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The *techne* as producer of outdated humans

This article aims at showing how the philosopher G. Anders develops his ontology of technology as described in his *Outdatedness of Mankind*, volumes I and II. The article is structured in the following manner: first, there will be a discussion on the role played by the machine in the Andersian philosophy of technology. Second, there will be an analysis on the mechanism through which radio and television alter the traditional anthropomorphic notion of 'experience' through the creation of phantoms and matrices. Third, there will be an exemplification of the consequences of humanity's progressive detachment from the awareness of its *praxis* through the Andersian notion of the 'Promethean Gap'.

Keywords: *Techne, Anders, Promethean Gap, outdated, machines*

Author Information
Filippo Ursitti, Goldsmiths, University of London
https://goldsmiths.academia.edu/filippoursitti

I N F O R M Á C I Ó S

T Á R S A D A L O M

1. Anders' first revolution and the emergence of the machine

Even though the two volumes composing the *Outdatedness of Mankind* were published twenty-five years apart – the first text appeared in 1956 and the second in 1980 – they were framed as one single comprehensive unit that discusses a common theme, namely, *techne* as 'subject of history'. The motives of Anders' research are rooted in the traumatic experience of the frightening development of the capitalist society and the mass conformism growth after the Second World War (Portinaro 2003, 58).

In this post-war context, Anders developed his theory of the 'Promethean Gap' *(Gefalle)* to describe the everyday growing distance between humanity and the world of its objects. In other words, it is the idea that technology has made – in the last century – such a step forward with the automatisation of the productive processes as to render superfluous and outdated humanity and its faculties to the point where humans almost feel inadequate for the world (Portinaro 2003, 59).

For Anders, the upsurge of technology to totalising power is recognised as the process of overturning the relations between humans and their needs (means and aims), since in this new era the means are the only source of justification of humans' needs and objectives. This technological upturn was accomplished through three distinct phases – three 'revolutions' – through which Anders defines the philosophical framework of human fate:

- The first revolution coincides with the coming into existence of the machine.
- The second revolution begins when the needs become commodities.
- The third revolution corresponds with the substitution of humans with machines.

The first phase started as soon as the 'principle of the machine' – that is, the fabrication of machines, or at least of pieces of machines – was introduced (Anders 2007, 9). This appears to be a decisive moment for Anders because it symbolises the substitution of the 'tool' with the 'machine', leading to the process of outdating (*Antiquiertheit)* the 'human' in the sense that we handle a tool while the machine controls us (Anders 1987, 55).

If a tool (*Gerät*), intended as an expansion or extension of a human's limb, is under the complete will of its user, who is using it to pursue his or her own needs, then the machine is presented as independent from the human's will. The machine is capable of producing not simply commodities but means of production that, independent from their usage, will be 'means' for continuing the production. By being 'consumed', they produce something new: the situation in which it becomes necessary to produce further machines (Anders 2007, 10). The human presence in this entire process is minimal; people only participate at the beginning of this chain of production (as manual labourers) or at the end (as consumers), while the process seems to be guided by an immanent necessity that defines its aim, namely, iteration of automatisation. Inspired by an electrical blackout that occurred in the USA in 1965, Anders formulated his preliminary reflections on the nature of *techne* in general and of machines in particular in ten theses:

1. Machines expand both qualitatively and quantitatively; every machine aims, to maintain its best performance, for a condition where its indispensable external processes occur with the same mechanical precision as its internal one.

2. The expansionistic impulse of the machine is insatiable; therefore, it cannot be stopped.
3. The number of existing machines diminishes.
4. Machines degrade to parts of machines, cogs of mega-machines; hence, they become ontologically inferior to the whole of which they become a part.
5. Machines become one unique machine that tends towards the abolition of plurality.
6. The bigger the mega-machine is, the more threatened are the single components.
7. In this interdependency between the mega-machine and the plurality of smaller machines grows the danger of failure or even of catastrophe; therefore, it is characteristic of this technological world to grant some degree of autonomy to its single components to avoid a disaster.
8. Machines must be able to preserve themselves, in case of calamity, in one or more of their pieces.
9. One of the principal duties of machines consists in regulating the growth of the mega-machine.
10. *Techne* is not an absolute evil; there is a *techne* that is indispensable for the development of vast areas of the world. Thus, one of the duties of the philosophy of technology is to discover the dialectical point at which our 'yes' to *techne* must change into scepticism or a severe 'no'.

The expansion of the machine is not just a technical change; indeed, it involves a drastic modification in the society as a whole. In its impulse towards expansion, the machine tends to include what it is not yet under its control, so that energy, things, and people are just possible goods to be confiscated (Anders 2007, 101) and consumed.

All of those who become part of the mechanical process become means: the triumph of the world of apparatuses consists in the fact that it has deleted the difference between technical and social forms, thus making them indistinguishable (Anders 2007, 99). The reasoning behind Anders' choice of the word 'apparatus' (*Apparat*) relies on the fact that it can be used to identify both a physical-technical object – for example a computer – and the enterprise that 'contains' in itself humans and many singular machines that together act according to the principles of technical character.[1]

The dream of the machines is to match with each other in increasing proportions so that they can reach an 'ideal state' of existence in one perfect mega-machine that contains and surpasses all the apparatuses.[2] But this condition should not be confused with what we usually refer to as 'interdependency of production', that is, all products having mutual relations with each other. The high degree of specialisation and differentiation of the singular technical functions, making the functioning of one product dependent on the utilisation of another, imposes the command that

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[1] 'To the *techne* do not belong only the "apparatuses" (*apparathafte Dinge*), i.e. the machines together with their products and the effects produced by them. To the *techne* belongs the enterprise in which we are utilised, since we work there, as instrumental parts' (Anders 1981, 180).

[2] In this sense it can be argued that Anders is a technological determinist insofar as he believes that technology does possess a set of properties that impact society in a way that, at best, can only be postponed.

every commodity, once bought, demands the purchase of other commodities; each one is thirsty for another one (Anders 2003, 194).

This first model of the expansion of the machine was later substituted by Anders with the idea of *Volksgemeinschaf*, 'the community of the apparatuses' (Anders 2007, 104), where the components of the machine have only one objective: the conquest of the totality, leading to a situation where nothing would be outside *techne*'s power (Anders 2007, 57). The world as a machine is the truly techno-totalitarian condition towards which we are going (Anders 2007, 58), a condition where 'technique', 'world', and 'society' are just different names for the same thing (Dries 2009, 39).[3]

The revolution represented by the substitution of the tool for the machine is not a mere consequence of the history of production but something concerning the totality of the human world, which now appears as the world of the apparatuses:

> Today singular machines do not exist anymore. The totality is the true machine. Every single one of them is a part, a screw, a cog of the bigger one; a piece which in part satisfies the need for other machines and at the same time imposes the need for others. It would make no sense at all to admit that this system of apparatuses, this macro-apparatus, is a 'means' that is at our disposal for freely achieving our objectives. The system of apparatuses is our world, and 'world' means something different from 'means'; it belongs to a different category (Anders 2003, 38).

In this world, from which it is impossible to escape, humans lose their freedom, surrendering it to their objects. What is changing us, by shaping and deforming us, is not just the objects mediated by the 'means' but the means themselves, which determine the usage of machines, which consequently changes us.

The things produced nowadays are maxims turned into things and modes of repressive usage that tell a story of an inverted domination where humans lose their control over the world that they have created and where they are not able to regain access to the processes that they once started. This 'emancipation of the objects' is carried out in a way in which the action stolen from humanity is given to the machines, which, therefore, represent the 'incarnated making' (*inkarniertes Handeln*), becoming 'pseudo-people' (*Pseudo-Personen*) (Anders 1961, 208). The machine's role being indistinguishable from its mode of usage is cleverly rendered by Anders with the equation '*Habere=adhibere'*, which translates as 'to have' equals 'to use'.

With this progressive growth of autonomy on behalf of the *techne* corresponds the consequential reification of humankind. Humans lose their central role of producers (*homo faber*) and their activities terminate at the extremes of mechanical production: at the beginning as inventors or manual labourers and at the end as consumers. Their natural 'deficiency' and their being anthropologically determined by their needs, on one hand, and their adaptability and plasticity, on the other hand,

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[3] 'The world of the apparatuses does not only constitute itself through the model of the *Volksgemeinschaft*; in fact, *mutatis mutandis,* the latter reproduces the former. *Example par excellence* is the National Socialism with its total functionalisation (*Indienstnahme*) of the individual who was technically produced: in a way, in 1933 the radio won [the elections]' (Anders 2007, 255).

are both utilised by the industry for reiterating the consumption, to which humans are forced through the intrinsic power of the commodities. The consumeristic terror is the terror of use. Our universe of apparatuses transforms us into beings that are coerced to use (Anders 2007, 398).

Therefore, it is not unsatisfied needs that push individuals towards commodities; rather, the latter produce the former. We do not end up having that which we need; we end up feeling need for what we have; the needs depend, for their being, on the existence of the commodities. The request becomes a product of the offer, and the needs conform to the products so that at the end they are never other than foot-prints and reproductions of the needs of the commodities (Anders 2003, 195) which the apparatus uses to sustain itself.

The industry, which needs to equalise the hunger of the commodities as hunger for commodities, is called advertisement. Advertisement is a means of propaganda produced for the sole objective of producing the needs for products that need us since, by liquidating these products, humans guarantee continuation of the production of the commodities themselves (Anders 2007, 10). On one hand, advertisement grants the world of the technical products an ontological status: what irradiates a bigger attraction and power to exhibit itself in the *bellum omnium contra omnes* is valued and recognised as 'being' (Anders 2007, 146). On the other hand, advertisement is a plea for destruction. Through advertisement, consumers are incited to 'ruthlessness', to substitute their old commodities with newer and more fashionable versions of them. Each advertisement is a call for annihilation presented as a functional imperative of the technical apparatus, which has repercussions for our lives.

The ideal of the industry is to imitate the method applied to the industry of consumption, that is, to render as small as possible the gap between production and liquidation of the commodity (Anders 2007, 43). Anders describes this ideal condition using the fairy-tale image of 'The Land of Cockaigne',[4] a world where 'usage' does not exist anymore, and only consumption remains untouched; a world where the industry, in its complexity, is transformed into one industry comprehending all the products of consumption (Anders 2007, 37). The immanent element of destruction contained in the production leads Anders to label the ontology of the industrial era a negative ontology, where 'fluidification' of the object is as characteristic as reification of the non-objective (Anders 2007, 48). Anders here recalls the well-known idea of 'planned obsolescence', the principle according to which goods are produced with an artificially limited useful life after which they become obsolete. In this sense, both objects and humans are ahistoric in the sense that they neither come from the past nor are built for the future; they live only for the present (Anders 2007, 261). The idea of property is liquidated with the objects whose stability is substituted by the alternation of having and not-having (Anders 2007, 42).

In 'the Land of Cockaigne', the immediacy once lost after Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden is restored (Anders 2007, 313); this is the dream of *techne*. Even though its mediation character is incontestable, the apparatus exists to fulfil a de-

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[4] 'An imaginary place of extreme luxury and ease where physical comforts and pleasures are always immediately at hand and where the harshness of […] life does not exist' (Chisholm 1911, 622).

sire, that is, it reduces time and space to a minimum. The time and space between a desire and its realisation are eliminated by the immediate realisation of the desire. Time and space appear as obstacles if they are measured by the Cockaigne standard; the battle against them is the secret motto of this epoch: the abolition of time is the dream of our time. Society without time and space (rather than without classes) is tomorrow's hope (Anders 2007, 317).

In a world dominated by *techne*, humanity loses its sense of time and the possibility of making experience. The lack of temporality consists in the 'deficiency' of our being human: time exists only because we are biological beings; because we never have what we should actually have; because we constantly need to obtain what is necessary. Being-in-time means existing in the mode of not-having or the mode of achieving the *desiderata* (Anders 2007, 319).

But if experience is the way in which humanity can *a posteriori* compensate for its alienation from the world, then it is the mediation form that humanity uses to experience the objective form of the world that *techne* impedes and precludes. This is particularly clear in the entertainment industry where the world is 'served' to us in its *liquid state.* At times it is not even served but rather provided in a totally direct mode to be immediately *used* and *consumed*; by being liquid, *the commodity* is, in the act of its consumption, *liquidated* (Anders 2007, 235).[5] In both radio and television, the objective of our modern efforts seems completed because in each of them the reception of what is transmitted happens in the same moment in which the broadcast begins (Anders 2007, 322). Thus, space and time are replaced by the simultaneity of events. There is not a 'there' anymore; everything is here. Yet, if everything is here, there is no space (Anders 1970, 131).

2. The anthropological consequences of the creation of needs

In relation to the second revolution, involving the creation of needs, Anders wrote an article titled *Spuk im Radio*; it was published in 1930 in the magazine *Anbruch*, edited by T. W. Adorno. In this article Anders maintains that the radio, by allowing reproductions of the same musical piece to multiply simultaneously in different places, destroys the unity and the essence of the artwork. Anders reveals in this short analysis his opinion regarding technical means: they are extremely strange and in need of an interpretation for the fact that *techne* can create phantoms (*akzidentiell Spuk*) (Anders 1930, 66). The example of a phantom Anders gives in his *Spuk im Radio* article is radio-reproduced music. Anders notes that the ubiquity of such music can uninterruptedly continue even when he turns the radio off, because it is still being broadcast from the radios of his neighbours.

Anders notes that no means is only a means (Anders 2003, 123). This leads to the conclusion that effective critiques of the social existent status can be seriously addressed only when messages, mediums, contents, and forms are questioned. This

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[5] 'It is for this reason that nowadays we find ourselves in a historic phase where the mode of sensorial reception is neither, as in the Greek tradition, the seeing nor, as in the Jewish-Christian one, the hearing but, rather, the eating'. (Anders 2007, 235, 246).

is particularly true for the mass media of radio and television. They represent a new stage in mass consumption compared to the previous 'media' (cinema and theatre) where the entertainment was 'consumed' collectively, or at least together, by a crowd that was *truly accumulated.* For radio and television, the mass product *is fabricated not only for the mass but en masse* (Anders 2007, 71). The mass of individuals is here substituted by the massification of individuals; the true revolutionary event of our time is the fact that the mass still represents only a quality of the singular and therefore must not be considered an active subject of history (Anders 2007, 81).

The principal consequence of radio and television is transformation of the public en masse. If the former, because of its characteristics (physical distance, separation, and attentive listening), presents itself as better equipped against the dangers of conformism and manipulation, then the latter, by definition, has always had negative meanings (in it the individual loses his or her characteristics: reason, control over passions, and independence of judgement). In attributing to the public the characteristics of the mass, Anders wants to highlight an intrinsic effect of the mass media themselves. Since radio and television are characterised by 'privacy of reception', they seem to realise the idea of a direct exposition of the individual to the action of the media. It is as if the means of mass communication can arrive directly to the singular individuals composing the (mass) public and turn them into slaves. TV devices, according to Anders, deprive their consumers of the word. They rob them of their faculty to express themselves, of the occasion and of the will to speak (Anders 2003, 130), making them *infantile* in its etymological meaning: minors who do not speak (Anders 2003, 132).

With the loss of language, humans lose their capacity to make experience. This is the incredible power brought by the radio and the television: that events themselves, not only the news about them, can be contemporaneously transmitted in every corner of the world in the form of broadcast. The world 'comes to us' and we do not have the need to explore it, thus making unnecessary what, until yesterday, we called *experience* (Anders 2003, 136).

Another consequence of this analysis is 'familiarisation of the world', meaning that people, things, happenings, and alien situations are presented to us as familiar facts, in a familiarised condition (Anders 2003, 139). While alienation means that what is close appears to be distant, in familiarisation everything becomes uniform and close to us. We are transformed, as spectators, in observers of the globe and of the universe (Anders 2003, 140). The motive of this phenomenon is individuated in the 'character of commodity of all phenomena', because: 1) everything that turns into commodity becomes alienated and 2) every commodity must change into something familiar (Anders 2003, 143). The principal objective of familiarisation consists in alienation itself, in hiding the causes and the symptoms of alienation. *Techne* takes from humanity its capacity to realise that it has been estranged from the world. Both familiarisation and alienation are two sides of the same coin: they both lead to the neutralisation of every event that is presented on the screen.[6]

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[6] Adorno wrote in Minima Moralia: 'estrangement shows itself precisely in the elimination of distance between people' (Adorno 1978, 41).

The television broadcast defines in a new manner the relationship between humanity and reality by creating a 'new medial situation' (*neue mediale Situation*), in which the singularity consists in its *ontological ambiguity*. Broadcast events are at the same time present and absent, real and apparent; they both are and are not: they are phantoms (Anders 2003, 152). The basic principle of the transmission is to deliver what is simply simultaneous and to make it appear as a genuine presence (Anders 2003, 154). The showed images are phantoms because neither are they images in the traditional sense nor do they possess any materiality inasmuch as they are forms presented as objects (Anders 2003, 187).[7] This causes, on one hand, attenuation of the perception of the difference between reality and fiction in the spectator; on the other hand, the elusive character of the transmissions produces a transformation of our way of making experience. The broadcasts put the receiver *a priori* in a condition in which the difference between direct experience and indirect information is obliterated (Anders 2003, 177). The broadcast object appears on the television screen in its reality but not in the form of relation such as would occur with a news item about itself. And yet, this reality has the same ontological status as news – that is, it is an interpreted reality and not reality itself. This happens because 'news' is a judgement or a proposition with a double structure (subject S and predicate P) that affirms something about an absent object – for example, the wallet is full. But this 'news' does not provide the spectator with either the object itself or its image (the full wallet); it provides only 'something about it'. Of this 'something' the important and truly meaningful aspect for the S is P because the predicate allows the subject to decide how to behave. Inasmuch as the predicate makes it possible to dispose of something which is absent, to include it in the practical dispositions of the subject, the news is a form of freedom. But since it communicates only a part of the absent object, thus underlining only one aspect of it, the news is a form of unfreedom because it is a partial supply, it is a prejudice already (Anders 2003, 176), and as such it limits the addressee, dispossessing the subject of its autonomy.

In the case of the radio the distinction between mediated learning (through news) and immediate learning (through the senses) is clear, but in the television's case such a distinction is completely obliterated because it becomes difficult to say whether we are in front of a thing or a fact (Anders 2003, 177). The ontological 'doubleness' of the television relies on 1) its elusiveness, which causes the images of the television to eliminate the difference between things and news, and 2) its presenting itself as immediate, because it deceives us by pretending to be a fact while it is only a pre-selected aspect of a possible fact and a piece of news to persuade the consumer that it has no intention to persuade him. The use of the recording camera, the choice of images, their editing, and in general every passage of a broadcast event constitutes already a choice presented only from one side and never in its totality. Hence, the television exonerates the spectator from giving his or her own judgement, and as soon as it frees the spectator from the necessity of gaining a direct experience, it

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[7] Anders anticipated that form of ambiguous perception of reality that is now called 'virtuality' (Liessmann 2002, 84–85).

forces him or her to accept as reality the pre-formed judgement. The TV deprives the spectator of his or her independence and autonomy of thought.

Broadcasts not only condition the way in which the subject makes experience but also reverberate on reality itself, on which they exercise a truly performative effect. The relation between reality and its transmitted form is characterised by the fact that the happening acquires more social importance in its reproduced form than in its original (Anders 2003, 134), forcing the original to conform itself to its reproduction, overturning the difference between reality and fiction. It is not reality that determines the simulation of TV transmissions; rather, the technical possibilities determine reality (Drews 2006, 69).

To understand this process, Anders goes back to the specific relation between model and reproduced commodity: on one hand, 'being' means plurality. On the other hand, the real must be adequate to its eventual reproductions; it must be transformed according to the copy of its reproductions. Given these circumstances, it is difficult to judge where reality ends and the game starts (Anders 2003, 206), as often happens in the case of sports events.[8]

Since there is no image that does not act as a model, our world is grounded on the images of itself. The world becomes its own inverted imitation. The role played by the matrix is twofold: 1) it shapes the actual events and 2) it outlines the 'soul' of the consumers. From this coincidence between the structure of reality and that of subject – both are preventively shaped – derives dire consequences that determine the character of our epoch. A vicious circle is created in which the resistance between humans and world is vehemently eliminated.

In this way, the resistance that the humanity–world relation was grounded on vanishes, thus causing the world to lose its objective character. In its disappearing the world becomes an 'edible commodity', a 'Land of Cockaigne'. The mutual relationship humanity–world, and *vice versa* world–humanity, is a matter involving two preformed entities. This is a back-and-forth process between a reality shaped by a matrix and a consumer structured by a matrix; it is a spectral affair (Anders 2003, 212).

Referring to the unreality of the world that now becomes reality, Anders affirms that the totality is less true than the entirety of its partial truths; in other words, the falsity is the whole, and only the whole (Anders 2003, 182). With this statement Anders aims at criticising television in its entirety because it constitutes a new relation of humanity with the world (Kramer 1998, 43). Even if each broadcast were to be transmitted according to the truth, the fact that many real things cannot be shown might allow the broadcast to turn them into the totality of an 'already-made' world and the consumer of such totality into an 'already-made' man (Anders 2003, 182).

Thus, the totality of the broadcasts produces a distorted picture of the world, a 'pseudo-model' of the world (Schraube 1998, 131), which becomes the sole condition of the experience. If the world is presented to the mass-man as a totality of fixed schemes, of stereotyped forms of perception and behaviour, the world risks becoming its own representation. The epochal character of this transformation relies on

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[8] Anders expresses that phenomenon according to which a happening obtains attention and therefore reality only through the mass media, and to these has to preventively conform.

its precise negation of human specificity. The matrix is, therefore, the fundamental character of modern man. The 'end of the ideologies' consists today in the fact that, instead of lies about the world, we have a falsified world.

3. The Promethean Gap and tomorrow's task

This progressive detachment of humanity from the awareness of its praxis is the core of what Anders calls the 'Promethean Gap'. With this notion Anders believes that he is characterising the *conditio humana* of our time and of all the ulterior epochs (Anders 1991, 74). With the Promethean Gap, Anders refers, first, to the discrepancy between the productive ability (*Herstellen*) of humanity and its capacity of imagining (*Vorstellen*) the consequences of its own producing; and, second, to the everyday growing asynchronisation between humanity and the world of its products and the incapacity of our soul to remain up to date with our production, which makes humanity outdated, a prehistoric species.[9] It is an overturning of Platonism and the result of a dialectical process in which the imagining loses its anticipating character and trudges behind the produced objects while the producing is emancipating itself from the guiding image of the representation positing it in front of the *fiat accompli*.

The term '*Vorstellen*' loses, in this particular case, its own reason because its prefix '*vor*', which means a planned anticipation preceding the realisation of a product, is now liquidated. We face an inverted Platonic situation in which the realised objects come before their *eidos*; they appear before they are imagined in their own magnitude and in their consequences. Hence, the person who used to 'imagine' becomes now the person who 'registers' because she cannot cognitively 'keep up' with what she has done or with the incalculable power that she has gained through her *praxis*. Thus, the fundamental dilemma of our epoch is that we are inferior to ourselves and we are incapable of making an image of what we have done. In this sense we are 'inverted utopians'; while the utopians could not produce what they imagined, we cannot imagine what we produce (Anders 1961, 203). Anders calls this gap 'Promethean' because we are not good enough for the Prometheus within ourselves (Anders 2003, 279). In this way Anders overturns the revolutionary emancipatory connotation of the mythical Titan. Prometheus, lauded by Goethe in a hymn and considered by Marx 'the noblest of the saints in the calendar of philosophy' (Marx 1997, 13–14), truly freed humanity with his gift (fire, a prefiguration of *techne*), but he chained it to a new servitude, that of products.

In the pre-industrial era, the gap between producing and imagining was imperceptible, worthless and harmless; today, that is no longer the case. We cannot connect today's *Vorstellen* to yesterday's emotional level to obtain bigger and more complex sets of emotions as today's scientists base their discoveries on yesterday's *Herstellen*. Through the technological revolution, the distance between humanity's

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[9] The invention of the atomic bomb preceded the creation of the anti-nuclear movement as a war precedes its war crime tribunal.

imaginative faculty and its objects' performances has dramatically increased. What should be set in motion today is not a campaign claiming humanity's omnipotence and omniscience but, on the contrary, a movement that realises that, *Vorstellen*-wise, we are inferior to ourselves.

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