

Wake-up call for the world

Dr Patrick Lagadec interviews Joshua Cooper Ramo who, in his new book, questions why we blindly follow the old course of making minor adjustments to current policies and incremental changes to institutions that are already collapsing

THE AGE OF THE UNTHINKABLE: WHY
The New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us and What to Do About It

blows away our Western beliefs, questioning conventional thinking and providing fresh ideas on how we can, and should, embrace the improbable – or risk disaster. Patrick Lagadec spoke to the author.

Patrick Lagadec (PL): Your book is a vital wake-up call. On all fronts, environment, health, economy, geostrategy, culture... our common references are disintegrating. To quote you: "We are entering a revolutionary age. And we are doing so with ideas, leaders, and institutions that are better suited for a world now several centuries behind us." So, my first question is, what are the faultlines, the unknown landscapes to discover and deal with?

Joshua Cooper Ramo (JCR): The essential point is that the greatest faultline is philosophical; it is a set of beliefs about the world that make the world seem incoherent to us. Largely, this is a belief in things like the inevitable triumph of capitalism and democracy, or the belief that states matter most, or that states are rational, or that small actors can never dislodge big players, whether they be military or financial. Every day there is proof around us that these are false beliefs, but there is very little action that suggests we understand what this means.

PL: *So if people are so reluctant to acknowledge and meet the challenge, it's perhaps because, behind their so-called optimism and assurance, they are in fact extremely scared by this new context – and then the question becomes: How can we act now, so that people in charge do not brutally switch from denial to despair?*

JCR: Generally, people are terrified by what they don't know. It is a natural human reaction. The point then is to understand that change is not always good and not always bad, to accept that when something is lost something else is gained. This is hard – particularly when what we are losing is often a source of great psychological assurance, be it the idea that we can keep our jobs forever or that our military can protect us from great



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threats. But my point is that innovation also means there is a tremendous amount to be gained, not least of which may be a more coherent and morally decent approach to thinking about and living in the world.

PL: *You refer to Einstein and his new world, far from the "old physics". Do you think that we now also need such a revolution in our minds and tools, to be able to understand, categorise and deal with the challenges we must face? Even crisis management developed as recently as the 1990s now appears to be a pathetic bridgehead of fast-emerging crises. We are faced with what we could call 'a barrier of complexity'. How to come to grips with this overwhelming challenge?*

JCR: Yes, I think that is correct. We need a complete revolution in thinking. Look around us and you can see this is happening in

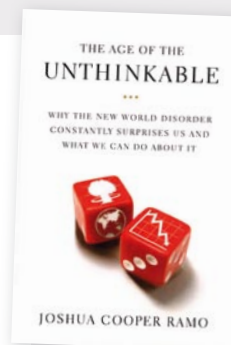
FROM THE UNKNOWN

Spearheaded by CRJ Editorial Advisory Panel Member Dr Patrick Lagadec, who is Director of Research at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, France, this series is devoted to exploring the challenging issues characterised by 21st century crises. The aim is to go beyond our usual mindsets, helping to clarify pitfalls, redesigning the new landscapes that must be considered, and showcasing creative moves that will help to feed positive dynamics. The goal is not to find ready-made solutions, but to stimulate and feed new ideas, new approaches and new methods of thinking.

medicine, in communication technology, and in dozens of other areas. Such a revolution in thinking was what allowed science to make so much progress in the 20th century – a shift from certainty to uncertainty. We now need to make this switch, not only in our social science but in all of our planning for the world.

PL: *At the end of the 19th century, scientists totally redefined American public health and medicine education to meet the challenge of the 20th century. "They created a system that could produce people capable of thinking in a new way" [Barry, The Great Influenza, p7]. How would you see such a decisive leap on this strategic front of in depth education? What kind of transnational initiative do you think we could launch, at least to prepare new citizens, new leaders, new institutions?*

JCR: Probably the easiest thing to do as a first step would be to change the sort of people we have in government and replace them with people who are practically and psychologically fluent in the new rules of global power. Today we have too many academics or politicians who have never done anything in the real world. This is a terrible handicap for us, both because these people have little idea of reality and because they are masters of manipulating bureaucracy to get what they want – independent of if that is a good thing or not. A massive influx of entrepreneurs, technologists, people who have lived overseas and younger people into governments is essential. CRJ



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