

CHAPTER NINE

Catastrophe and Totality The Idea of Humanity in the Face of Nuclear Threat and Climate Catastrophe

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Asking about the good means asking about the end. Or, to be more precise, relating an individual action or practice as such to the question of the good means placing it in the perspective of the end. In the end, the good is what is worth striving for. With our actions and deeds, we want to correspond to it or help realize it. Whether as a norm or as an objective, the good is what we strive for; it is where we wish to arrive. However, the endpoint of fulfillment, which one might associate with the question of the good and discussions about “means to an end,” no longer seems to prevail. There has been a tectonic shift that goes back to what Adorno once called the “fall of metaphysics” and the subsequent transition to a so-called post-metaphysical epoch, when the question of the good was transposed to the investigation of language games and communicational procedures. Furthermore, with regard to the end as objective, when the public imaginary refers or relates to an end today, the end predominantly appears in the form of self-destruction or self-annihilation. Asking about the end is not so much about aims and purposes, questioning the historical progress in realizing the good, but about doom. So when in the contemporary world action is presented or experienced as necessary or required, it is no longer primarily projected as a potential

articulation or realization of the good, but rather as a means of *preventing an end*. Today, with climate change or, more broadly, ecological transformation, what is hoped to be prevented is a full-scale extinction that destroys the possibility of human (and non-human) life and that is therefore imagined as an end of the *possibility* of action itself: an end of all possible realizations of the good. Thus, in the present, action is necessary or required because an end must be prevented, and it seems to be an end that can no longer be rendered in the perspective or framework of the good.

The relation to the end in the framework of prevention is not connected with the expectation of a coming fulfillment or a set of actions as realizations of the good, but rather with the affect of fear. It is not an end we want to arrive at, but one that scares us. Now, the end that we fear seems to bring with it mechanisms of disavowal and repression. These defense mechanisms, in our preventative relation to the end, are accompanied by the experience that it is no longer possible to conceive *destruction itself* as the means of realizing a utopian good. One could say that in the twentieth century there was a dominant conception of destruction as the main operator leading to a political impasse. The century, as Alain Badiou has pointed out, thought of negation primarily as destruction, and of destruction in itself as a creative force, as a means of *realizing the good end*. If we follow Badiou's diagnosis that at the beginning of the twentieth-first century, after two centuries of revolutionary politics, "a sort of crisis of the trust in the power of negativity" (2014, 45–55, 46) is becoming apparent, then this even more urgently raises the question how the relation between the end, the operation of negation, and the good can be conceived today in a situation where a certain dialectic of destruction seems exhausted, while we are facing total destruction.



To begin with, we should not forget that if today it is common to relate to climate catastrophe as a form of total destruction, a quasi-apocalyptic event that threatens human life as such, then it does not really introduce a radical novelty. Already in the mid-twentieth century, in the midst of the Cold War with its imaginary of nuclear doom, human life as such was experienced not only as mortal but as "killable" (Anders 2018, 270). In this context, the German-Austrian philosopher and essayist Günther Anders, for example, spoke of a "potentiated mortality" (Anders 1981, 171) as the key novelty brought by the atom bomb: not only are the individual members

of the species mortal; the species itself is now mortal. Therefore “our” time is interpreted and depicted as an “end time” marked by the threat of the end *of* time *itself* (ibid., 203–206). With the “deadline” introduced by the nuclear threat, Anders argues, our fundamental relation to time has radically changed. Time is no longer a medium for events, for actions realizing the good, nor is it a “conditional form” in the Kantian sense.¹ It has become something conditioned, namely by peace. Since the “end time” is not an epoch, not a period of history followed by another one, for him, “our” time becomes indistinguishable from time as such, time in general. In the end time, at the end of days, that which takes place *in* time and time *as form* coincide. But if that which takes place in time, the conditioned, and time as a conditional form coincide, then what collapses is *historical temporality*, time as history. History itself, as a horizon of events and meaning, becomes mortal, beyond the lifetime of the individual. Historical time then is no longer a meaningful process of becoming and passing, able to potentially integrate each process of becoming and passing. What appeared as the collective singular of History, which we were used to conceptualize, with Reinhart Koselleck or Niklas Luhmann, as the novelty of a *temporalization* of time,² paradoxically becomes a finite part of itself.³

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- 1 Ibid., 204. For Kant, time and space are “pure forms of sensible intuition,” that is, forms that are given without concept and contribution of understanding. While space is defined as the “outer sense,” Kant determines time as the “inner sense,” that is, consisting of pure intuitions of our inner state. The transcendental ideality of time, as a *subjective* condition of sensible intuition, is thereby at the same time supposed to have empirical (not absolute) reality, that is, it is supposed to have equally *objective* validity for sensibility, insofar as it is at the same time the mode of representation of myself as object. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 155–192, esp. 164.
 - 2 “Time is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality. Consequently, history no longer occurs in, but through, time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right. Presupposed by this formulation of experience is a concept of history which is likewise new: the collective singular form of *Geschichte*, which since around 1780 can be conceived as history in and for itself in the absence of an associated subject or object” (Koselleck 2004, 238).
 - 3 For Anders, the atom bomb implies a “metaphysical metamorphosis” because it introduces a death without survivors. With universal annihilation as “real non-being,” ontology is said to come to itself for the first time. One could thus describe Anders’ activist engagement in this “metaphysical metamorphosis” as a work of *pre-memorializing* (Anders 1981, 174, 177).

On the level of temporality, a threatening end thus has a *unifying, totalizing* effect – in a strange way similar to the absolute good itself. But even if, with respect to the conditioned character of time, change is no longer imaginable, because the “end time” is itself without beginning and end – in the sense of a period of time, which always allows another beginning and end to come – the end-time activist still passionately calls for a change. *One must act*, because the preservation of the world, a continuation of it, through the prevention of its end, can only be accomplished through radically changing it. The emphatic “now” of the deadline connects past and present end-time activists: it is an attempt of pointing out an impossibility precisely to render action possible, the conscious use of this paradox. But here we are dealing with an intricate situation. The transformative force ultimately remains ambivalent, because it seems that to preserve the whole you must change it, and at the same time while changing it you can never really change the structure of this very whole. One could then ask: What is the power and scope of such change? What is a change that preserves a whole precisely by transforming it? What is a change that is never able to alter the whole in its structure? Or, to put it differently: What is the relation between *change, preservation*, and the *whole* in the “end time” that is conceived as “deadline”? And can the radical change preventing the end of the world be a *good* end?



The relation of the destruction of the whole to its preservation, which entails the urge of radical change, draws our attention to the role of negativity in the first place. If Hegel is right in that the emancipation of humans only proceeds through an appropriation of the “tremendous power of the negative,” (Hegel 1977, 19) then the possibility of catastrophe is not reason’s other, but inherent in it: in its own realization, reason exposes itself to destruction, to death. This means that one cannot simply contrast preservation and survival with destruction and extinction from the outset. The French philosopher and writer Maurice Blanchot connected and actualized this thought in dealing with the atom bomb, which rendered possible the total (self-)annihilation of humankind in the Cold War. In response to Karl Jaspers’s radio lecture and book *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, from 1958, Blanchot published a short essay that is still challenging for contemporary discourses of the end or current apocalyptic modes of speech. Instead of using the threat of the atom bomb only as leverage or “alibi” (Blanchot 1997, 101–108: 103) to enforce already existing political positions and traditional existential values – as Jaspers did – Blanchot approaches the atom bomb as a “problematic event” for thinking (ibid., 105).

For Jaspers, the “total extermination” of the atom bomb and the “total domination” (ibid., 104) of communism were two coequal threats. In “The Apocalypse is Disappointing,” a short essay from 1964 directed against Jaspers’s book, Blanchot considers the atom bomb rather as an enigmatic, ambiguous event. It challenges humanity in its totality, but at the same time – this is his bold hypothesis – through it the idea of this totality becomes conceivable and affirmable as such for the first time (ibid.).

With the atom bomb a negative relation to totality is established. Humans acquire a destructive power over the whole, which as power, however, only indicates an unmastered possibility, a probability. The nuclear apocalypse is said to be “disappointing” because it refers to a power that man does not appropriate, and which Blanchot therefore characterizes as a *negative* power. It indicates a power “that is not in our power” (ibid., 106) because the subject of this power does not yet exist – as a whole. If the subject of this power existed, instead of merely its objects, this power would no longer be feared, he claims. Against inflationary discourses of a self-destruction of humanity, he objects: “This humanity, capable of being totally destroyed, does not yet exist as a whole” (ibid.). It is divided into the rulers and the ruled. Because one can confirm the idea of humanity for the time being only “after its disappearance and by the void, impossible to grasp, of this disappearance,” he draws the conclusion that humanity is “something that cannot even be destroyed, because it does not exist” (ibid.). Consequently, in a Hegelian fashion, for Blanchot it is a matter of *elevating* the fact of the annihilation of humanity to the level of a concept, and “empty negation to negativity” (ibid., 107). This means transcending the register of *understanding* towards *reason*, in order to produce the whole. Blanchot develops the remarkable thought that humanity becomes affirmable only by the event of the atom bomb and in the form of the potential *disappearance* of humanity. He subsequently transforms the abstract and negative idea of the whole into a provocative argument for communism, which has yet to be invented. In doing so, the essay is structured by the fundamental Hegelian operation, the negative power of understanding, which is distinguished from reason:

The power of understanding is an absolute power of negation; understanding knows only through the force of separation, that is, of destruction – analysis, fission – and at the same time knows only the destructible and is certain only of what could be destroyed. Through understanding, we know very precisely what must be done in order for the final annihilation to occur, but we do not know which resources to solicit to prevent it from occurring. What understanding gives us is the knowledge of catastrophe, and what it predicts, foresees, and grasps, by means of decisive anticipation,

is the possibility of the end. Thus man is held to the whole first of all by the force of understanding, and understanding is held to the whole by negation. Whence the insecurity of all knowledge – of a knowledge that bears on the whole. (ibid.)

Blanchot's essay is challenging because in it the end or the apocalypse is no longer simply something one hopes for or something one is afraid of. It confronts us with a paradoxical implication of communism as the totality of a realized humanity. Only in humanity's free decision to appropriate the possibility of its own total annihilation does this humanity generate itself as an autonomous collective subject. In other words, the "apocalypse is disappointing" if it remains without a subject. In the face of its own destructive power, which at the same time proves its powerlessness, humanity could find itself "being awakened to the idea of the whole," becoming aware of its wholeness and giving it a form "by organizing and uniting itself" (ibid.). Here the potential catastrophe becomes the flipside of a unifying totality; the potential annihilation of the world appears as the moment of its creation. Blanchot radicalizes the paradox of the possibility and impossibility of change by dissolving the opposition of unification and annihilation of humanity, bringing both close together, almost merging them. The realization of reason and total annihilation form a strange, uncanny alliance.

In Blanchot's essay, totality is, strangely, that which has always been at work and, at the same time, the idea to which one must still "awake." Despite all polemic, this is a point that he shares with Jaspers. But at the same time it implies the difference between the two, because for Jaspers there is an absolute split between understanding and reason, whereas for Blanchot, reason realizes itself in the negative force of contradiction, "through antagonism, struggle, and violence" (ibid., 107). In its extreme form, reason – which is already at work, in the process of its own realization – must expose itself to the danger of annihilation. Yet, as Blanchot writes, reason is still waiting for its own realization, and in this continued deferral it degrades itself in the face of understanding. So one has to ask: What is the nature of this strange relation between understanding and reason, the anticipation and postponement of unification as the absolute good? How do both faculties affect the unification of humanity, which is at stake in an apocalyptic present? In answering this question, one should not be distracted too much by Blanchot's apparent polemic against Jaspers. After all, slogging through Jaspers's tome shows one thing: Some elements of Blanchot's radicalized line of thought are already laid out in it.⁴

4 As an example: "Maybe God wanted the bombs to fall so that humanity in its present form would be destroyed by them. [...] The cipher that God wants the survival of humans under all circumstances seems unbiblical and unphilosophical to us". (Jaspers 1982, 352, 354).



One of these elements is the temporal ambiguity in the concept of humanity. On the one hand, humanity becomes a whole through the all-encompassing nuclear threat that affects it as a whole. As a threat that concerns the totality of mankind, it also generates humanity as a – negative – whole. And since the whole of mankind is threatened “in its existence,” the whole with which it is to unite thus seems to be prefigured by the threatening event. (Jaspers 1982, 62) On the other hand, however, in the demand for rescue the “unity of humanity” appears, as Jaspers puts it, as an “idea demanded by reality itself” (ibid.). “Only reason can unite humans in the whole of their being” (ibid., 290).⁵ For the Christian liberal, the idea of unity, the salvation of the whole, calls for *human rights* as their specific expression, as the “common, inviolable ground” whose renewing realization is yet to be accomplished. The salvation of the whole is founded in a coming “community in human rights,” which appears as its realization. (ibid., 62) For the twisted Hegelian thinker of communism, on the other hand, the idea of unity is articulated dialectically, “through antagonism, struggle, and violence.” In some sense, unity is not the opposite of antagonism but is already at work in certain antagonisms. The oscillation of the concepts of humanity, totality, and unification, however, is characteristic for all who think about reason in the nuclear threat. In Anders, too, the unification of humanity, which can only be prepared by a sharpened “resolution” to radically refuse to cooperate, is anticipated by the bomb: “What religions and philosophies, what empires and revolutions have failed to accomplish: to really make us one humanity – it [the bomb] has succeeded” (Anders 2018, 342). Humanity is unified by the threat of the bomb, as a humanity that is not only the object of total annihilation, but is given a minimal agency insofar as it is described as a struggling subject. In this struggle it is already united, and for the first time “really” – even if this is the dubious figure of beings about to die: “As morituri we *are* now *we*. Really, for the first time” (ibid.).

If we consider this movement in Blanchot, Jaspers, and Anders, we can state that “humanity” is always both at the same time: the threatened whole of human life and its wholeness, totality, or unity as an idea that *transcends* life. Because this idea of the whole, and with it human reason, is yet to be realized

5 Armando Manchisi makes a similar argument in this volume about the role of the idea as such in Hegel: “reality regarded not as an aggregate, but as a unity in which the parts realize themselves by having the whole as their own end” (2024, 32).

– with and against understanding, beyond it – it must at the same time be opposed to all positions that presuppose it as given or already existing, (Jaspers 1982, 108) that is, against abstractions that dismiss the ideal part of the whole. Now this endeavor is not so simple, because the idea itself cannot be kept free from these abstractions at all times. On the one hand, any reference to a given universal subject is accused of deceitful anticipation: One polemicizes against the self-accusatory form of a tragic unification found in a “hero of the negative” (Blanchot 1997, 106); one denounces the suppressed division between perpetrator and victim, which levels the ideal part of the whole; one exposes the vane mixture of power and powerlessness in the talk of a “suicide” of the species, and so on. But on the other hand, where the technical feasibility of destruction calls for the realization of reason, this realization always appears to be in some way prefigured or already realized to a certain degree. It is as if a kind of pre-empting is required to be able to introduce the ideal part of the whole. So from the very beginning, the relation to the whole must be given as twofold, as contradictory, having always been split into understanding and reason, in order to be able to envision the realization of the whole at all. The Bomb and the Idea, understanding and reason, are attached to one another and compete as forces of unification, as agents of unity. It is a permanent oscillation of the unifying force, already effective here and now and at the same time lacking, still. Humanity, like the apocalypse, is a figure that is already here and yet still to come. The wager of philosophy is to realize reason in a forcing together of both temporalities with the help of the atom bomb – to conceive of the nuclear apocalypse *as* the apocalypse of reason.

The unification of humanity must always take place *twice*: once *externally*, as a unification that is an effect of understanding, which extends the possibilities of both destructive and preservative technology, but which is more registered by it than enacted through it; and once *internally*, as a unification that is assigned to man, realized by reason, and supposed to take place at the origin of man’s forgotten being, to which it ultimately leads back (in Jaspers), or “through antagonism, struggle, and violence,” by which reason articulates itself (in Blanchot). Yet, and this is the difficulty, a unification that appears twice is nothing other than the point of a distinction, the act of splitting. At the very place where unity is at stake, difference insists; where One is wanted, it appears twice. As far as the production of unity is concerned, with the twofold unification, difference is inscribed again and again. It is a difference that resonates with one inherent in the humane itself, which is founded on the distinction between the merely

living and the essence resting in itself, which transcends all that is living in order to overcome this distinction in a coming unification.



In all this, the power of understanding remains ambivalent. Understanding brings about the technical possibility of destruction, while at the same time it is being used to prevent its realization. It enforces technology as a destructive process and intervenes in the technical means to restrain it. Understanding furthermore potentiates the knowledge of the negative to “total knowledge” (Jaspers 1982, 411–412). It thus puts what is known into the perspective of doom, because it is only able to foresee the negative,⁶ while as a demystifying force it dispels any thought of potential doom. To put it differently, understanding as a faculty is a technique that makes self-destruction possible *and* confines it according to a plan; a knowledge that grasps the negative, with the calculation of all probabilities, *and* rejects negativity as the impossible. Blanchot comments:

What takes place, finally, is both disappointing and instructive. Reason, in anticipation of itself and immobilized by this anticipation, seems only to want to win time, and, in order to win time, passes off to the understanding the task that it is not yet able to master. (In such a way that the caption that would best illustrate the blackboard of our time might be this one: The anticipation of reason humbling itself before understanding.) Understanding is cold and without fear. It does not mistake the importance of the atomic threat, but it analyzes it, subjects it to its measures, and, in examining the new problems that, because of its paradoxes, this threat poses for war strategy, it searches for the conditions in which the atomic threat might be reconciled to a viable existence in our divided world. This work is useful, even for thought. It demystifies the apocalypse. (Blanchot 1997, 108)

Understanding brings the possibility of absolute self-destruction, which it disenchant and demystifies. This explains why all attempts that declare cognition, knowledge, and science to be the basis of a political program for radical change are doomed to failure. Because in the end understanding always prevents the shock it is supposed to prepare or cause in this process. Wherever understanding refers to doom, it must also normalize it as a demystifying faculty. Understanding is destructive, related to the destructible – and yet its

6 “Understanding can foresee only the negative (except what it may be able to ‘do’ itself), and therefore always sees only the downfall” (ibid., 390).

negative force resonates at times with the “original feeling of life” (*ursprüngliches Lebensgefühl*),⁷ the impulse of life to hold on to itself, with self-preservation, which interrupts or blocks the relation to “elevated” negativity. So this at least can be learned from Jaspers: the institution of science is not suited to be the guiding force for the change of the whole.

As a negative power, understanding refers to time as a measure of destruction and delay. Its linear temporality is that of calculation, probability, and prognosis, which always both stirs up and calms down, mobilizes and sedates. Reason, on the other hand, appears as timeless, always connecting duration and point, interval and event. Its vertical temporality is that of memory and leap. Its “any time and today” establishes a timeless actuality, a time without measure.

Perhaps one can compare the step Blanchot takes beyond Jaspers and Anders with the step taken by Hegel beyond Kant. It is a minimal step, yet it makes a difference to the whole. Ultimately, what is at stake is the question of the status of that excessive, immanent-transcendent force called reason, the question of its relation to understanding, to knowledge, to history, to time. In Jaspers, as in Anders, reason remains an instance sharply set off from understanding, which, although it affects everything in reality, has no place in it. Reason is an instance that is supposed to permeate everything, but cannot be planned, organized, or institutionalized. It is everywhere and nowhere. There is no way from understanding to reason; one must leap from one to the other. With Blanchot, on the other hand, reason is already effective in the struggles of the present. It works and unfolds itself in conflicts that transcend the individual. And the realization of reason’s unification remains precisely a question of *organization*.

If there is, as in Jaspers, no safe way from understanding to reason, if reason rather presupposes itself, and if the link between the two is the affect of fear, a shock which is supposed to initiate a rebirth, then the event of the potential total annihilation forces a decision on man, who has to prove whether he is worthy to continue to exist. His potential annihilation would ultimately be nothing other than a just, divine judgment on a “humanity” that has failed in the renewal of its essence as an “idea demanded by reality itself.” At the

7 “I admit that I can make only effective in my heart for moments what understanding inevitably tells us about the probability of doom. I must shake myself awake from the tendency to forget. There is something in us that resists due to an original feeling of life (*ursprüngliches Lebensgefühl*). We live, in fact, as if that downfall would be impossible. We gladly allow ourselves to go back to the beautiful happiness of the affirmative existence. We do not give it away, even if we tear ourselves out and glimpse it in the deep shadow” (ibid., 466).

strangest moments in his essay, Blanchot now brings this annihilation closer to realization – almost to the point of their indistinguishability. The cryptic nature of his text consists in the fact that annihilation itself appears in some passages as a figure of this realization. He seems to allow a speculation in which potential annihilation coincides with the idea of humanity. It is as if this thought, at once abysmal and strangely empty, marks the zero point of the attempt to *realize* reason. It represents perhaps nothing other than the *gag* of this text: something that one can only laugh at but cannot relate to, because it simply gets stuck in one's throat.



Today the means of accurately determining the deadline are increasingly precise. It is as if the mind even registers and examines its own prospective end. What was once the biblical portent has taken the form of sober calculations; universal extinction becomes the object of techno-scientific modeling. The deadline acquires an overwhelming, almost suffocating effect, increased but at the same time also demystified by our refined ability to calculate. Yet perhaps the deadline as such has never been anything but an operation of understanding: By generalizing and de-temporalizing time, understanding tries to appeal to reason, but it succeeds only in the form of a de-limitation of itself. Ultimately, with the refined measurement of the deadline, understanding falls back on itself to take the place of reason.

While the deadline of the nuclear threat is an indeterminate, unlimited, and virtually endless one – the form of time itself – the deadline in climate change or ecological transformation appears to be quantifiable and determinable. The end is rendered as the ultimate form of time, yet becomes temporally determined, finite again. Does this quantifiable and determinable time thus represent an even greater degradation of reason before understanding – or, in contrast, is it part of a recovery of historical time? To put it differently: Is measuring the deadline the last, sad triumph of understanding, which cannot stop, as it were, to dissect and to determine? Or is it a reclaiming of historical time in the de-temporalized and supra-temporal deadline, an attempt to re-generate a new historical time in the timelessness of the deadline? Are the status reports, for example, which are periodically compiled and publically presented, promising signs of an “awakening” of reason, evidence of the efforts related to scientific analysis and its social mediation – or are they mere articulations of the self-degradation of reason? Is the focus on calculating and

modeling our contemporary figure of this degradation – or is it a step towards reason’s “awakening”?

These might be the wrong questions. What distinguishes the temporalities of the two catastrophic events thought to be the end of humanity is this: While one unfolds in a few seconds or minutes, the other appears as a series of processes and events that extend over long periods of time. While the one can be linked to an initiating action that is associated with an identifiable subject, a consciousness, a decision, the other is a disparate sequence of more or less quasi-subjectless actions that only becomes recognizable as a unified structure of action with the help of scientific analyses, data collections. Ecological transformation confronts us with a whole cascade of effects that can be traced back to a variety of actions and habits. Nevertheless, we seem to tend to imagine both events as punctual, as finality. But the sharp contrast between their respective temporalities is also somewhat misleading. After all, the advent of the bomb refers to a long history of technology as its condition, while the expansive process of climate change, as we now know, is accompanied by event-like “tipping points” that bring it closer to the bomb’s modality. Processes that extend over decades, centuries, the prolonged and gradual changes, thus acquire an element of suddenness that was previously associated with the advent of the bomb: points of unpredictable tipping that reveal the whole of accumulated behaviors and habits.

The crucial question, however, is: How can one “awake” to the idea of the whole when this whole seems to anticipate itself as a quasi-natural accumulation of effects? How can reason realize totality when the whole seems to delay itself by its processuality and thus evades appropriation in the form of what Blanchot called a “decision”? How can one produce, create, or found the totality or whole of humanity in the face of the catastrophic series of events that are subjected to an automatism, the logic of the effect, rather than a subjective “resolution”?

Alenka Zupančič, in an article on Blanchot, argues that his perspective of a whole presupposes an external standpoint from which this whole appears as such. The external point of view is temporalized in Blanchot through the threat of apocalypse. However, according to Zupančič, this is no longer our apocalypse. Our apocalypse – climate catastrophe – no longer has to do with a perspective that is oriented towards the loss of the whole in a single, incomprehensible event, and from this point of view envisions the realization of the idea (Zupančič 2017-18). Compared to the threat of an action represented in

the image of a single dramatic pressing of a button that triggers a nuclear catastrophe, the situation of the climate catastrophe is different. It is a different temporality of the catastrophe: “The wrong button has already been pressed. The apocalypse has already begun and is about to become an active part of our lives and our world as it is” (ibid., 24). We are then already in the midst of the apocalypse. It is no longer a future event from which we could draw the shape of our whole, and which in turn could be prevented by the awakening of reason. It is already here, already unfolding.

This shift must influence all end-time activists, playing the role of the “prophylactic apocalypticist” (Anders 1981, 179) who sees his function primarily in wanting his announcement of the apocalypse to be falsified. The performative announcement of the apocalypse, for Anders, and recently revisited by Bruno Latour (2017, 217–218), pursues a single aim: to prevent it. But this shift must also influence the decision that Maurice Blanchot conceives as the construction of a collective subject in the potential annihilation, as the moment in which humanity “awakens” to the idea of its totality, and thus to reason. The question then is: Does the temporal logic of the “deadline” still function, with its emphatic “now,” as soon as the apocalypse is something that is already happening? Can reason still “awake” in the appropriation or elevation of the negative power? Can one still produce the whole by a “decision,” “resolution” or “conversion,” if it has already been released as a cascade of coming effects?



Whether in Anders, Jaspers, or in Blanchot: The anonymous “Us” is able to address itself only in a time that both closes and opens up in the form of the deadline – namely by anticipating its own form, that is, coming from the end, as still pending. Only where time has become the deadline is it possible that humans are “awakening to the idea of the whole,” “giving form” to it, and realizing their good end. In a peculiar way, the universal of humanity as a good end requires a threat, a deadline, an end that must be prevented in order to be able to name and identify itself, to unify itself and realize the good. It is an idea of the whole, a universality, that does not function on the basis of a “human nature,” but that is supposed to realize itself in the shared consciousness of an apocalypse. It is the universal of a “naked apocalypse” that nevertheless, in a minimal way, remains connected with the revolutionary apocalypse.

In the climate catastrophe, it seems, this awakening to the idea of the whole fails to happen not only because its temporality thwarts the end time of nuclear reason, but also because in the orientation towards a revolutionary unification, unity has itself increasingly been seen as an expression of a particular violence. The link or alliance of the “naked apocalypse” and revolutionary unification that thinking established in the search for its collective subject seems to have been dissolved or renounced today.⁸ If the universal of humanity returns in theoretical discussions of climate change, then at best – for example in Dipesh Chakrabarty – as an emphatically “negative universal,” (Chakrabarty 2009, 222) as a blank space that can and should no longer positively subsume the particular – not even in a utopian vanishing point. Humanity is no longer conceived as the carrier and manifestation of universal reason that would be capable of “elevating the negative to negativity.” The subject of action appears as a crossed-out universal – not because of the negative of its potential future annihilation, but because of the different catastrophic temporal structure and the rejected perspective of the whole. “It is not a Hegelian universal that emerges dialectically out of the movement of history, or a universal of capital that is brought forth by the present crisis.”⁹

In place of a divided humanity, whose unification is still pending, as a realization of reason prepared by the possibility of extinction, now instead comes the diagnosis of a preemptively unified humanity, whose divided essence must be unmasked. In the face of the climate catastrophe as the contemporary scenario of annihilation or extinction, it is not the idea of a unification of humanity that is actualized – by a danger that refers to it as a whole – but the idea of a division that aims to render the very concept of humanity obsolete (Latour 2017, 246). In contrast to the idea of unification, an

8 The fact that today the nuclear threat does not spread fear and terror in the same way as it did in the Cold War is perhaps not only a sign of a contemporary “apocalypse indifference” and “apocalypse blindness,” indicating a rational normalization of the danger, its repression or obfuscation. Perhaps the integration of this threat is conditioned by the fact that the desire for unification associated with it, the realization of reason, has already expired.

9 Ibid. In his widely discussed paper Chakrabarty further argues that climate catastrophe and the Anthropocene configure humanity *as species*. The history and historiography of globalization, which have been coupled with a specific critique of the concept of humanity, are replaced by the history and historiography of climate change, in which the universal humanity returns in a strange way – as an appeal to an *impossible subject*: for humanity as species (similarly as before as multitude, mass, etc.) represents a collective identity that remains phenomenologically empty – since we are only one instance of the concept of species.

incompatibility is emphasized that reaches cosmological proportions. This incompatibility is understood as a present struggle or *war* of mutually incommensurable world conceptions and cosmologies, of opposing temporalities with their different references to the apocalypse.¹⁰ If the nuclear threat was about man awakening to the idea of the whole in the face of the bomb, which at the same time prefigured it negatively, the “Anthropocene” posits the impossibility of giving consistency to man as a collective being (and not, as is sometimes mistakenly assumed, the negative form of a new sovereignty of the *anthropos*).

In the renewed deadline of the climate catastrophe that understanding sets, that we set ourselves, it is as if “we” are in search of a collective subject, while at the same time the mode of this search – the bet on the realization of universal reason – appears as part of the problem. The “us” as a whole, as a totality, no longer finds a time, a space. Today, humanity and the world appear as the two void spaces, as the never subsiding phantom pain of a *post-apocalyptic* present of catastrophe.¹¹ Against an idea of unification – be it as a preliminary unification by invoking a common human “nature” or as a unification through the world-creating realization of universal reason – today there is an orientation towards provisional and fragile associations insisting on distinction and difference.

10 The division here is drawn between “humans living in the epoch of the *Holocene*” and “the *Earthbound* of the *Anthropocene*” who fight with each other, *go to war with each other* (ibid., 248). “Whereas Humans are defined as those who take the Earth, the *Earthbound* are *taken by it*” (ibid., 251).

11 The term “post-apocalyptic” easily leads to misunderstandings because of the different time horizons that can be implied. Thus, the present can be identified as “post-apocalyptic” in various respects: 1. On the one hand, the birth of Western modernity can itself be seen as an end of the world, an apocalypse, insofar as it was believed to be the realization of a secular kingdom and thus at the same time brought an end of the world for all those who had to make room for this kingdom. The end of the world, as Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have pointed out, has thus already taken place several times – depending on who is talking about it and from where. The ends of the world, apocalypses multiply (Cf. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017). 2. However, the present can also be qualified as “post-apocalyptic” if, as Alenka Zupančič argues, one must assume that the catastrophic event does not lie in the future, but has already been triggered, is unfolding in the present (Cf. Zupančič 2017). 3. The present turns out to be “post-apocalyptic” again because it no longer proceeds from the event thinking of a fundamental revelation, because the apocalypse no longer means the unveiling or inauguration of a divine kingdom, but a “naked apocalypse,” an “apocalypse without kingdom” (Cf. Anders 1981, 207). 4. Srećko Horvat uses the term “post-apocalyptic melancholy” as an emphatic concept, which he explicitly turns against the mourning over a past loss, with the intention of averting this loss in the present. Anticipatory mourning over a future loss, or the loss of the future as such, on the other hand, is problematic because it has a normalizing effect in the present (Cf. Horvat 2021, 54).

No “decision” or “resolution” (*Entschluss*) can realize reason if the apocalypse is no longer a mere possibility or probability of the future, if the end is not temporalized from the outset of an eventual point of destruction; no “conversion” (*Umkehr*) can lead man back to his lost origin, revive his forgotten essence, if the distance, the difference, always persists in the relation to essence and origin; no “awakening” (*Erwachen*) can unite humanity in the face of catastrophe, if its extended dividedness seizes the idea of the whole, if the world and its end have been multiplied. The atom bomb, as the ultimate counter-image of reason, was the last wager of thought on reason’s dialectical realization. It represents the last – tragic or comic – attempt to envision a final unification of humanity via negativity. To repeat it today, for example by re-invoking a deadline in/of climate catastrophe, in the role of a contemporary end-time activist, is bound to fail. The ecological transformation implies temporalities that thwart this attempt in advance and territories that sabotage its premises. It is as if we can no longer awaken to the idea of the whole, not only because we are already *in the midst of it*, but also because this idea has become fragmented, dispersed at its core. Our time-space is no longer that of an apocalypse of reason.

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