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LIVING AT THE TIME OF THE END: READING GÜNTHER ANDERS IN THE LIGHT OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Emmanuele Quarta
Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro

At Doom's Doorstep

The Doomsday Clock was created in 1947 by The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and can be defined as "a design that warns the public about how close we are to destroying our world with dangerous technologies of our own making" through the imagery of apocalypse, which is represented by midnight on the clock. Clearly, back at the dawn of the Cold war, the most recognizable threat to humanity consisted by and large of nuclear weapons, especially in the context of growing confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Today, scientists at The Bulletin take into account a wider range of threats, such as climate change, new technologies, and biosecurity, when deciding whether the hands should be moved closer to – or farther from – midnight. Ever since its creation, the Doomsday Clock has been reset 24 times, the latter being in 2020, when it was moved from two minutes to midnight to 100 seconds to midnight, that is, the closest the hands had ever gotten to the hypothetical end of the world. Such decision was subsequently confirmed in January 2021, first, and then again in January 2022, roughly a month before the beginning of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Humanity now finds itself "at doom's doorstep", the 2022 Doomsday Clock Statement reads, citing concern about rising nuclear risks, widespread inaction over climate issues by national governments and international organisations alike, burgeoning biological

threats to human civilization, as well as the risks associated with ever-growing disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks.

As it is known, ever since the first days of war, talks on use of strategic nuclear weapons have dominated the international media environment. On February 27, 2022 – that is, three days after the beginning of the invasion – Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the "Defence Minister and Chief of the General Staff to put the Russian Army's deterrence forces on high combat alert" (Putin, 2022). Since then, the possibility of resorting to nuclear weapons has been repeatedly evoked by the Russian political leadership. It is worthwhile highlighting that the 2022 Statement was updated in the wake of the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, even though the hands had not been moved closer to the symbolic midnight that means world destruction. It should also be noted that the farthest the hands were set from midnight was in 1991, that is, in conjunction with the end of the Cold war and the signing of the first START treaty on the reduction of strategic arms by the United States and the Soviet Union. As the infamous "Short Twentieth Century" came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1991 Statement was unsurprisingly imbued with (albeit cautious) post-Cold war optimism. The Doomsday Clock was set "in a new region because we feel the world has entered a new era", the Statement read back then. Three decades later, we now know that such optimism was, to say the least, misplaced: not only did old-fashioned threats – such as war and terrorism – not disappear, but in our globalized, post-9/11 world, a new kind of de-territorialized threats to mankind came into place. Consequently, new fears came along, and old ones resurfaced, so much so that, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) published guidelines on how to deal with the issue of nuclear anxiety.

To be sure, the global audience had reasons to worry about the most ominous effect of nuclear-associated accidents even *before* the events of February 2022, that is, before the ongoing war in Ukraine and the ever-looming menace of either a potential accident at the Zaporizhian nuclear plant or the actual use of strategic weapons in the conflict. Already in 2011, the Fukushima nuclear disaster – whose long-term effects cannot be fully assessed yet – seemed to remind us, so to speak, that the ghost of nuclear holocaust had not been permanently confined in the Chernobyl nuclear power plant sarcophagus. In other words, the world may as well have entered into a 'new era' after the end of the Cold war; nevertheless, it is worthwhile discussing how radically different this world at 'the end of history' truly is. Hence, opening a debate on the heritage of the Twentieth century on Soft Power is a much-welcomed initiative.

The purpose of this essay is not to assess how seriously the current nuclear threat should be taken: I have no mean to evaluate whether this new surge of nuclear anxiety is justified, nor am I interested in doing so. Instead, it takes the opportunity to discuss nuclear weapons and the inherent threat they represent from a (geo-)philosophical standpoint and, more specifically, through the reflections by German philosopher Günther Anders (1902-1992) on the subject of atomic energy and nuclear weapons. The reasons behind such choice are manifold but can be easily summed up as follows: first and foremost, Anders' major work, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*[1], consists of one of the most profound and radical critical theories of technology as a whole; secondly, he actively campaigned against the danger of atomic energy and even kept correspondence with Claude Eatherly, the pilot who provided weather reconnaissance support for the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945; thirdly, he addressed the issue of atomic energy and nuclear weapons from a philosophical and moral standpoint. Even though that of the nuclear threat is a recurring theme in many of Anders' works, for the sake of clarity we shall mostly refer to (some of) his 'Theses for the Atomic Age' (*Thesen zum Atomzeitalter*), as this short text – which was published upon request of the students who attended a two-day seminar on "The Moral Implications of the Atomic Age" Anders held at the Free University of Berlin in 1959 – aptly sums up his views on the subject, which were further developed in other works.

Of course, one must keep in mind that Anders wrote his twenty-two theses on the Atomic Age under the influence of the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and, decades later, would update them in the light of the nuclear accident in Chernobyl. Nonetheless, and such is the argument I shall develop in the following sections, reviewing Anders' theses today might provide what I believe could be useful insights to understand our current situation on a theoretical, moral level by an author whose vast intellectual production may open further lines of research. Hence, in the next section, I will try to sum up and review Anders' perspectives on the consequences of Hiroshima on both world and human history. In the third and last section, I will briefly discuss the principle of deterrence, as well as Anders' critical stance on such subject.

1. To my knowledge, this work has not yet been translated into English, even though an unofficial, self-published translation of both volumes by Josep Monter Pérez can be found online. The lack of an official translation raises problems regarding the title, for which it is not uncommon to find different versions, such as 'The Obsolescence of Man' or 'The Antiquatedness of Man', among others.

Living at the Time of the End

Over the last thirty years, few works have drawn the same amount of attention (and criticism) as Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History and the Last Man' (1992), so much so that it has become a commonplace to understand it as the ultimate epitome of post-Cold war optimism about the future of Western liberal democracies. While properly conveying the debate sparked by Fukuyama's best-known work would exceed the scope of this essay, its main assumption was that, instead of just the end of the Cold war, the years 1989-1991 marked "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 2). As highly debatable as this may be, it is still revealing of the widespread confidence on the beginning of a new era among Western government officials and intellectual circles alike, especially but not exclusively in the United States, at the end of the East-West confrontation.

Fukuyama's take on a historicistic approach was mostly concerned with, of course, the subject of world politics, whereas Anders was far more interested in the moral consequences of technological progress, with the nuclear weapon representing the acme of such technocratic process. However, oth, as it is known, share – to a certain degree – the same concern over the relationship between technology and the ethics-politics dyad.

In his Theses, Anders came to diagnose Hiroshima as a worldwide condition (Anders, 1962, p. 493). Ever since the dropping of the nuclear bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, "the age in which at any given moment we have the power to transform any given place on our planet, and even our planet itself, into a Hiroshima" (Anders, 1962, p. 493) has begun. In this New Age, Anders argue, humankind became 'modo negativo' omnipotent and yet *completely* impotent, given that the condition of our own omnipotence lies *precisely* in the fact that "we can be wiped out at any given moment" (Anders, 1962, p. 493). As a consequence, this New Age we entered in 1945 is, according to Anders, our 'Last Age': it does not matter how long it will last, "for there is no possibility that its 'differentia specifica', the possibility of our self-extinction, can ever end – but by the end itself" (Anders, 1962, p. 493). In his views, nuclear energy came to embody the very essence of the third industrial revolution, "not because it is a physical *novum* – which it also is – but because its possible or probable effect is of a *metaphysical nature* – which cannot be claimed for any previous effect brought about by humans" (Anders, 2010). *Metaphysical*, he further clarifies, and not *epochal*, because the latter would imply "the continuation of history and a succession of other epochs" (Anders,

2010), which he does not deem possible *precisely* because of the consequences of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima.

Therefore, under such predicaments the very concept of 'time' is somewhat suspended: by its own nature, the Last Age ushered in by the first and only use of nuclear weapons in armed conflicts will last insofar as its end will be endlessly delayed, for the end of the Last Age would equal to the end of everything, the end of the world as a whole. Anders define such state of things as a 'respite': in the Last Age, our 'mode of being' as humankind "must be defined as 'not yet being non-existing', 'not quite yet being non-existing'" (Anders, 1962, p. 493). Hence, the implications on our moral existence as 'not-yet non-existing' beings in the Age of Respite produce a shift in the most basic moral question, which now needs to be reformulated in a radical way: according to Anders, "instead of asking '*How* should we live?', we now must ask '*Will* we live?'" (Anders, 1962, p. 493). In other words, in our global condition of 'not yet non-existence', the nature of morality itself is displaced: in the Last Age, the normative categories of 'right' and 'wrong' give way to a different kind of ethics. For these reasons, Anders – who, as I mentioned earlier, was actively engaged as an anti-nuclear militant – suggested that the only possible answer to this new question should be summed up as follows: "although at any moment The Time of the End could turn into The End of Time, we must do everything in our power to make The End Time endless" (Anders, 1962, p. 494). In this sense, Anders clarifies, we are at the same time Apocalyptics (in that we believe in the eventuality of the End of Time) and anti-Apocalyptics (because "we fight against this man-made Apocalypse" [Anders, 1962, p. 494]).

What Anders define as the Time of the End – the End of Time dichotomy (*Endzeit – Zeitenende*) – as Hiroshima as a global condition – is a rather specific situation.

First, "in this Time of the End", he wrote, "everybody is in deadly reach of everybody else" (Anders, 1962, p. 495). As we have learnt by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, certain threats are inherently transnational in scope (Enemark, 2009, p. 204). Much like infectious diseases, international terrorism, and cyberattacks, "radioactive clouds do not bother about milestones, national boundaries or curtains", which means that in our Hiroshima-world "distances are abolished" (Anders, 1962, p. 495). If, as it would be later argued by David Harvey, technological advancements have reduced the relative distance between once faraway places, shrinking the world to the size of a "global village" or a "spaceship earth" (Harvey, 1989, p. 240), one may consider the invention of the nuclear bomb as perhaps one of the *first* truly global factor behind the globalizing processes that marked the second half of the Twentieth century. In other words, what is

more *global* than a device whose consequences, if employed, would bring about unprecedented destruction potentially *everywhere*?

Secondly, the inherent dangers of nuclear weapons exceed the self-evident fact that, in today's world – with over 13,000 strategic arms in current arsenals and nine nuclear-armed states[2] – the actual use of an atomic weapon could potentially lead, if not to the annihilation of humankind altogether, *at least* to unprecedented scales of devastation and millions of casualties. If, on the one hand, "[a]ny distinction between near and far, neighbours and foreigners, has become invalid" and "today we are all 'proximi'" (Anders, 1962, p. 495), we are, on the other hand, unable to picture the immensity of the apocalyptic danger itself.

Such impotence might seem trivial at first, and yet – Anders argue – it is of the utmost importance. First and foremost, because the ability to imagine in a comprehensive way the consequences of this man-produced apocalypse – to "visualize this nothingness", in Anders' own words – is a *conditio sine qua non* to take action and effectively *fight* against such possibility. Hence, even if "[s]uch 'total abstraction' […] surpasses the capacity of our natural power of imagination", as "what we have to visualize today is not the not-being of something particular within a framework […], but the nonexistence of this framework itself" (Anders, 1962, p. 496), we need our imagination to match our own ability, as *homines fabri*, to actually *produce* the non-existence of the world as humankind. In other words, we as a species have been capable, by the means of technological advancements, to create the very same device that could lead to the end of human life; nonetheless, we are unable to conceive the consequences of the deadly weapon we *ourselves* created.

This gap between our ability to *produce* and our inability to *imagine* is part of what Anders defines as Promethean discrepancy or Promethean shame. It should be noted that, while only briefly evoked in the Theses, this category is the object of a thorough investigation in the first volume of *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* and represents a cornerstone in Anders' philosophy of technology and its impact on human beings. As human beings, because of our '*natum esse*' we, as human beings, share, we cannot but feel shameful when confronted with the qualities of the objects we ourselves produce. In other words, compared with the inherent limitedness of the human species, this peculiar shame has its roots in the fact of having come into being (or of having been born), instead of having been *manufactured*, so much so that our uniqueness, our own non-reproducibility, is perceived

2. These numbers come from the ICAN website. For further reference: https://www.icanw.org/

as a *limit*. Hence, "we are smaller than ourselves" (and, one may add, smaller than *machines* and *products*), in that we are "incapable of mentally realizing the realities which we ourselves have produced" (Anders, 1962, p. 496). In other words, "while ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualize, we are unable to visualize what we are actually producing" and are, therefore, "inverted Utopians" (Anders, 1962, p. 496). This, as we will see, has many implications on the

As we have discussed earlier, the nuclear threat – the worldwide range of nuclear warheads – has led to the abolition of both *time* and *space*. This, however, does not translate to the abolition of *distances* altogether, as we are confronted with the "the daily increasing distance between production and imagination" (Anders, 1962, p. 499). Therefore, what we are unable to visualize by means of our imagination is simultaneously 'limitlessness' (that is, our 'pragmatic life horizon', "the one within which we can reach and be reached" [Anders, 1962, p. 497]) *and* 'nothingness' (the ever-looming threat of the consequences of technological progress, or human annihilation). It is important to note that – when discussing of the 'imagination nothingness' – Anders does not refer exclusively to the most widespread of 'imagination', but, more precisely, to *fear*, for "it is our capacity to fear which is too small and which does not correspond to the magnitude of today's danger" (Anders, 1962, p. 498). In other words, 'fear' is nothing else but "the imagining of nothingness 'in concreto'" (Anders, 1962, p. 498) and it is fear that we should recognize (and embrace) as a driving factor to fight against the possibility of the End of Time.

The abolition of *time* and *space* on the one hand and the ever-increasing gap between *imagination* and *production* on the other hand – in short, our condition of inverted Utopians – is even more dangerous as *feeling*, too, "has ceased to live up to responsibility" (Anders, 1962, p. 497). The argument he develops can be summed up as follows: we can easily imagine the act of murdering a fellow man and either repent or not. What we cannot visualize in our imagination is, however, "to do away with one hundred thousand people by pressing a button", for "the wider the gap, the weaker the brake-mechanism" that would prevent us from committing such an 'act' (Anders, 1962, p. 497). And yet, Anders warns us, the killing of hundreds of thousands of people by pressing a button – or by controlling a drone from a military base located thousands of kilometres away from the *locus belli* – can hardly be considered an 'action' *stricto sensu*, "for activities which formerly had occurred as actions and were meant and understood as such by the acting subjects themselves, now have been replaced by other variants of activity: 1) by working, 2) by triggering" (Anders, 1962, p. 500).

To put it shortly, if work is a substitute for action, triggering can be seen as a substitute for work, in that "in triggering, the specific characteristics of work – effort and consciousness of effort – are diminished, if not nullified" (Anders, 1962, p. 501)[3]. In other words, the fact of simply pressing a button could hardly be considered a form of work, nor an action. And yet, "although seemingly no one would have done anything, this 'doing nothing' would actually produce annihilation and nothingness" (Anders, 1962, p. 501), so much so that the displacement between the 'act' and the 'scene' of the suffering – the killing of millions – do not coincide, no one can perceive what they are *actually* doing: 'schizotopia', hence, instead of 'schizophrenia' (Anders, 1962, p. 501). Furthermore, the displacement between the 'act' and the 'consequences' thereof lead to the 'macabre abolition of hatred'. As Anders put it: "atomic war will be waged with less hatred than any war before: attacker and victims will not hate each other since they will not see each other" (Anders, 1962, p. 504)[4].

Apocalypse Now?

A well-known quote by Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece 'Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb' main character – that is, the unsettling ex-Nazi advisor Dr Strangelove himself – goes as follows: "Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy... the fear to attack" (Kubrick, 1964). The popular quote by Dr Strangelove does, indeed, sum up the 'basic concept' behind the logic of deterrence, that is, "an enemy will not strike if it knows the defender can defeat the attack or can inflict unacceptable damage in retaliation" (Betts, 2013, p. 88). Often understood as the "crucial ingredient in winning the Cold war without fighting World War III" and the "backbone of U.S. national security" (Betts, 2013, p. 87), the principle of deterrence – alongside the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) – is perhaps what defined the most international relations throughout the post-World War II decades, providing the element of stability that ensured that the Cold war turned out to be, in fact, a long peace with only relatively 'minor' tensions arising between the two blocs (Gaddis, 1986, p. 123).

3. I am, of course, aware that such distinction between 'action', 'work', and 'triggering' would deserve a deeper discussion; nonetheless, I hope to develop these categories in further writings.
4. Hower, Anders notes that "in order to nourish what a perverted age calls "morale," identifiable and visible objects of hatred will be exhibited, in emergency cases invented – 'Jews' of all kinds. Since hatred can bloom only if the objects of hatred are visible and can fall into the hater's hand, it will be the domestic scene from which one will choose scape goats" (Anders, 1962, p. 505).

In other words, the principle of deterrence rests on the *threat* of the use of nuclear warheads: in a paradoxical fashion, one may argue that nuclear weapons exist to prevent nuclear war from breaking out. The idea that "if it were not for our ability to threaten with total annihilation, we would be unable to hold the totalitarian menace in check" (Anders, 1962, p. 144) is, however, rejected in full by Anders. First and foremost, he argues, the nuclear weapon has *already* been used – against Japan – even though "those who used it were not in danger of falling victim to a totalitarian power" (Anders, 1962, p. 144). What he does find 'totalitarian' is, in fact, the very act of *threatening* – either openly or implicitly – with nuclear war, "as this threat amounts to blackmail and transforms our globe into one vast concentration camp from which there is no way out" (Anders, 1962, p. 145). In other words, deterrence – which, again, consists on an unspoken mutual threat – might have served as perhaps the most powerful self-regulating mechanism in post-war international politics *and*, at the same time, as the greatest threat to world peace: once again in a paradoxical fashion, we may argue that deterrence works insofar as it does not stop working.

Günther Anders "published these words in order to prevent them from becoming true" and warned his readers: "[i]f we do not stubbornly keep in mind the strong probability of the disaster, and if we do not act accordingly, we will be unable to find a way out" (Anders, 1962, p. 505). The ambition of this essay was, of course, much more restricted in scope than Anders' twenty-two theses. The eightieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is due in a few years, while the wind of war is blowing back at the geographical doors of Europe for the first time after the end of the Yugoslav wars. It is sure that war in the post-Cold war age is inherently different than the old-fashioned, localized, proxy conflicts that marked the history of the last century.

It is also sure that, although for too long ignored or deemed unlikely, the sole possibility of an all-out nuclear conflict is still, in fact, a *possibility* and one may add, following Ander's reflections, that it will *always* be a possibility. As I have stated earlier in this essay, I was not interested in trying to assess the actual chances of a nuclear war breaking out in Europe any time soon, for I as well – to quote once more the words by Günther Anders – am naturally restricted by the narrowness of my own imagination. However, I believe that there is a great deal to be learnt about the dangers of the world we live in by rereading Anders' works. If we were to adhere to Anders' theses, we currently find ourselves stuck in the Time of the End and have been doing so for the last eight decades. However, if we were to believe in the concerns raised by the scientific community at the Bulletin, the End of Time is just 100 seconds away.

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