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‘Torturing Things Until They Confess’: Günther Anders’ Critique of Technology

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Anyone who studies the human dimensions of technological change will sooner or later encounter the work of Günther Anders, at least in German-speaking countries at any rate. (Unfortunately Anders’ writings are mainly not available in English.) He wrote extensively on the ‘Seele’ in an age of high technology and he was, less at the universities, but all the more in the social movements, one of the most influential German philosophers.

As a student of Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, Anders was sensitized to the crisis of the European sciences and to the ambivalent role of technology in human life. His escape from Nazi Germany in 1933, his exile in North America, and—most importantly—the events of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, formed the experiential background to his thoughts. After World War Two, Anders returned to Europe and chose to live in Vienna until his death in 1992.

Anders recognized that human activity had begun to overreach itself in a fatal way through its development of technology. Since human faculties such as emotion, perception, or even human language ability, are relatively circumscribed compared to our capacity to create new things, we are now faced, he says, with a ‘Promethean discrepancy’ between the world of technology and our ability to visualize it. In this paradoxical situation, whereby ‘we are smaller than ourselves’, Anders sees the basic dilemma of the twenty-first century, a dilemma that can only be resolved by a ‘moral imagination’ and a thing-cognizant approach reconnecting production and visualization, creation and its representation.

When I first read Anders’ writings, it was with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, it was a shock. His analyses of burning issues of our time are so clear and direct, without any attempt at masking the aporias and perversions in the human relations to technologies, that the insights can sometimes be hard to take. On the other hand, reading Anders was also a relief. Here at last was someone addressing the individual and social consequences of modern technologies—something not very common in the social sciences and humanities, even today. At last, someone was trying not to play down or avoid issues, but rather to face problems head on, to think them through and to expose their implications.

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I was fascinated by this ruthless but also humane and caring mode of articulation. When I began to study the whole body of his writings, it was a real discovery. I was confronted with what can only be described as a huge oeuvre that constitutes an extensive critique of technology: one meter of writings, more than 20 books and 100 articles, and 70% of his work yet to be published. ‘I am just not able to turn off the tap’, Anders once explained, ‘that’s a job for the plumber’ (Hage, 1988, p. 34). I also discovered an amazing life and biography, not a *vita* as he once said, but a life in plural, a *vitae*. I was impressed by the way this German-Jewish intellectual confronted the issues surrounding the Nazi period and the inhumanity emanating from Germany during that time—the racism, the ostracism, and the Holocaust.

Few other intellectuals share Günther Anders’ way of combining theory and practice. The starting points of his reflections are always concrete problems of human practice in everyday life. However, he was not only a philosopher and thinker, but also a radical political activist who intervened in the politics of daily life. He was one of the first intellectuals who, in the Germany of the mid-1920s, warned against the Nazis and he took part (together with his wife at that time Hannah Arendt) in the resistance against Hitler and fascism. Later, he became an active anti-Vietnam War protester and an initiator of the anti-nuclear and environmental movements.

His commitment to practice was so strong that he declined offers of professorships. One, for example, from the Free University of Berlin, he declined on the grounds that he needed instead to go to Hiroshima to talk with the victims of the atomic-bomb, not to mention having to galvanize the anti-nuclear movement. But, as much as he was a political activist, he also recognized that, in a world of high technology, theory begins to take on a new importance.

He reversed Karl Marx’s famous formulation: ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world...the point however is to change it’, and emphasized the importance of interpretation. In a way, the following sentence encapsulates Anders’ project: ‘It is not enough to change the world, we do this anyway, and it mostly happens without our efforts, regardless. What we have to do is interpret these changes so we in turn can change the changes, so that the world doesn’t go on changing without us—and not ultimately become a world without us’ (Anders, 2002b, p. 5).

Discrepancy between Creation and Mental Representation

To understand the relationship between humans and technology more clearly, we can consider the process of human creation as an arc of action containing two aspects, production and its repercussions. In a study that closely examines the structure of human production, Elaine Scarry shows how the act of human creation includes both the creating of the object and the object’s recreating of the human being, and she emphasizes that: ‘When one is attempting to understand the nature of creating—it will always be misleading to look at it in isolation; it [the first part] can only be understood when seen in conjunction with its second half’ (1985, p. 315).

At present within the social studies of technology, the major emphasis is placed on the first half of the process: on inventing, developing, and producing, and an analysis of how technological systems are socially constructed (e.g. Bijker *et al.*, 1994). Of course, the genesis of production does lie in the realm of the social and with us as humans, and it certainly makes sense to emphasize this point (and with it the fact of human responsibility)

and to explore the process of how technologies are constructed within their social, cultural and material context. However, we must also explore the repercussions of this process and how the created world of things in its turn influences our human world.

Now, a tradition has emerged within the social studies of technology that examines exactly this side of the process, recognizing that modern technologies are more than simply means to an end and the results of rather remarkable processes of production. In fact, they are world-creating objects, powerful structures and forms of life that fundamentally alter human existence. This tradition can now gain insights into the power that technological structures exert and how they can embody ideologies and politics, intolerance, racism or even patriarchal ways of thinking (see, for example, Feenberg, 1999; Haraway, 1991; Hess, 1995; Noble, 1984; Winner, 1989; and many others).

This understanding of technology places the things themselves at the centre of the analysis, focusing on the forms of life reified within the created objects and their consequences for human life. Langdon Winner has formulated basic concepts for such a conceptual framework with his call for a 'theory of technological politics'. He argues for a research perspective that investigates the characteristics of technical objects, which also poses questions with an eye to the future and asks how the artefacts *are* changing and *will* change individual and social life. 'This approach', Winner stresses, 'points us back, to borrow Edmund Husserl's philosophical injunction, *to the things themselves*' (1989, p. 22).

Anders' thought represents a precursor to this critical tradition within technology study. His analysis directs a radical focus on the contradictions and discrepancies marking the relationship between people and technology, and on the repercussions of the created things on human experience and action.

In an approach reminiscent of Marx's treatment of economic structures in *Capital*, Anders, in his book series *The Obsolescence of Human Beings*, goes beyond an economic analysis and focuses on technological structures. Similar to Marx, he describes how the reciprocal process that human creativity once intrinsically was has now lost sight of its human origins, and where the attempt to reconstruct the way the path was lost is also the attempt to reinstate the original connection.

The distinctive feature of Anders' thought can be seen in the manner he approaches this problematic of the lost 'back-binding' in the relationship of humans and technology. Whereas the origins of the problem are typically located either in specific social forces expressing themselves in thing-form, or in the 'inner' world of ourselves—in the human unconscious and in the mind—Anders situates it in the 'outer' world of technological creations. In relation to the limits of our various human capabilities, the size and the dimensions of the things we are creating are just too big (or too small). Today's technological world, Anders explains, is 'like an oversized frock that flaps around our mind' (1992b, p. 7). Anders formulated the basic idea of this thesis on the day following the destruction of Hiroshima. He sees a discrepancy between our human capacity to produce and our other capacities: our emotions, our language, and our imagination. This discrepancy between production and reproduction, between creation and imagination, he sees as the sign of our times. 'Nothing could be more characteristic of humankind today', Anders writes, 'than the inability of our soul to be "up-to-date", our inability to remain abreast of production. We are . . . incapable of running at the speed of transformation which we ourselves ordain for our products and of catching up with the machines . . . So imagination lags behind production. We may be able to produce the hydrogen

bomb, but we are not capable of visualizing the consequences of what we have produced . . . Our feelings lag behind our deeds: we can bomb hundreds of thousands of people, but we cannot cry for them or feel remorse' (2002a, p. 15).

Technological development leads to an extreme contradiction between human omnipotence and impotence, a situation where we humans are capable of annihilating ourselves as a species but are nevertheless incapable of adequately conceptualizing the dimensions of actual and potential production. Anders attempts to articulate this problematic in the relationship of humans to technology with the concept of the 'Promethean discrepancy'.

On the one hand, he sees this gap between producing and imagining as determined by the relative limitations of human nature and human psychical abilities, and the relatively static nature of human emotionality and imagination when compared to the sphere of production (where it is possible to build on what has been made before). On the other hand, he sees the discrepancy as determined by the particular forms of contemporary work, where hardly any worker can visualize the end-product of what has become an extremely mediated production process. Products are produced in complex, worldwide production processes involving many small products, themselves composed of other products, and so on. The concomitant development of radical forms of division of labour and specialization produce a situation where it is virtually impossible to grasp the overall context of action. The imbalance between producing and imagining, where the thing produced no longer bears any relationship to its production, is already present within the production process itself.

This problematic of the lack of mediation between producing and imagining, represented in the concept of the 'Promethean discrepancy', forms the central axis of Anders' thought. Throughout, he defines all his thoughts and actions within the furthest limit of the 'negative future perfect'—we shall not have been—a grammar made possible by the technological development of the twentieth century. 'I have a nightmare', he writes, 'in which I see a bare, blind globe, that will no longer be called "the Earth", rotating around a dark, unseen sun; where there is no one left to know that we once existed, and where our millions of acts and omissions, works, pains and pleasures will not merely be futile, but will, in fact, be null and void' (1996, p. 286). The most impressive dimension of Anders' thought and the guarantee of its continued relevance is the seriousness of his response to this danger and the way he makes it the central focus of his theoretical and practical work from August 1945 until his death [even his last publication warns of the dangers of atomic technology; see Anders (1992a)].

In today's social study of technology we can find approaches (such as the actor-network theory, for example) that try to overcome the abstract dichotomy between people and technology simply by removing the distinction from their epistemological framework altogether. Anders, too, attempts in his writings to overcome the abstract distinction between human and technology. But however minutely he describes how human power and action have shifted (of course through human action) from the province of humans to the sphere of technical products, and how the dividing line between humans and technology is becoming blurred, he always maintains this distinction.

Holding on to this distinction is of fundamental importance. It is the prerequisite for a discussion, both of the imbalances and dangers, and of responsibility and morality in the relationship between humans and technology. How can we talk about imbalances or about *someone's* responsibility for *something* if we can no longer differentiate between the two? All of Anders' writings after 1945 can be seen as variations on the theme of the

'Promethean discrepancy' and as attempts to develop a moral imagination of the situation in which the techno-scientific world puts us, and to bring ourselves, our ways of thinking, our theories and interpretations, within the radius of the things we are creating. 'If we don't succeed', he stresses, 'in matching the circumference of our productive capacities to that of our imagination, then we won't survive' (1992b, p. 8): hence his attempts, but also his call to develop a language of technological practice and to mediate between producing and imagining.

Moral Imagination

How exactly do Anders' analyses attempt to overcome the 'Promethean discrepancy' and relate technology back to humans? Anders' moral imagination expresses itself in a particular form of technology analysis. When he calls for 'torturing things until they confess' (2002b, S.428),¹ this illustrates his particular approach, one that informs and marks all his analyses and interpretations. As a guiding principle of such an approach he formulates: 'However natural it may be to treat people as if they are "objects", treating "objects" as if they were "people" is ... precisely the dictate of the moment, because the crucial "objects", those which constitute our modern world and which determine its future, are not "objects" at all, but in fact reified maxims and ossified modes of action' (2002a, p. 298).

The starting point of Anders' analyses are concrete ambivalences and problems that people encounter in social life. For example, questions like: 'Why do so many people in Japan play pachinko all day long?' or: 'What happens to us when we watch television?' However, he doesn't dwell much on the people, on their experiences and what they are doing with the artefacts, but jumps directly from the perspective of the subjects towards the one of the objects. He thinks his way into the things, to illuminate the politics and ideologies, and the principles of action that are embodied in the technologies; and, finally, to ask what the things are doing, and will do, with human beings.

Anders doesn't analyse his topic historically [the way, for example, Lewis Mumford (1970) approaches technology]; instead, he develops prognostic interpretations. In order to reconnect humanity with technologies, it is essential to encourage the facility of recognizing in the implements of today the people of tomorrow. This kind of prognostic hermeneutics, Anders explains, should be no more difficult than producing a view of history, and is often in fact less difficult. And in a reference to the German romantic writer and philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, who called historians 'reverse prophets', Anders suggests we can look at prognosticators as 'reversed historians' (2002b, p. 429).

An example of Anders' approach is his analysis of television. In this study he illuminates how television alters human activity and he begins with the question: 'So, what am I actually doing here? So, what's actually being done to me here?' (2002a, p. 101).

Now, what follows is not a comprehensive account of people's experiences of using the appliance. That would scarcely have been feasible at the beginning of the 1950s, when he began his analysis; television in Europe was only in an embryonic stage with no regular programming. Anders doesn't examine specific experience but rather gives a detailed analysis of the particular technological forms of life that have been created by the appliance; he questions the action maxims of the things and proceeds from there to illuminate the changes of human activity and practice.

Anders gives an example of one such ‘inherent maxim of things’ when he describes how a ‘thirst for things’ develops in the modern world of commodity networks with the products themselves creating needs. ‘The primary needs of today’, Anders notes, are ‘those . . . which are suffered by our world of things’ (1994, p. 124). In order to avoid becoming obsolete, products need more products. Each good demands another: the automobile needs petrol and oil, it needs spare parts, streets, petrol stations, refineries and much more. ‘The owner of a commodity’, he notes, ‘has made its thirst . . . his own. And however difficult he may find stuffing the accumulative mouths of the objects that have become his property, he has no alternative but to adopt their needs too’ (2002a, p. 177).

Anders’ thought moves from the concrete, the ambivalences of human experience, to the abstract, the worldly and technological relations, so as to better elucidate the concrete within its actual context and in its relation to the future. He doesn’t dwell much on the particular experiences of people, not so much thinking his way into people’s minds as into the things and the technological practice and, in this way, tries to articulate what technology means both individually and socially.

This method of analysis is rooted in Anders’ specific mode of thought whereby today’s technological artefacts are understood not simply as neutral means to an end but as in fact political and ideological things that embody power, interests, discrimination etc., but especially the insight that crucial dimensions of the things produced have simply not been envisaged and therefore exist beyond human influence and control. He attempts to render the meaning of things conceivable, thus integrating them within the horizon of human influence.

This thing-cognisant approach forms the core of Anders’ thought. While such an analysis may have appeared exotic when Anders was in the process of developing it in the middle of the last century, it no longer appears strange in the context of today’s social studies of technology. The ‘scripts’ that are embodied in things, as Bruno Latour puts it (1999, p. 215), the ‘values’ to use Andrew Feenberg’s formulation (1999, p. 176) or the ‘politics of artifacts’ in the words of Langdon Winner (1989, p. 19) are now recognized themes, and the effects they have on human life the object of detailed research.

Winner describes this method of analysis as ‘technological ventriloquism’ and promotes it as a general faculty for modern humans. ‘As a person encounters a device or a system’, he stresses, ‘whether one in use or one on the drawing board, it is crucial that he or she ask what the form of this thing presupposes about the people who will use it. Having asked that question, one can move on to give voice to the presuppositions in human-made things’ (1994, p. 196). But in no other body of work does the understanding of things play such a systematic role as it does in the work of Günther Anders. No one analyses the principles of artefacts and the crystallized action maxims of things so comprehensively, vigorously and accurately as he; and nobody concentrates so exclusively and consistently on the repercussions of things back to humans.

Pseudo-concreteness of the Person’s Perspective

However, this consistency also demonstrates the limits of Anders’ thought. An elucidation of the activity context of things certainly offers important insights into the social implications of technology. It explains the world humans inhabit since it reveals the latent forms of action embodied in technological structures and with which persons are

confronted. If humans can comprehend the world they live in then they can also understand themselves.

However, this is not the last word on technology and the human condition. In fact, the actual sensitivities of people, their immediate conflicts, their individual and collective experience and ways of dealing with things are not articulated. It is important to differentiate between reified forms of action and concrete individual and collective action, between structures and their human appropriation. Otherwise, one risks falling back on conditioning discourse and technological determinism where the argument runs from 'the top', from the material-social structures, 'down' to the concrete experience of the individual subject. This type of technological determinism appears to emerge time and again in Anders' writings, for example when he refers to TV pictures as 'cutting dies' (2002a, p. 167), or people becoming 'imprints' of devices that 'coin' them (2002b, p. 424).

But while it may initially appear so, Anders' thought is, in fact, not deterministic at all. For him, the ideas of the acting subject play a central role. He is concerned with the vulnerability of the subject and the danger of its loss of freedom and influence, and with the mechanisms and structures that undermine human subjectivity and agency.

However, the question of subjectivity remains incomplete and it is this incompleteness of the perspective of the person and its active relation to the things that pervades Anders' work, even where it is very close to people's experience.

There are impressive examples in Anders' work where he not only engages with the things but also talks extensively with people and includes the subjective side of human experience and agency. For instance when he visits the Hiroshima victims of radiation sickness in hospital (1995, p. 81ff); or exchanges letters with the Hiroshima pilot Claude Eatherly, who was admitted to psychiatric care suffering from a supposed Oedipus complex, and helps him to get free (1989a); or when he calls for an expansion of feeling and imagination in the passage where he talks about the plasticity of emotions in the first volume of *The Obsolescence of Human Beings* (2002a, p. 271ff).

With a few exceptions, however, he never engages fully with people's experiences or includes the perspective of the subject in his analysis and insights in any systematic way; there is a distance, the argument remains abstract and remote, sometimes even appearing extrinsic and arrogant; it doesn't really arrive 'down' at the level of subjective experience.

Another example from Anders' analysis of Japanese pachinko players should help to illustrate this limitation. The object of the analysis is a concrete conflict in human life: what fascinates the player so much about his machine? 'What kind of sex appeal', so Anders' formulation, 'draws him into the arms of this chrome Siren?' (2002b, p. 59).

He then begins the analysis by approaching the person: 'Let's ask the man himself', he writes (2002b, p. 61). But he doesn't remain very long with the person, doesn't really ask the man himself about his experience with the machine; instead, he jumps straight to an explanation of the changes taking place in work under the present technological conditions. The perspective of the person remains rhetorical, abstract and incomplete. He only gives the impression of responding to the person without really engaging in a dialogue. This shows a pseudo-concreteness in Anders' thought and a conceptual limitation to the analysis.

Such an approach—to render imaginable what is produced—when seen against the background of the 'Promethean discrepancy' thesis may well appear sensible, at least initially. But however accurate such an understanding of things may be, it is not alone

sufficient as a means to overcome the gap and to provide a real mediation between production and imagination. Who should develop such an imagination? Who could overcome the gap? Theoretical, but also practical reasons would argue in favour of a conceptual broadening of Anders' approach and for a two-sided analysis; one that would really include the people's perspective and get involved in their subjective experiences—their conflicts, contradictions, inner dialogs and so forth—in the process of dealing with and producing technology. This seems to be the only path toward overcoming the discrepancy.

Important though Anders' insight into the necessity of 'torturing things' may be, when attempting to re-couple technology with people, it is not sufficient to think oneself into the inner structure of the things in order to describe possible future worlds shaped by technology. The actual worlds and the perspective of the person also need to be included in the analysis. It is possible that Anders sensed the limitations and fragility of his approach. For, in the manuscripts of the third volume of *The Obsolescence of Human Beings* we can see Anders moving more strongly in this direction by including an analysis of subjects' language and modes of articulation (Anders, 1989b).

At any rate, he was well aware of the difficulties of really arriving 'down' in the world. In his fable entitled *The View from the Tower*, he describes the dilemma: 'As Mrs. Glü was looking down into the depths from the highest observation tower, in the street below there appeared like a tiny toy, but unmistakable by the colour of his coat, her son. Just at that moment this toy was run over and obliterated by an equally toy-like truck—but it all happened unbelievably quickly, in the blink of an eye, and anyway, it was only toys that were involved. "I won't go down!" she cried, rebuffing attempts to help her down the stairs, "I won't go down! Down there I would despair!"' (1988, p. 7).

Note

¹Here, Anders is referring to the seers of antiquity. As they once read the future from the entrails of sacrificial animals, so too must we learn to read from today's devices. They will reveal to us the shape of the world to come and the type of our children's children. 'And if they [the devices] won't do it on their own', he emphasizes, 'then we'll have to make them do it' (2002b, p. 428). With this rather pointed formulation, Anders attempts to express the necessity of a consistent, wholehearted 'thing-analysis' in order to get to the truth.

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Note: Besides the literature mentioned in the article, I include here everything of Anders' writings available in English.

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