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# Epimetheus

The Orphic Path to Anarchy

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but the hope of the “*hopeless*” is based on the saturation of *spectacular lies*; it is the hope of the unexpected. According to Heraclitus (fragment 18): “*If you do not hope for the unexpected, you will not find it. It is hard to find and inaccessible*”<sup>19</sup>. The unexpected is what truly is, the *aletheia* that has never yet been: sovereign anarchy.

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<sup>19</sup> *Les Présocratiques*, trad. J.-P. Dumont Gallimard, 1998, p.150.

a single cosmos that establishes their community. The “*dreamed*” turn away from the common cosmos because the dream is singular and cannot be shared. Promethean society, in its final “*spectacular*” form, forbids men from thinking about the common, imposing on everyone a dream that each consumes individually. Escaping the Promethean spectacle requires an asceticism, an apophatic *praxis* of being in the world. Julien Coupat has emphasized the importance of the mystical asceticism of Orphism: “*The Orphic way is notoriously an acetic way that is not exactly that of an aesthetic of existence [...] We can call it “mystical” provided we see clearly that there is no consistent materialism other than mystical and that a saved humanity would perhaps be entirely mystical*<sup>17</sup>.”

We find this ascetic dimension in Illich’s Epimethean anarchism, an asceticism on which is based the friendship (*philia*) that nourishes the quest for truth (*aletheia*): “[...] I plead for a renaissance of ascetic practices to keep our senses alive, in lands devastated by the “*spectacle*”, in the midst of overwhelming information, perpetual advice, intensive diagnosis, therapeutic management, the invasion of advisors, terminal care, and breathtaking speed<sup>18</sup>.”

In his essay “*Goethe’s Elective Affinities*” (1924–1925), Benjamin writes this sublime sentence: “*Only for the sake of the hopeless have we been given hope.*” (“Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben”).

The despair of participating in Promethean society is the only hope of breaking it. The radical opposition of the “*hopeless*” is the only revolutionary hope: the system cannot integrate the hope of despair because this despair does not stem from lesser having but from *anti-having*.

For Marx, revolutionary hopes are based on the frustration of the proletariat and the rationality of economic and social progress,

<sup>17</sup> Julien Coupat, *op. cit.* p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Ivan Illich, introduction à *La perte des sens*, Fayard, 2004.

“Why not call these brothers and sisters, bearers of our hope, Epimetheans?”

— Ivan Illich

**Because the gods have always concealed man, we have never known who we are, and our nature has remained hidden: “Let man first tear himself away from that which ‘conceals’ his nature<sup>1</sup>”.**

How does the human species differ from other species? The answer reveals itself to us “*a posteriori*”: humanity alone, of all living species, has appropriated nature, inaugurating the Anthropocene. With human beings, domination over nature and the rise in productivity have developed disproportionately, destroying the biotic environment. This “*pleonectic*” appropriation<sup>2</sup> has separated man from life: by appropriating the world, he has expropriated himself from life.

## The Extinguishing of Promethean Fire

The discovery of fire, which gave rise to homo faber, marked the beginning of the Anthropocene, the initial event that enabled the human species to transform its environment. Of course, the actual signals of anthropogenic alteration of the biosphere would not be observed until much later — as early as the Neolithic period, with the development of agriculture, and then in modern times, starting with the invention of the steam engine at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and above all the “*great acceleration*” of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with digital technological development,

<sup>1</sup> Reiner Schürmann, *Le principe d’anarchie*, Diaphanes, 2013, p. 344.

<sup>2</sup> La pléonexie (du grec πλεονεξία, *pleonexia*) est le désir d’avoir plus que les autres, de vouloir posséder toujours plus. Cf. Mehdi Belhaj Kacem ; *Système du pléonectique*, Diaphanes, 2020.

population growth and exponential consumption of resources — but we can only understand what has happened to us if we grasp this inaugural technological fact of the mastery of fire. The Greek myth of Prometheus gives us an idea of this: by stealing fire from the gods of Olympus and transmitting it to mankind, Prometheus established himself as the god of technology.

Greece provided the West with its civilizational hero: with Prometheus, civilization was no longer conceived as a gift from the gods but, on the contrary, as a conquest by men in revolt against the deities. From then on, the social order was no longer situated in the continuity of the cosmic order, whose natural laws were symbolized by the gods: culture no longer derived from nature, but separated from it, superimposed on it — if not opposed to it.

But the gods can't accept men overstepping their limits and taking their place. So Zeus puts Prometheus in chains and sends him a vulture as eternal torment, for with the theft of fire, mankind has discovered progress: the transition from raw to cooked food, the domestication of the wild forces of nature and the invention of metallurgy. To punish them for this hubris, Zeus passes on new evils from the box of Pandora, wife of Prometheus' brother Epimetheus.

This myth, first passed down in the writings of Hesiod, was later retold in Aeschylus' tragedy *Prometheus Bound* and in Plato's *Protagoras*. While the main features of the story are fairly well known, one detail seems essential: Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus are titans. Primordial divinities, the titans and titanides are the offspring of the love between *Ouranos* (Heaven) and *Gaia* (Earth). They formed the first pantheon of Greek divinities. They reigned during the Golden Age, until the overthrow of Cronos by his son Zeus and the establishment of the Olympian pantheon. This clarification is important to grasp the allegorical meaning of the myth, which describes the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal order.

Attributing no quality to man is an apophatic act that forbids oneself from making any judgment on the subject, an act of Husserlian phenomenological reduction. The human without a predicate is not a man without quality, he enjoys an a-subjective presence in the world, in a *being-there* freed from all reflexive thought.

By forgetting to attribute qualities to humans, Epimetheus makes them unpredicable, that is, he no longer distinguishes them from immortals. For Illich, the supposed "*fault of Epimetheus*", his failure to attribute qualities to humans, is a creative non-act that makes them discover the truth of hope and the illusion of hopes. The impossibility of predicating the human, of attributing any quality to it, is an act that opens up the possibility of the unexpected. To make the human unpredicable is to reintroduce it into the apophatic semantic field that is that of the gods. The *archè* does not reside in the subject but in the predicate.

The two-faced character Prometheus-Epimetheus of Vernant's exegesis, taken up by Bernard Stiegler, corresponds to the androgynous character Pandora-Epimetheus of Illichian Orphic hermeneutics. By marrying Pandora, Epimetheus incorporates the Orphic *metis*, thus becoming the antagonist of Zeus who had created her with the Olympian *metis*. The incorporation of the Orphic *metis* by Epimetheus annihilates the Promethean blood sacrifice, frees men from divine authority and gives them back their freedom.

The hope of the Promethean spirit is teleological. The hope of the Epithemian spirit is non-teleological. By closing the jar on hope, hope remained imprisoned in the woman's womb, obscuring true life, without purpose, "*without why*": life without *archè*. The teleological conception of life gave rise to the institutions of Promethean civilization. The woman's womb contains the seed of anarchy. What was profoundly political in Orphism consisted in the radical rejection of the *polis*, the city-state founded on institutions that fabricate the consent of citizens.

The lost book of Heraclitus began with this sentence: "*One must follow what is common.*" For Heraclitus, "*awakened*" men have

On the contrary, Heraclitus uses an apophatic mode of thought, a non-predicative way of thinking that allows him to think about both being and non-being. In his fragments, we find numerous epithets with alpha (α) in the privative form to qualify being and mark its difference from beings. Thus, the adjectives “immortal” (ἀθανάτος, *athánatos*) or “unlimited” (ἄπειρον, *ápeiron*) designate it by negation. In a certain way, we could say that the philosophical opposition between Parmenides and Heraclitus refers to the mythological opposition between Prometheus and Epimetheus.

In its very etymology, the word anarchy comes from an apophatic modality of language: *anarkhia* – composed of the privative prefix an, “without”, and *archè*. Anarchy is the absence of *archè*. *Archè* signifies not only the original principle of the beginning of things, but also the leader, the one who possesses authority, the principle of command. The *archè* is both the principle that begins and the one that commands. However, the principle of command, having no precedent, being at the beginning, its power proves to be transcendent, sovereign, and absolute. Through the Epimethean apophatic non-act, the human species, restored to its given being, removes itself from being and emancipates itself from all divine transcendence.

## The Unexpected Hope of Anarchy

The history of the Anthropocene is that of generations with a Promethean spirit who invented institutions to protect them from evil but who ended up depriving them of their souls: “*The deprivation of souls was the price to pay to enter the historical temporality of progress*”<sup>16</sup>.

Bernard Stiegler did not perceive that the “*fault of Epithemy*” resided in the impossibility of predicating the human (*the predicate is the property that is conferred on the subject by the copula*).

<sup>16</sup> Gianni Carchia cité par Julien Coupat, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

We should remember that Prometheus’ theft of the fire is the consequence of an earlier episode in the myth, “*Trick at Mecone*”, in which Prometheus has already tried to trick Zeus (*mètis*).

As long as Cronos had reigned, understanding had been maintained between gods and men. This golden age came to an end with the advent of the Olympians. Zeus wanted to impose a divine *arkhè* (ἀρχή) on mankind and, in order to establish a new hierarchy, asked Prometheus to distinguish between men and gods. To this end, Prometheus invents the first bloody sacrifice. He slaughters a bull, cuts it up and, using a clever ruse, divides it into two parts, one appetizingly white but containing only bare bones, the other unappetizingly enveloped by the belly but containing the animal’s edible flesh. Zeus chooses the most beautiful part, but it is not edible: burnt, it will rise to the heavens in the form of smoke. This inaugural sacrifice establishes a hierarchy between gods and men, with the rot-proof bones serving as a reminder of the gods’ immortality, and mortal men receiving the meat for sustenance. This is the distinction established by Prometheus. But Zeus decides to take revenge on mankind for Prometheus’ cunning; he hides from them the fire they once had, since it circulated freely between gods and men, and deprives them of the wheat that had previously grown in abundance.

The bull sacrifice took place at Mecone. This location remains unknown. Meconion is the sap of the poppy, a plant that grows at the edge of wheat fields; it therefore seems that the inaugural sacrifice is linked to the emergence of agriculture. The myth of Prometheus would thus correspond to the transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic, that is, to the dating of the entry into the Anthropocene.

Why didn’t ancient Greece build a “*machine technology*”, even though it seemed to have the skill and knowledge to do so? Having the means to create an industrial civilization, the Greeks preferred to make do with mechanical and artisanal techniques. This was not only because technical power could have disrupted the

political order, but also because antagonistic mythological heroes such as Orpheus and Dionysus balanced Promethean practicality with a poetic vision of life. This agonistic spirit disappeared from civilization with the modern break-up of machine technology.

Today, with new information and communication technologies, we are witnessing a frenzied technicization of social life, a raging Prometheanism. Modern agriculture exhausts the soil and, as we must constantly produce other goods, we poison the atmosphere and the oceans, while claiming to promote hygiene as an antidote to this poisoning: the sanitized world is programmed by ecological institutions that “normalize” contact between humans and their own environment. For Günther Anders, in our historical era, the purpose of technology turns out to be the obsolescence of man.

Modernity has recognized itself in Prometheus. The current civilizational crisis heralds the return of the vulture, the image of this “*Great Refusal*” that hopes for a postmodernity freed from Promethean culture. Today’s crisis adheres to its etymology (*krisis*): it passes “judgment” on the faltering Promethean world. But is it still possible to extinguish the global fire that Prometheus spread?

## Prometheus or Orpheus?

For every historical era, there is a cultural hero who embodies the spirit-principle, that is, the archetype of social togetherness. If Prometheus was the one who embodies modernity, who will be the one who embodies the spirit of postmodern times?

The will to power over nature is the *primum movens* of the Promethean mentality realized in the capitalist spirit of modernity. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse presents Orpheus as the emblematic figure of the new society that will emerge from the postmodern imagination. Orpheus is a god linked to Mother Earth, his image is one of joy and freedom; his voice does not command, it sings; his

world; and because, “*alone of all the Greek divinities, he inserts this alternating balancing act, this coming and going from the one to the many, from the same to the other, from concentrated totality to dispersion*”<sup>15</sup>. Through Dionysus, men will thus be able to return to the lost unity, which is not a regression to the past but the recovery in the eternal present of the life of a golden age that the Orphites refer to the matriarchal divinity of the primordial Metis.

This *androgynous mêtis* is based on a logic of contradictions and an apophatic perception of reality, which reveals its pre-Socratic origin. Indeed, Western thought has been playing between Parmenides and Heraclitus, depending on whether it followed the Eleatic or the Ionian, the inventor of being or of becoming, chose stability rather than dynamism, opted for homogeneity rather than the heterogeneity of reality.

Parmenides announces the thought of Promethean domination. It is Heraclitus whom he targets in his *On Nature* (fragment 6) when he criticizes those who think that “*being and non-being are both identical and non-identical*.” The Aristotelian logic of the excluded middle, on which Western civilization is founded, belongs to this Parmenidean lineage.

For the philosopher of Elea, men can judge things only by reason. Now, for reason, it is possible neither to think nor to express non-being. To think is always to think something. It is not possible to think nothing. To think nothing is not to think. And the same is true for saying: *to say nothing is to say nothing*. Thinking and saying must necessarily have a predicating object; and this object is being.

It is a philosophy that, rejecting the possibility of a third party between being and non-being, excludes all freedom. All homogeneous dynamics have in common a logic of identity and non-contradiction that goes back to Parmenides and that Aristotle elevated to the rank of universal *Organon*.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.



Promethean evil, would be a prerequisite for the “deindustrialization” advocated by ecological degrowth.

Bernard Stiegler’s exegesis of the myth must therefore be modulated, since it was Zeus’ political will and not Epimetheus’ fault that the human condition was reduced to technology.

Of all the characters in the myth, Epitheme seems to be the only one devoid of *mêtis*. According to the Promethean vision, this is enough to make him look like an idiot. But Epitheme is endowed with another kind of intelligence that Detienne and Vernant call “Orphic *mêtis*”<sup>13</sup>. The character of *Mêtis*, borrowed from Hesiod, is found in the Orphic theogony of the rhapsodes. For the Orphites, she becomes the great primordial divinity, the first generator of the universe, who, emerging from the cosmic egg, carries within her the seed of all the gods and the germ of all beings. Whereas in Hesiod, the role of this goddess was subordinate to Zeus, the sovereign male god, of whom she was merely the obscure companion, in Orphism, *Mêtis* is no longer presented as feminine: she is an androgynous god, with a dual male and female nature. Her polymorphic power transcends all oppositions. In this new context, the episode of Zeus’ swallowing of *Metis* acquires a completely different significance: “*This time, it is no longer a question of the young sovereign god assimilating the powers of a female counterpart, in order to immobilize the course of the universe in the state instituted by his victory and his new reign; on the contrary, by identifying himself entirely with the one who preceded him, Zeus intends to return, beyond Cronos and Ouranos, to the previous primordial state*”<sup>14</sup>. This reintegration will give rise to a “second creation” from which a new world, our own, will emerge, in which Zeus will no longer reign, but his son, the Orphic Dionysus, who will replace him because he represents the total unity of the dispersed, variegated, inconstant

<sup>13</sup> Marcel Detienne et Jean-Pierre Vernant, « La mêtis orphique et la seiche de Thétis », dans *Les ruses de l’intelligence*, Champs essais, 2018, pp. 181–235.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

gesture is one of offering and receiving: beyond historical time, this mythological figure unites man with nature. The predominance of reason, its repression of instinct and sensibility, was never total in our Promethean civilization, and art and poetry succeeded, in certain periods, in bringing the pole of reason into tension with the antagonistic pole of the imaginary.

Based on Heraclitus’ aphorism “*Nature likes to hide*” (fragment 123), Pierre Hadot has identified two existential attitudes towards nature<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, the idea that nature (*phusis*) likes to hide itself can elicit two types of reaction: either we seek to wrest its secrets from it, which is the Promethean attitude; or, we commune with it, which is the Orphic attitude. According to Hadot, an example of the former attitude is provided by Francis Bacon, who, in his *Novum Organum Scientiarum* (1620), suggests that it is possible to induce the laws of nature through scientific experimentation with particular natural substances and phenomena. Hadot describes this violent human intervention in nature as “*Promethean*”. But Heraclitus’ formula can provoke, on the contrary, an attitude of reverence and conciliarity towards nature. Hadot cites Goethe as an example of this approach, which he places under the sign of Orpheus. The three words of Heraclitus’ aphorism (*phusis krupyesthai philei*) can thus be used to trace the human history of the idea of nature.

According to Julien Coupat, in his commentary on Gianni Carchia’s book *Orphisme et Tragédie: Le Mythe Transfiguré. Précédé de Dialogue avec les Morts (Orfismo e Tragedia. Il Mito Trasfigurato)*<sup>4</sup>, the Orphic path remains the only answer to biopolitical power in the age of the realized Anthropocene. It is from the sacrificial dimension that the process of civilizational hominization<sup>5</sup> begins, and Orphism is precisely a challenge to the Olympian

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Le voile d’Isis. Essai sur l’histoire de l’idée de nature*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Gianni Carchia, *Orphisme et tragédie*, précédé de : Julien Coupat, *Dialogue avec les morts*, Éditions la Tempête, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*.

compromise established by Promethean sacrifice. Orphism, says Coupât, is “*that possible fork in the road that has not been taken*”. He insists on the ascetic, we might say apophatic, dimension of Orphism, which he sees as an internalized Dionysian orgasm — the Orpheus-Dionysus couple being the interface of a single thought, originating in the hunter-gatherer Paleolithic and opposing the bloody sacrifice of Olympian Prometheanism<sup>6</sup>.

In *L'Épreuve du Labyrinthe* (Ordeal by Labyrinth), Mircea Eliade states that “*bloody sacrifices, especially human ones, are attested only among farmers. Never among hunters*”. This is why, paradoxically, Orphic vegetarianism joins the Dionysian diasparagmos<sup>7</sup>, this memorial ritual of the Paleolithic hunt which comes to oppose the Olympian sacrifice. The wild Dionysian thought and the mystical Orphic asceticism are the two sides of the same contestation of civilizational Prometheanism. The place of this rebellious thought is the *chôra*, that is to say the rural part outside the walls of the ramparts of the *astu* (*the city itself*). The *chôra* is the place which generates and where the peasant commune develops, in opposition to the one-dimensional citizenship of the city: “*What was profoundly political in Orphism consisted precisely in the fact of rejecting the whole of the polis*”<sup>8</sup>. City dwellers were frightened by Pan’s flute and its power to arouse the instincts. Plato, in *The Republic*, describing the ideal state, banished popular music to the harp and Apollo’s lyre: *only shepherds could play their syrinx, and only in the countryside!*

## Epimetheus, Ivan Illich’s Black Orpheus

In the myth of Prometheus, it could be that the figure of Orpheus is concealed within that of Epimetheus, as the final

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Maria Daraki, *Dionysos et la déesse Terre*, Flammarion, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Le *diasparagmos* est le sacrifice d’un animal décheté et dévoré cru lors du culte dionysiaque.

<sup>8</sup> Julien Coupât, *ibid.*, p. 9.

dynamism that opens onto the indeterminate and makes human finitude bearable: *Elpis* is that unthinkable state that Derrida has called “*différance*”.

In his apprehension of technical thought, Stiegler borrows another essential notion from Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne, that of *mêtis*. The authors explain this mental category as follows: “*Metis is indeed a form of intelligence and thought, a mode of knowing: it implies a complex, but highly coherent, set of mental attitudes, intellectual behaviors that combine flair, sagacity, foresight, flexibility of mind, feinting, resourcefulness.*”

*Mêtis* brings success, often achieved through fraud and deceit, disloyal cunning, perfidious lies and treachery: it is the absolute weapon of domination. In Hesiod, the goddess Metis is the first wife of Zeus. The supreme god of Olympus swallows her after she gives birth to Athena, keeping her in his belly, thus integrating *Metis* into himself. Aeschylus, in his *Prometheus Bound*, asserts that, in the conflict pitting the Titans of Cronos against the Olympians of Zeus, victory would necessarily go to “*whoever would win, not by force and violence, but by cunning.*” (*Prometheus Bound* v. 213–213). As for Prometheus, Hesiod and Aeschylus agree that he possesses the kind of devious intelligence, the power of deception, that the Greeks call *mêtis*: isn’t he nicknamed “*aîolomêtis*” (*who possesses dazzling mêtis*)? But how could he defeat Zeus’ absolute *mêtis*? According to Vernant and Detienne, Prometheus was mistaken: seeing a fault in Epimetheus’ sharing, his ruse to correct it backfired, Zeus being the master of the situation. Prometheus deluded himself into believing that he was stealing what he had been allowed to take, with technicality revealing itself to be the gods’ way of arresting men, a way of binding them to them indefinitely.

There would be a pre-eminence of the “*political function*”, embodied by Zeus, over the “*technical function*”, represented by Prometheus. Technology would be political, not ontological. The “*deinstitutionalization*” of state society, advocated by Illich’s epimethean anarchism, which targets the political root of

culture and compensating for his native deficit by manufacturing anthropotechnics.

Traditional hermeneutics overlooks a very important aspect of the story: the fact that the two brothers, Prometheus and Epimetheus, bear names which, in ancient Greek, had very precise meanings. Prometheus means *he who sees ahead*, and Epimetheus *he who sees behind*. Prometheus and Epitheme are the two inseparable poles of myth. Stiegler points out that myth has bequeathed to the common language two “technical” notions derived from their own names, *prometheia* and *epimetheia*. *Prometheia*, προμήθεια, thoughtfulness, predictive thinking, foresight. *Epimetheia*, επιμηθία, retrospective thought that comes to mind afterwards, reflexive thought, as translated by Steigler: “The common Greek language roots reflexive knowledge in *epimetheia*, that is, in the essential technicality that is finitude” (217). For Stiegler, Epimetheus’ fault, redoubled by Prometheus’ theft, has turned man into a being-for-death, producing an anthropological technology identified with thanatology.

Promethean sacrifice gives rise to resentment, jealousy, competition and quarrelling (*eris*) between men and gods. This original *eris* is perpetuated in contemporary transhumanism, which envisages immortality for man: “*If human life, unlike that of the gods, cannot escape eris, it is because the mortal condition finds its origin and its raison d’être in the eris that pitted Prometheus against Zeus*”<sup>12</sup>.

Stiegler picks up on Vernant’s analysis of the Pandora jar sequence. The hope, *Elpis*, that remains in the jar is, according to Hesiod, the anxious expectation of the scattered evils from which the soul knows it cannot escape. Yet, according to Vernant, *Elpis* includes a dimension of uncertainty, belonging neither to anticipatory nor reflective thought, and presenting itself as a paroxysmal tension between *prometheia* and *epimetheia*, an oppositional

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant et Marcel Detienne, *La cuisine du sacrifice*, Gallimard, 1979, p. 57.

chapter of Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society* suggests. In this chapter, entitled “*Renaissance of Epimethean Man*”<sup>9</sup>, Illich’s exegesis reverses the conventional interpretation of the Promethean myth, as Epimetheus and Pandora become its cultural heroes.

According to Ivan Illich, the original Pandora (the “*dispenser of all*”) was the earth goddess in prehistoric, matriarchal Greece. From time immemorial, the navel of the earth, the *omphalos*, was located at Delphi (the “*matrix*”) where Gaia slept, until she was replaced, after Zeus’ victory over Cronos, by Apollo, the male solar god. In the myth, as recounted by Hesiod, Pandora was created on Zeus’ orders to take revenge on mankind for Prometheus. Hephaestus made her of clay and water, giving her the beauty of the immortal goddesses of Olympus. She was the first human woman, for throughout the Golden Age, humanity was composed entirely of men (*anthrôpoi*). Zeus offered Pandora’s hand to Epimetheus, who took her as his wife, despite Prometheus’ attempts to dissuade him. As a dowry, Zeus gave Pandora a jar containing all the evils that could befall humans. Pandora opened the jar (*pithos*) and let them escape, but she closed it again before hope (*elpis*) could escape. Henceforth, with the first woman, the utopia of the Golden Age disappeared and began, according to tradition, the Iron Age, marked by death, disease and work.

If we refer to Plato’s *Protagoras*, Prometheus’ theft of fire would have been a way of remedying “*Epitheme’s fault*”, to use Bernard Stiegler’s title<sup>10</sup>. As Zeus had entrusted Prometheus with the task of distributing specific qualities to all mortal races, Epimetheus wanted to take over. He distributed the qualities (*dunameis*) to each species, but when the human race arrived, he found himself bereft, having distributed everything. Faced with man’s

<sup>9</sup> Ivan Illich, *Une société sans école*, « Renaissance de l’homme épiméthéen », pp. 172–188, Points/Seuil, 2015. Les chiffres entre parenthèses se réfèrent à cette édition.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Stiegler, « La Faute d’Épiméthée » dans *La technique et le temps*, Fayard, 2018, pp. 215–311.

destitution, Prometheus decided to sneak into the workshop of Hephaestus and Athena to steal the knowledge of craftsmanship and the arts; but he also had to steal a spark of his divine fire from Zeus, so that man could forge the material and immaterial tools that would replace his lack of qualities.

Thus, according to the accepted interpretation, Epimetheus would be a fool and Pandora an idiot. But the perspective is reversed by Illichian exegesis. By marrying Pandora, Epimetheus married the earth. He is the archetype of men who lavish gifts and cherish life, those who establish a convivial relationship with nature. For Illich, the “*fault of Epimetheus*”, his failure to attribute qualities to men, is a creative *non-act* that makes them discover the truth of hope and the illusion of expectations.

To explain the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy, Illich emphasizes the difference in meaning between what he calls hope and expectations: “*Hope, in its strong sense, means a confident faith in the goodness of nature, while expectations, in the sense in which we will use the term here, mean that we rely on results intended and projected by man.*” (173). Hope therefore has an Orphic and qualitative dimension, with expectations being quantitative Promethean projections (*hence the singular/plural antagonism of the two terms*). Illich considers that the Promethean ethos has kept hope stifled throughout the Anthropocene and he asserts that the survival of the human race depends on its rediscovery as a social force (174).

Hope is the fundamental notion of Ivan Illich’s anarchist thinking. For him, only human institutions can envisage a future, but human beings have only hope. The Marxist mistake was to confuse social institutions with individuals. The idea of the future devours the present moment, the only moment of fulfillment in life. To foresee is to want to force the future; hope, on the other hand, extends the present to the unhoped-for future of anarchy.

The name Epimetheus gave rise to the word *epimetheia* in the common Greek language, which means retrospective thought. Epimetheus invents a mode of existence, not in anticipation of the

future but from the vision of a previous past. In contrast to the teleological thought of Prometheus, which *foresees* a finality for human action, Epimetheus sees it afterward, and in doing so, he shows us the Anthropocene. Indeed, Prometheus cannot perceive the Anthropocene, which is the product of his own thought. To note, as Bernard Stiegler did, that “*at its very origin and until now, philosophy has repressed technology as an object of thought,*” is to admit the original Prometheanism of philosophy. The only human consciousness of the Anthropocene is the thought of Epimetheus. It is not man that modernity has killed, it is his thinker: we must resurrect Epimetheus.

## Epimetheus’ Fault

The dominant interpretation sees Prometheus as the symbol of the Enlightenment, the hero who liberates man from obscurantism. This is Marx’s conception, in *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1841), when he proclaims: “*In the philosophical calendar, Prometheus ranks first among the saints and martyrs*”. Contrary to his predictions, however, by integrating the consumerist values of economic Prometheism, the modern industrial proletariat has lost all revolutionary perspective. This observation led Bernard Stiegler to criticize the Marxist interpretation of the myth<sup>11</sup>. Stiegler’s exegesis is based on Plato’s *Protagoras*, in which Epimetheus takes on a greater role than in Hesiod. According to him, Epimetheus’ fault was to reduce the human condition to technology. But this fault was a necessity, a tragic *fatum*, for without it, the human being would never have come into existence: man without qualities could only survive thanks to the technicality brought by Prometheus. Thus, according to Stiegler, the human being is a prematurely born being, essentially incomplete, who can only make up for his defect of nature by inventing

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard Stiegler, « La Faute d’Épiméthée », *op.cit.*