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Defying Hidebound Institutions

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

Richard Falk

For more than sixty years, I have been educating students and myself in the classrooms, lecture halls, and libraries of highly acclaimed centers of learning in the West, especially the United States. My own preparation for walking such a path reflected what I learned at a top NYC high school and several Ivy League universities. I appreciated the mentoring I received, which helped form my worldview and professional life. And yet, even as a young adult, I sensed the limitations of such elite education.

It was a privilege to be a faculty member at Princeton for forty years; to visit Stanford for a year, teaching a seminar at the Law School and being mainly connected as a fellow of the Center of Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences; and to give talks at more than 100 universities in the US, Asia, and Europe. I had many brilliant students who went on to do notable things. I enjoyed the benefits of excellent pedagogic facilities and managed to produce a stream of books devoted to international law and world politics, most of which were published by leading university presses. I took some controversial stands on foreign policy issues, and despite this, was able to have good access to mainstream media platforms in the pre-Internet world as long as I respected several prevailing taboos.

However, such educational environments did nothing whatsoever to prepare me, or those I taught, to understand the precariousness of the pillars upholding modernity, much less contribute to the Great Transition. Venturing a generalization, I have concluded that the better the university, the more resistant it was to innovations along epistemological or ecological lines, and the more hostile to venturing beyond the views of prevailing orthodoxies. In my experience, intellectual departures from the academic consensus, including its most liberal variants, are so discouraged that

incremental advances in understanding and pedagogic practice identify the outer limits of productive knowledge and creative research, especially on social, economic, and political issues. A narrow enclave of academic space was cleared in the last half century to accommodate environmental concerns, especially for the study of various types of pollution and toxic materials, but not for truly transformative visions of an ecological civilization.

Such experiences are emblematic of cultural models derived from modern scientific methods, which do not fit the broader imperatives calling for a transformative pedagogy. I am primarily seen as a left academician who has taken controversial stands on foreign policy issues and was subject to defamatory smears when holding a UN position involving reporting on Israeli violations of human rights. My views were not widely shared on the Princeton faculty, although not sharply criticized, while my activism created much more social distancing as unbecoming behavior for a professor, which for me was a matter of epistemological and pedagogic integrity, that is, acting upon my beliefs, a matter of engaged citizenship.

Worse for my standing within the Ivory Tower than my peace activism was my work devoted to the future of world order, which was dismissed as “utopian” and “normative” (that is, not “scientific”), two epistemic taboos that constrained learning in the upper reaches of academic life. My views in such books as *This Endangered Planet* (1971), *The Future of Worlds* (1975), *The End of World Order* (1983), and *On Humane Governance: Toward a New Global Politics* (1993) were all ignored or outlawed as falling outside the paradigm of “political realism” that accommodated policy controversy but not paradigm challenges based on values, qualitative analysis, and structural critique. My more recent writing has continued to defy canons of orthodoxy and has continued to be treated as marginal by the gatekeepers of academic excellence even in the face of rising public concerns about climate change.

It is wishful thinking to suppose that the educational establishment in the West or, as far as I know, elsewhere is ready for transformative changes in its treatment of useful knowledge. Given the urgency of the civilizational and epistemological challenges facing humanity, we must look elsewhere. More pointedly, all the assessments of transformative potential of the great centers of learning in the world are and will remain resistant to the call for a Great Transition. From this perspective, Stephen Sterling’s comprehensive [vision](#) of a transformed epistemology needs to be actualized along the lines he proposes, but such a possibility depends on the prior realization of a radical “institutional imaginary.” Putting this observation differently, what is admired as valuable guidance for the promotion of a

transforming world, with an ecological orientation, at Schumacher College will be dismissed as New Age musings at Princeton or Harvard.

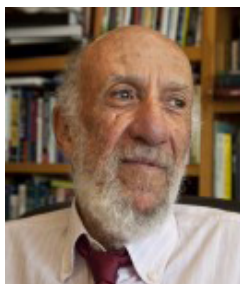
Again, reverting to my own experience, my horizons of epistemic affinities were not altered by my long presence at Princeton but were changed in Sterling's directions by years of involvement in unconventional "learning communities" and eccentric projects that were supported by maverick funding sources. I took part in the Lindisfarne Fellowship (1975–2012) from its inception, founded by William Irwin Thompson, who sought fruitful synergies connecting the natural sciences, humanities, religion and spirituality, and indigenous wisdom with an underlying ambition to shape new knowledge paradigms. Thompson had a talent for gathering like-minded, innovative, and dissident scholars and thinkers. I found the annual gatherings of the thirty or so fellows intellectually exciting, imparting insight into the existence and relevance of postmodern and premodern pedagogies. It became obvious that such a group lacked the capabilities or credibility to have any substantial impact on orthodox ways of educating, mentoring, and learning which were increasingly focusing on comprehending, appropriating, applying, and regulating such new technologies in AI, robotics, genetics, and cybersecurity. In effect, the educational mainstream, with strong corporate and governmental encouragement, was being influenced by money and public pressure to help win these technological races, thereby likely determining the next phase of global ascendancy as world history unfolded.

In retrospect, I have come to realize that Lindisfarne perspectives were somewhat reluctant to accept transformative critiques of the underlying economic and political structures of modernity: predatory capitalism, the fragmenting of human or species community by nationalist and statist ideologies, and inhumane governance mechanisms at all levels of societal complexity.

I did have the opportunity to participate in the World Order Models Project from 1970 to 1990, which brought together normatively inclined experts and scholars from around the world, which manifested greater divergencies when it came to values and policies than with respect to the transformation of the pedagogic orientation toward learning. These intellectual mavericks tended to be preoccupied with equitable economic development if they came from the Global South and with the prevention of major wars if from the Global North—in this sense finding ways to cope with severe existential problems such as extreme poverty, famine threats, and political violence.

In the end, I believe that social forces in the culture, including the humanities long sidelined as “useful knowledge” in deference to the technocratic payoffs of natural science, will provide the needed energy and direction taken by emancipatory knowledge and wisdom. The struggles for transformative epistemologies and pedagogies that are motivated by the desperate need to move the peoples of the world toward an ecologically and ethically sustainable future. In delineating what is necessary and desirable, we should not forget that the established order, constructed by past knowledge empires, will not give ground without an all-out fight. Struggles for the “cultural mind” are underway, and the good news is that winds of change are blowing in directions congenial with the GT imaginary.

About the Author



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