

Bischof, Günter; Dawsey, Jason; Fetz, Bernhard (Hrsg.): *The Life and Work of Günther Anders. Émigré, Iconoclast, Philosopher, Man of Letters*. Innsbruck: StudienVerlag 2014. ISBN: 978-3-7065-5352-0; 202 S.

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As Jason Dawsey succinctly states in the introduction to this volume, Günther Anders „should be regarded as one of [the] chief witnesses and interpreters“ of the twentieth century as an „age of extremes“ (p. 11). Yet Anders – born 1902 in Breslau as Günther Stern into a wealthy Jewish family – is still not a household name with a broader recognition in twentieth century European intellectual history. Whereas many of his close friends – including Hannah Arendt, his first wife, or Walter Benjamin – and of his frequent intellectual interlocutors and correspondence partners – ranging from Theodor W. Adorno to Paul Tillich and Herbert Marcuse, to name only a few – are part of a canon of thinkers who are consulted for their insights into the destructive aspects of the twentieth century, Anders' work has only received very uneven reception. In recent years, the situation has slightly improved in German and Austrian academic circles. But in Anglophone academia, the discovery of his work has yet to gain momentum, and to address all major aspects of Anders' highly diverse and complex *Œuvre*.¹

Against this backdrop, the publication of this collection of essays is extremely welcome. It is not only the very best English language introduction into key aspects of Anders' work. Many of the contributors are also drawing on their extensive research in his personal papers, which are deposited in the Austrian National Library in Vienna and have only been accessible for a couple of years. An additional bonus is the reproduction of three key texts by Anders in English translation. One of them is a wide-ranging reflection on the static, almost frozen livelihood of the émigré, first published in 1962, which was based on his own personal experiences of his exile in France (1933–1936) and the United States (1936–1950) before he settled in Vienna, home of his second wife. Another key text are his

„Theses for the Atomic Age“ (1960), which hammered down in short, snappy dialectical phrases the gist of his reflections – first elaborated in his opus magnum on the „Obsolescence of Human Beings“, published in 1956 – on the inversion of all fundamental anthropological categories that the production and deployment of the atomic bomb had brought about (pp. 187–194).

The ten chapters are divided in three parts. In the first section on „historical contexts“, Jason Dawsey offers fascinating insights into a neglected part of Anders' restless writing endeavours, a body of poems that he wrote in American exile to reflect on the Nazi persecution of the Jews and the Shoah. One of the first examples of this use of the poetic medium was a piece published in the journal „Aufbau“ in 1940, in which Anders reflected on the suicide of his friend Walter Benjamin, with whom he had had many encounters during their joint years in Paris. Many of these poems take their cue from newspaper articles, and some of the most trailblazing pieces contemplate the meaning of language and silence vis-à-vis the news of the genocide, and the ability of language to express and reflect the monstrosity of the Shoah. In another chapter of this section, Elisabeth Röhrlich provides important insights into the anti-nuclear activism that accompanied Anders' trenchant critique of the atomic bomb since the 1950s. Together with his friend Robert Jungk – with whom he had a sometimes problematic relationship – Anders founded the Austrian Committee for the Easter Marches in 1963, following the model developed by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the UK. Already in 1958, Anders had travelled to Hiroshima, and he subsequently tried to translate the magnitude of the devastation this city had to endure back into European contexts. Yet while Anders was deeply immersed in a dense network of anti-nuclear activists across Europe, it is also notable, as Röhrlich argues, that it took him more than a decade before he was able to translate one of the key caesuras in his life and thinking – 6 August 1945 – into sustained

¹ An important resource of texts, links and up-to-date information is the website maintained by Harold Marcuse: <<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/anders.htm>> (26.01.2015).

political activism.

The second section focuses on some core areas of Anders' philosophical thinking. Konrad Paul Liessmann provides a succinct summary of his philosophy of technology, with its focus on the obsolescence of human beings through the advancement of machines that are connected as a system. Here, Anders developed the notion of a „sociology of things“ that was only fully considered half a century later, as Liessmann notes (p. 75). He applied these ideas not only to his analysis of the atomic bomb, but also to the new medium of television, which he considered to be characterised by its „ontological ambiguity“ as the transmitted events in a live broadcast were „at the same time present and absent, at the same time reality and illusion“ (p. 77). Reinhard Ellensohn explores another fascinating aspect of Anders' work, his philosophical reflections on music. This had been first the subject of a study on 'Musical Situations', which he had completed in 1930/31, hoping to submit it successfully as a Habilitationsschrift at the University of Frankfurt. Yet the political context was not favourable, and the fact that Theodor W. Adorno was critical of the – in his view – Heideggerian elements of the work was not conducive either. Hence, the manuscript remained unpublished, and Anders' hopes of pursuing a proper academic career were thwarted. Anders' reflections on music focused on the different states and forms of listening, and on the transformation of the listener who becomes a part of the music itself.

In the final section, Bernhard Fetz and Kerstin Putz illuminate different aspects of the writing style and writing habits of Anders, and of his engagement with fiction. Anders was a literary critic in his own right, and also an author of fiction, not least in his novel „The Molussian Catacomb“, written between 1930 and 1938 as an attempt to express the complexities of the struggle against the Nazis in the late Weimar Republic, a text that was deeply influenced by Bertolt Brecht. As Fetz argues, Anders believed in the need to develop a philosophy that adopted a narrative style and presentation, and tried to write texts that could reach out to readers beyond academia. Anders was also an avid writer

of letters, as Kerstin Putz explains, taking his correspondence with Hannah Arendt as an example. This correspondence extended beyond their personal engagement, and remained an important site of communication about shared interests despite manifold differences in the interpretation of certain topics. The correspondence had, as Putz shows, a shared point of reference in the attempt of both authors to retain their intellectual independence.

The literary output of Günther Anders spanned almost seven decades, from the first writings in the early 1920s to his death in 1992. This important collection of essays goes a long way in making the case for a more systematic rediscovery of Anders, that should acknowledge the originality and continuing relevance of his thinking for an understanding of the twentieth century as an age of extremes.

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