

## ***Guest Editor's Preface***

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This collection of essays is a reaction to a provocation. Its title, may appear “extreme” or a contradiction in terms: technomania and technophobia . On another level, however, there are overtones of an idea, called “technocracy”, a new concept which has begun to surface a lot lately. This idea constitutes an immediate reference both for technomaniacs (or technobsessives) of different social ranks and for more or less declared technophobics. In our contemporary age a heated discussion seems to be taking place between fierce followers of the recent extraordinary technologic development and equal passionate critics of the several risks and disguised pitfalls coming from it. According to the Thought of Technique, the technological “imperium” is in the centre as a dream or a nightmare, goal to achieve or target to shoot. Defenders of opposite positions are obstinate, tenacious and in tension in this decisive heroic feat, the final struggle for human survival; the impression is that times are no more appropriate for restrained and moderate attitudes, and an intermediate, critical but possibilist or carefully favourable stance mustn't and cannot be taken anymore. The position from both sides is considered necessary; the present state of affairs makes a calm reflection impossible, forcing quickly to take sides for or against “the Technique”. This phrase is surely inadequate, both because talking about technique in singular form<sup>1</sup> (maybe using capital letter) could be inappropriate and probably because it isn't possible at all to go against technique *tout court*. To define technique as nearly as “artefact” and “not natural”, doesn't take into account both of the complex and wide range of technological

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger was not the only one.

phenomena<sup>2</sup> and of the same meaning that practical employment of the products of technique in the history of mankind and in different cultures had.

Moreover, the ticklish problem of the relationship between the technique and the human nature shouldn't be underestimated. Many supported the idea that the technique is absolutely linked to mankind, and actually, an integral part of the definition of "human being". All along, the skilfulness of making "artefact" is a specific characteristic of mankind; in fact the superiority to the other living beings or the distance between mankind and nature depends on it. The myth already establishes the necessity of this distance. Prometheus stole Gods' fire and gave it to human being in order to make him able of devising any useful instruments, as Gods did, to improve his own life. This improvement exactly consists in a transformation from an originally "beastly" into a more dignified condition<sup>3</sup>; it means the estrangement from animality (a natural situation) and a rise to a superior, "cultural status", possible thanks to the usage of technologies (represented by the fire). However, all the ambiguity of the Gods' gift appears in the symbology of the myth: its advantages have in any case their price<sup>4</sup>.

Mankind advanced thanks to technology; technology changes and adapts itself to the world, or better, adapts the world to itself, and seems so indispensable for its life; indeed humankind wouldn't be what it is without technology, or maybe, it wouldn't be at all. In our contemporary age, Arnold Gehlen, philosopher and sociologist, says that technique is ancient as humanity; it means that one can legitimately talk about "human beings" only when it is possible to discover traces of technical bustle<sup>5</sup>. From his point of view, mankind

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<sup>2</sup> For example, M. Nacci, *Pensare la tecnica, Un secolo di incomprensioni*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> There are many versions of Prometheus' myth: in Eschilo's version, entitled *Prometheus Enchained*, mankind is particularly similar to a beast without the gift of technique.

<sup>4</sup> The reference to the ambiguity of the gift is continuous, from Prometheus's pains to the consequences of the opening of Pandora's box; the technological progress is as well ambivalent.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, Wiesbaden, Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1978, and Id., *Die Seele im technischen Zeitalter*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1957.

without technology is inconceivable, because of the biologically lacking origin of human beings. This deficit distinguishes human beings from any other animals. An “intervention” on the surrounding nature is necessary, in order to modify and to correct the “purely natural” conditions of human beings and to give them sufficient chance to survive. Thanks to the contribution of technical instruments, mankind builds an artificial environment – the world of culture – like the thick and safety city walls.

But there is something more: in our contemporary age, technology shows an unexpected capacity of manufacturing and overproduction. Technology is planed and expanded by mankind. However technology seems to be able to make itself completely independent by its inventor. On the one hand technology has become always more indispensable: once technological instruments had been manufactured, one can't do without them and one can't be satisfied with them and stop at that level; it is necessary to update them and to transform them. On the other hand technology has the “intrinsic” and unexpected capacity of an independent development and goes in an uncontrollable direction. Human being is a feckless Prometheus, unable to govern his own products and absolutely inferior to the created instruments which may destroy him. Parallel to the difference between mankind and nature, Günther Anders defined “promethean gap”<sup>6</sup> the distance between mankind and its inventions, their effectiveness but also their dangerousness. Mankind is not capable of knowing the real dimensions and consequences of the actual extraordinary technological development (for example the ignorance of consequences caused by nuclear devices, by massive emissions of exhaust gas in the atmosphere or by genetically modified food); for at least two reasons. First of all, the process of technological invention increases in size and develops – as said before – in often unexpected or unthinkable directions. The answers to highly advanced products are generally due to not calculated or even not calculable coincidences (as Anders said, it is difficult to adapt human imagination to development of technique);

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<sup>6</sup> See G. Anders at least the following texts: *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I: *Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, München, C. H. Beck Verlag, 1956 and Bd. II: *Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*, München, C. H. Beck Verlag, 1980.

secondly, the production of new instruments requires a “collateral production“ too, that is the means to demolish obsolete instruments and to dump useless remaining materials (for example radioactive waste)<sup>7</sup>.

The more technology is powerful, the more opinions are conflicting. In the general emphasis, an uncritical, justificatory and exciting support of all technological development is in contrast to a sceptical statement of mechanical obtrusiveness; mediation seems impossible between the positivistic view of a universe of technological wonders, media accelerations , virtual entertainments and the catastrophic view of a robbed and devastated world “without humanity”. As the results of a laboratory experiment, this proposed title may provokes reactions and to query radicalized positions and to contrast a certain ingenuous technocratic fanaticism and the pseudohumanistic anguish of a definitive metamorphosis of human being. A really deep reflection is still missing. As in any heated discussions, judgements abound but they are often consequences of emotional enthusiasm and not detached and critical maturity. The impression is that the question has a long way to go; now it is important that the state of affairs starts reacting with itself.

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<sup>7</sup> G. Anders, *Gewalt. Ja oder nein. Eine notwendige Diskussion*, München, Knauer, 1987.