
Introducing Kostas Axelos and ‘the world’

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Kostas Axelos was born in 1924 in Greece, but has lived almost all of his adult life in Paris. He moved to France in 1945, after the defeat of the communist forces in the Greek Civil War. He was under sentence of death at the time, and fled on the same boat as Cornelius Castoriadis and Kostas Papaïoannou (on their relation see Premat 2004). Studying at the Sorbonne, Axelos wrote his two doctoral theses on Heraclitus and Karl Marx, both of which later appeared as books (1961; 1962), while translating Martin Heidegger, Georg Lukács, and Karl Korsch. The combination is revealing: Axelos was an unorthodox Marxist who believed that Marx’s works could be brought into productive relation with Heidegger, which would simultaneously allow a political critique of Heidegger’s own work and action. In the book on Marx, for example, he reads the problematic of technology through his writings in implicit dialogue with Heidegger.

He is best known for his works on the concept of the world, particularly the 1969 book *Le jeu du monde*; as one of the editors of the journal *Arguments*; and as editor of the book series of the same name published by Les Éditions de Minuit. A range of figures of the French intellectual establishment published in the pages of the journal, including Henri Lefebvre, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Claude Lefort, and Roland Barthes. The book series included works by Lefebvre, Lukács, Deleuze, Blanchot, Georges Bataille, as well as almost all of Axelos’s own works. Add to this his personal friendships with many of those already mentioned including Heidegger, Lefebvre, and Deleuze, and with Pablo Picasso, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida, and we get some sense of his central role in French, and indeed European, intellectual life for over fifty years.

Axelos is, however, much less well known in the English-speaking world. His book on Marx appeared in translation (1976), but none of his other full-length works has, and only a couple of other pieces are accessible to Anglophone readers (1968; 1979; 1980). There has been little analysis of his works, aside from the introduction to the book on Marx (Bruzina, 1976), and some helpful comments in Mark Poster’s *Existential Marxism in Postwar France* (1975). Even the references by French thinkers who appreciated his work are marginal in English translations (for example, Derrida, 1976, page 326, note 14; Lefebvre, 1991 [1974], pages 20, 63; 2003, page 201), and Deleuze’s essay on him has only recently been translated (2004, pages 156–161, see pages 75–76). In distinction, other countries have embraced his works much more positively, with a range of translations and interest in his writings in Greece, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Latin America, among others. In his adopted France there have been numerous studies, including a biography (Haviland, 1995) and two recent collections of essays (Lissa et al, 2004; Milet, 1997).

To my mind, Axelos is one of the most profound thinkers on the question of ‘the world’ (*le monde*) as he thinks about it in a way which is important to our

comprehending the issue of globalisation. French has two words which can be translated as the English globalisation, *mondialisation* and *globalisation*. Axelos claims that the first, which was extensively discussed in the pages of the *Arguments* journal as early as the 1950s, is worth preserving because it retains the notion of the ‘world’.

“*Globalisation* names a process which universalises technology, economy, politics, and even civilisation 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 *globalisation* is a kind of *mondialisation* without the world” (Axelos, 2005, page 27; see also 2001, page 40).

Mondialisation therefore presents problems for the English translator. In common French usage it can be rendered as ‘globalisation’ but this misses the element of the ‘world’ that Axelos insists upon. Other thinkers, including more recently Derrida (2002a; 2002b), have similarly stressed the distinction between the globe and *le monde*. Globalisation, for these thinkers, misses the element of the ‘world’ that requires thought in itself.

Mondialisation can therefore be understood as a process of becoming, a ‘becoming worldly’ that precedes any mere expansion of economic, cultural, and political phenomena. Thinking this process, this becoming, is one of the reasons why geographers should be aware of Axelos’s arguments. It enables an understanding of what it is that the other phenomena are extended over, taking into account the material and conceptual basis of the world, and the course through which it passes (see also Elden, 2005).

In reflecting on the world Axelos can be seen as the most recent of a long line of thinkers in a lineage he would trace back to Heraclitus, and whose 20th-century figures include Heidegger and Eugen Fink (1960). But while Axelos uses these thinkers as spurs to his thought they are continually brought into productive dialogue with Marx. Axelos regularly cites the comment from Marx’s doctoral thesis which suggests that “the world’s becoming philosophical is at the same time philosophy’s becoming worldly, that its realization is at the same time its loss” (Marx, 1967, page 62). In its becoming worldly—that is, in its actualisation or realisation—philosophy is transcended and overcome. For Lefebvre, who also regularly used this formulation of Marx’s, Axelos is “one of a rare breed, if not the only one” who has combined three things: scholarly work on Marx, the relation of this work to a wider trajectory of thought, and criticism of it (1985, pages 167–168; see also 1962). He forces us to confront Marx with the contemporary problems of the world, as well as the reverse. In addition, Lefebvre argues that Axelos is the only thinker who has really come close to thinking the question and distinction of thought of the world and thought in the world, as initiated by Heraclitus (Lefebvre, 1985, page 13; 1973, pages 24–26). The fragment of Heraclitus that is regularly referred to by Heidegger (1991 [1957]), Axelos, and Lefebvre states that eternity, or time (*aion*), standing as a cipher for the world is “like a child playing a game” (Diels, 1951, page 162, fragment 52).

For Axelos, then, in his development of the accounts of Heraclitus by Heidegger and Fink, the world deploys itself as a game, a *jeu*. *Le jeu du monde* can be translated as ‘the game of the world’ or as ‘the play of the world’ and Axelos works with these and other meanings, particularly in the use of *l’enjeu* (stake), and *jouet* (plaything). For Axelos the world can be understood only on its own terms, or in terms of its own rules, rather than on the basis of anything exterior to it. It is a question of internal relations and interplay.⁽¹⁾ The making-worldly of phenomena through a logic implicit only to

⁽¹⁾ On the notion of play, with some brief references to Axelos, see Brian Edwards (1997).

itself, and the claim that the world can be understood only through this continual process of becoming, is particularly brought into modern thought by Heidegger’s suggestion that “world never *is*, but *worlds*” (1998 [1967], page 126). This phrase is found in “On the essence of ground”, an essay first published in 1929, and is often reduced to the shorthand that the ‘world worlds’ (*die Welt weltet*). I take this to be the sense of Axelos’s suggestion that the world “deploys itself [*se déploie*]”, the world unfolds and unfurls itself. For Lefebvre this implies that “the world-wide [*le mondial*] conceives itself in and by itself and not by another thing (history, spirit, work, science, etc). The world becomes world, becoming what virtually it was. It transforms itself by becoming world-wide” (2003, page 200). Heidegger’s reflexive formulation is more concretely developed by Axelos through this juxtaposition with Marx (Axelos, 1964; see Lefebvre, 1965; 1992 [1986]; 2004 [1986]). Like Axelos, Lefebvre sees the notion of mondialisation as able to replace philosophical notions of totality and globality, and as able to challenge the equation of universality–rationality–totality. Lefebvre’s own writings on mondialisation and the world scale, developments of his ideas of the production of space (see Brenner, 1997), are explicitly indebted to the work of Axelos (see Elden, 2004a; 2007).

The translation which follows is a chapter taken from *Systématique ouverte* (Axelos, 1984), a book in which Axelos approaches the world from various directions, including thinking its relation to language, god, nature, the human, history, and poiesis and techne. In the chapter here Axelos discusses the world in relation to becoming, and juxtaposes this to the issue of being and totality. The play of the world is in part between the fragment and the whole, and seeks to replace the “metaphysical relation of the relative and the absolute”, just as his notion of errancy “must be substituted for the metaphysical opposition of true and false, error and truth” (Deleuze, 2004, page 76). The 1969 book *Le jeu du monde* itself is written in fragments of a whole, which like Nietzsche’s work only superficially appear as aphorisms. *Systématique ouverte* can be seen as one of Axelos’s attempts at communicating these ideas in another way (see Axelos 1984, page 123).

This translation is part of a wider project to make his ideas accessible to a wider audience (see also Axelos 2005; Elden, 2004b). For Lefebvre’s biographer Rémi Hess this work of reconsideration is important and necessary even in France (2002, page xiii, note 1).

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