

# Thought after Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Günther Anders and Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>

Konrad Paul Liessmann

Universität Wien

konrad.liessmann@univie.ac.at

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## Abstract

The paper explores the relationships and interconnections in the philosophical and socio-political concepts of Günther Anders and Hannah Arendt. Both philosophers, who were married to each other for a short time, not only shared a similar fate in that they both had to flee from National Socialism, but both dealt with similar questions, albeit in different manners: with Auschwitz and the Holocaust, with the problem of totalitarianism, with the development of the Modern, which is defined by technology and industrial labour. A comparison shows that many themes in the thinking of these philosophers are near to each other, but the methods and foci are other. At the foreground of Anders' thinking is the question of the destructive influence of modern technology and weapons of mass destruction. However, Arendt concentrates on totalitarian political structures and the possibility of people to take action. Nevertheless, they both are concerned that people's humanity is at risk under the political and technological conditions of the Modern.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of the 20th century; Anders; Arendt; Heidegger; Auschwitz; Holocaust; Hiroshima; political philosophy; philosophy of technology; media philosophy; ethics; mass destruction; National Socialism; labour.

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## Resumen. *Reflexión después de Auschwitz e Hiroshima: Günther Anders y Hannah Arendt*

Este artículo explora las relaciones e interconexiones en los conceptos filosóficos y socio-políticos de Günther Anders y Hannah Arendt. Ambos filósofos, que estuvieron casados durante un breve tiempo, no sólo compartieron un destino similar, puesto que ambos tuvieron que huir del nacionalsocialismo, sino que también se ocuparon de cuestiones similares, si bien de distintas maneras: trataron de Auschwitz y el Holocausto, del problema del totalitarismo, del desarrollo de la modernidad, el cual es definido por la tecnología y el trabajo industrial. Esta comparación muestra que muchos de los temas del pensamiento de estos filósofos son afines, aunque los métodos y enfoques difieren. En el primer plano del pensamiento de Anders está la cuestión de la influencia destructiva de la tecnología moderna y de las armas de destrucción masiva. Por otro lado, Arendt se centra en estructuras políticas totalitarias y la posibilidad de intervención de las personas. Sin embargo, ambos están preocupados por el hecho de que la humanidad de las personas está en riesgo bajo las condiciones políticas y tecnológicas de la modernidad.

**Palabras clave:** filosofía del siglo XX; Anders; Arendt; Heidegger; Auschwitz; Holocausto; Hiroshima; filosofía política; filosofía de la tecnología; filosofía de los medios; ética; destrucción masiva; nacionalsocialismo; trabajo.

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1. Translation from German: Andrew Smith.

In retrospect, many people regard the 20th century as one of the most violent epochs in the history of mankind. To question how and whether it is still possible to philosophize in view of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Gulag is to question the possibilities and limits of philosophy itself. It means asking what it can mean to understand this century of barbarism philosophically, and it means asking whether thought as thought can still make sense at all under these circumstances, and in view of a development of technology and civilization far surpassing all man's previous forms of self-empowerment. Using the example of a philosopher couple, this essay sets out to at least intimate what it can mean to face up to these problems. It may be pure chance that the paths of the two philosophers who examined these questions more radically than virtually anything else crossed in a remarkable manner: Günther Anders (1902-1992) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). The thought of both is inseparably linked to the political disasters and violent events which they both experienced during their lives. As dissimilar as they were, the couple was bound not only by their brief marriage, but also by the conviction that, if philosophy were still to have any meaning, it had to leave the academic forum so as to deal with urgent and persistent problems of the present and the immediate past as soon as the latter threatened to burst the accepted forms of comprehension.

Günther Anders (whose real name was Stern) was born in Breslau in 1902. His father was William Stern, the well-known psychologist. Günther Anders grew up in a middle-class, well assimilated Jewish family. As a boy his main interests were literature, music and painting. After the First World War, Anders studied philosophy and art history under Cassirer and Panofsky, and later philosophy in Freiburg under Husserl and Heidegger. He graduated under Husserl in 1923, and in 1925 met Hannah Arendt in Husserl's Freiburg discussion group. He met her again in Berlin four years later, and soon afterwards married her. Anders' attempt to become habilitated in the philosophy of music in Frankfurt floundered, not least due to the resistance of Theodor W. Adorno. From 1930-1932 Anders worked on an anti-fascist novel *The Molussic Catacomb*, which could no longer be published. The work was first published only in 1992, sixty years after it was written. In 1933 Anders and his wife emigrated to Paris, where Anders wrote political poems. Under the title *Pathologie de la Liberté* he published his negative anthropology, the outlines of which he had sketched out at the end of the 1920s. This work was to have a significant impact on Jean-Paul Sartre.

Anders and Hannah Arendt were divorced in 1936. Anders fled to America, but maintained contact with Brecht, Marcuse, Thomas Mann and Adorno. Anders always remained an outsider whilst in exile. He was neither as celebrated nor as financially secure as many of his colleagues, some of whom were extremely condescending towards this headstrong poet and philosopher. However, the experience which Anders gained in America, and in particular the various jobs with which he was obliged to earn a living sharpened his eye for the factors that are of central importance to modern civilization. His somewhat ludicrous job as a cleaner in the props rooms of Hollywood induced him

to make the historico-philosophical and epistemological reflections without which his subsequent media theory, for example, would scarcely have been possible.

Günther Anders' life and thought took a decisive turn as the truth about the Nazis' extermination policy slowly seeped through, followed especially by the news of the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. This horrific event, the true dimensions of which only gradually became apparent, marked the beginning of a global threat to mankind. From this moment on, it also had a considerable influence on Anders' life. Although he returned to Europe in 1950, it was not to either of the two Germanies, but to Vienna, the home of his second wife, Elisabeth Freundlich, whom he met in New York. There he turned down the opportunity to make a career as a literary essayist, which would have been possible following the success of a book about Kafka, and an academic appointment. As a freelance journalist, the theme to which he devoted the following decades of his life was the possibility of exterminating mankind due to the construction of the atomic bomb. In 1959, Anders entered into a correspondence with Hiroshima pilot Claude Eatherly. This correspondence was published by Robert Jungk in 1961 under the title *Burning Conscience*. However, the concept of a self-induced apocalypse also runs through Günther Anders' main, two-volume philosophical work, *The Antiquity of Man*. However, he was concerned about far more than this: about a radical philosophy of industrial civilization that appears to reach its ultimate extremity in the bomb. He also published his reflections on space travel, philosophical stenographs, diaries, glossaries and even literary works. Anders died at an advanced age and still working in Vienna in 1992.

Anders first attracted attention in the 1950s with a study of television that firstly represented a milestone in the development of media theory: *The World as a Phantom and a Matrix*. Anders poses the question as to what the picture provided by a television set actually *represents* in the dual meaning of the word: «The peculiarity of the situation created by the broadcast (consists) of its *ontological ambiguities*». Ontological ambiguity: in other words, the television picture cannot be assigned to any of the realms in which we are accustomed to think: virtuality or reality, likeness or actuality. A broadcast event—and the principle of live broadcasting is a paradigm in this analysis—cannot be described either as pure imagery, and certainly not as the as-if reality of a work of art. In other words, it is not a form of aesthetic virtuality, but neither is it reality, as if the event itself were taking place in the living room. The broadcast events are «at one and the same time present and absent, at once real and virtual, at once there and not there». They are—to use the term with which Anders described the quintessence of television—*«phantoms»*<sup>2</sup>. These images, however, have an absolute archetypal role: they become the matrix, or template, by which people are imprinted. In this manner, produced for television or live,

2. Anders, Günther (1980). *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I. München: Beck, p. 131.

they again become a phantom. It is as such that television pictures, acting as a matrix for human behavior, generate the world which they then portray. The lie has lied itself true, and reality forms itself based on the images of this lie.

The relationship between man and technology played a decisive role in the philosophy of Günther Anders. One of the central premises of this philosophy states: the products of our technical intelligence *are* more than they *appear*. It is from this that Anders derived his controversial thesis of the *Promethean gradient*, of an inescapable difference between man and technology:

So this is the basic dilemma of our age: we are smaller than ourselves. In other words, we are incapable of creating an image of something that we ourselves have made. To this extent we are *inverted Utopians*: whereas Utopians are unable to make the things they imagine, we are unable to imagine the things we make.<sup>3</sup>

The perfectibility of technical equipment increasingly exceeds the cognitive and emotional potential of man. In his immediate dealings with perfect machines, man reacts with a *Promethean shame*, to use Anders' disputed terminology. Man is obliged to admit his own imperfection in view of the perfection of technology.

Certainly, long before there was any talk of *networked systems*, Anders already knew that it was inadmissible to reduce the problem to the relationship between an individual and a single appliance.

If there were a sociology of things, its axiom would be: there is no such thing as a single appliance. On the contrary, every one is a *zoon politikon*; outside its society it is a mere Robinson thing that would remain unserviceable. In this context the word society is not used to designate only equals, not only the millions of appliances functioning simultaneously or their sum total, but a correlate accommodating morphologically to the appliance, a housing consisting of raw materials, consumers, sibling appliances, waste disposal systems that embed, nourish, and purify it—in short: an environment.<sup>4</sup>

In the developed industrial nations, at least, this aspect of the networked momentum of these appliances becomes the determining, driving and structuring aspect of their development. According to Anders, it is precisely in this sense as a society that technology itself becomes a new theme of history: the themes of freedom and unfreedom replace one another. Things are free, man is unfree. Man has to subordinate himself to the needs of technology. Where this does not occur, we logically refer to *human failure*. In view of technology, in the end man fails when he behaves in an intrinsically human manner. An example is the driver of a locomotive whose concentration fails him because of his emotional problems, thereby causing an accident. If time and activity

3. Anders, Günther (1981). *Die atomare Drohung. Radikale Überlegungen*, München: Beck, p. 96.

4. Anders. *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, p. 115.

structures are determined by machines, the times when the worried lover or griever could expect to be treated leniently are a thing of the past. Anders summarizes the fundamentals of the relationship between man and technical appliance in his essay *The Term*:

Our aim is always to create something that could dispense with our assistance and function perfectly without us. In other words, nothing less than appliances through whose functioning we make ourselves superfluous, eliminate ourselves, liquidate ourselves. It is of no consequence that we only ever approximately achieve this goal. What counts is this trend and its maxim, which is: «without us!».<sup>5</sup>

What this means to Anders, though, is that in an industrial civilization unhuman tasks increasingly become tasks without humans. The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima became a paradigm of this to Anders: at the touch of a button, hundreds of thousands of people were killed in just a few seconds. However, Anders saw the initial attempts to achieve such a mechanization of death in the National Socialists' extermination machinery. He regarded this not as singular barbarism, but as a specific expression of the civilizational development of the modern age. For this reason he was one of the few who considered Auschwitz and Hiroshima—for all their differences—within a single context. Günther Anders even wrote an open letter to Klaus Eichmann, Adolf Eichmann's son, published under the significant title of *We, Eichmann's Sons*. In this letter he examined the connections between technical modernism, Auschwitz and Hiroshima in an exceptionally original manner. In both places, something dreadful happened which Anders described as *monstrous*, a term of central import to him.

To Anders the *monstrous* thing at Auschwitz was the «institutional and industrialized extermination of millions of people». It was only possible to carry this out because the process of mass extermination was organized by people «*who undertook this work like any other*»<sup>6</sup>. Anders formulated this in pregnant terms in *The Antiquity of Man*: «Those employed in the extermination camps did not act, but, as terrible as it may sound, they worked»<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, Anders was unable to overlook the differences between Auschwitz and Hiroshima. He considered Auschwitz to have been «*morally incomparably more terrible*» than Hiroshima—whilst the latter was «*incomparably worse*» than the former. This was because, at Auschwitz, despite all the mechanization of the killing process, there was still direct involvement of individuals, with all their sadism, cruelty, hatred, and cynicism towards their victims, brutality, careerism, and perhaps even doubts. There was still close physical contact between perpetrators and victims. In the case of Hiroshima and

5. Anders. *Atomare Drohung*, p. 199.

6. Günther Anders (1988). *Wir Eichmannsöhne. Offener Brief an Klaus Eichmann*. München: Beck, p. 19.

7. Anders. *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen I*, p. 291.

Nagasaki, on the other hand, in a matter of a second the pilots exterminated hundreds of thousands of people with whom they had absolutely no connections, literally at the emotionless touch of a button. But what does this mean?

If a man can exterminate millions of his fellow men in a fraction of a second, a couple of thousand SS soldiers who could only murder millions peu à peu are harmless by comparison. (...) Whereas nuclear weapons are «apocalyptic» in the most literal sense of the word, the concentration camps were «apocalyptic» only in a metaphorical sense. Compared to modern means of mass murder, what happened at the extermination camps in the three years prior to Hiroshima was (and I can hardly write the word) harmless. Compared to the technical standard and possible capacity of a modern rocket base, the technology and the output of the concentration camp system were still unwieldy and 19th-century. ... There can be no question: The «future» belongs to modern mass murder (to the extent that an appliance that produces «futurelessness» can be considered to have a future). Naturally this does not preclude the possibility that Auschwitz may still be regarded as a model for a long time to come in countries that are not highly industrialized. Those powers that are not yet in a position to create Hiroshimas will have to make do with the establishment of «Auschwitzes». But even the Auschwitz principle still has a future because «the future has not yet begun» everywhere. These two methods of genocide —the modern one and the less modern one— will continue to «overlap» for a long time, indeed for as long as we are even permitted to survive.<sup>8</sup>

The «Auschwitz principle»: it is not by chance that Anders uses this formulation. This is also the expression of his attempt to find a term between the apotheosis of the absoluteness of Auschwitz and its trivialization and relativization. This term was intended to make it possible to understand this historical mass murder as an event that was not subject to pathology or demonism, but a principle. Under the conditions of the modern age, this principle cannot become invalid. Though its effectiveness may be surpassed by the advanced technology of nuclear weapons, it may be diminished in its moral monstrosity. According to Anders, the dropping of the atom bombs did not in the least mean the dawn of a new, irrevocably final era in the history of mankind.

A new age began on August 6, 1945: the age in which we are able at any moment to transform any location, in fact the entire planet, into a Hiroshima. Ever since this day we have become *modo negativo* almighty. However, since we can now be exterminated at any moment, this also means that since this day we have become totally powerless. No matter how long it takes, even if it lasts an eternity, this age will be the last. This is because its differentia specifica —the possibility of our self-extermination— can never end, unless it be through this end itself.<sup>9</sup>

8. Günther Anders (1979). *Besuch im Hades*. München: Beck, p. 206 and 207.

9. Anders. *Die atomare Drohung*, p. 93.

With all the differences between Auschwitz and Hiroshima, there is an important subliminal connection based on the trend towards a *universal mechanization*. According to Anders, on the day when the «chiliastic realm of technical totalitarianism» comes about, «we shall then exist only as parts of machinery, or as parts of the material required by the machine: as humans, we shall therefore have been liquidated»<sup>10</sup>. And it is precisely in this respect that the similarity between this impending techno-totalitarian realm and the monstrous one of yesteryear lies. It lies in the total and smooth *functionalization* of man, in his incorporation into a system of constraints which he is not even capable of recognizing as such because it no longer admits a point from which it could be seen differently, and in the degradation of man to matter, to a raw material. And it is precisely in this sense that the Eichmann problem is as little yesterday's problem to Anders as the nuclear threat. This does not simply cease with the end of the Cold War. Although this may increase the chances that the *term* given to mankind may be extended, it is inherent in the nature of monstrosity that it is also present as an idea, even developing a specific potency as a result. We shall always know that it is technically possible to eliminate all human life on this planet.

Günther Anders' first wife, Hannah Arendt, was also to take an interest in the catastrophes of this century, however with a different focus. Arendt was born in Hanover in 1906. Soon after her birth, her parents moved to Königsberg, where she later studied philosophy, theology and Greek in Freiburg with Husserl, but primarily in Marburg with Heidegger, whose lover she became. Later she admitted that she had married Günther Anders more out of disappointment in her unfulfilling affair with Heidegger than out of love—and after the war she resumed her relationship with Heidegger, albeit in a different form, and although she knew of Heidegger's involvement in National Socialism<sup>11</sup>. For her doctorate, Arendt wrote a dissertation on Saint Augustine under Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), with whom she remained friends for the rest of her life. Between 1930 and 1938 she worked on a study about Rahel Varnhagen, she was fascinated by the *Life of a Jewess*. However, the political situation made it impossible for her to carry on her research work. Arrested by the Gestapo in 1933, Arendt fled to Paris, and later to the USA. In 1937 her marriage to Anders was terminated by correspondence, and a short time later she married Heinrich Blücher. Arendt stayed in the USA, working extensively on the story of the Jews and anti-Semitism, became politically involved with the problems of the Jews in Palestine, assuming a rather anti-Zionist stance. In theory, immediately after the Second World War she was working on a major study on the phenomenon of totalitarianism. Perhaps her most important book was published in 1958: *The Human Condition (Vita activa or Vom tätigen Leben)*. In 1961 she was sent to Jerusalem by

10. Anders. *Wir Eichmannsöhne*, p. 53.

11. Ettinger, Elzbieta (1995). *Hannah Arendt und Martin Heidegger. Eine Geschichte*. München: Piper.

the *New Yorker* magazine to follow the trial of Adolf Eichmann. The reports she generated as a result, which also appeared as a book entitled *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, stirred up considerable controversy. Arendt lectured at various American universities, especially Chicago and New York. She was awarded numerous prizes, both European and German, and died in New York in 1975.

It is worth briefly outlining three aspects of the extensive oeuvre of Hannah Arendt that overlap to some extent with the analyses of Günther Anders, although the tenor of Arendt's works differs greatly from that of her former husband. A key document from her political thought is without a doubt her major study on totalitarianism. *Elements and Origins of Total Domination* is the title of a lengthy book that Arendt revised several times. In this book, she set out to conduct a political, philosophical and historical analysis of the phenomenon of the two major totalitarian systems that the twentieth century has produced: National Socialism and Stalinism. It is perhaps only now, since 1989, that we can truly see the validity of this study. Arendt adopted the approach—much criticized at the time—of examining one aspect of National Socialism and Stalinism, that of *total rule*. This did not mean equating these two systems, but stressing similar structures, methods and goals. According to Arendt, total rule differs greatly from other forms of absolute rule and is also not the same as other historical dictatorships. The totalitarian aspect of these concepts is revealed in the fact that they are all-encompassing in the truest sense of the term. They are often supported not, as is often assumed, by a party or a leader, but by the masses:

Totalitarian movements are mass movements and are, to this day, the only form of organization that modern masses have found and that seems adequate to them. In this alone they differ from all parties, which are either interest groups or ideological parties representing the politics of the classes in the nation state or, in the two-party system of Anglo-Saxon countries, representing citizens who hold a particular view and have a common interest in the handling of public affairs. In contrast to parties whose power depends on their relative strength based on numbers in the relevant country, so that we can also talk about strong parties in small countries, a movement can only exist if it encompasses millions of people, and it cannot occur in countries with relatively small populations, even under the most favorable conditions.<sup>12</sup>

With this definition, Arendt addresses a key problem in the analysis of totalitarian systems: that the matter at issue is no longer a classical relationship between ruler and ruled. What is totalitarian about the system is that it is a mass movement: it is the masses who sustain such movements. The totalitarian system is not merely imposed by an exterior force, in some situations this strong stimulus comes from the modern masses themselves, which in fact

12. Arendt, Hannah (1996). *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, totale Herrschaft*. München: Piper, p. 663.



only came into being with industrial society. *Totalitarian* means all embracing. Other forms of tyrannical or dictatorial rule always relate only to certain aspects or groups of people. The goal is to extort money or to recruit soldiers. However, there have always been areas of life that were not of interest to the dictators and tyrants of history. Total dominion takes a different tack. It sets out to force everyone into its system, with the exception of those who are declared its enemies, and who must be destroyed. It is for this reason that the universal mobilization of society by means of a series of associations, societies, groups and organizations is a key feature of totalitarian systems. The purpose of such institutions is in fact to integrate the individual in several ways into the system of total rule.

Incidentally, this also explains the alarming speed with which the Nazis succeeded in organizing millions of people and forcing their will upon them. It was one of the basic prerequisites of this system that each individual should belong to one of the many organizations, to the Hitler Youth, the League of German Girls (BDM), the German Work Service, to a paramilitary organization such as the SA, a military organization, one of the various associations of college instructors, artists, etc. This also meant being part of a «national community» on the one hand, and at the same time frequently performing a management function. No one was merely an underling; everyone was part of the movement. The line between ruler and ruled then became blurred. Pre-modern power structures allowed the underling at least to know where the power was, he could submit to the power, perhaps rebel a little, but quietly, and he even had the possibility of being left in peace. In a totalitarian system, such peace no longer exists. Everyone is constantly on the move, first on the streets, then on the battlefield. Just by doing nothing, the individual becomes the enemy in a totalitarian system; he does not even need to offer heroic resistance, it suffices for him to refuse to go along with the general mobilization. Totalitarian systems do all they can to exclude the possibility of people being passive.

Hannah Arendt analyses this phenomenon of total penetration and all-encompassing organization of the masses in Stalinism too, to the extent that the materials were available to her, and she comes to a similar conclusion, even though the aspect of the human extermination in the Soviet Union had other motives and took on a different form from Hitler's Germany. In the proceedings against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt saw at first hand how total power was in fact exercised. Eichmann was the Austrian who had organized the transportation of Jews to the extermination camps, who disappeared in South America after the war, was tracked down by the Israeli secret service, captured and taken to Israel, where he was put on trial. He was condemned to death and hanged. Arendt followed every detail of the trial, alert, meticulous, from the word go skeptical of the intent of trial. She realized that Eichmann was by no means the sadistic monster that the media of the day had depicted, but rather the archetype of an unsophisticated, intellectually rather monotonous civil servant who had enjoyed having a successful career and who had basically acted

out of a desire to do his duty rather than being driven by any ideological conviction. Arendt tried to explain this phenomenon whereby someone who was essentially unimportant and who was merely adapting to his situation could commit horrendous crimes in the milieu created by totalitarian rule as the *banality of evil*, an expression since extensively quoted. In her reflections on the trial, Hannah Arendt also tried to understand the nature of the crime of which Eichmann was accused; Arendt insists that it was not, as literature since the *Nuremberg Trials* has suggested, a crime against *humanity*, but rather crimes against *mankind*, which would indicate a quite different nature:

Neither the national crime of legalized discrimination nor the international crime of expulsion were truly new or without previous models, not even in modern times. Legal discrimination was common practice in the Balkans, and mass expulsions have been a consequence of all the revolutions of the twentieth century. It was not until the Nazi regime declared that the German nation would no longer tolerate Jews in Germany, but was intending to wipe the entire Jewish nation from the face of the earth that a new crime surfaced: a crime against mankind in the true sense of the word, namely a crime against the «status of being a human» or the nature of the human race. Expulsion and genocide are both international crimes, but a distinction must be drawn between them; expulsion violates the regional sovereignty of neighboring countries, whereas genocide is an attack on human diversity as such, i.e. on one of the essential characteristics of being human, without our even having to truly understand such things as mankind or the human race.

According to Arendt, the extermination of European Jews by the Nazis then takes on two dimensions. On the one hand, it was an attack on the Jews as Jews; on the other, it was an attack on the idea of mankind itself:

If the court in Jerusalem had understood that discrimination, expulsion and genocide are not simply the same thing, then it would immediately have been clear that the greatest crime facing it, namely the physical eradication of the Jewish people, was a crime against mankind, carried out against the Jewish people, and that only the choice of the victim and not the nature of the crime could be derived from the long history of hatred of the Jews and anti-Semitism.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout her life, Hannah Arendt was concerned with the question of what it means to be human. The most comprehensive and also the most impressive discussion of this topic can be found in her study *Vita activa* or *Active Life*. In the final analysis, this study is about the question of how the behavior of humans has evolved over the course of history. Arendt refers to Aristotle and makes the following distinction between human activities: «The expression *vita activa* is used here to describe three basic human activities: labor, work and action»<sup>14</sup>. In contrast to the currently popular view, action is not tanta-

13. Arendt, Hannah (1996). *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*. München: Piper, p. 391 and 392.

14. Arendt, Hannah (1981). *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*. München: Piper, p. 14.

mount to labor. *Labor* is dealing with nature as a necessity of life, typically left to slaves in classical antiquity. In the thinking of those days, labor was not an action worthy of a free man. It must be kept distinct from *work*, which is more than and different from labor. Work means undertaking a creative act, wanting to create something artistic that already existed as an idea and that was potentially intended to outlast its creator. Work was anything from the craftsman who produces articles ranging from pure usurpation and processing of nature to the artist who creates immortal works. The Greek work for labor, *poiesis*, is retained in our word *poetry*. Classical antiquity also had the concept of *action*, which was described as *practice*: social and political communication between humans, intended to give some form to coexistence, i.e., politics in the true sense of the word. In classical antiquity, active people could only be conceived of as free men, subject to neither internal nor external pressures. However, classical antiquity also had a counterpart to these three forms of active life: theoretical life, or *vita contemplativa*. The maxim of this form of existence was not activity, but the employment of the intellect, requiring that the body be inactive. For Aristotle this was the true life ideal, as the philosopher should lead a life of contemplation.

This central thesis of Hannah Arendt's—and in this she is closely aligned with Günther Anders—states that modern times have successively eliminated all these life forms, with one exception. That exception is work. All the other forms have either been discredited, like the *vita contemplativa*, or they have been turned into types of *work*. Today, everyone works, from the politician and the artist to the sportsman. The concept of work has become so universal that we no longer love but, carry out relationship work. The idea behind this is that only what is efficient and measurable is socially acceptable. Hannah Arendt recognized this trend early on and registered her concern:

If we compare the modern world with worlds we know from the past, what we notice above all else is the enormous decline in experience inherent in this development. It is not just that cursory contemplation no longer has a place in the range of specifically human, rational experience; even thinking, where it involves drawing conclusions, has been degraded to a function of the brain that electronic computers can perform significantly better, faster and more efficiently than the human brain. Action on the other hand, which is now equated with work, is declining to the level of labor, because even work—due to its inherent worldliness and indifference to the demands of life—can be tolerated only as a form of labor, as a perhaps more complex function of the life process that is essentially indistinguishable from other functions.<sup>15</sup>

However, even labour itself is losing the status it had acquired at least in a bourgeois age. Labor is ceasing to be a satisfying momentum in the self-affirmation of being human:

15. Arendt. *Vita activa*, p. 314.

But even this world, focused solely on labor, is gradually giving way to another world. We have succeeded in eliminating the effort and toil inherent in the learning process to such an extent that we can foresee the time when labor and the life experience it brings will be eliminated from the human experience. There are already indications of this in the most advanced countries of the world, where the word labor is already too sophisticated for what people do or believe they are doing. In its final stages the labor society is transformed into a society of job-holders; this society demands little more from those who are part of it little more than automatic functioning, as if the life of the individual had already become completely submerged in the flow of vital processes of which the species is master, and as if the only active, individual decision consisted only of letting go, as it were, giving up one's individuality, or deadening the senses that register the toil and anguish of life in order to be able to «function» better and more smoothly in a completely «calm» state.<sup>16</sup>

It is hard not to admit that there is a certain farsightedness and plausibility in this analysis. The hope proffered by late industrial society for this devaluation of individual activity lies solely in productivity promising the individual previously unsuspected freedom, in which the possibilities of action, work and contemplation destroyed by the process of modernization could be regained. However, it remains to be seen whether this would be in the interests of the leisure industry. At the close of this century, it is in fact not inconceivable that—as Günther Anders believed—man has become an *antiquated* creature. The philosophical reassurance of all that being a human could mean is undoubtedly not the way to regain what has been lost; but it is perhaps a necessary precondition for everything being done at least to prevent the worst excesses of a dehumanized human condition in the future.

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**Konrad Paul Liessmann**, 1953, is University Professor and vice-dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Education at the University of Vienna. Since 1997 he is the academic director of the annual international symposium «Philosophicum Lech» and the editor of the collection with the same name. His research is centered in aesthetics, 19th and 20th century philosophy (Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Adorno, Anders), theory of education and philosophy of culture. Some of his most recent publications are: *Ästhetik der Verführung. Kierkegaards Konstruktion der Erotik aus dem Geiste der Kunst* (2005); *Theorie der Unbildung. Die Irrtümer der Wissensgesellschaft* (2006); *Zukunft kommt. Über säkularisierte Heilserwartungen und ihre Enttäuschung* (2007); *Ästhetische Empfindungen* (2008); *Schönheit* (2009); *Das Universum der Dinge. Zur Ästhetik des Alltäglichen* (2010).

**Konrad Paul Liessman**, 1953, es catedrático y vice-decano de la Facultad de Filosofía y Educación de la Universidad de Viena. Desde 1997 es el director académico del simposio anual internacional «Philosophicum Lech» y el editor de la colección con el mismo nombre. Sus investigación se centra en las áreas de la estética, la filosofía de los siglos XIX y XX (Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Adorno, Anders), la teoría de la educación y la filosofía de la cultura. Entre sus publicaciones más recientes destacan: *Ästhetik der Verführung. Kierkegaards Konstruktion der Erotik aus dem Geiste der Kunst* (2005); *Theorie der Unbildung. Die Irrtümer der Wissensgesellschaft* (2006); *Zukunft kommt. Über säkularisierte Heilserwartungen und ihre Enttäuschung* (2007); *Ästhetische Empfindungen* (2008); *Schönheit* (2009); *Das Universum der Dinge. Zur Ästhetik des Alltäglichen* (2010).

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