

THE UNIVERSITY IN TRANSFORMATION

Global Perspectives on the Futures
of the University

EDITED BY

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Homo Tantricus: Tantra as an Episteme for Future Generations

Marcus Bussey

Institutions reflect the minds of those who create them. Change the mind and you change the institution. In this essay I explore such a change to try and foresee what kind of university might emerge if we were to shift as individuals and as a culture from a model of mind based on the Western sapientia of Homo sapiens, to a model of mind founded on the consciousness inherent in the Tantra indigenous to central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

Currently most cultures have submitted to the educational model based on the vision of people as Homo sapiens, being possessed of a distinctly Western rationality that dominates and exploits its environment. This form of instrumental consciousness is trapped by its own internal necessity and cannot escape from the force and form of its own logic. The time is ripe for it to cross-pollinate with other nonwestern epistemes to build into our consciousness the flexibility and vision needed to reinvigorate our emergent global civilization.

Tantra, in the form of Homo tantricus, offers such a fusion. Human consciousness enriched by a tantric episteme offers to us a chance to explore new ways of educating based on an ethic of relationship and integration that will act as an antidote (what a wonderful Western metaphor) to the alienation and instrumentality that has impoverished the educational landscape.

Many who follow this article may say, to quote the poet Wallace Stevens, "but you do not play things as they are."¹ And you will certainly be right when looking at the "story" from our current social and economic setting, but then this is not what futures is about. Rather it is about finding, and playing, the "tune beyond us, yet ourselves."² Paul Wildman and Sohail Inayatullah's work on causal layered analysis gives us a clue here. With this method we can go beyond

conventional framing of issues. Each layer is an authentic strand within our experience of reality, and used as a tool of analysis we can, by "[m]oving up and down layers . . . integrate analysis and synthesis, and horizontally we can integrate discourses, ways of knowing and world views, thereby increasing the richness of analysis."³ Tantra fits comfortably into this description as it offers multiple realities, embraces various (often conflicting) ideas, and situates these within a discourse that is fundamentally metaphysical and unifying.

Tantra is usually relegated to the esoteric domains of book stores and libraries. Books on the subject will be found along with indigenous American shamanism, Australian Aboriginal myth, Celtic astrology, and esoteric sex. I want to argue that though some aspects of Tantra are certainly esoteric, it is also intensely practical and methodical. Tantra is not a religion, but an ethical and spiritual approach to life that is rooted in a resurgent indigenous consciousness. It is both ancient and modern, possessing the deep wisdom of its traditional eastern roots, while being energized with a liberatory ethic aimed at physical, social, and spiritual emancipation from exploitative ideologies.

Homo tantricus is a creature of the future. He or she will possess the skills of the present but will apply them with love and an appreciation of humanities' existence within a dynamic and beautiful whole. In this essay I will look at how such a being may be reflected in an institution of higher learning. Perhaps the term university will no longer be used but, judging by Tantra's respect for tradition and continuity, I think it will. First, we must briefly look at the state of universities today in order to contextualize how they might be different, or to quote Stevens again, how we might better play that "tune beyond us, yet ourselves."

TODAY'S UNIVERSITY

At the present time, universities have become large corporations producing and selling knowledge. As the postmodern philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard wryly notes: "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange."⁴ This is a natural development that reflects our culture's commercial obsession with capital. The knowledge-power nexus transforms information into a commodity that can be exchanged in the university marketplace in the form of bundles of "information." Knowledge is exchanged for power and vice versa. In this system, knowing and its product knowledge that does not translate into information that can be observed, measured, controlled, and easily exchanged, is excluded in favor of docile forms of knowledge that are more amenable to transaction.⁵

The significance of this development is that as power has shifted from the hands of those with an investment in culture, the liberal elite, to those who create capital, the managerial elite, the emphasis of the university has shifted to reflect these changes. Thus the university acts as a repository of socially valued knowledge forms and we can track the fortunes of ideologies by following the

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appearance, popularity, and disappearance of subjects on the timetable. So today, we see that the liberal project has come on hard times and that it is being eclipsed by a technical and managerial rationality, which has close links to capital and its production, and is distant from what that arch-liberal Cardinal Newman described as a form of learning that "refuses to be informed (as it is called) by any end."⁶ This definition is of course suspect in that all institutional learning founded on this principal at least has the desired end of what the educational philosopher Paul Hirst describes as "personal development by initiation into a complex of specific, substantive social practices with all the knowledge, attitudes, feelings, virtues, skills, dispositions and relationships that that involves."⁷ Lyotard describes such initiates as "heroes of knowledge"⁸ and Michael Peters sees them as "trained in the great task of pursuing good ethico-political ends . . . leading their countries toward social progress."⁹

Such postmodern thinkers have disturbed the neat liberal narrative of education leading to the good life, not only by questioning its underlying benevolence, but also by offering a discourse of discontinuity and fragmentation. But such postmodern critique can hardly be held responsible for the shift that we have seen in the very substance of universities. No, these shifts owe more to the liberal project itself than to any ideological critique. The creative Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci foresaw the seeds of this shift years ago when he described how the middle class, the architects of liberalism, had constructed an organic route through education and law that allowed all entry to its world. "The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level."¹⁰ Thus the state became the educator, opening the doors of hallowed institutions to any who sought them out. With this opening up, learning had to become more utilitarian because the focus of the majority has, within the modernist paradigm, to be on "ends." And also with this opening up foreseen by Gramsci there comes a point of saturation at which the class itself starts to disintegrate and the State too ceases to be a useful unit of organization.

This is where we find ourselves today. Modernism appears to be on the point of collapse. The powers of the State have been eroded by the global marketplace and the individual has been cloned. Cultural critic John Ralston Saul describes this development as "a hijacking of Western Civilization."¹¹ His concern is that the West as a civilization has made no real progress over the past two and a half thousand years. Indian philosopher and mystic Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar has made the same assertion. Progress is illusory and should not be measured in technical terms.¹² Saul argues that we are in the grip of unifying narratives that blind us to reality; we are in fact an unconscious civilization in which "we are actually teaching most people to manage not to think."¹³

Without a doubt universities are in trouble, since all they do is reflect the dominant mind-set of a culture that has ceased to dialogue with itself. They have ceased to create culture, to offer safe havens for dissent, to create their own future. They are now tied to the purse strings of fearful governments more worried about

being returned at the next election than about the long-term effectiveness of these institutions as generators of a learning culture that might help us enter the next millennium with vision and dignity.

RECONTEXTUALIZING LEARNING

It is not my intention to chronicle the parlous state of universities in the late 20th century. Rather, it is to chart a course of vision and hope into the next millennium by looking at the reasons for the system's failure, and recontextualizing learning within an episteme that allows for human potential to be expanded to include new ethical and spiritual dimensions. Central to this new episteme is the thinking of Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar. But his is not a lone voice as many people from many traditions are turning away from material rationality and its managerial and hegemonic agenda by seeking to chart alternatives that are creative and more fully attuned to human aspiration and spirit.

Earlier this century, Rabindranath Tagore started a university, and more recently William Irwin Thompson and a group of English intellectuals founded the learning community of Lindesfarne in the United States. Sarkar is, however, a seminal thinker, and it is his vision of a Tantra University, embedded in a spiritualized education system, which will be examined here as an example of how different universities of the future may be from their lackluster ancestors.

A REAWAKENED DISCOURSE

In the mid-1950s, Sarkar began laying the philosophical foundations for his educational agenda. Central to this project is his recognition that we, as a global civilization, are rapidly approaching a crisis—the positive resolution of which will only come about through a shift of consciousness. The new consciousness will be holistic, having its roots deep within an indigenous appreciation that it is consciousness, not humanity, that is central to the drama of existence. Because this reframing greatly expanded the humanist mandate that placed human consciousness on center stage. Sarkar called this new awareness of our interconnection with the universe *Neohumanism*.

In a recent reappraisal of the New Age movement, David Spangler pointed directly to the fundamental issue of our times: the birth pangs of a new consciousness. Such an immense shift has not been seen since the emergence of civilization itself thousands of years ago. "We are in the midst of a process of reimagining and reinventing ourselves and our world."¹⁴ But this shift is not occurring without pain and disruption. In fact, forces are amassing to contest the emergence of this new ethic:

- The massive escalation in the dominance and penetration of managerial and corporate psychology;
- The hunger to possess and control that drives all agents within society from the individual to the vast corporation via nuclear family and nation-state;

- The fear of difference and the need to silence dissent through a wide range of media from the bullet to the universalization of the unreflective consciousness of television and cyberspace; and
- The total disregard for the integrity of the natural world and our own bodies, which we poison and pillage at will.

It must be remembered that power never willingly surrenders to change. It intensifies its means of control through the technologies that penetrate deeply into everyday life; the visual, oral, and print media along with education and an economic system that binds it all through the linking of personal autonomy and happiness with economic success. This escalation cannot be sustained indefinitely. Modernism relies on the concept of indefinite progress to maintain its own momentum, but progress that is synonymous with cultural, environmental, psychological, and spiritual exploitation cannot last. Ziauddin Sardar points to this when he asserts that "the innate and powerful desire for meaning and identity in non-Western societies cannot be eradicated."¹⁵ Sardar calls this desire "traditional idealism"¹⁶ and it is in this nonwestern critique of the West, to which Sardar belongs, that lies the creativity and depth to accomplish the reimagining of ourselves and our future.

THE "TRADITIONAL IDEALISM" OF TANTRA

Sarkar's civilizational discourse also emerges from this space. In reimagining the future he weaves stories of continuity and discontinuity. Tantra is essentially a worldview rooted in indigenous pre-Aryan Indian culture.¹⁷ Its historical roots go at least as far back as the peaceful Dravidian peoples who lived on the Indus river and gave rise to what archaeologists call the Indus Valley civilization that flourished about 2500 B.C. and was swept away by the Aryan invasions of Northern India about 1700 B.C. The warlike Aryans brought with them the earliest Vedas and wove into their own culture the cosmology of Tantra.

This perennial tantric tradition of India has permeated many other cultures, particularly in its Buddhist and Jain manifestations. Today, Tantra is alive and well and has made successful inroads into popular Western culture through the modern fascination with the "spiritual treasures of the orient," hence the success of Vivekananda and Yogananda in the United States earlier this century and more recently of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who began the university initiative described in Grant's chapter, and Shrii Satya Sai Baba. These ideas are not unique, and corollaries are found in all spiritual traditions drawing on the deep collective myths of the human soul.

What is unique about the way Sarkar has redefined Tantra is that it gives very clear form to these popularized images and fuses them in a spiritual and social agenda that generates the energy and vision to begin the project of social reconstruction. Being deeply rooted in the indigenous experience of reality, Tantra has a broad metaphysical base, which allows for ways of knowing, feeling and processing that go far beyond the limited rationality that informs the post-Western

Enlightenment project. Priorities are different as Sarkar notes because, "spiritual life controls all other arenas of human life."¹⁸ This perspective generates a synthetic outlook steeped in what Sarkar calls "spiritual vision."¹⁹

So in Sarkar's tantric worldview, the individual can only exist within a collective to have meaning, with individual and collective consciousness working together in striving to overcome the physical obstacles that arise on the path of evolution. Consciousness is seen as an infinite and eternal entity of which we are a spark.²⁰ While "reality" is both relative and very real from our position within its unfolding story, in Sarkar's view, we have a sacred relationship with everything and are thus responsible for the maintenance of the whole by serving the parts. In this way we maintain our mythic connection to the whole. So in this tantric view the personal drama of life is also mythic and reflects our relationship with the sacred.²¹

Most indigenous cultures have found their purpose to be in maintaining cosmic balance and working in harmony with others and their environment.²² In many ways traditional Tantra also followed this pattern. Modern Tantra, as Sarkar has defined it, has a more dynamic agenda. It is specifically liberatory and therefore political. Tan in Sanskrit means "bondage," and tra means "to liberate from."²³ Traditionally this was interpreted to mean the individual transcending the limitations of their own ego. Sarkar radically shifted the emphasis from the individual to the collective by linking the two so that neither could progress without the other. Spirituality ceases to be selfish and becomes a collective act. Within this construction of Tantra the individual works for their own liberation by following specific physical, social, and spiritual practices, while at the same time struggling to free others from physical, social, and spiritual bondage. This brings to spirituality an ironic tension in which the individual must engage with the world in many ordinary and extraordinary ways. Thus "spirituality is both a grand project and an everyday task,"²⁴ as the bioethicist Jennifer Fitzgerald points out. The poet David Rowbotham summed the situation up nicely when he wrote, "Pray, speak beauty, but dust first spoke."²⁵ Much of the energy and dynamism of Tantra lies in this ironic tension.

Sarkar has based his educational philosophy on this expanded definition of Tantra. Sarkar is offering a meta-narrative of power, which is deeply attuned to the yearnings of the human soul, what Fitzgerald calls the "innate desire to expand one's potential."²⁶ Yet Saul rails against the dominance of meta-narrative in the form of ideology in the 20th century,²⁷ but his complaints are directed at materialistic and mechanistic ways of interpreting and acting upon life. Neil Postman states that the deeper "gods" are dead and that education has died because we now only educate in self interest. He argues strongly that the human "genius lies in our capacity to make meaning through the creation of narratives that give point to our labors, exalt our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to the future."²⁸ Sarkar shares this opinion and offers deep spiritual tantric narrative as the way to establish education and culture in a future that weds material reality with deeper readings of life.

Tantra's Key Concepts

As Peter Scott reminds us, universities are capable of "ceaseless adaptation."²⁹ They possess a dynamism that ensures their relevance for future generations. Sarkar's concept of Tantra is certainly dynamic but it shifts the emphasis of the university away from its traditional base. In earlier liberal constructions of the university, knowledge was often an end in itself, the possession of which endowed its owner with significant cultural capital. Later the most privileged knowledge came to be linked with mastery over technology, either institutional or real. Sarkar appreciates the cultural value of knowledge and its technical importance but he places these discourses, the liberal and managerial, within an expanded metaphysical framework. His agenda directly involves the university in activities that will take those engaged in them, the *Homo tantricus* of the future, into the community in a facilitative and participatory way. The origin of this shift lies in an episteme rooted in an ethical relocation of purpose from individual aggrandizement to social responsibility situated in a spiritual worldview.

The key concepts³⁰ that underpin this relocation include:

- The theory of PROUTist³¹ economics—provides the understanding of the social process needed to promote justice and equity taking into account the forces of capital, human ambition, and ecological responsibility;
- The philosophy of Neohumanism—a holistic philosophy situating all human activity in intimate and reverential relationship with the universe, spiritualizing the educational mission;
- Microvita theory—subtle energy waves affecting matter and thought, changing our foundational assumptions about science, learning, and consciousness;
- Theory of mind—the mind has many layers of which academic discourse acknowledges only one, reframing what constitutes knowledge, intelligence, and communication;
- Theory of prama—describes all individual and social structures in terms of physical, psychic, and spiritual balance, along with Prout, makes much of what universities do start with the practical, such as ecological degradation and economic disparity;
- Concept of aesthetics as a liberatory (that is, purposeful) activity—the arts are drawn into the center of human learning and experience as an important way to develop intuitional intelligence;
- Reconceptualization of history—history is cyclic and evolutionary, redrawing our understanding of human progress and of the function of education;
- Linguistics—a science that is spiritualized with introduction of Tantric theory of vibration and form, reflecting intent and also psychology. This is essential in understanding human mind and cultural expressions;
- Sadhana, meditative practice—research is also redefined as an intuitional science, consciousness needs to be plumbed through systematic meditative investigation, the results of such work make sense of the economic, social, aesthetic and ecological functions of the university;
- Concept of ecology—situates universities as part of projects designed to heal, protect, and nurture the earth as extensions of their community.

These concepts provide the organizing principles for the Tantra University. Growing out of traditional structures, they empower the human agency well

beyond the limits offered by those structures. Agency vivifies structure, which in turn locates agency within a cosmology that promotes universalism instead of the entrenched individualism of Western culture. In this way, Sarkar escapes both the traditional passivity associated with indigenous expression and the dynamic but selfish individualism that typifies the West. Thus freed from its cultural moorings, tantric episteme, as encapsulated in these key concepts, has applicability well beyond India and Asia. By introducing dynamic universalist ethics to Tantra, Sarkar has created the conditions for a breaking down of barriers relating to culture, class, gender, and species. The result is potent indeed and has great significance for all explorations of culturally relevant alternatives to the dominant Western model of education.

In this way dissent emerges from the periphery to recover what the Indian futurist Ashis Nandy calls the "other selves" that nonwestern cultures have written out of their own stories in order to fit into the dominant categories of the West. Sarkar's revitalizing of Tantra offers resistance to what Nandy calls the "dominant politics of knowledge."³² Thus Tantra resists the structural violence of colonization, those "monocultures of the mind," which according to peace educator Frank Hutchinson have led to the "domestication or impoverishment of social imagination."³³

It is important to realize that Tantra represents an epistemic shift that critiques and expands all practices, both Western and nonwestern, in the light of universalist ethics. By asserting that Tantra is rooted in an indigenous Indic episteme is not to assert that such an episteme is accepted uncritically or that Tantra will colonize in the name of this episteme. Tantra seeks to create universal culture based on generally shared values inherent in the key concepts previously described, yet it is sensitive to local and regional variations. Sarkar laid great emphasis on this fact. The nature of epistemic shifts is, as feminist futurist Ivana Milojevic observed, to "help bring about new resolutions, policies, and actions."³⁴ From such resolutions, policies, and actions emerges the new, informed by its past. In this sense Tantra is no longer indigenous, but transdigenous³⁵ as it no longer has regard for traditional boundaries. This disregard for boundaries fits well within the context of our emergent global culture, which has scant regard for many of the divisive practices that constitute earlier forms of cultural expression and oppression. But globalism needs to be tempered by concepts such as those inherent in the episteme of Tantra because, as the Islamic cultural critic Ziauddin Sardar has observed, it is becoming synonymous with the extension of capitalism and Western culture and is therefore perceived to be inimical to all nonwestern peoples.³⁶

The Tantra University in India

The experiment is already under way in India where the organization Sarkar established in 1955, Ananda Marga, has started the first Tantra University at Ananda Nagar in West Bengal. This project, which is part of a broader educational

movement called Ananda Marga Gurukula that ranges from kindergarten to university, has already attracted much interest amongst India's intelligensia who are looking for ways to escape the dominant model of learning that was imported into India by the British, as discussed in greater depth by Rahman in this volume.

The project places the Tantra University alongside a number of other tertiary institutions. The Gurukula, an ancient Sanskrit term denoting the residence of a realized teacher (that is, a place for deep learning), as the entire campus is called, offers courses that include the staple university threads such as the sciences and humanities, but stretches far beyond them in an attempt to embrace the deeper mythic and cosmological realities that are part of the Indian consciousness. The Tantra University is one institution amongst many on this campus, its focus being on "the application of Tantric precepts to contemporary problems facing society—political, economic, social, educational, environmental, and the rest." Its stated mission is to "foster social changes based on justice to all beings."³⁷ Some interesting developments within this university are its determination to sponsor poor and tribal peoples and the way it breaks down disciplinary boundaries to allow for rich rereading of old discourses. Thus they bring spiritual philosophy to bear on political theory as part of their Proutist Economics course, also we find homeopathy, ayurveda, and other indigenous medical practices being taught alongside, and interacting with, Western allopathic medicine.

A BROADER VISION OF IMPLEMENTATION

The curriculum of any Tantra university would reflect a transcendence of conventional divisions of knowledge. This is because in Tantra knowledge is rooted in deeper epistemes of meaning in which discrimination and wisdom are valued over "information retrieval." Conventional disciplines only have relative meaning in this broader discourse in which, as Rick Slaughter commented, "we are all and always immersed in a stream of knowing in a world brimming with immanent meaning."³⁸ This loosening of the stranglehold of "disciplines" on the mind of Homo tantricus allows for a great unleashing of creativity. What this means to us now in a world still dominated by the compartmentalized worldview it is hard to say, but we can certainly indulge ourselves here with a little educated guess work.

Links between the arts and science could become real as scientists and artists discover that what they are both dealing with is microvita, those subtle energy waves that both generate life and influence thought and emotion. Historians too can bring an understanding of microvita into their work, once again in collaboration with scientists and artists, and perhaps we will see courses like Microvita and Revolutions, and Microvita and the History of Ideas on campuses of the future. Similarly the Tantric theory of the mind as a many-layered system may have great implications for psychology, medicine, and the humanities. The introduction of this concept of layers, called koshas, may lead to the birth of courses like Criminology and Kosha Theory, or Kosha and Language Groups—Explorations in Cross-Cultural Linguistics. These courses may sound strange to modern ears

but the real power of these ideas to transform our understanding of current disciplines should not be underestimated.

Take another example using Proutist economic theory. Here we can imagine courses like Proutistic Strategies for Agrarian Reform in Papua New Guinea and Proutistic Business Management. Education will be transformed with the appearance of neohumanism shifting the emphasis from discipline and control to neohumanistic learning strategies. Subjects will appear like Neohumanistic Child Development and Neohumanistic Curricular Development. Teacher training may involve subjects like Ethical Mathematics and Overcoming Learning Blocks: Reincarnation Theory and the Developing Mind.

The possibilities are endless and fascinating to explore, even with our limited consciousness. Playing like this fills me with a sense of pathos at the suffering we endure because of our isolation within a rationalist framework. "If only . . ." I keep whispering to myself. But all the signs are here that change, major change is on the way. The presence of thinkers like Sarkar confirm this. Too much is already giving way for the old boundaries and constructs to last.

HOMO TANTRICUS

In choosing to play with a term like Homo tantricus I have deliberately combined two very different cultural traditions, the West's deductive and rational narrative with the East's synthetic and mythic consciousness, to suggest that unlikely partners may generate fruitful insights into the future.

Although much about a Tantra University remains speculative, the creative potential of such a concept cannot be denied. The value of a rich tradition like Tantra for the problems of our day—ecological degradation, social and economic disparity, individual alienation, and spiritual impoverishment—is that it is not bound to play by the rules of the dominant paradigm that has created these problems. And, although such a proposition raises as many questions as it seeks to solve, I have no doubt that Homo tantricus will have a lot of fun answering them.

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9. Peters, op cit.: 29.
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31. PROUT—Progressive Utilization Theory. Spiritual economics based on the Tantric principle that all human activity, including economic activity, should be directed toward liberation from poverty, ignorance, and injustice so that every human life can be spent working toward spiritual realization.

32. Ashis Nandy, "Shamans, Savages and the Wilderness: On the Audibility of Dissent and the Future of Civilizations," in R. A. Slaughter, *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies, Volume 3: Directions and Outlooks* (Melbourne: Futures Study Centre, 1996), 145.

33. F. P. Hutchinson, *Educating Beyond Violent Futures* (London: Routledge, 1996), 34.

34. I. Milojevic, "Learning from Feminist Futures," D. Hicks and R. Slaughter, *World Yearbook of Education 1998: Futures Education* (London: Kogan Page, 1998), 85.

35. Here I display poor etymological sense (I should have said trans-genus) but this word-play makes the point that Tantra transcends its own roots and is no longer concerned with the inward self-reclaiming of indigenous movements today, but rather with a reclaiming of the transcendent global self.

36. Sardar, op cit.

37. Acharya Shambhushivananda Avt, "Tantra Vidyapeetha," *Gurukula Network* 1, 2 (New York: AM Publications, 1996), 5.

38. R. Slaughter, *The Foresight Principle: Cultural Recovery in the 21st Century* (London: Adamantine, 1995), 172.