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Is there a future for culture? A feuilletton

Santayana described culture — all culture, any culture — as a “knife pressed against the future.” Culture is about making things different from what they are; the future different from the present.

(Zygmunt Bauman in Bauman & Tester 2001: 31)

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To *press into* the future requires confrontation with the challenge *for* the future thrown down by the contemporary human condition. The challenge is plain: the contemporary condition poses the possibility of the *end of the future*. The future cannot be taken for granted anymore. This is not a philosophical argument, nor is it theological, and neither is it an allusion to the kinds of stories popularized after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ours is a condition in which the future might well be ended in a very *real* sense.

The contemporary human condition contains two possibilities for the end of the future. First of all there is the ecological crisis. Even though the seriousness of the situation is clear to any open mind, the lack of action to deal with environmental degradation and its consequences is sufficient proof of the willingness of global capital to destroy even its own conditions of existence if profit can be made on the way to the inferno. But at least there is *a* politics of this possible end of the future. The second possibility is the nuclear apocalypse. The Cold War might be consigned to the history books but the nuclear threat remains. There are still enough weapons to achieve overkill. Yet this issue is not widely discussed because it seems to come from a long-gone past. Indeed, because the weapons are no longer discussed very much, their danger is all the greater. The silence makes the nuclear threat evaporate from concern, and disappear from politics. Consequently, there are few if any civil restraints on military-scientific adventures.

It is *remiss* to imagine the future without considering the possibility of the end of the future. It is *naïve* to imagine the future *today*, at the time of the seventieth anniversary of Hiroshima-Nagasaki, without confronting the continuing challenge of the nuclear threat.

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The early guides are usually the best guides. They are able to think and see more clearly, without distraction by later, often decadent, posturing. This principle certainly applies when attention is turned to consideration of the possibility of the end of the future. Günther Anders started to raise the right questions within a few years of Hiroshima-Nagasaki. Anders focused on the nuclear threat, but his themes can also apply to the ecological crisis.

Anders reasonably extrapolated from the enormity of Hiroshima-Nagasaki and saw the dawn of a new and eternal historical epoch in which — as never before — all of humanity can be instantly exterminated (Anders 1956: 148). He called this epoch *The Last Age*, “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: 493). By this argument the future has ended because, except by means of the extermination of humanity itself, there is no way out of the present epoch of The Last Age. Yet the extermination of humanity is also the practical and humanly real end of everything. What makes The Last Age unique and identifiable as an epoch is what also makes it eternal.

Consequently, the future collapses into the present: “Since acts committed today [...] affect future generations just as perniciously as our own, the future belongs within the scope of our present.” Indeed, and here Anders imagines clearly: “By setting fire to our house, we cannot help but make the flames leap over into the cities of the future, and the not-yet-built homes of the not-yet-born generations will fall to ashes together with our homes” (Anders 1962: 495). But at precisely this point imagination falters. It might be possible to imagine the not-yet-built homes, but it is not possible to imagine the absence of the not-yet-born generations. Such an imagining of complete absence projects the human into the future from which it is absent and is, therefore, logically impossible. The imagining is inadequate to what is possible. Anders nicely identified this as a condition of the *inverted utopia*. Whereas utopians before The Last Age could imagine what was beyond the possibility of their bringing about, the contemporary human condition of The Last Age is the moment of the *inverted utopia* in which it is impossible to imagine what is possible (Anders 1962: 496).

But this does not at all cause paralysis. The contrary is the case. As Anders points out, if the inverted utopia is a condition in which it is possible to bring

about what cannot possibly be imagined, then the bringer of the unimaginable must be like a mythical Titan. “If there is anything that modern man regards as infinite, it is no longer God; nor is it nature let alone morality or culture; it is his own power.” As Anders continues: “Since we are in a position to inflict absolute destruction on each other, we have apocalyptic powers. It is we who are the infinite” (Anders 1956: 146). This point definitely applies to the possibility of the nuclear end of the future, but does it also apply to the ecological crisis? Curiously it does. Attempts to *prove* the *human causation* of global warming are also statements of the infinity of *human possibility*. The apocalyptic powers of humanity are confirmed as greater than anything nature can do. The inverted utopia is a condition of hubris. We are Titans *precisely because* we have done something previously impossible: we have ended the future.

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Even in its anxiety, the Titan of The Last Age is confident. Even as it fails to imagine the possibility of the end of the future, the Titan of The Last Age rejoices in its great power. Anders was quite right. In spite of everything, he said, this Age is marked by an *inability to fear* (Anders 1962: 498). But in the contemporary human condition it is *sensible* to be fearful. Furthermore, fearfulness is the only hope we have for even glimpsing the possibility of the imagination of a future in the context of the end of the future. Fear can be the spirit of the future and, by extension, the spirit of the *reversion* of utopia.

The admission of fear is the first step towards an expansion of the moral imagination. Of course the expansion of imagination can never be sufficient enough to make it commensurable with the possibility of the end of the future. But this is precisely why the admission of fear — of being *frightened* and *terrified* — might allow for hope. As Anders put it: “don’t fear fear, have the courage to be frightened, and to frighten others, too. Frighten thy neighbor as thyself” (Anders 1962: 498). The admission of fear achieves two things. First, it calls the bluff of the Titan of The Last Age and reveals its hubris. Second, the admission of fear requires, if not demands, dialogue. In this way it is the basis of a politics and of a politicization of what is otherwise left outside of the civil sphere.

But Anders was also right when he identified three principles which this admission of fear must express. It must be a *fearless fear* involving the courage to stand up to the sycophants of the Titan who shall accuse the fearful of cowardice; it must be a *stirring fear* which takes us onto the streets to protest together rather than into the loneliness of survivalism or acceptance of the embrace of the Titan; it must be a *loving fear* — “not fear *of* the danger ahead but *for* the generations to

come” (Anders 1962: 498). In other words, it must be a fear which goes beyond itself and which *expands* the very *ability* to fear.

To press into the future in the contemporary human condition of The Last Age it is first of all necessary to uphold and practice a simple yet difficult principle: I *am* fearful, therefore we *shall* be.

Bibliography

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