



Erich Jantsch (1929–1980)

Obituary

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“We cannot abandon ourselves passively to evolution if we want to take our role in it seriously; but with every step of emancipation we risk working against evolution.”

Erich Jantsch is dead. His ashes scattered over the Pacific Ocean, from the shores he loved so much and which brought him so much sorrow, his work remains unfinished and his dreams unfulfilled. Evolutionist, philosopher, humanist, and passionate writer, Erich Jantsch succumbed to a painful illness in his beloved Berkeley on December 12, 1980, alone and lonely, abandoned by friends, misunderstood by colleagues, yet still gentle, hoping, helping, forgiving.

Erich was born in Vienna in 1929. He grew up in the cultural and educational environment which also nurtured John von Neumann, Oskar Morgenstern, Heinz von Foerster, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Peter F. Drucker, Kurt Gödel, Theodore von Kármán, George von Békésy, Karl W. Deutsch, and many, many others. Jantsch received a doctorate in astrophysics from the University of Vienna in 1951. But his first love was music, theatre and art. He was a music critic in Vienna for many years and maintained his interests in the arts until his death (over 300 reviews). Even recently he surprised me with his detailed knowledge of Otomar Krejča and his avantgarde theatre “Za branou” from Prague. He liked to talk of his friendship with Oskar Kokoschka, Austrian painter, who prophesied an untimely death for him – Erich did believe him and Kokoschka’s visions haunted him often, although others laughed.

I knew Erich personally since the early seventies when he joined the Circle of Human Systems Management. But he insisted on not being listed as long as he could not pay the \$15 contribution – he never could. Erich was without job and affiliation as long as I knew him. I still remember visiting him in his

apartment in Berkeley: dark and depressing room, with massage parlors above and below; a typewriter, a plant, and scattered copies of his favorite newspaper, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

In these degrading and often inhumane conditions he completed his last book, *The Self-Organizing Universe* (Pergamon). He did not live to see the publication of his AAAS Symposium *The Evolutionary Vision* (Westview), or his contributed chapters in *Autopoiesis, Dissipative Structures, and Spontaneous Social Orders* (Westview) and *Autopoiesis: A Theory of Living Organization* (Elsevier/North-Holland).

Earlier, Erich edited *Evolution and Consciousness* (Addison-Wesley) with the late Conrad H. Waddington. ‘Wad’, too, died before seeing their remarkable book published. But he still managed to write: “I realize now that the word ‘Jantsch’, besides being a surname of an individual, is, or ought to be, the name of a certain quality – something allied to zest, verve, dash, élan, combined with efficiency and accomplishment.” Erich had to part with his co-editor in the Introduction: “Et la Vie l'emporta . . .”, he wrote.

Another famous book by Jantsch is *Design for Evolution: Self-Organization and Planning in the Life of Human Systems* (Braziller), written in 1974 during his stay at Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, where he was one of the first distinguished residents invited by the Rockefeller Foundation.

It is and it still remains a deep paradox that Erich Jantsch is best known for his early books: *Technological Forecasting in Perspective* and *Technological Planning and Social Futures*. Because of this expertise, he served as a consultant to the Directorate of Scientific Development of the O.E.C.D. and as a member of the executive committee of the Club of Rome. He was an editor of *Technological Forecasting and Social Futures* and was listed among associate editors of *Management Science*. Yet he considered most of his own “technical” work useless and unworthy, and only reluctantly admitted any connections with operations research and management sciences.

Erich often listed his association with the Center for Research in Management Science, University of California at Berkeley. Yet the sad fact was that he was a *persona non grata* at the Center. He made his living by giving lectures all over the world, through writing, and by relying on a few friends. He had his mother Olga to support: ailing and in her eighties, in Vienna – he visited her every year. I remember deep sadness when, in November 1979, he wrote to me: “Also, I am now no longer part of the academic community, even in a formal way. Churchman did not want to have me any longer as member of the Center for Research in Management, even unpaid and without any mail or stationery privileges. So, I’m out – and I better enjoy it. I am throwing away all these rude letters which reach me from Business Schools in America, dumping tasks and stuff on me, instructing me what to do, etc., without first asking.” I knew Erich was growing bitter and I felt guilty, unable to respond, revolted by the explicit immorality of academic conduct.

Erich was the most knowledgeable person I have ever known. His memory was awesome and he gave me the impression that there is only very little he did not yet know about. From politics and theatre, through general systems and nuclear fusion, to children books and religion – he would inform you about the latest issues, quietly, with a shy smile, asking for nothing in return.

Erich admired Ilya Prigogine and his irreversible thermodynamics, Manfred Eigen and his self-organizing hypercycles, Kenneth Boulding and his evolutionary vision; he respected von Weizsäcker’s ultracycles, Margulis–Lovelock Gaia system, Maturana–Varela autopoiesis, and few other intellectual models. These concepts were at the root of his noble attempt to formulate a unifying paradigm: *dissipative self-organization*. Unfortunately, Erich did not live to see his first formulations published.

Erich loved America, especially Berkeley and California, and especially in the sixties. America did not seem to care. Although he came to the U.S.A. in the mid-fifties, it was only in 1979 that he received his ‘green card’ for permanent residency. I remember how proud he was, even grateful, that the immigration officers acknowledged the hundreds of publications he had written in America and for America: somebody out there cared.

So, naturally, most of Erich’s friends and admirers were from Europe. Especially University of Lund in Sweden, Technical University in Denmark, and uni-

versities in Hanover, Bielefeld, Kassel and Stuttgart in West Germany were his favorite places. I even overheard a talk about nominating Erich Jantsch for Nobel Prize while I was visiting at Lund. For years I tried to persuade Erich to accept one of the many offers from Europe – but, inexplicably, he never betrayed ‘his’ Berkeley. He never acknowledged how much it changed since the sixties. He always hoped that his old students would come back to him.

For information on *Friends of Erich Jantsch*, please contact Dr. Fritjof J. Capra, 2793 Benvenue Ave., Berkeley, CA 94704, U.S.A.

I had many professional disagreements with Erich and I think most of those who knew him did. He was uncompromising, he always said what was on his mind, he abhorred mediocrity. He was totally unamerican in his behavior and yet he could not make himself to leave America and possibly flourish on more fertile intellectual grounds. We don’t have to cope with Erich’s “science with human face” anymore – only his writings are left. There will be no more.

Erich has written, perhaps naively, in his last article: “The new paradigm of self-organization, and with it the focal concept of autopoiesis, ends the alienation of science from life. It forms the backbone of an emergent science of life that *includes a science of our own lives*, the biological as well as the mental and the spiritual aspects, the physical as well as the social and the cultural. It is only in our days that the dreams of Ludwig von Bertalanffy and Norbert Wiener may come to fruition.” But what about Erich’s dreams?

Scientific methodology of Erich Jantsch was convincingly holistic, he did not consider reductionism worthy of serious scientific concern. I think that his approach was best captured in the following metaphor: “There is a more powerful and beautiful paradigm hidden in the fog than any part of it, pulled out into the sun, can be. Therefore, let’s not pull, but work on thinning the fog!”

In saying farewell for Erich, I realize that his ideas will be missed with an increasing intensity. He will be re-discovered, recognized, and acknowledged as one of the most original systems thinkers of recent decades. All that will be too little, too late, and too guilt-ridden. A line keeps coming to me through his fear: “J’accuse . . .”

Milan ZELENY