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Symposium

## A depth approach to the futures of the self

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In Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* we are told that light and lightness—historically about the realization of higher states of consciousness—can as well be about forgetting what is of significance [1]. The self is created free from history, from nationalism, from attachments. He can travel through life untouched by the pain and anguish brought upon by war and death; malady and anguish. Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen* gives us a different self [2]. He or she is equally light, able to shed identity and take on different characters, becoming male or female, “hunk” or “hotbabe”. This is the swift self, netspeed giving him or her the ability to not be drawn into the gravity of the symbols being expressed on the net—of revolutions, of struggles against despots, of sites against torture. The speed of the latest pentium chip allows one to explore other's identities without being consumed by them. As Bill Gates writes, “the 2000s will be about velocity”. [3] In New Age discourse as well, identity is less foundational and more of a “tape”, a pattern individuals and collectivities practice. Health comes through creating new tapes that better approximate desired futures. New Age visioning seminars intend to create new tapes for humanity itself. This is the new story, or the meta-story that some futurists call for. It is an image of the self as teflon, not glued to history, that does not stick to pain, but instead moves on to different pleasures.

At heart the light, swift and teflon vision of the future, of the self, is ahistorical (although more scholarly efforts attempt to locate this discourse within general evolutionary systems theory) and culturally exploitative. Why? As American Indians has told New Age appropriators, if you desire to use our symbols, our names, our dances, our mysticism, then you must as well participate in our pain, in our defeats, in our anguish. You must also see us in our humanity, good and evil, and not as noble savages. It is the arbitrary exclusion of certain dimensions of history and self that become problematic.

But for the light and swift self—the liberal postmodern—if you will, it is choice that is essential. Healthy selves are created through the enhancement of choice,

whether that is increased goods and services, or increased choices about what religion or civilization one desires. In sharp contrast are the expressions like that of the Hawaiian, who asserts that the transcendental is not an issue of choice. It is foundational and not open to negotiation. But for the postmodern self, all is open to negotiation. The health of the former is based on the idea that certain things in the universe are known and there is humility, man is not the measure of all things, there is God or gods and nature. The health of the latter rests on the notion that the torments of history can be escaped, *varna* or caste, “like father like son”, can be rendered less powerful in determining one’s future and past.

The image of many selves in one does not necessarily mean, however, a commodified spatially shallow self. There can be authenticity. One can be many people; one can through travel, marriage, and other episodes in one’s life stages, learn about other cultures and include them in one’s selves, creating a pluralistic self. There are successful stories of this—but the success of incorporating the many is based not only on lightness but on depth. It is undergoing the struggle of learning about the other, the light and heaviness of their selves.

Thus it is depth and not horizontal orientations that give us insight into the future. This does not mean, however, that we are forever condemned to repeat the tragedy of history.

## 1. Ways out of trauma

Are there then ways out of for the selves that are created through historical episodes of trauma? First, it is important to note that selves can respond different to trauma. For example, Brenda Hall-Taylor has studied the recently unemployed and noted that each one brings a story to his or her experience [4]. These stories are based on foundational experiences of love and rejection, often through the metaphor of the family. There is the jilted lover, who believes the institution left him/her for someone else; there is the mother who believes she gave her all to the institution, and is regretful that she can no longer take care of her children (angry that they, her projects, have been taken away from her); there is the controlling father, who can not let go of the business, and who tries to destroy the institution rather than face others taking over. There is also the child, who cries and whines, hoping that someone will find a solution for him. This typology can also work at the national level, with different stories helping to negotiate trauma. But it is trauma that creates the mythology of identity that creates a demarcation of self/other that is fixed and not permeable.

While certainly more permeable selves can lead to a better world, imagining new selves without authentically speaking to trauma creates fanciful scenarios that cannot help in the historical reconstruction challenge. For example, writing a new story or future for South Asia without the brutality of partition, the Indian/Pakistan hate for each other (indeed, each defines the other as not-itself), without concerted collective efforts to speak to this pain leads to selves that may appear to have transformed but are quick to revert back to prior barbarism at a minute’s notice, as we can see from

Yugoslavia. There as well—without speaking to the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, of the defeat to the Turks—no new selves can be created.

But as much as there stories of pain, there are episodes of transcendence, where a political of inclusion is created. It is this we must focus on. In Yugoslavia, these are the stories of cultural pluralism, of Serb/Croat/Muslim helping each other, of, for example, the man who lost his legs and arms to keep alive the idea if not the reality of multicultural Bosnia. In South Asia as well, there is history of neighbour helping neighbour, of selves in pluralistic relationship to each other. These stories are more grounded in the deeper category of civilization, touching deep humanity, then on more recent nominations of nation.

It is this pain of exclusion that the light/swift/teflon self cannot deal with, indeed, hopes to hide from, or transform through convenient spirituality or web surfing, or partying. However, none of these three have the depth to help change how humans see their history, and thus their future. This is partly since the unthought to the postmodern liberal image of the self is exclusion [5]. There is no experience of exclusion, of uncomfortableness, of racism, since the world has been created in their eyes, their ways of knowing, their categories of what is important, of what is time, and what is space.

A depth approach to the futures of the self immediately challenges the universality of these experiences, partly by recounting history, by recovering silenced ways of knowing. It thus does not discount history but embraces the past; without, however, acceding to official version of history or religion. For example, it investigates how mullahs, priests, intellectuals, or vicious local leaders have used the other to gain privilege, have set up systems of verticality with them at the top and others at the bottom. A historical based vision of the future does not thus accede to dogma, indeed, it asks questions of practices that are, for example, anti-women, nature and culture.

## **2. The seduction of the postmodern**

The seduction of the postmodern future is that it allows for other ways of knowing since reality is seen as socially constructed and not given by a higher being or a greater power. However, the trojan horse is that behind the sensibility of poststructuralism—which methodologically contests all discourses—is the ontology within which it functions. “Rather than presuming an underlying system of order, a form of life in which the self can achieve authenticity or non-alienation, it assumes that Being is fundamentally disordered and that every interpretation of the order is an arbitrary imposition” [6]. It is thus ontology that civilizations outside of the Western discourse must see as part of modernity/postmodernity and not in any way as natural. With this accomplished, alternative histories and futures can be created that challenge postmodernism.

With the willingness to enter the sufferings of others, alternative futures can then be created. Once suffering is acknowledged, the possibilities of transcendence can be explored. But the acknowledgment must be one that shares epistemes and world-views, that enters the other within their own terms, that understands and does not

call for a “new story of stories” that erases history. While the erasure of history can lead to temporary lightness, allowing one to quickly go from one self to another, it does not create selves and futures that deliver us from the gore of history, from demonic expressions of what it means to be human. It does not account for evil. Indeed, evil becomes solely a horizontal discussion of perspective instead of a more layered analysis, which while certainly inclusive of multiple perspectives does not shy away from accountability.

Postmodern selves thus continue the linear ascent of the privileged. But it is not a return to cyclical history, I argue for, that is for tradition in itself, but very much the spiral vision of past, of returning to the past, to move us forward to new futures.

What I argue for is a layered self, which does not discount ego, family, nation, religion, race or ideology but progressively moves through these various aspects of identity, until humanity is embraced, and then finally a neo-humanism self, wherein nature and the spiritual are included. Identity thus has depth but is not shaped by the dogmas of the past. Rather they become the fodder for struggle, for moving to a more inclusive global pluralism. But evil cannot be avoided in this more inclusive self, as much as there is *vidya*, and embracing of good, of selfless practices, there is the exploitation of others<sup>1</sup>. This struggle does not disappear or is made horizontal (a battle of contending discourses) as with liberal postmodernism, rather it becomes the vehicle for transcendence.

If we do not go this way then the long-term result will be depression. Already the World Health Organization forecasts “that unipolar depression will be the leading cause of ‘Disability Adjusted Life Years’ throughout the developing regions in the world.’ [8]. By the year 2020, non-communicable diseases such as depression and heart disease are expected to account for seven out of every ten deaths in the developing regions, compared with less than half today. Death becomes the future since hope is lost. During economic crisis particularly the teflon vision of the self becomes known to be a charade, as Thais recently found out during the Asian Economic Crisis. However having jettisoned Buddhist ways of knowing for modernity, there were no other possibilities there—a pluralist essentially spiritual vision of the self, and the hard work it takes to become that, is not readily available (taking a life time to develop). Moreover, the memes for this alternative vision of the future are just being created. What results is schizophrenia—a world where everything is real, every fear, every image is real. It is a virtual hell of panic and sweating, where Pol Pot stands at the corner of every street. Where paying one’s electricity bill takes days because the bureaucracy has been structured to give pain through diminishing others, through making them wait, not creating a timeless spiritual self, but a tired, beaten self.

Which self then is the future? But the prior question is that how are we framing the future of the self? What voice are we using, and how does that voice silence

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<sup>1</sup> In classical Tantra Yoga, foundational are the forces of *vidya* (introversion) and *avidya* (extroversion) [7].

others? How does the story we use to talk about the future create a narrative void of passion, of love, of bitterness, of depth?

### 3. What then are the scenarios of the future?

The first is the future as “schizophrenia” [9]. Faced with the onslaught of cloning, nano-technology, space travel, shrinking space and shrinking time (increased demands made on one to survive financially within globalism), selves implode. Nothing is real and everything is real. There are no layers of reality, only monsters chasing us day and night, with the self having no idea when it is day and when it is night, since nature will have ended, become virtualized or roboticized. The second is the “postmodern liberal” scenario, where the middle-class and rich West float away into spiritual and chemical bliss, negotiating all realities by consuming them. Juxtaposed to floating selves are grounded fundamentalist selves of the religious and scientific varieties, each unwilling to give an inch on History and Truth. The third scenario is “struggle with bliss”. Selves are complex and layered; an inclusive spirituality is the ground but evil and struggles within and without are intrinsic to them. The self is as complex as multiple ways of knowing define it.

I hope for the third scenario but see it coming into fruition only after the levity/heaviness of the second is resolved. The first remains ever present, and with no evidence that it will go away for a long time yet. Perhaps, there will always be contradictions: with light there is always darkness, the heavy is always measured against the light. So even our desired spiritual pluralistic futures will be contradictory, there will always be dimensions of self we can not see, perhaps fundamentally never see.

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