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The bomb as a new definition of present and future humanity

What we owe to Günther Anders' thoughts

By Frédérick LEMARCHAND



Image taken from the movie Dr. Strangelove by Stanley Kubrick – Credits: COLUMBIA PICTURES CORPORATION/COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL - AFP

« I have seen the world spirit, not on horseback, but on wings and without a head, and that refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel's philosophy of History". Th. Adorno, Minima Moralia, Payot, p.53.

On the day after the explosion of the dropping of the first atomic bomb, on the 7th of August 1945, Albert Camus authored an editorial in the newspaper Combat, the last words of which were: *"The world is what it is, that does not say much. We all know this as of yesterday, thanks to the formidable chorus that radio, newspapers and news agencies broadcast on the subject of the atomic bomb. They told us, effectively, in the midst of a host of enthusiastic commentaries, that any average sized town can be completely levelled by a bomb the size of a football [...]. We can sum it up in one sentence: mechanical civilisation is about to set upon its ultimate phase of barbarism. A choice must be made, in the near or not too distant future, between collective suicide or the intelligent utilisation of*

scientific conquests". A single voice pierced the clapping crowd consisting of western citizens blindly cheering, more or less confusedly, for the anonymous forces that had just triumphed over evil, without even minding the literally apocalyptic destruction of the City of Hiroshima whose immediate toll rose to some 70 000 dead; however, as was the case with the death camps, it was strictly forbidden to represent the scene, due to the extent of the disaster. Two days later, and still without any justifiable reason being given, the experiment was repeated, this time using a plutonium bomb that destroyed the whole city of Nagasaki. The two bombs killed 250 000 people, but unfortunately, it is not so much this appalling number that led us into a new era – the second World War had just killed 70 million people! – but the apocalyptic potential of such a weapon.

Another voice rose from the multitudes, that of the philosopher Günther Anders who, over the following decades and until his death in 1992, strove to establish the foundations for a reflection on what happened in Japan in 1944, and especially, as we will see, on what kept happening as a direct consequence of "the bomb" that never seemed to be used as a military weapon during World War II. The inaugural text of *Reflections* on the H Bomb was written in the decade that followed the Hiroshima bombing and published in 1956 under the title "The Bombs and the Roots of Our Blindness to the Apocalypse" in a book which was in fact a philosophical programme providing a new definition of human nature and entitled *The Obsolescence of Man (Die Antiquiertheit des menschen)*. He would come back later on what he called "the time of the end, the post-nuclear Kairos defined by the imminent possibility of the end of times which he felt immediately on Hiroshima day, on the 6th of August 1945, without being able to turn it instantly into texts and that marked a major "turning point" [...] a huge turnaround from my original subject matter". We cannot develop here this ontological project in its entirety, which provides a new negative definition of our *anthropology* after the nuclear bombings, but we will simply say that Anders' work, of which the text on the bomb is a part, might probably be the most significant and contemporary thinking attempt to view the challenges brought about by modern technology, as in legacy of Heidegger and Husserl who taught him, but whose influence he perfectly managed to overcome. Furthermore, before going into the details, it should be noted that Anders uses neither the words "atomic bomb" nor "the bombs" (as objects) but "THE bomb" thus creating an interpretative paradigm of the unprecedented nature of our time, namely, that of "the apocalypse". On the understanding that the one thing that distinguishes us from our ancestors, as Mr. Delmas-Marty quite rightly reminded us in the opening address of this colloquium, is the ability to act on the world and on ourselves, with greater responsibility, Günther Anders, remaining faithful to the Frankfurt School's methods, pushed this assumption to the extreme: what is new is the capacity of mankind to destroy itself through the destructive power of nuclear weapons. Therefore, we could translate this into "the bomb" or "technological power" and "apocalypse", the latter to be understood in its non-religious meaning, induced by the Greek meaning of the word "catastrophy" as a "turnaround" situation or a complete "collapse". We shall first offer a ten-step exegesis of the inaugural text of 1956 that could be called the Ten Commandments of the atomic age; this has since been followed by many other publications on nuclear issues.

"concern" for the possible end, appeared on the spot, the day of Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, without of course being able to transform itself immediately into "texts"¹, which "constitutes truly a" turning point "[...] , a reversal of what was my main subject at the beginning ". We will not be able here to develop the entirety of this ontological project which proposes a negative redefinition of our anthropology² after the atomic bombardments, we will simply say that the work of Anders, whose text on the bomb constitutes one of the inaugural moments, is probably the most relevant and contemporary attempt at thinking about the issues of modern technology, in the legacy of Heidegger and Husserl who were his teachers, he was able to distinguish himself .

Before going into detail, let us note, that Anders does not say "the atomic bomb" or "bombs" (as objects) but "THE bomb" as an interpretative paradigm of the unprecedented nature of our time, that of the "apocalypse". Given that what distinguishes us from our ancestors, as Mr Delmas-Marty rightly pointed out in his introduction to this colloquium, is our ability to influence the world as well as ourselves, with great responsibility, Günther Anders, faithful to the specific methods of the Frankfurt School, pushes the hypothesis in its radicality: what is new is our capacity for total self-destruction, of which the nuclear weapon is the means. The "bomb" could thus be translated as "technical power" and "apocalypse", a term to which it gave a non-religious meaning (naked apocalypse), in the Greek ethymological sense of "reversal" and "collapse ". We will first propose a ten-point exegesis of the inaugural 1956 text, which could be considered the ten commandments for the atomic age, many other publications on nuclear issues having followed.

What appears fundamental to us, in reflection to the way the bomb leads us to consider a tragic redefinition of mankind's humanity, is its universal dimension and its wholly anthropological way: We are made by our own productions as much as we produce them, they structure us, limit us or rather constrain us in our capacities for action as opposed to the doxa which consists in making us believe that we *master* technique just as we *master* nature. Both from now on look back to humanity, in the double sense of the term which refers to both the living biological species and the way we think of ourselves as human beings and not as barbarians, animals or machines.

¹ Anders G., introduction à *L'homme sans monde*. Fario, 2015.

² Nous entendons par ce terme la manière dont chaque société se donne une définition de l'humanité de l'homme.

1 – *Moral philosophy has always believed that there would always be human beings.* Anders is the first philosopher to integrate into his line of thinking, to the extent of making it a starting point, the fact that humans now have the means of self-destruction. This is of course a fresh reconsideration of the Kantian heritage “in the shadow of the threat” and from the experience of Hiroshima. This way he introduces to moral philosophy the question of *future generations*, which will be taken up by Jonas³ in the eighties and by the “catastrophists” like the French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy.

2 – *To be able to make the bomb, it was necessary that there be no moral conscience.* If the bomb is the natural outcome of a project, like any technical object, it is also the result of a process. The number of workers who have worked to achieve it can be estimated at several hundred thousand, but most of them were unaware of it. The fact remains that many of the artisans – that is to say the manufacturers and designers - of the latter, scientists, engineering technicians who, confined to the site of Los Alamos in New Mexico, could no longer ignore what they had contributed to, and even more so after the first test at Alamogordo (16th July 1945). Under what conditions could men of science and technicians who most certainly were « good father figures » have knowingly contributed to the making of such an appalling act? If the work by psycho-sociologist Stanley Milgram⁴ on the conditions of a transfer of responsibility to a higher authority can partly provide answers to such questioning, the Andersian analysis of work gives us a more general understanding of the problem: It is that rationalized work doubly exceeds our imagination. In our everyday life, ultimately we have no valid perception of what we are doing, since we are trapped in a segment from the division of labour and in the same disaster our senses are irritated. The consequence being that the unitary conception that we had of the subject breaks into fragments of « faculties », in human fragments specialized in « productive being », in « sensitive being », in « able to enjoy », in « able to imagine » etc. This explains how the torturer or the atomic bomb maker can also at the same time be a good father figure. Schizophrenia, states Anders in conclusion is no longer an isolated psychic illness and becomes the unsurpassable condition of the modern man.

3 – *The bomb is not a means since it exceeds all ends.* Being able to destroy the Earth once, fine, but why give yourself the means to destroy it several times over? Which brings us back to a metaphysical question. The bomb exceeds, through its power, all the means ever invented by humans that influence the world. It is from this theoretical hypothesis which at the same time is very tangible, that Gunther Anders questions the movement of transformations from means to ends. Critical theory had indeed understood the way we relegate the ends in the unthought against the ever-growing empire of means (so ask a researcher to provide an early justification for plant transgenesis or animal cloning!), but Anders goes further: It is now a question of considering former aspirations and ultimately, humans (but also freedom, happiness) as *means without ends*. The bomb inaugurates this era by turning modern technology into a new transcendence. Thus Vietnam does not according to it,

³ *Le Principe responsabilité (Das Prinzip Verantwortung, 1979).*

⁴ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority : An Experimental View*, Harper Collins, 2004.

have contributed to the production of weapons for the war but rather to the production of a war for weapons.

4- *It is used every day... as a means of blackmail.* Far from constituting a “weapon of peace” or any actor of stabilisation as the nuclear doxa teaches since the beginning of the cold war, the bomb is far from being a harmless object forgotten at the bottom of a silo which we could always use “just in case” but the existence of which would preclude any use in the real world. On the contrary, Anders thinks, it now places humanity in an unprecedented posture of vulnerability, making every human being, rich or poor, whether or not he or she owns an anti-atomic shelter, a disillusioned and potentially a vulnerable being. To live in the atomic age is to become a “*being-in-suspension*”, a human who has not yet been killed: “*The era of the changes of time has passed since 1945. Since then we have lived a moment in history that no longer constitutes an era before other eras, but a delay ...“This third revolution is therefore the last ”.* We have entered the Damoclean era, as permanent victims of peace blackmail with the prospect of total destruction as a horizon: after Auschwitz, states Anders, humanity had become killable (murderable); after Hiroshima, humanity became lethal.

5 –*Nuclear « tests » are not tests.* The substantialist approach of danger found in the concrete philosophy of Gunther Anders, which comes in opposition with the abstract philosophers, takes the “tests” beyond the terminology, as concrete elements of our reality. To put it another way, they are part of our world: let's imagine some 2000 nuclear tests of which half of them are in the open air and most of which are each ten times the power of Hiroshima. The environmental consequences of those tests were carefully studied in Hiroshima, for the sole purpose of seeing if the damage caused was up to expectations, and we know today the dramatic ecological impact of all the tests carried out, in the Pacific of course, but also French experiments conducted in the Sahara. Plutonium is one of the most toxic substances in the world and it is now known that very small amounts of contaminants can have lethal effects on health because in real life the substances act in combination. The new paradigm of environmental health thus highlights the combined, potentiated, delayed and transgenerational effects of pollution, thus challenging the old belief that “the dosage makes the poison”. Radioactive substances are thus often referred to as “small doses” (implied as harmless) while they actually display effects fully comparable to those of endocrine disruptors. The nuclearized world thus embodies Philippe Roquelo’s conception of technique when he writes “*every technical object is the petrification of social relations that it contributes to both establishing, perpetuating and modifying and that’s precisely why it is possible to perceive the essential social characteristic of the technique*”⁵.

⁵ Roqueplo Philippe, *Penser la technique*, Seuil, 1983.

6 – *We have become bigger than ourselves.* Gunther Anders places at the heart of his thoughts, like Hannah Arendt who was his first wife, the question of knowing what we are doing. At the same time, he questions our ability to understand what we are doing, mainly hyper technology (bomb, media, biotechnology, etc..) with this central hypothesis about man's obsolescence: we are not in imagination or feeling at the standard of what we produce. The demiurge man maker of hyperpower and complex machines, even autonomous, begets his Golem or his Frankenstein creature as we choose. Technology transcends and leaves us behind, we create it: we have become bigger than ourselves, our creations are no longer human but they have become foreign to us and incomprehensible. Hence the second assertion.

We have become smaller than ourselves. Our inability to apprehend what we are doing turns us into imperfect beings as opposed to the perfection of machines. Jean-Michel Beysnier summed up the situation very well regarding transhumanism in the following terms: The optimised man is first and foremost a diminished man, cut off from his understanding power. In other words, Anders uses the concept of supralinearity to refer to the phenomena that goes beyond human understanding (In first place, the bomb) such as the consequences of a 4 °C global warming and infralimilarity to designate what escapes our immediate perception (like the bombing lurking at the bottom of an ocean in a strategic submarine, environmental pollution or climate change). Although regarding that last point this is less and less true.

7 – *We are incapable of being afraid.*, catastrophists have always taken great interest in the notion of fear, beginning with Hans Jonas who used it as a heuristic foundation in his new ethic for techno-scientific societies: listen to your fears and you will truly know what matters to you. Paradoxically, Anders neither refutes nor criticizes fear (a traditional obstacle to self-realisation or great ideals in modern thought), but wonders why we are not afraid of future disasters despite the presence of signs that have gathered and are readable around us like in the oracles. Simply waking up in condemned world – and not only under the threat of the bomb should produce a sense of fear, which could drive us to collective action: demand nuclear disarmament wherever atomic weapons exist. The catastrophism of Jean-Pierre Dupuy is based on such an idea that the catastrophe must be ontologically conceived and sufficiently credible so as to give of the future an image repulsive enough for us to fight against its occurrence, we will come back to it. On the contrary, the occurrence of catastrophes in the real world and more precisely the various ends of the world of which the bomb is the inaugural moment, would somehow have overturned the perspective between real and imaginary catastrophes thus annihilating the fear that animated the ancient imaginations of the catastrophe. So, at the very moment when we should apprehend- in the double meaning of grasping and being afraid- what we are doing, the maker of end of the world instruments seems devoid of any moral conscience and therefor of any *sense* of concern for the world. The human responsible is a worried, concerned person so we should be more scared than ever. Our lack of fear, says Anders, is part of our pathology.

8 – *There are Promethean disparities: fear is not up to what the other faculties are able to generate.* The anthropological-psychological analysis of the subject or rather the fragmentation of the subject opens a fundamental perspective on man within scientific societies. It would be difficult to come back in just a few words on the question of man's destiny: are we in the history – created by men caught up in the balance of power– or are we in socio-technological evolution in which technique would have played a role, through giving a competitive advantage to some rather than others, the role played by genes in the evolution of life? I know that such a question will be swept aside by many philosophers and academic sociologists. However, it deserves to be examined, at least as hypothesis, if we want to understand why what is happening seems to be beyond our reach. Not that we lack knowledge because we know, science enlightens us through the power of logos and information is accessible to most through the World Wide Web. But however, Gunther Anders boldly announces: indeed, we know but don't dare believe what we know. Here he introduces the distinction that can be seen between abstract information and disconnected from experience and the social imaginary of the catastrophe. We lack an anthropological base in which we could inscribe the catastrophe: here the nuclear apocalypse, rather than take refuge behind absurd theories such as "the balance of terror" or more broadly the "management" of calculable risk. Our task for Anders from now on is to develop the formation of "moral imagination", including the possibility of imagining the very worst, in other words the end of the human species.

9 – *The problem: our belief in Progress.* In anthropology, Anders tirelessly probes our social imaginary that is to say this collective and immaterial instance where forms a more or less image of what we want or do not want to be, of what we are, of the world. The idea of Progress and its corollary, the time, gives a strong structure to progressive and developmentalist ideals whose history (of the lived world) shows us that they are at the source of catastrophes. So as we have said, Anders is the one the first, if not the first, to consider that we must equip ourselves with a new temporality: the future is no longer that horizon of possibilities – of which only one can come to be – to which we are connected through an arborescence of causality and of which each bifurcation would be the opportunity to assert our freedom of choice but rather a fixed point of the catastrophe that we should consider as a new figure of destiny. The effects of human activity, that can be regrouped under the term of Anthropocene⁶, are such that the future is literally colonised by what we do : a process of climatic turmoil for the next 10 000 years (even if we immediately stop emitting CO₂), long life nuclear waste⁷, biodiversity erosion which brings us to the 6th greatest phase of the extinction of

⁶ Nom donné par le chimiste de l'atmosphère Paul Crutzen à la nouvelle ère géologique dans laquelle nous serions entrés et qui a débuté lorsque les activités humaines ont eu un impact global significatif sur l'écosystème terrestre.

⁷ La France a produit 2700 m³ de déchets de haute activité, soit 0,2% du volume de déchets qui concentrent 96% de l'actinité. La durée de vie de certains isotopes se compte en millions d'années.

species, environmental xenobiotic pollution having profoundly altered the logic of the living as well as the reproduction of species.⁸

10 – « *Only own things whose precepts could also become the maxims of your action* ». Before Hans Jonas, Günther Anders formulated the precepts of new ethic adapted to the *new* New World that we westerners created. But would they in their turn be adapted to the new type of human, the fragmented and short-sighted man generated by the technoscientific economies?

This is the whole source of Ander's methodological despair, who published his biography under the provocative title *And if I'm desperate what can I do*. It is of course a question of basing our ethics on a methodological and not psychological despair in order to "start from the worst hypothesis" as the basis of the most elementary prudence. The invitation is clear: we must be able to give up action, to acquire for example new technologies if they threaten anthropologically and ontologically humanity. This is indeed what guides the whole movement for global nuclear disarmament (such as the Nuclear Disarmament Initiatives Movement). It comes fifty years before the "neo-luddites" thinkers such as the American computer scientist Bill Joy who published an article in *Wired magazine* in 2000 entitled "Why the future does not need us" at the end of which he concludes that all progress in technical knowledge, particularly posthumanism research (artificial intelligence, biotechnologies) brings us closer to the end of humanity. So, in order to save ourselves, we most *forego knowing...*

To conclude, Anders installs new hope in a possible transformation of the idea of humanity, abstract, inherited from the Lumières and whose morals were unable to prevent the catastrophes of the twentieth century (wars and genocides) into a *coherent and united humanity* through a shared interest of survival. Thus, the major ecological crisis is perhaps a chance to be seized in order to expand the space of imaginations as envisaged by the author." the bomb has succeeded, as he wrote in conclusion to his essay, where all philosophies, religions and empires had failed: it has really made us into a humanity". Will the famous quote, very Hegelian, from the poet Hölderlin "But where the danger is, also grows the saving power" prove him right?

⁸ Voir la conférence de Séralini Gilles-Eric à ce colloque (*Les effets transgénérationnels des pesticides et polluants : comment et pourquoi ?*) et *Le sursis de l'espèce humaine*, Belfond, 1998.