

Robert Jungk: One Man Revolution¹

Richard Slaughter talks to one of the founding fathers of futures studies - one of the most trenchant critics of 'big technology' and a highly productive pioneer in the futures field.

When Hitler came to power Bob Jungk was a nineteen-year-old Jewish student in Berlin. Following the Reichstag fire he was arrested for anti-Nazi activities and deprived of his citizenship. With luck and the help of friends he was released, went to the Sorbonne in Paris, but later returned illegally to Germany to work for a subversive press service. Before long he was forced to flee to Czechoslovakia. The fall of Prague took him to Paris and the fall of Paris to Switzerland. Even here he was again jailed for his outspoken condemnation of the Nazis. After the war he returned to Germany, took a degree at Zurich and travelled widely.

From that time on, Jungk had set his hand against oppression in all its forms. By 1952 he completed *Tomorrow is Already Here*, a book highly critical of the emerging uses of advanced technology in America. But the focus of his subsequent work turned upon a trip to Hiroshima in the early 50's. As he related below, it was here that the major themes of his life's work were forcefully impressed upon him: the power and potential destructiveness of modern technologies, the corresponding need for careful foresight and the constant struggle to preserve human qualities in the brave new post-war world.

Why interview Jungk? Well, after nearly eight decades, he had a long view back over the 20th century and had been close to many of its momentous events. From this rich experience emerges *a sense of perspective* which tells us much about the deep trends, the ways things are going. Second, his critique is matched only by his constant inventiveness and dedication to people. Such imperatives are of immense value. Finally, if we are to see our way ahead we'll need to listen to voices such as this. Jungk, and others like him, did not / do not attempt to predict the future. They understand that it's constantly created by asking the right questions and helping people and organizations to make careful, long-term choices.

His work seemed to fall into perhaps three broad phases. First was the painstaking research on nuclear issues, both military and civil, emerging in books like *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns* and *the Nuclear State*. There followed a later period spent looking for, and developing, ways of responding to the challenge. This produced *the Everyman Project* and, much later, *Futures Workshops*. During this time he was one of the founders of the World Futures Studies Federation. He was instrumental in creating the London-based Institute for Social Inventions which itself became a well-established seedbed for innovative ideas.

In later years he became a kind of 'elder statesman' of the futures field, an inspiration both to fellow futurists and many other people. In the late 80s he persuaded the city of Salzburg in Austria to support the establishment of the Robert Jungk International Futures Library. Here, in elegant rooms overlooking the fast, grey river that bisects Salzburg, he founded one of the great repositories of futures material in the world.

Over the years, Jungk continued to think, write, speak and travel. It was he who spotted the need for institutions of foresight back in the late 1960s.² He was one of the earliest to draw attention to the important distinctions between what he called 'the logical, critical and creative imagination' in futures work. He has done as much as any,

and more than most, to identify the central dangers of modernity. But he did not merely diagnose, become angry, nor rail helplessly against vast and impersonal forces. Rather, he pursued a wide variety of individual, institutional and community responses, and not without success. It's therefore no exaggeration to think of him as a kind of 'one-man revolution', albeit a wholly benign one. As such, he exemplifies a central principle of futures work: *'don't wait for the future to happen; look ahead, evaluate what you see, and act now from the highest motives you can muster'*.

Then nearing his eighties Jungk looked frail. But his determination and human warmth were tangible. He remembered clearly that day in Hiroshima which led him to pursue futures as a life-long avocation:

'I interviewed a couple for German television who were aged 50, but looked as if they were 80. They both suffered from leukaemia. They had become critically ill in '52 or '53 and when I met them it was 1955. It was likely that they would die within two years. The man asked me, 'why is it that all those very intelligent people who invented the bomb never thought about the long-term consequences, so that years after the war we are dying, and maybe even the future of the nation dies through the genetic consequences of the bomb?'

Bob realised that, as a newspaper man, he had always run after stories when it was too late, when the catastrophe had already occurred. But now there existed instruments of power and destruction which threatened not only the present, but the future too. 'I thought, I must address myself to this new situation where it has become possible to reach far into the future through technological power. At first I thought it was only the nuclear issue; then I saw it was bulldozers too, pulling down whole forests. I realised that I had to warn people about the possible negative consequences of modern technology.'

In *The Future is Already Here* he wrote that 'the future is not something far away, because what we do now has future implications.' The book was published in 1952 and was one of the first books critical of America. 'At that time everybody admired America's technological progress and here was somebody who put that into doubt and said that may be all very beautiful but it endangers our future life.'

The book did cause some trouble, but not immediately. 'It got me into trouble with many people later – for instance I still had an American passport and they took that away from me, but not right away – they did it later on because I was on television too often. But on the whole I don't want to exaggerate that – I have never been really threatened in a dangerous way. I have been thrown out of newspapers – the weekly I wrote for 15 years threw me out because of my banned book in Switzerland, and I had to leave a newspaper because I was too critical of science and technology.

Next came *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*, the story of atomic scientists and how the international family of physicists who knew each other became enemies because they were on two sides of the war. Jungk commented: 'one thing I said there turned out to be wrong; some of the Germans who had worked on the German atomic bomb had told me they never achieved the bomb because they didn't want to. 'We didn't give it urgency because we were afraid that Hitler might get the bomb'. It turned out that they could never have made that decision because it had been made long before by the General of Staff who said 'we don't want to give any money for that because we will win the war without an atom bomb'.

'So the German scientists constructed a kind of a legend in order to gain entry into the international community again, and they used me for propagating that legend. Since then I have publicly stated that I was misled and that this mistake was made because I couldn't get access to the secret papers of the General staff. There was also an American research worker who gained access to those papers and who convinced me he was right and not me.'

Jungk spoke freely about his involvement in the establishment of the World Future Studies Federation. 'I was very active in peace work after the war. One day an English Quaker came to Vienna where I lived at the time and said 'Mr. Jungk, do you

have any ideas for the Peace Movement? Because the Peace Movement is stagnating and we can't get ahead.' And I said 'yes, I think I have one' because the Peace Movement always talks about war. That's good, but you never gain a positive image of what 'peace' might be and what benefits people would derive from it, (apart from not being cut to pieces and being killed). But there are other benefits from a peaceful society where you don't spend so much money on weapons and you don't have a potent military structure.' At that time that there was a very interesting exhibition in London about the future of Great Britain (the Festival of Britain) and I said 'why don't we do a similar exhibition on the future of mankind?'"

'So we formed a committee which was called Mankind 2000. We got together in Oslo in '68 with about seventy people and out of that developed the World Future Studies Federation'.

'We decided to meet again because it was a new experience. What was important was that it was an inter-disciplinary experience. There were sociologists, psychologists, people interested in the future of technology. For the first time you had an inter-disciplinary group working together and discussing the future. The next meeting was held in Kyoto in 1970. It was very important because this was the first time that we involved more Asian participants. The next one was Rome with the help of a Catholic organisation which had taken an important role in developing futures studies'.

Eleonora Macini and myself had opted in Oslo and Kyoto for what we called 'human futures' – others talked about technological or social futures, but we said 'human futures' because if the human personality is forgotten, then we won't have a good future. So in a very curious way the people who helped us on that were the Catholics because they also think about the human soul. So there was a kind of natural alliance which came out of that. You still had the technocrats there, but our interest

was to further what we called human futures. This seemed even more important as time went by.'

Clearly, one of Jungk's enduring themes is the tendency for technology to develop, but too often leaving deeper human concerns behind. This was addressed in *The Everyman Project* which came out in 1973.

'The main thesis of the book was that the real treasures in futures are not in the ground. The real resources are within us. But most of those resources are neglected because many people are arrested in their development at a certain age, and because human development is seen only as educational development – you learn more and more but you don't look at your inner sources of imagination.'

'So the book said that there are hidden resources in all people which we should develop. In 1950 there was a famous lecture by Gifford on 'Creativity'. He created the word and I saw that one key to the future would be human creativity.'

Around the same time Jungk gave a paper in Hawaii called '*Three Modes of Futures Thinking*' which helped to define the notion of critical futures thinking.³ He expressed the key point this way:

"I thought that there were two main aspects – there was critical futures where you analyse, and creative futures where you imagine – I think I called it 'imaginative criticism' where you think what might be wrong, what could be different. I wanted to imply that even in criticism you can't rely on your analytical power, you also have to think 'how it could be better?' - and then compare what you imagine as a better state to the present'.

In 1968 Jungk was offered a teaching role at the Technical University in Berlin where he started a course on future technologies. 'I had many more people coming

than any other professor at the university. This inspired the idea to involve the students in creating this 'other' future. We said 'we are not going to give these seminars in classrooms, we will do it outside the university where people come by – on the campus'.

'We later did it where people from the street could join in. That was after '68. We didn't want a closed ivory tower university – we opened it to the public, to the community. Nobody did that – everybody talked about it, but my students and myself actually did it. When somebody stopped and asked what was going on I said 'please come in. listen, you can talk too' – this actually created the first futures workshop'

'I continued my courses until about '75 and then stopped because I was very much involved in the anti-nuclear movement. German industry was putting in more and more nuclear plants and there was a popular movement growing against this. I became extremely active in writing and observing this scene of the nuclear enterprise. I saw that we always protested only about the biological impact, the health hazard of nuclear power, but not enough about the political and social hazard. You see it now in Russia, everywhere – to guard against social upheaval you have to install more and more security; you have to examine people working in an atomic plant; you have to have special zones around nuclear establishments because you are afraid of sabotage, so this makes for what I call 'the new tyranny'.⁴ What they are really after is not only the nuclear power, but the political power they can derive from that because they have become the 'protectors' of the citizens".

'I pointed that out – everybody was talking about radiation fallout – and I was talking about the social and political fallout which comes from atomic energy and so I wrote a book called *The Atomstadt*' (*The Nuclear State*).⁵ it was published in England by John Calder. It was published in France. It's very interesting – the French publisher was bought by the power industry so that he couldn't go on publishing!

But the book was a tremendous success – for instance it helped in Yugoslavia and Poland – it had a great impact because they were about to start nuclear power there and people had an argument against it.

Jungk spent many years of his life arguing for the human factor. But at the same time the technologies continued to develop. It was of interest to ask how he saw it in 1992 and whether he thought that human or cultural innovations, such as the Futures Workshops, were beginning to balance out technical change:

'More and more people are doing futures workshops and I can tell you why. In the '80's and '90's you have had these immense upheavals in East Germany and everywhere. People think that they are against totalitarian power, but also see that representative democracy is not enough – it cannot bring what the people really want. The grievances and the wishes of people, the channels are too narrow and so they go to the street. But when they go to the street there is a lot of heat and nothing comes out of that, the heat is dispersed, it is not put to any use'.

'So between mass demonstration and representative democracy you need new democratic institutions where people can express their grievances and ideas. That was where the Futures Workshops came in. They have sprung up all over the place in communities who want to re-organise and say 'well how can we do it differently?'

'There have been Futures Workshops in many places, not only among people who want to express their views, but also in business. Business even takes over the term and the notion of the 'Futures Workshop'. For instance the energy producers – who are my long-standing enemies – put up a thing called a 'Futures Workshop' – a big industrial exhibition, claiming that they are creating the real future by getting more and more energy. Clearly, they've misused the idea'.

While writing his autobiography, Bob Jungk had looked back over his life and considered the key insights. He summarised them this way.

'The most important thing is to never give up. In many ways these days people give up too early. They just give up. But my main experience is that one should never resign. One should always stand up again. My earliest toy was a little plaything, Stehaufmenshün we call it in German. It has a round bottom which you push down. The figure falls and then promptly gets up again. That's the story of my life. Whenever I have been pushed down it has weakened me because it took away all old securities, but it also strengthened me, because it gave me new opportunities. In fact I have to 'thank' Hitler in a certain sense because otherwise I would have been a provincial German. He threw me out of Germany; I had to go into the world. As a result of Hitler I became a planetary citizen. So I feel that every negative event can be an opportunity. You can turn even the worst negatives into something new and positive. If you can learn how to do that, then you don't give up; you can go on living. Then you can go on to the future'.

'So there are two sides to our contemporary crisis. On the one hand it could destroy us - there's no doubt about that. But it is also a profound challenge which gives us the opportunity to develop and create something new. It will take time, but there will be advances: we have almost no slavery today; we have more women's rights. It is by no means a perfect world, but all these things have been started by small groups. It is the small groups, or even individuals, who go on developing their own ideas and believing in their own strength, who can make an impact and make the difference'.

Jungk's view was that if people use the powers that are available to them, then the future, as a 'place to live in', is far from being lost.

'I wouldn't say it's metaphorically a good place, but it is not an entirely disastrous place. I'm not an optimist, I'm a pessimist, but a pessimist who still believes that not everything has to be bad... an optimistic pessimist, perhaps. We can slow things down which are negative and we can also develop the first new shoots from the soil. The important thing now is to create seedbeds for social innovations; places where people can take ideas. The ideas are nurtured and they can grow. From these seedbeds emerge the projects, the real practical changes that over time move our civilisation from its present self-destructive course'.

Books by Robert Jungk

Tomorrow is Already Here: Scenes from a Man-Made World, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.

Brighter than a Thousand Suns, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1958.

Children of the Ashes, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961.

The New Tyranny, New York, Warner, 1979.

The Everyman Project, London, Thames & Hudson, 1976.

Future Workshops: How to Create Desirable Futures, London, Institute for Social Inventions, 1987 (with Norbert Mullert).

Web links

Wikipedia. Brief overview.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Jungk

Right Livelihood Award, 1986

<http://www.rightlivelihood.org/jungk.html>

Images of RJ

http://images.google.com/images?client=safari&rls=en&q=Robert+Jungk&oe=UTF-8&um=1&ie=UTF-8&ei=_O9sS_fiKYGOkQX4IKHUBw&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CB0QsAQwAw

Summary of Obituary from December 1994 World Futures Studies Federation

Bulletin, by Richard Slaughter

<http://www.globalideasbank.org/site/bank/idea.php?ideaId=145>

Obituary from The Independent, by John Calder

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-robert-jungk-1414618.html>

¹ An earlier version of this article was first published in *21C*, Commission for the Future, Melbourne, Issue 6, Winter 1992, pp.40-45.

² Jungk, R. Look-out institutions for shaping the environment, *Futures*, Vol 1, No 1, March 1969, pp. 227-31.

³ Jungk, R. Three modes of futures thinking, in Chaplain, G. & Paige, G. (eds), *Hawaii 2000*, Hawaii, University Press of Hawaii, 1973, pp. 101-119.

⁴ Jungk, R., *The New Tyranny*, New York, Warner, 1979.