and the transformative imagination.

All these are powerful restraints against the work of the social innovation movement, nevertheless, the opportunity is immense. The message has been diffused throughout the world by democracy, by liberalism, by socialism and, above all, by the worldwide, popular, romantic culture that ordinary men and women are not as ordinary as they seem to be and that there is a vocation for a larger life established in every human being. The fundamental problems of the contemporary societies cannot be resolved within the restraints of the limited repertory of available institutional options. The multitude of small-scale innovations arises from below as a pre-figurement of larger possibilities. The world remains restless under the dictatorship of no alternatives. Let this restless world find an unexpected ally in the social innovation movement.