

Mondialisation without the world

Stuart Elden When you left Greece in 1945, why did you choose Paris?

Kostas Axelos Having a trilingual education – Greek, French, German – when I had to leave Greece, dominated by the Right, at the end of 1945, there was no choice. To undertake advanced studies in philosophy one must know the language in which one is working. Not speaking English, and with Germany in smoking ruins, this left only France. In addition, the Institut Français of Athens, of which I was a student, had organized a system of bursaries that allowed me to leave with a group of comrades.

SE You were already political, but why did you become a philosopher?

KA The impulse towards active politics had come from my interest in philosophical thought. Marxism and communism were seen as the ‘realization of philosophy’. In the Communist movement I had functioned not only as an organizer, but also as a journalist and theoretician.

SE What role did the Parti communiste français (PCF) play in your first years in France?

KA The PCF seemed to me at once too Stalinist and too conservative. In the so-called cultural sphere its positions did not seem very advanced.

SE So what kind of intellectual environment did you encounter in France?

KA At that time, France was dominated by Marxism – more or less dogmatic – and existentialism. Neither of them satisfied me, and the university philosophy of the professors did not essentially concern me. I therefore met and discussed with the marginalized, the isolated – that is to say, those who were that way at that time – in the search for another way, outside of trodden paths.

SE Can you tell us about your studies in France, teaching at the Sorbonne and working as a researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS)?

Kostas Axelos was born on 24 June 1924 in Athens. He was educated in a Greek lycée, the Institut Français in Athens and the German School. He enrolled in the Faculty of Law in Athens, but the war turned him towards politics. Under the German and Italian occupation he took an active role in the resistance and the ensuing civil war as an organizer, journalist and communist theoretician (1941–45).

Axelos moved to Paris at the end of 1945, leaving on the same boat as Cornelius Castoriadis and Kostas Papaioannou, where he pursued studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne. From 1950 to 1957 he was a researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique. He then worked on his theses, as a research assistant at the École pratique des hautes études, until 1959. During this time he attended courses by Heidegger and Jaspers. From 1962 to 1973 he taught philosophy at the Sorbonne.

His first book, *Essais philosophiques*, was published in Athens in 1952. He was a contributor, editor and then the chief editor of the *Arguments* journal (1956–62), whose contributors included Barthes, Lefebvre, Blanchot and Lefort. Since 1960 he has been the director of the *Arguments* imprint with Éditions de Minuit. His Sorbonne doctoral theses were published by Minuit as *Marx penseur de la technique* (1961; trans. Ronald Bruzina as *Alienation, Praxis and Techne in the Thought of Karl Marx*, University of Texas Press, 1976) and *Héraclite et la philosophie* (1962). These are the first two volumes of a trilogy, ‘Le déploiement de l’errance’, of which the third volume, *Vers la pensée planétaire*, appeared in 1964. This was followed by *Einführung in ein künftiges Denken: Über Marx und Heidegger* (Niemeyer, 1966), based on lectures given in Berlin.

Axelos then published two more trilogies, ‘Le déploiement du jeu’ (1969–77) and ‘Le déploiement d’une enquête’ (1969–79). Other works include *Systématique ouverte* (1984), *Métamorphoses* (1991), *Lettres à un jeune penseur* (1996), *Notices ‘autobiographiques’* (1997), *Ce questionnement* (2001) and *Réponses éniqmatiques* (2005), all with Minuit.

KA Teaching at the Sorbonne did not do much for me: it was too academic. I learnt some things, certainly, here and there, but the decisive things were elsewhere. At the CNRS my work consisted of developing my two theses: on Heraclitus and on Marx. As when teaching at the Sorbonne later, I had the freedom to speak on the issues on which I was working; these related to the books which succeeded my theses.

SE How did you come to meet Lacan, Picasso and Heidegger?

KA Lacan I had dinner together twice with our partners – one the editorial secretary of *Arguments*; the other an ex-actress and ex-wife of Bataille. There was the beginning of a discussion which did not continue. I met him again in his country house in Guitrancourt in August 1955, where he had invited Heidegger and his wife, Elfriede, Jean Beaufret and me to spend a few days. This was just before the seminar Heidegger gave at Cerisy-la-Salle, in Normandy, on *What is Philosophy?*, which Lacan did not attend.¹ The discussion between the thinker and the psychoanalyst was a complete failure. They did not speak the same language, their approaches were entirely different.

I met Picasso in 1948 in Vallauris where I was spending a few days on holiday with a friend. He impressed me very much, quite apart from his work, which fascinated me. The relationship was very good. After Picasso's partner Françoise Gilot left him, she and I had a love affair.

Heidegger I met in the summer of 1955, when he was spending a few days in Paris, just before the meeting with Lacan and the conference in Cerisy. We subsequently met several times, in his house in Freiburg or his hut in the Black Forest. We discussed many things – the 'political question' throughout.

SE This question of Heidegger's politics is still very present. What did Heidegger say about this? What do you think of this?

KA The discussion of the political question with Heidegger never advanced very far. One must say, the political realm in general eluded him. He was a great thinker and a narrow-minded petty bourgeois at the same time; he did not really understand what had happened and was happening on this level. In the discussions, he tried to exonerate himself, saying that he had committed a great error, that in the beginning National Socialism was not what it later became, that he had distanced himself from Nazism, and so on. All this was wholly insufficient. But despite the National Socialist enticement of Heidegger, his thought can absolutely not be reduced or limited to Nazism. It is an opening, but it remains covered by a shadow. This shadow cannot and must not be forgotten, but all reductive attempts to explain it fail entirely.

SE The *Arguments* journal existed before you were involved in it, and yet you went very quickly from being a contributor, in the fourth issue, to editing it, in the fifth. How did this happen? This was the time of the 'explosion' of Stalinism: was this important for you?

KA *Arguments* was created in 1956, effectively by Edgar Morin and Jean Duvignaud. I was involved very quickly. It was a passionate adventure, a laboratory of ideas, very distant from orthodoxies and -isms of the time. My separation from Marxist–Leninism dates from 1946. The events of 1956 only made clearer what had been visible before. They constituted a breach that announced in advance the collapse of an entire system, which only took place much later.

SE What was its heritage – non-orthodox Marxism, or not Marxism at all? Towards post-structuralism, or more Heideggerian ideas like that of 'world'? Its opposition to

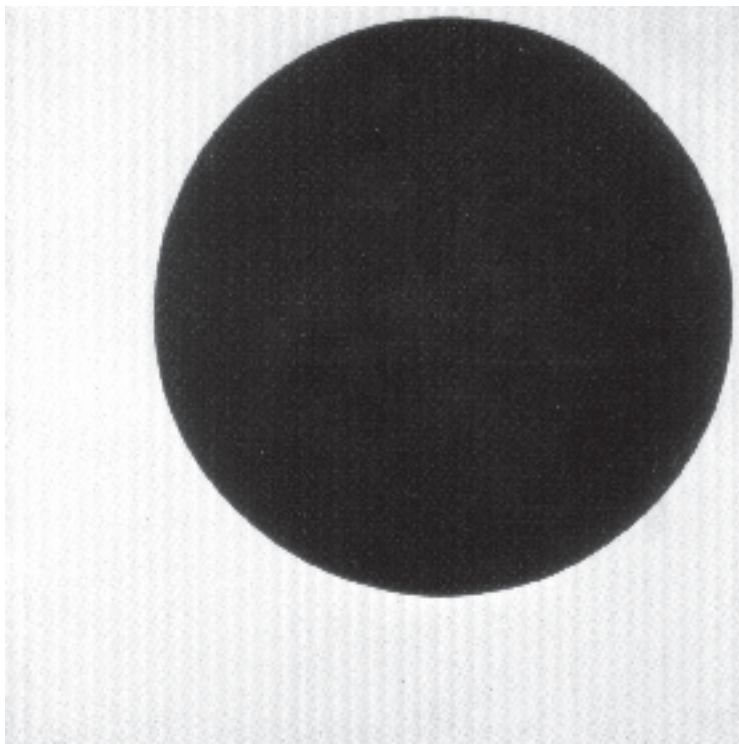
1. Axelos was Heidegger's interpreter at this event, and the translator (with Beaufret) of the lecture into French.

the journal *International situationniste* is fairly well known, but its relations to *Socialisme ou barbarie* and *Les temps modernes* appear more complicated.

KA It is difficult to say what the heritage is. The researches and ideas of the editorial team and their close collaborators were a long way from constituting a homogenous plan. The differences never ceased. I would say, briefly, that an attempt at an open Marxism, of a revised and corrected Freudo-Marxism and, finally, a post-Marxist and post-Heideggerian thought were elaborated, but not without difficulties. *International situationniste* fought against us violently. With *Socialisme ou barbarie* we exchanged articles from time to time. There was no contact with *Les temps modernes*. Each of these reviews had their direction and we had ours.

SE You played a significant role in the translation of Lukács, Korsch, Heidegger and Adorno. Why these particular figures? And why did the review close in 1962?

KA Lukács, Korsch and Adorno because they opened up a breach in systematic Marxism – quite insufficient of course. With Heidegger, a great thinker, it was important that a review that was definitely of the Left was open to him. The review was scuttled in 1962 when it was at the top of its form and its influence was growing. We did not want to repeat ourselves, to become institutionalized. We thought that we had said what we had to say – in this review and in this time period. Additionally, each of us was turning more to our own work, writing our own books.



SE There are five principal thinkers who were important in your formative years: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Heraclitus. Why return to Heraclitus?

KA Heraclitus was at the beginning of a very great current of thought, and he remains an originator. Nietzsche and Heidegger productively confronted this, each in his own way.

SE The world, the game, errancy and technology are perhaps the four central themes of your work. Would it be true to say that *mondialisation* is not the same thing as *globalization*? What would be the difference?

KA *Globalization* names a process which universalizes technology, economy, politics, and even civilization and

culture. But it remains somewhat empty. The world as an *opening* is missing. The world is not the physical and historical totality, it is not the more or less empirical ensemble of theoretical and practical ensembles. It deploys itself. The thing that is called *globalization* is a kind of *mondialisation* without the world.

SE ‘The becoming-philosophical of the world is at the same time the becoming-worldly of philosophy; its realization is at the same time its loss.’ Why is this quotation from Marx so important to you?

2. See Eugen Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1960. A French translation appeared in the Arguments series: *Le Jeu comme symbole du monde*, trans. Hans Hildenbrand and Alex Lindenberg, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1966.

KA Philosophy, as philosophy, is not alive any more. It is reflected in the history of philosophy, and is replaced by technical sciences – of nature, humanity and its works, theories and social-historical practices. These technical sciences ignore what they cross. As such philosophy sees its end. Those that succeeded Hegel should not be called philosophers, but thinkers.

SE What is the relation between the world and the game, *le jeu*? What do you mean when you talk of the *jeu du monde*, the play of the world? Is this related to the fragment of Heraclitus where he talks of time as the child who plays?

KA The *world* deploys itself as a *game*. That means that it refuses any sense, any rule that is exterior to itself. The play *of* the world itself is different from all the particular games that are played *in* the world. Almost two-and-a-half thousand years after Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Fink and I have insisted on this approach to the world as game.²

SE Technology is a theme of Heidegger's, but you read it in the work of Marx. Is it a question of alienation through technology? What political implications follow from your understanding of the idea?

KA Heidegger talks of the 'question' of technology and, more precisely, of the essence of technology. Technology is certainly at work in Marx's thought, but Heidegger deepens the theme further. Technology is neither a god nor a devil. We can neither unconditionally say yes to it, nor deny it completely. It is at the same time alienating and an opening, it is everywhere in work: in techno-science, techno-politics, techno-culture – in all political regimes. Friendship towards technology – neither wanting to dominate it, nor submitting to it – is a present and future task. Contemporary people and societies – apart from Islamic fundamentalism, which displays a backward-looking tendency – are marked by an omnipresent technology, as much in the real as in the imaginary. Technology irresistibly advances. We always have to think, still more deeply, and search for a style of living which exhausts itself in neither conformism nor unreflective revolt.

SE You write of planetary technology. How do you understand this idea, and what relation does it have to politics, planetary politics?

KA Technology puts into movement all that happens on the earth and leads to the conquest of space, the conquest of the other stars in the heavens. In Greek, planet means wandering star [*astre errant*]. All planetary movement is therefore errant, it takes place in the play of errancy. Errancy is not the converse of truth, it does not mean error or vagrancy. Everything that we name as truth – empirical or transcendental – is precipitated into errancy; the truth does not illuminate what it is, it is done, it demolishes itself. Planetary technology governs planetary politics and no government can resist it.

**Interviewed by Stuart Elden
Paris, Autumn 2004**