THOMAS BERRY
Guides to a Viable Future

URSULA FRANKLIN
Feminist Leadership

JOSEPH SLICKER
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SOHAIL INAYATULLAH
Cycles of Power
I left work early last Friday, largely to go home and watch an amazing event. No, it was not star American basketball player Michael Jordan soaring through the sky; rather I went home to watch the Chinese revolution on TV. I was suddenly made part of this awe-some event...this age of video had now included me in judging the goodness or the rightness of the events. My eyes could then decide whether the official words of the Chinese government or the American government were true; I could judge for myself. As the Chinese bureaucrats tried to force Cable News Network (CNN) to leave, I again could decide who was correct. Was Chinese national territory and culture being violated by this foreign presence or did CNN have a larger global right to provide information?

In the end, CNN avoided the philosophical issue and settled for the bureaucratic discourse. They agreed to pull the plug only when a letter signed by the Chinese government was given to them. The Chinese were, of course, puzzled by this. The Beijing official tried to explain to the newsperson that these were obviously extraordinary times:
why the evocation of official stationery? But with CNN unwilling to evoke rights, all that was left for them to buy time was procedure, due process, and when the letter—written in Chinese—was produced, the live revolution was over. The basketball game, too, was over, and there appeared to be no revolutions in the offing: Aquino was already stable, and Marcos appeared to not want to die Friday evening; Zia had died last year and Noriega had his own timeline. So I turned the age of video off, walked onto the street and pondered the incredibleness of it all.

The Ancients: All Things Rise and Fall

Sau-Ma Chien, ancient Chinese historian, had written of—without access to live real-time revolutions—how new dynasties are born from the actions of the sage-king, and how they rise in virtue, but eventually, over time, there comes squandering, laziness and pride, and then the tyrants step in, virtue is gone and the dynasty ends. This cycle is repeated over and over. The Tao is present; it then disappears. In virtue all gain; in decline all lose. Ibn Khaldun, the 13th century founder of sociology and modern history, too outlined this cyclical view of history. But to him it was not the rise and fall of virtue, it was the rise and fall of asabiyya or unity. He studied the Bedouins and saw that their success was a result of their solidarity; a closeness derived from their struggle against the elements. In the desert, they had a remarkable level of communication among themselves and a low degree of noise, of disunity. But over four generations, unity disappeared and people's minds turned to wealth and to expectations without hard work. Each succeeding rulership did not have to work for leadership—it was routinized. Thus, the empire fell and asabiyya passed on to some other group, usually someone from the desert who still had unity and a collective vision of the future; he would then ride on a camel into power.

For these two historians and others like Indian philosopher P.R. Sarkar—who I will come to—all things rise and fall. Leaders come into power, they exaggerate their power and in this exaggeration there is exploitation. As Sarkar would say, power always centralizes to some group on the wheel: it goes to the warriors, to the intellectuals and to the acquisitors. And, of course, in this cycle there is the group who causes revolutions but rarely gets to enjoy them—the people, the students, the workers, the women, the groups who do the work. They bring about a new world, but power quickly centralizes and the cycle of power continues. The wheel is eternal. From this perspective of macrohistory, even if the Chinese students succeed, there is a larger deeper structure which will re-emerge. It is the cycle. The ancients noticed this cycle everywhere: in nature, in our breathing, in the moon; it was this cycle that led women to create mathematics (mother-wisdom according to writer Barbara Walker in The Crone); it was this cycle that reminded the great that one day they would fall, and it reminded the impoverished that they would one day rise—everyone knew they would have their turn. It is this cycle that gives hope to the third world, to the Pacific Islanders, to women and to the environment itself—to Gaia. And to use another sports metaphor, mother earth always has the last bat. Nature always wins. This is then the world of the rise and fall. Here, there is no linear progress; rather there are fits and starts, moments of glory and episodes of betrayal.

And as I walked outside along the sea and looked above at the near full moon of May, the self-evident truth of the cycle seemed utterly clear. For when Michael Jordan rises, he falls. When great teams win, eventually they lose. People are born, and then they die. The cycle speaks to that which is irreversible; that which is ancient. It is the story of creation, the story of who we are.

The Enlightenment Challenges the Wheel

But all stories are challenged, and the European Enlightenment was precisely a radical challenge to the ancients. The Enlightenment brought forth reason and made it natural; it brought forth the linear arrow of time and made it a necessity; it brought forth greed and made it divine; and finally it brought forth nature and made it human. This was the end of the cycle; with reason and industrial technology, God and the cycle of nature could forever be vanquished. In their place would emerge the city of heaven on Earth—a city where power was curbed through the written word, where despots could not claim the divine mandate, but instead were forced to exist in a mutual contract with the people. The world was now not god-centred or nature-centred or myth-centred; rather, it was man-centred. In fact, as Michel Foucault brilliantly argues in his The Order of Things, humans have existed epistemologically only for a few hundred years—knowledge was ordered differently in feudal and religious eras. “Man” is thus a recent category, and soon, as we enter a postmodern world, whether it be a spiritual recovery of enchantment, or a technological creation of the evernew, “man” will once again disappear to the
sidelines, and the gods of magic or the robots of the future will become the focus of thought.

Now, when the Enlightenment faltered, when the cry of equality, liberty and fraternity in the British and French revolutions ended the reign only of the clergy and the aristocrats, but not of the bourgeois technocrats, there came another challenge—that of Marxism; but it, too, continued the project of rationalism; after all, historically speaking, liberalism and Marxism are minor deviations from each other: they both believe in empiricism, materialism, prediction, domination and separation from nature, and technological progress. Marx, however, saw the cycle, but believed that if ownership could pass to the people, then new technological developments would not create contradictions, but, rather, would generate greater levels of wealth. The wheel of history would end and the heaven promised by the people of the book—the Jews, Muslims and Christians—would descend. The secret of knowledge would be forever gained.

But we all know where that project ended. Power centralized, new wealth went to the Party and instead of the priests of religion, it was the ideologues of the Party who watched over the brain-death of creativity. Just as the priests took away all spiritual insight, the partycrats took away all individual initiative. The grid of partocracy succeeded, but at a cost that led to its own demise. The cycle of history was not so easily defeated.

Then came the liberals. The liberals put something else at centre stage that could once and for all solve the problem of poverty: this was technology. Tools removed us from the monkey and they would provide the next jump in human history, one where the myths of the past, the myths of scarcity, of the rise and fall, of the stranglehold of irreplaceable, nonrenewable commodities such as oil, would keep us from realizing the good society that was possible.

**New Technologies Challenge the Wheel**

Now from the liberal view, there is a new revolution that will climax the project begun a few hundred years ago. For this revolution has as its base something that when used becomes better and when shared increases. It promises to bridge the distances between individuals, cultures and nations. It promises to join the isolated into a community and to take the best from the historical and the modern world to create a global village and an electronic cottage. This world will have highways but not polluted ones; rather they will be of light; instead of seaports or airports there will be teleports. We will have resolved the historical contradictions of the urban and the rural, of self and community, of worker and manager. These contradictions will be resolved not by the Pacific Shift, not in the Japanese method of miniaturizing nature (as in the Bonsai tree) and including it in the city; not by making meditation a corporate activity, or giving lifetime employment; it will be resolved by creating a post-scarcity society. The ups and downs of history, the rises and falls will then disappear—so say the proponents of this revolution—once basic needs such as food, health, shelter, medicine and education-information are plentiful and natural, not for the few, but for all.

Through these new technologies, poor countries will be able to jump past the industrial era and quickly and painlessly enter the Age of Video. Villagers won’t need to go to cities, because the Mango (the Pakistani clone of the Apple computer) will allow them to stay at home and work from there. Families will remain united and the rumour...
that in the big city streets are made of gold will forever be
gone from history. Population will stay evenly distributed,
and, with increased wealth, population rates will continue
to decline. Businesses will no longer be site-specific; they
will be able to move here and there, and even labour will
be free to move from region to region, and both business
and labour will be able to move through history, from one
culture to another, then and now, for the cycle of time will
have been vanquished.

And to those critics who argue that these new technolo-
gies are prohibitively expensive comes the reply: can any-
one not afford to invest in them? Moreover, perhaps it is too
late anyway. Among other technologies, the VCR is already
a global phenomenon. Within minutes of a release of any
movie, pirated copies are available throughout the world. In
Pakistan, for example, any movie from any country is avail-
able. And those who try and remove this new technology
from the home are quickly rebuked (see sidebar).

Thus, these new information technologies, according to
many, do not have the contradictions of previous industrial
technologies, for they allow one to live at an ancient stone-
age level. They do not open and close, nor expand and
limit at the same time; rather they allow the past, present
and future, real and unreal, to exist simultaneously. Thus,
what the best minds of Europe failed to do in the
Enlightenment, what the Marxists failed to do in this cen-
tury, is about to be accomplished by the technological rev-
olutions—the cycle is about to end.

The Response: End of an Era

But there remains a fear among us all. What if we have
gone too far? What if the new technologies are not creating
a new world, but simply reproducing old inequalities?
What if there are limits? What if there really is a natural
state of things that we humans in our desire for control and
power are upsetting? Have we gone
too far? The myth of the cycle thus lurks underneath all who claim to
have defied the laws of nature. In this
fear, what lies ahead is a catastrophic depression.

This depression will result in the
end of the era of liberalism and capital-
sim (the Communist vision having already ended); it will be the reclaim-
ing of earth; it will be the conclusion
of greed; the revenge of Kali or Pele—
Mother Earth as destroyer. Those
individuals and nations who are
linked with the present whether intel-
lectually, materially or spiritually will
be devastated by the massive depres-
sion. Those islands that depend on
tourism or on economic aid from the
Core Powers will see their existence
ravaged. Those places that remain
self-reliant, that still have traditional
ohana (extended family) structures will survive; that is, the
high will fall and those that have bought into the liberal/
capitalist or technological worldview will pay for it. The
dream of the last few hundred years of progress will vanish
before their eyes as the Tokyo, New York and London mar-
kets begin their slide. We gave ourselves a warning in 1987
but did not listen. There will be many who will have their
life meanings decimated such that they will be caught
between a future that has disappeared and a past that no
longer exists.

But how can that happen? Everything seems to be going
so well—even the feared recession might be merely a soft
landing. There is more wealth than ever before; peace and
democracy are breaking out everywhere. Six hundred years
ago, Ibn Khaldun said it best: “At the end of an era or
dynasty, there often appears a show of power that gives the
impression that the senility of the era has been made to dis-
appear. It lights up brilliantly just before it is extinguished,
like a burning wick the flame of which leaps up phenome-
nally a moment before it goes out, giving the impression it is
just starting to burn, when in fact it is going out.”
The 1990s will bring in an end of an era, but it will be a difficult
end; capitalism has not survived five hundred years by acci-
dent. It will take the collapse of the speculative bubble that
has fuelled the markets; it will take the realization that the
debt game is really a pyramid scheme, and it will take, say,
a minor earthquake in Tokyo, a flood here, a sea-level rise
elsewhere, a nuclear explosion or two, and soon the project
will be over. And within moments the rational world of lib-
eralism and Marxism will have met its end.

The Movements and the Counter Project

But there are others who have been described by the
Enlightenment project as people outside of history and thus
outside of the future, who view things quite differently.
They know they have been in a depres-
sion for centuries; they have lived with-
out a self, without a home. These were
the people in the colonies who pro-
vided the labour, these were the regions from which the raw materials
emerged. These were the people who
lived and rejoiced in the cycle. And it
was only brutal force and the promise of
joining the world of progress that con-
vincing them to join forces with the lib-
erals and the Marxists. But this joining
did not make things better for them.
Each time the flame of power passed—
from Riverine to Mediterranean to
Atlantic and now to the Pacific Rim,
they were left behind, for the system of
expansionist power always needs some-
thing and someone to be the resource,
to be the difference, the inequality,
from which wealth can emerge.
CYCLES OF POWER

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Thus, as we look at the feminist movements, at third world efforts to renegotiate the terms of technological trade, at the spiritual movements, at the peace and green movements, we see a counterproject that is emerging. While many of these groups are anti-technological, others have become more sophisticated and want to create their own local technologies. In this view, the world has been created by the West and all of us see ourselves through this Western view: the culture of the self itself has been conquered. What then is needed are ways to recover the self that existed before the modern world. This is the view of the recovery of the past. The recovery of historical ways of seeing the world before contact with the expansionist West. It is, for example, the effort to keep alive the language of the oral traditions presently being done in Vanuatu by the Vanuatu Culture Centre. And it is not letting Western cultural institutions have copies so that oral history can be economized and transformed into the additive intellectual knowledge of the West. It is also the Prime Minister of Papua and New Guinea, Paias Wingti, attempting to stop the Australian dreams of a Pacific TV empire. In his words, "we are being asked to sacrifice our cultural heritage for passing material gain. No money can buy back our languages once they are lost." 2

It is also groups like PROUT (Progressive Utilization Theory) who are attempting to create a new cycle. Sarkar, the founder of this movement, is among the few spiritual activists and mystics who is basing his vision on a merger of spiritual and physical technologies. Although he believes the cycle of rise and fall will continue forever, nevertheless through spiritual wisdom and intellectual information it is possible, through evolutionary intervention, to keep the cycle moving to reduce significantly the phases of misery. Unlike humanists, who still believe that there is dignity to work, he looks forward to the day when we will not have to work. For him, to bring about this new world, we must think beyond left and right. There must, for example, be ceilings and floors on wealth, and there must be ways to reward excellence. Instead of bureaucrats, technocrats or partycrats, there must be people's organizations which, of course, could work best with the new telecommunications technologies. Instead of corporations, there should be local and, eventually, global cooperatives. In addition, even while new cultures are constantly being created, he has started cultural, linguistic, bioregional, local self-reliance movements to counter the liberal/Marxist paradigm. Yet at the centre of this counter movement is a spiritual universalism, lest the movements become particularistic. This universal, he hopes, will come about largely from spiritual practices, but also from the fall of the national community, the nation-state, brought about by travel, videos, and of course pollution and the fear of nuclear destruction, for they do not respect boundaries of nation or body.

This spiritual view is also expressed by the Greens who claim they are neither left nor right, but in front. Central to them is the natural world. This world must be given rights not for our sake, but for its sake. Greens are not interested in information, nor knowledge, but in that which comes from understanding the cycle of life—wisdom. For wisdom cannot be commodified; the power of the king or the market cannot control it. This the yogis and the martial artists of the past knew well—thus they learned to fast, to think, to live with few clothes, to master the elements, and to live outside of wealth, such that the soldiers and the priests could not control them. They lived with the natural world. In this view, the real communication is not among humans, but in the planet itself, and the messages she receives about us are no longer positive.

The Feminist movement, too, reminds us who has done the real work for the last thousand years; it reminds us that new technologies must be developed that lead to cooperation, not dominance, among groups. Otherwise, although men prefer the images of the virgin and the mother, creation and preservation, there is also the Crone—the image of power and destruction that descends upon all, and forces us to remember the temporality of that which we thought was eternal.

But while Sarkar's PROUT and to some extent the Greens and the Feminists focus on ownership of technology as central to the social good, they also speak about other technologies. For Sarkar, the future is not about molecular assemblage or genetically engineered chickens, but it is about the Age of Microvita. He posits that the smallest building blocks of life are the emanations from Pure Consciousness. These emanations, however, can be understood not by more refined microscopes, but by refined minds, for they exist outside our sense world, yet provide the bridge between the mind and the brain. They are the silver lining between perception and conception. They can be used to spread ideas throughout the world, they can be used to heal bodies, and they can be used to spread information throughout the stars. According to him, the rediscovery of these "mind waves" will soon radically change physics and chemistry and biology, for these microvita impact our thoughts, our food, and our social movements. One goal, then, is to find ways to refine the mind so that it can perceive these seeds of life and use them to increase economic productivity, intellectual awareness and spiritual well-being.

There is also the theory of Rupert Sheldrake articulated in his A New Science of Life. For him, too, this is the end of the materialistic age of science. The new telecommunications technology are not physical but fields of awareness that are...
invisible but organize behaviour, that explain how ideas are 
unconsciously transmitted; how ideas become powerful and 
resonate among us. He provides a scientific reading of myth 
and of social change. Thus, this means that humans can 
learn from the past, and they can learn at quicker and 
quicker rates. The exact conclusion that telecommunication 
experts believe that telematics will lead to. More 
information means more learning, means a better world, 
eventually. The wheel then is just a reflection of every-
thing we have seen for the last thousands of years, but this 
structure, with learning and new ways of thinking can be 
overcome, and new structures can gain force.

Of course, the movements mentioned above would 
focus on access to these new technologies, the liberals 
would concentrate on the growth of them, and the Marxists 
would argue that a central authority would better distribute 
the benefits of them.

The End of the Really Real

But the postmodern theories of Sarkar, 
Sheldrake and others are made conten-
tious by another group. This third group 
believes that nothing is natural, that 
everything is human creation, that every-
thing we know is perceived. We cannot 
know anything as it really is. Every the-
ory, whether Platonic or Aristotelian, 
whether earth-centric or sun-centric, puts 
at centre one way of knowing over 
another way. In this view, there is nothing 
to predict; there is nothing to recover or 
remember; there is no self to prop up; to 
save from technology—the self is created 
by society. For when we perceive, we must describe in lan-
guage and in this representation the world is created. We 
cannot know anything as it really is, since “we” are implicit 
in the act of knowing. The real is always mediated.

Thus, for this group, we must look at our language and 
our categories of thought and see who gains from them, 
what is lost, what is silenced. We must look at the cycle and 
see what this construct does—does it liberate or oppress? 
For them, nothing is really real, everything is description. 
Power is making one description seem more real or natural 
than others. Thus time is a social construction, not a reality; 
the purpose of talking about the future or the past is not to 
predict or to recover, but to make the present remarkable; 
to thus make the status quo contentious and thereby create 
the possibility for change, for creation.

In this view, we must also live on the edges of reality, 
always testing to see if we have made a representation 
really real—ontologically real, always seeing the power of 
our descriptions of the world. In this view, the new technol-
gies will create more and varied texts and the present 
notion of the separation of the empirical-physical world and 
the world of text or video will forever be gone. Television 
creation Star Trek will really be more interesting and thus 
real than the landing of humans on the Moon. Fiction and 
non-fiction will become one and the focus of the text or the 
video will not be the writer, the producer, the manufac-
turer, but the reader, the interpreter, the consumer, or the 
user. There will then really be, as Roland Barthes argues, 
an infinite number of interpretations to everything.

And what exists beyond language, perception, interpre-
tation? From the cultural and spiritual view, a world of mys-
tery and bliss, of the divine. For the empiricist, the material 
physical world—tables and chairs but no inherent mean-
ings. And for the third view, beyond interpretation, are 
other interpretations waiting to describe what is, for both 
the divine and the physical are simply imposed meaning 
structures, for we cannot know if anything really exists: the 
key question is who gains and who loses by every descrip-
tion of the world. I have no idea what appears to be real and 
what is really real: are the Chinese restructuring their world 
because positive microvita has entered 
them, or because they have more knowl-
edge of things, more information, or 
because new fields of awareness have 
been created by the Filipino non-violent 
demonstrations? I do not know, but will 
more information, microvita energy waves, 
or fields of awareness help me slam dunk 
a basketball after watching Michael Jordan 
this week? Perhaps there are limits.

As it turned out, the Chinese stu-
dent’s hope for celebration that could 
transform the bureaucratic party structure 
of the past fifty years did not turn out to 
be. Perhaps it was that Deng did not wish 
to be humiliated again in Tiananmen 
Square, or perhaps their turn will come another day; per-
haps a video image of the crumbling of the Berlin Wall will 
be catalytic, leading to a transformation of the Great Wall.

But more central than video images themselves, how-
ever, are individuals who can transform these images into 
myths and visions. These larger stories of who we are pro-
vide the link between the routine day-to-day activities of 
the present, and the personal sacrifice, the episodes of brav-
ery, needed to create a new tomorrow. To create this new 
future, these stories will, I believe, have to speak to the cycle 
and speak to a notion of progress. To meet the chal-
lenges ahead, leadership will have to speak to and balance 
humanity’s spiritual, knowledge and material dimensions. 
Here Sarkar reminds us that while the cycle will continue, 
through spiritual leadership the phases of exploitation and 
human misery can be reduced, thus creating a vision that 
dialectically embraces the ancient, enlightenment and post-
modern. In the meantime, I look forward to being ever at 
home and seeing the myriad of worldviews that exist: past, 
present and future. ❖

2. Liz Fell, "Poor Reception for TV Moguls": Pacific Island 
Monthly, May 1988, p. 43.