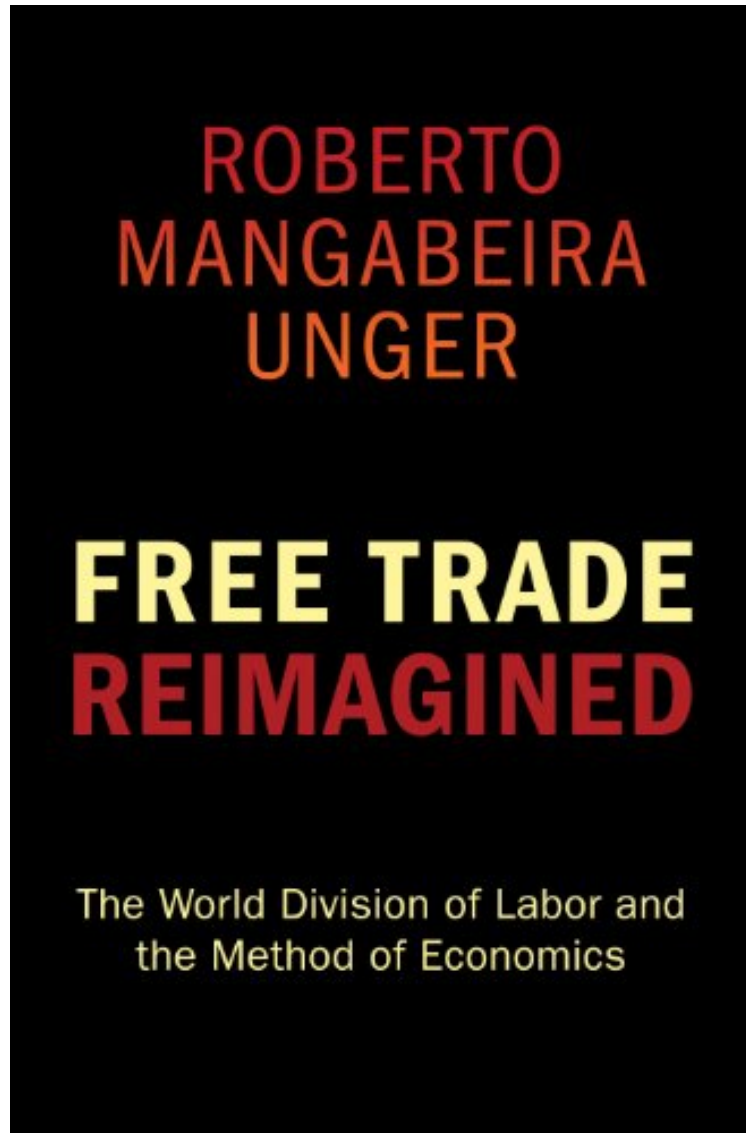


Free Trade Reimagined: The World Division of Labor and the Method of Economics

Roberto Mangabeira Unger

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Roberto Mangabeira Unger : Free Trade Reimagined: The World Division of Labor and the Method of Economics before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Free Trade Reimagined: The World Division of Labor and the Method of Economics:

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A masterpiece of free trade theory By Surendra R. Bhandari I am neither a fan nor a critic of Prof. Unger. I enjoyed reading his book Free Trade Reimagined. Most trade theorists have understood and explained free trade from the perspective of comparative advantage and factors of production. Trade

theorists have often ignored or overlooked the role of "constructed advantage" in trading regime. No less than the "given comparative advantage" and the factors of production, the "constructed advantage" is shaping the market mechanism and orienting the global and domestic trade policy regime. But this key concept of trading regime was/is regrettably missing among academicians. Professor Unger has unmistakably and powerfully articulated this profoundly important concept of trade regime, which I believe, is the most important contribution of the book. This book certainly offers a new perspective to the trade policy regime and I am sure that this book would command more debates and discussions in the future.

Surendra Bhandaribhandarisurendra@gmail.com
3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Controversial, interesting ideas, but poorly supported.

By Oleg Zaikov
In the book "Free Trade Reimagined: The World Division of Labor and the Method of Economics," Roberto Mangabeira Unger argues that we should revise the way in which we view free trade because the picture it currently paints is incomplete. As the first reviewer mentions, the central themes of the book are that there are multiple efficient ways of structuring a market economy, and that government should seek to establish a trade regime that allows for flexibility, diversity, and experimentation. With these ideas in mind, Unger sets forth his proposals, which "can be grouped under the heading of four counter-principles that we should put in place of the four principles on the basis of which free trade is now being established" (p. 180): the first counter-principle is that instead of maximizing free trade, we should seek to reconcile the "alternative development strategies and alternative versions of economic, political, and social pluralism" (p.180); the second counter-principle is to avoid worldwide institutional convergence and to "foster alternative approaches to the...organization of the market economy" (p.185); the third counter-principle is to encourage the freedom of movement of people and ideas, eventually establishing "a universal right of labor to cross national frontiers" (p.197); the last counter-principle is to make free labor truly free by setting labor standards that eliminate "wage slavery" (p.198). Overall, I found the controversial proposals to be interesting and thought-provoking. I especially enjoyed Unger's discussion of the current lack of freedom of mobility of labor and ideas, and the notion that a truly free trade system would allow workers to move across borders in order to obtain the best reward for their skills. Also, Unger did a very good job of acknowledging and addressing the possible objections to his theories. However, despite the originality of Unger's ideas, the book was ultimately unsuccessful in supporting his arguments. One of the reasons for this was the manner in which the information was presented - the language was somewhat convoluted, difficult to follow, and repetitive. The book lacks a real structure that guides the reader from one idea to the other. Because of this, one feels that he's groping around in the dark for the majority of the reading. Moreover, the proposals and arguments are almost completely abstract. Unger gives very few real world examples and essentially zero factual data. As a mathematician, I found this lack of concrete evidence in the book bothersome. Unger makes claim after claim supposedly refuting long-standing theory, but fails to provide specific examples or numbers to support his point. Once in a while, he will make some offhand comment citing a certain country, but it is difficult to understand what event he is talking about or how it is connected to the point he is making. In making claims as radical as the ones Unger does, I expect him to provide a vast collection of historical data in support of his position, especially after initially suggesting that historical evidence shows no correlation between free trade and economic growth. The final problem with Unger's proposals is the seeming impossibility of their implementation. Take, for instance, the notion of universal freedom of movement of labor. Because of national identities and citizenship rights, domestic policies, and ethnic tensions, global labor freedom is wishful utopian thinking. Even taking things one step at a time, as Unger suggests, it is difficult to imagine workers moving freely from Israel into Palestine. Thus, even though complete mobility of labor could be globally efficient, it is infeasible in modern society. Unger's call to move away from wage labor is similarly unrealistic. He proposes to have an international labor standard which, among other things, guarantees a "living wage...with a minimum degree of personal dignity" that "becomes the responsibility of the entire world" if the home country is too poor to provide it (p. 200). Again, full international cooperation to enforce and supplement a wage standard within a separate country is too idealistic and could potentially stymie growth - workers will know that no matter how little they do or how they work, their sustenance will be guaranteed. Even more implausible is the "gradual replacement of wage-labor...by self employment or partnership" (p. 202). Huge corporations hold a great deal of power and political influence, and it will be in their best interest to keep a wage-labor based society. It is unimaginable that these large entities would allow property right laws that diminish their relative power. Ultimately, "Free Trade Reimagined" proposes a unique perspective that unfortunately gets lost in a cloud of abstraction. The arguments provided lack empirical support and it is difficult to fully evaluate the merits of the proposals because Unger fails to give concrete examples of the policy changes he wants to implement. This leaves the reader frustrated, bored, and skeptical. Without further illumination from the author, the proposals in their base abstract form seem impossible to achieve in practice.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Three Stars
By Pramesus
A little tough to read.

Free Trade Reimagined begins with a sustained criticism of the heart of the emerging world economy, the theory and practice of free trade. Roberto Mangabeira Unger does not, however, defend protectionism against free trade. Instead, he attacks and revises the terms on which the traditional debate between free traders and protectionists has been joined. Unger's intervention in this major contemporary debate serves as a point of departure for a proposal to rethink

the basic ideas with which we explain economic activity. He suggests, by example as well as by theory, a way of understanding contemporary economies that is both more realistic and more revealing of hidden possibilities for transformation than are the established forms of economics. One message of the book is that we need not choose between accepting and rejecting globalization; we can have a different globalization. Traditional free trade doctrine rests on shaky empirical and theoretical ground. Unger takes a new approach to show when international trade is likely to be useful or harmful to the socially inclusive economic growth that every nation wants. Another message is that the movement of people and ideas is more important than the movement of things and money, and that freedom to change the institutions defining a market economy is just as important as freedom to exchange goods on the basis of those institutions. *Free Trade Reimagined* ranges broadly within and outside economics. Presenting technical issues in plain language, it appeals to the general reader. It puts a disciplined imagination in the service of rebellion against the dictatorship of no alternatives that characterizes life and thought today.

[Unger's] argument [is] that we can at once deepen democracy, enhance social security, and foster economic innovation and growth. . . . The scale and scope of the proposals are breathtaking, encompassing the entirety of human society, from the individual to global institutions. From the Back Cover "Few minds are as fertile as Roberto Mangabeira Unger's. In this extraordinary book, Unger turns his attention to an area that is in much need of creative thinking and breathes some fresh air on the stale academic debates surrounding free trade."--Dani Rodrik, Harvard University, author of *One Economics, Many Recipes* "Unger has written an incisive and compelling critique of free trade. The core of the argument--which seems to me historically incontrovertible--is that a nation's comparative advantage is always constructed by collaboration between public authorities and private interests. The essay hammers this point home with the relentless brilliance for which the author is known. A clear and worthy challenge both to those who are sure the doctrine of free trade is right and those who are confident that is fundamentally flawed."--Charles Sabel, Columbia Law School "This book aims to provide a critical assessment of the present theoretical and practical consensus in favor of the orthodox conception of free trade and to outline the elements of a realizable alternative. Unger reveals a remarkable breadth of understanding of the field, boring into it with his inimitable and potent vision. This is a book of enormous intellectual and worldly interest."--Sanjay Reddy, Columbia University "As one would expect from Unger, the book is brilliantly written and his central theses are persuasively and passionately argued. It is readily accessible and will command a wide audience and generate significant and constructive public debate and controversy."--Michael Trebilcock, University of Toronto About the Author Roberto Mangabeira Unger served until recently as Brazil's Minister of Strategic Affairs. He is widely regarded as one of the leading theorists of society in the world. His two most recent books are *The Left Alternative* and *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound*.