



What's Neo About Neohumanism? The Transmodern and Decolonial Philosophy Of P.R. Sarkar

Neohumanism promotes both a reformulation and a revision of classical humanism; a way of thinking and acting which is at the same time transmodern and decolonial. With its visionary and even revolutionary discourse, neohumanism represents another form of knowledge, an “other” thinking, the renewed expression of the ancient tantric epistemology – or science of yoga – from which it was conceived and elaborated as a primarily spiritual and profoundly mystical philosophy.

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*Sam'gacchadvam' sam'vadadhvam', sam'vomanam' si janatam,
devabhagam' yatha' purve, sam'jana'na' upa'sate,
sam'ani va' akuti, sama'na hridayani vah,
sama'nama'stu vomano, yatha vah susaha'sati.*

— Rg Veda 10-191

THE MEANING OF the Sanskrit mantra is: “Let us move together, let us sing together, let us come to know our minds together, let us share, like sages of the past, that all people together may enjoy

the universe, unite our intentions, let our hearts be inseparable, our mind is as one mind as we, to truly know one another, become one.”
- Source: <https://ampsnys.org/samgacchadvam>

Neohumanism is a philosophy developed by the eminent Indian thinker Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1921-1990), better known as the spiritual master and tantric guru Shrii Shrii Anandamūrti (“The Embodiment of Bliss”). Founder of the socio-spiritual organization Ananda Marga, whose motto in Sanskrit — *Atma mokṣartham jagat hitaya ca* — means “self-realization and service to humanity,” Sarkar developed some of the principles of neohumanism in the book *Liberation of Intellect: Neohumanism* (1982), a volume composed of a series of discourses elucidating the theme in question. Based on a form of love that is expressly universal (*universalis* = related to the universe, to all) and progressively radical (*radicalis* = related to root, origin), neohumanism promotes both a revision and a reformulation of classical humanism, and can ultimately be characterized as a way of thinking and acting that is at the same time transmodern, for renewing the foundations of modernity from a position of alterity, and decolonial, for deconstructing the bases of coloniality from a condition of subalternity.

As the name already indicates, neohumanism was basically defined by Sarkar himself as a continuation or extension of the humanist project:

[...] when the underlying spirit of humanism is extended to everything, animate and inanimate, in this universe – I have designated this as “Neohumanism.” This Neohumanism will elevate humanism to universalism, the cult of love for all created beings of this universe. (2020, p. 25)

Humanism, in turn, was a Renaissance movement based on the Roman concept of *humanitas*, coined by the philosopher Cícero, and corresponded, in part, to the Greek concept of *paideia* (education), which in antiquity referred to the classical education system characterized by the study of disciplines such as philosophy, grammar, rhetoric, music, mathematics, geography, natural history, and even gymnastics, all of which would contribute to the training of the ideal citizen. *Humanitas*, which is related to the current terms human and humanity, concerns the cultivation of virtues and ethics by promoting the balance between thought and action, on the one hand, and between the individual and the social, on the other. During the Renaissance, when the European intelligentsia (re)discovered Greco-Roman



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classical literature, *humanitatis studia*, or “studies of humanity,” (re)surfaced through disciplines such as grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy, which would all later form the basis of the so-called “humanities” or “human sciences” curriculum in modern and contemporary universities. Founded on the concept of *humanitas*, therefore, humanism has always emphasized education for the complete development of the human being, with all of its apparent or inherent qualities.

As in humanism, both study and reason (or logic) are fundamental in neohumanism, which likewise prescribes the all-around development of the ideal human being and society. Whereas humanist scholars emphasized particular disciplines of knowledge, Sarkar defines study in general as “intensive intellectual analysis,” or more specifically, the “internal assimilation, subjective assimilation of objective happenings” or events (Ibid., p. 79-80). In fact, there are two types of study, both of which are equally important and necessary: the “literal” (i.e. from reading) and the “non-literal” (i.e. from listening to others and from observing the material world). Knowledge is therefore found not only in books but also in people and in the world itself. In sum, for Sarkar “the importance of study is tremendous” and “knowledge must be disseminated throughout all sections of society,” not only “for all people to judge everything in the light of truth,” but also for them to “enjoy the sweet taste of intellectual freedom” (Ibid., p. 84).



If the first “step” towards the establishment of neohumanism would be study, the second would be “rationalistic mentality,” which is created from a “rational analysis” of the demonstrably positive and negative aspects of knowledge and the “logical decision” to accept it or not based on its merits and demerits. The next and final step would be to arrive at the “discrimination” to implement the decision or not for the promotion of universal well-being (Ibid., p. 86). The completion of this process of “logical reasoning” would thus result in an “awakened conscience” (Ibid., p. 87). Ultimately, and in (neo)humanist terms, “[t]his state of awakened conscience is what is called ‘rationalistic mentality.’”

In the wake of the so-called “Dark Ages,” thus named by the very humanists who fashioned a cultural rebirth, Renaissance humanism, seeking to universalize its knowledge, would begin to preach individual formation and social transformation in the light of Reason, initially in Europe and later around the world, through its pretentious civilizing mission. Unfortunately, this presumptuously enlightened humanism suffered from what Sarkar would call “geo-sentiment”

(i.e. identification with a particular geographical place) and “socio-sentiment” (i.e. identification with a particular sociological group), while its presumably civilized universalism reflected a predominantly white, male, and Judeo-Christian Eurocentrism that conquered the space(s) and time(s) of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and even Oceania through the imperialism and colonialism established during modernity, which was inaugurated with the Renaissance of the 15th to 16th centuries and instituted with the Enlightenment of the 17th to 18th centuries. In an ironically inhuman manner, other human beings were either (de)classified as non-human or (de)characterized as subhuman through what Sarkar would call “pseudo-humanism,” as in the cases of the exterminated and/or acculturated Amerindians, the enslaved and/or discriminated Africans, and the exploited and/or exoticized Asians.

Such a false, or rather pseudo humanism inherent in the various forms of imperialism/ colonialism would compose what the Peruvian sociologist Aníban Quijano (2005) termed the “coloniality of power,” a “matrix” that would

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actually constitute the basis of modernity and the current world system. Uncovering or unmasking this “darker” side of modernity, as the Argentinian semiologist and decolonialist Walter Mignolo (2011) would say, the concept of transmodernity developed by the Argentinian liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel (2016), among others, seeks to transcend (or decolonize) the rhetoric of a single Eurocentric and universal modernity to realize (or imagine) a decentered and pluriversal modernity. According to Dussel, trans-modernity refers specifically to the other, otherwise “universal” cultures that “maintain an alterity with respect to European Modernity, with which they have coexisted, responding in their own way to its challenges” (Dussel, p. 42). Such cultures are furthermore “not dead but alive, and presently in the midst of a process of rebirth, searching for new paths for future development.” To be trans-modern is to effectively be pre-modern, modern, and post-modern at the same time, but in different spaces. In other words:

[T]he strict concept of the “trans-modern” attempts to indicate the radical novelty of the irruption—as if emerging out of Nothing—from the transformative exteriority of that which is always Distinct, of universal cultures in the process of growth and that assume the challenges of Modernity, and even of European/North American postmodernity, but which respond from another place, another Location. They respond from the perspective of their own cultural experiences, which are distinct from those of Europeans/North Americans, and therefore have the capacity to respond with solutions that would be absolutely impossible for an exclusively modern culture. A future trans-modern culture, a new age of world history—that assumes the positive

moments of Modernity (as evaluated through criteria distinct from the perspective of the other ancient cultures)—will have a rich pluriversity and would be the fruit of an authentic intercultural dialogue, that would need to bear clearly in mind existing asymmetries [...] But a post-colonial and peripheral world like that of India, Africa or Latin America in a position of abysmal asymmetry with respect to the metropolitan core of the colonial era, does not for this reason cease to be a creative nucleus of ancient cultural renewal that is decisively distinct from all of the others, with the capacity to propose novel and necessary answers for the anguishing challenges that the Planet throws upon us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. (Dussel, p. 42-43)

Whether (co)incidentally or not, Dussel specifically names “Vedic” (or Indian) culture as an example of a transmodern culture, which is “something very different” from a Eurocentric modern culture “as a result of [its] distinct roots” (Dussel, p. 42). Inasmuch as Sarkar’s neohumanism is a product of Vedic (or else Tantric) culture, it may in fact signal such a “process of rebirth,” a renaissance that foresees “new paths for future development” and that heralds a “new age of world history” by responding with “new solutions” to modern problems and proposing “novel and necessary answers” to global challenges.

As a transmodern, decolonial philosophy in its own right, neohumanism (re)presents not only a “renewal” but also a revision of the classical humanism of modernity/coloniality. Indeed, despite its explicitly humanist principles, Sarkar’s neohumanism constitutes an implicit critique of a (pseudo)humanism historically characterized by inferiority complexes on the part of the colonized and complexes of superiority on the

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part of the colonizers. According to Sarkar, these “perpetuate exploitation in the social sphere by injecting a fear complex in the minds of those whom they want to exploit” (2020, p. 59). The purpose of this “injection” of an inferiority complex in the minds of the colonized would evidently be exploitation in its multiple forms, not only psychic (or psychological) but also economic, political, and cultural. The history of the world would clearly demonstrate that “whenever one group exploited another in the economic sphere, they first created psychic exploitation by infusing inferiority complexes in the minds of the exploited mass” (Ibid, p. 61). In other words, one must observe that “in each case of economic exploitation, psychic exploitation was the foundation.” As is the case in any and all forms of colonialism, the history of humanity could thus be summarized, from Sarkar’s perspective, as the “continuous and cunning attempt to create inferiority complexes in the minds of the exploited.”

Once coloniality is conceived as the other side of modernity, barbarism is likewise perceived as the other side of humanism, whose historical manifestation is revealed to be “an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage” according to the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in the preface to the book *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*, 1961), which was written by the Martiniquan psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, an intellectual and militant of the decolonization movement (Fanon, p. 25). A contemporary of Sarkar, Fanon associated the process of decolonization with the birth of a “new humanity” and the rise of a “new humanism:”

This new humanity cannot do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and for others. It is prefigured in the objectives and methods of the conflict. A struggle which mobilizes all

classes of the people and which expresses their aims and their impatience, which is not afraid to count almost exclusively on the people’s support, will of necessity triumph. The value of this type of conflict is that it supplies the maximum of conditions necessary for the development and aims of culture. (Ibid., p. 246)

According to Fanon, a new humanism would thus be “prefigured” in the revolution enacted by a new humanity that must be liberated in order to transform “the heavy darkness in which we were plunged” into the “new day which is already at hand” (Ibid., p. 311). Yet even before Fanon called for a new humanism, the Indian philosopher Manabendra Nath Roy had already proposed a “radical humanism” akin to decolonial theories and practices and apart from capitalist and communist ideologies. Interestingly enough, Roy is even said to have originally used the term “decolonial,” implying a process of economic and political independence.¹ In the aptly titled manifesto *New Humanism* (1947), Roy acknowledges that “the civilized world needs a new hope, a new faith, a new ideal – a new philosophy of revolutionary theory and practice suitable for the conditions of the time” (p. 6). Combining aspects of individualism with tenets of socialism, such a new and “revolutionary” philosophy would be defined by rationalism, moralism, and universalism. Nonetheless, as Fanon would later affirm, the new humanism was yet to be realized and could only be established by force of will. As Roy states in the manifesto:

¹ In an article titled “Process of Social Change in India Under The Colonial & Decolonial Era – An Analysis of Changing Rural-Urban Complex,” the authors K. C. Panchanadikar and Jalu M. Panchanadikar affirm that “the term decolonial was originally used by the late M. N. Roy” (p. 9). See *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (September, 1965), pp. 9-26 (18 pages).



But a new philosophy of revolution, suitable for our age, is yet to arise as the beacon light for civilised humanity. The new philosophy must be able to destroy what remains of the moral sanction of the status quo, by providing an idea of a new social order to inspire all those disgusted with the present state of affairs. It must also indicate new ways of revolution appropriate to the needs of the time. While the concrete steps for social transformation must differ from place to place in accordance with prevailing condition, the movement for freedom, if it is to succeed, must outgrow its sectarian class character and be inspired by the Humanist spirit and cosmopolitan outlook. (p. 32).

With its idealist rhetoric of freedom, therefore, such a “new philosophy of revolution,” according to Roy, must ultimately be inspired by “the traditions of Humanism and moral Radicalism” (p. 33).

The revolutionary, decolonial perspectives that gained strength as of the 1950s and 1960s are reflected in the neohumanism proposed by Sarkar, who is rumored to have known or even mentored Roy in his youth, precisely when the latter was elaborating his radical new humanism.¹ Regardless of any unresolved

questions of influence, Sarkar indeed echoes the thoughts and feelings both of Roy regarding a “new hope” and of Fanon regarding a “new day” by saying that “[h]owever dense the cimmerian darkness may be, the crimson dawn must follow.”¹ In Sarkar’s view, we are actually at the threshold of a new era, the “age of Neohumanism:”

So ours is the age of Neo-humanism – humanism supplying elixir to all, one and all. We are for all, and with everything existent we are to build up a new society, a Neohumanistic society. (Sarkar, 2020, p. 221-222).

If Roy’s new humanism would promote freedom “for all” and Fanon’s new humanism would characterize a new humanity “for itself and for others,” Sarkar’s neohumanism would be for “one and all.” While Roy strives for a “new social order” and Fanon aspires to “cultural development and invention,” Sarkar aims at

M. N. Roy is based on unverified accounts from the Ananda Marga Archives published in *Shri Shri Anandamurti: The Advent of a Mystery*, by Pranavatmakanda, Prabhat Library, Kolkata 2017.

¹ Excerpt from Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, *Ananda Vairii Samgraha*, No. 39, 1973.

¹ This information about contacts between P.R. Sarkar and



“building a new society.” Finally, and acknowledging their respective differences, all of them assert the need for “conflict” and “struggle,” both externally and internally, for the advent of a “new” culture or society. For Roy, the fight is both individual and social, with morality and rationality serving as the basis for the “quest for freedom” and the “search for truth” (Roy, p. 53). For Fanon, the conflict is both physical and psychological, since in addition to the use of force for the emancipation of the body, there is the use of effort for the decolonization of the mind. Finally, for Sarkar, the struggle is both spiritual and material, for beyond the liberation of the mind from its internal “enemies” (*śadripu*) and its external “bondages” (*aśtapasha*), there is socio-economic and political-cultural revolution.

Ultimately, as Sarkar emphatically states: “struggle is the essence of life” (Ānandamūrti, 2013, p. 323).

In one way or another, and just as in humanism, cultural development plays a significant role in the neohumanist society idealized by Sarkar, who founded Renaissance Universal (RU) in 1958 to inspire a “re-awakening” and establish a “new human society based on the principles of universal humanism” (Sarkar, 2012). As a fundamental part of this organization, the Renaissance Artists and Writers Association (RAWA) specifically promotes activities devoted to the dissemination of literature and the arts. Seeking to inaugurate a cultural rebirth through a new and other form of Renaissance humanism, Sarkar himself can

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actually be considered a “Renaissance man,” or else a *homo universalis* (“universal man”), since in addition to discussing philosophy, linguistics, psychology, biology, ecology, sociology, history, politics, economics, etc., he composed a collection of over five thousand songs called the *Prabhāt Saṅgīta: Songs of the New Dawn*, several of which address neohumanist themes. The third song in the series, “Navyamánavatáder Gīta,” can precisely be translated as the “Song of Neohumanism:”

Calling all, I will sing the glories of this crimson dawn in the kingdom of divine light beyond the threshold of darkness.

The sky above is studded with stars, The air is intoxicated with fragrance. With all entities I exist, anointing my mind with the pollen of flowers.

Calling all, ...

This earth on which I walk is purer than the purest gold. In its green shade, all creatures are cherished Dancing, blessed with new life.

Calling all, ...¹

As in his other musical and poetic compositions, Sarkar even provides his own interpretation of the “purport” of the song as follows:

Darkness has come to an end, crossing the threshold at the edge of light. Now is the proper time to call all and announce that the crimson dawn has come. The beautiful sky is studded with

so many stars, the air is sweetly scented. The atmosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere everything is closely related to me. All the flora and fauna I must preserve; I must save them from premature extinction because I love everything of this earth. I am a Neohumanist. I call one and all to come and create a new rhythm.

In the specific field of arts and literature, Sarkar also elaborated on what he terms aesthetic science (*nandana vijñāna*), which corresponds in many ways to the modern Kantian aesthetics of the Enlightenment, and supra-aesthetic science (*mohana vijñāna*), which dialogues with the ancient metaphysical philosophy of yoga. In a seminal discourse given in 1957 titled “The Practice of Art and Literature,” he also discusses literature (*sāhitya*), whose characteristic would be “to move with (*sahita* = “with”) the trends of life” (Anandamúrti, 2013, p. 276). For the Indian philosopher, a (neo)humanist par excellence, literature would not be “the invention of the superficial side of social life” or “the colourful spell of fantasy,” but rather “the portrait of real life, an external expression of the internal workings of the mind, a bold and powerful expression of the suppressed sighs of the human heart.” To fulfill its artistic and social role, literature must thus “maintain a rhythm that reflects the dynamic currents of society.” But there would still be another way of interpreting the word *sāhitya*, according to Sarkar: “*sa + hita = hitena saha*, ‘that which co-exists with *hita* [welfare].’” As such, literature would be an art that “moves together with society and leads society towards true fulfillment and welfare by providing the inspiration to serve.” Accordingly,

¹ Source: [https://sarkarverse.org/wiki/Songs_1-999#3_\(17/9/1982\)_K_NAVYAM%C3%81NAVAT%C3%81DER_GIITA](https://sarkarverse.org/wiki/Songs_1-999#3_(17/9/1982)_K_NAVYAM%C3%81NAVAT%C3%81DER_GIITA)

Neohumanism defends the extraordinariness of human beings and aspires to liberate them from inferiority feelings and defects, thus inspiring the construction of a “new world.” ”

and in contrast to an aestheticism founded on classical humanism, the philosophy of ‘art for art’s sake’ is rejected and replaced by the principle of “art for service and blessedness,” which differentiates a transmodern and decolonial neohumanism from its modern/colonial predecessor and counterpart.

In addition to cultural creation, social development is also a fundamental aspect of neohumanism, whose universal realization would depend on the implementation of a new socioeconomic theory. For that purpose, in 1959 Sarkar conceived the revolutionary system of PROUT, the acronym for the Progressive Utilization Theory, which was expressly designed and propagated for the happiness and well-being of all of humanity. Conceived as a kind of “third way” or alternative to both capitalism and communism, two arguably (neo)colonialist and demonstrably flawed systems, PROUT aims at economic democracy through the “maximum utilization” and “rational distribution” of the full potential of planetary resources and those of the individuals and groups that form human society. Recalling the ideals of the “radical democracy” proposed by Roy, which would presuppose a “progressive satisfaction of material necessities” and prescribe a “progressively rising standard of living” (Roy, p. 59), the basic principles of the theory establish that the minimum necessities of a given time and place should be guaranteed to everyone, that any profit should be distributed to individuals according to criteria of merit, that socioeconomic success should only be defined as an increase in the minimum standard of living, and that physical wealth should not be accumulated by any individual without the prior consent of society as a whole (Cf. Ánandamúrti, 1967).

Through initiatives such as RU or RAWA and theories such as PROUT, which effectively address and encompass the human and social sciences, Sarkar laid the foundations for a new,

other renaissance founded in neohumanism, a universalist philosophy that would represent not only a revision and reformulation, but also a renewal and reconsideration of classical humanism, especially with regard to the aforementioned “distorted” (pseudo)-humanism. In Sarkar’s own words:

Neohumanism is humanism of the past, humanism of the present, and humanism – newly explained – of the future. Explaining humanity and humanism in a new light will widen the path of human progress and will make it easier to tread. Neohumanism will give new inspiration and provide a new interpretation for the very idea of human existence. It will help people understand that human beings, as the most thoughtful and intelligent beings in this created universe, will have to accept the great responsibility of taking care of the entire universe, will have to accept that the great responsibility for the entire universe rests on them. (2020, p. 101)

Just as “there is nothing new under the sun,” according to the biblical book *Ecclesiastes*, there is apparently nothing new about neohumanism, defined by Sarkar as humanism “newly-explained and newly-sermonized” (Ibid.). However, as the renowned art critic Hal Foster argues in his famous essay “What’s Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?”, which examines how the so-called neo-avant-garde artists of the 1950s and 1960s revisit the so-called historical avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s, the repetition of a momentous movement may actually ensure its difference and enable its success (Cf. Foster, 1994). That being said, neohumanism is presumably a philosophy as new as it is old, which defends the extraordinariness of otherwise ordinary human beings and aspires to “liberate” them from “all inferiority feelings and defects,” thus inspiring the construction of a “new world.” (Sarkar, 2020, p. 102). If one considers that the current world is on the verge of a political-

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economic crisis and on the brink of a socio-environmental catastrophe, it must be recognized that “human beings of today are following a defective path” and that there is “a desperate need for a change in direction” (Ibid., p. 106). Perhaps the “only remedy” is really neohumanism, in a strict or broad sense. By reiterating that human essence is actually divine and is not distinct from animal, vegetable, or mineral essence, neohumanism thus proposes that the same universal consciousness, the same immaterial energy, is both transcendent and immanent in everything and everyone, and that it is based on love. With this visionary and even revolutionary discourse, neohumanism is definitely (re)configured as another form of knowledge, an “other” thinking, a transmodern and decolonial expression of the ancient tantric epistemology – or science of yoga – from which it was conceived and elaborated as a primarily spiritual and profoundly mystical philosophy:

[A]ccording to Neohumanism, the final and supreme goal is to make one’s individual existential nucleus coincide with the Cosmic Existential Nucleus (nádabindu yoga, in the language of Tantra). As a result, the unit being’s entire existential order becomes one with the Controlling Nucleus of the existential order of the Supreme Entity of the Cosmological order, and that will be the highest expression of Neohumanism. That Neohumanistic status will save not only the human world but the plant and animal worlds also. In that supreme Neohumanistic status, the universal humanity will attain the consummation of its existence. Then nothing will be impossible for human beings; they will be able to do anything and everything. (Ibid., p. 107-108)

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