

Creating the experience of social change

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the social change theory of P.R. Sarkar is introduced to students of the Australian Foresight Institute's Masters in Strategic Foresight program through an action learning process. Through action learning, the student can come to appreciate the qualitative difference in understanding that can be obtained through taking an 'integral' or meta-perspective on social change processes. Such a perspective increases the efficacy and scope of all social interventions.

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1. Introduction

In the Australian Foresight Institute's Master of Science in Strategic Foresight program, the first year of a student's study is concluded with the subject 'Dimensions of Global Change'. After studying the history, the methods and the use of futures methods, students are then exposed to the idea of the 'constructedness' of theories of social change. An outcome of this subject is for students to become aware of the deep macrohistorical processes that shape and contour both 'presents' and 'futures'.

P.R. Sarkar's 'Social Cycle' elegantly demonstrates how easily 'social roles' are adopted and how these roles bring forth partial and limited understandings of change and change processes. Both as a macrohistorical model of social change and the embodiment the process of social construction it is a pivotal learning element in the subject. Ken Wilber suggests that developing an 'integral' or 'meta'-perspective allows the individual to honour all participants' perspectives and can generate interventions and behaviours that can act with greater effectiveness and sustainability on a social system. Here, too, Sarkar is relevant, as the role of the 'sadvipran' in the social cycle is both theory and action that embodies 'integrality'.

By 'creating' the experience of the social cycle in the classroom, the students learn of their own social constructions and roles. They experience the frustration of how these roles and constructions limit the effectiveness of their actions. They can also recognise the qualitative

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difference in the potential of actions that arise from adopting an ‘integral’ stance in participating in social change.

2. The need for an Integral approach

There have been a great number of theorists who have called for an ‘integral’ way of seeing the world in order to act in ways that honour all perspectives and can also find paths of greater inclusion and growth. Ken Wilber’s theory of human consciousness is based upon the concepts of the Kosmos, holons and the direction of evolution. Wilber employs the original meaning of Kosmos, as introduced by the Pythagoreans, being “the patterned nature or process of all domains of existence, from matter to mind to God, and not merely the physical universe” [3, p. 16]. In this view, the Kosmos contains the cosmos (the domain of matter), the bios (the domain of life), the nous (the domain of the mind or intellect) and the theos (the divine domain). The relationship of these domains to each other is holonic.

Arthur Koestler coined the term ‘holon’ to refer to an entity that is itself whole and simultaneously part of some other whole. Everything is a holon and holons are arranged hierarchically.

A King goes to a Wiseperson and asks how it is that the world does not fall down. The Wiseperson replies, “The Earth is resting on a lion”. “On what then is the Lion resting?” “The Lion is resting on an Elephant”. “On what then is the Elephant resting?” “The Elephant is resting on a Turtle”. “On what then is the...?” “You can stop right there Your Majesty. It’s Turtles all the way down” [3, p. 18].

Thus, there is no lowest holon or an ultimate holon. There is nothing that is not part of something else. Today’s somethings are part of tomorrow’s somethings.

Wilber proposes that evolution occurs holonically in a self-transcending process; it incorporates what went before and yet goes beyond it as well. Thus, holons are arranged in natural hierarchies (called ‘holarchies’) of increasing wholeness, such as: particles to atoms to cells to organisms; or letters to words to sentences to paragraphs, for example. A higher point in a holarchy is not necessarily a ‘better’ point but it is certainly a point that contains a deeper level of structural organisation than that of the holons it contains. If you ‘destroy’ a holon then all holons above it in the holarchy are also destroyed, but the holons below it continue. For example, the bios is ‘higher’ than the cosmos because if you destroyed all life forms (bios) then matter (cosmos) would still continue.

Finally, evolution does not occur through purely random chance but instead seems to have a direction. It has a broad and general tendency to move in the direction of increasing complexity, increasing differentiation/integration, increasing organisation/structuration and increasing relative autonomy. This is the apparent self-transcending drive of the Kosmos—to go beyond what went before, and yet to include what went before, and thus increase its own depth [3, p. 37]. Post-modernist perspectives are uncomfortable with the notion of any apparent teleological drive in evolution, and seek to deconstruct any potential meta-narrative or over-arching structure. An integral perspective operates with holarchies and understands that all perspectives are just parts of the whole. The attempt to find the whole is to ‘go integral’ on a particular perspective. To seek the direction towards greater complexity, differentiation and integration is to also ‘go integral’.

Wilber maintains that integral theory is not merely a conceptual understanding but also embodies practice and action. The integral perspective cannot be found through the mind alone.

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