

Kostas Axelos

Introduction to a Future Way of Thought: On Marx and Heidegger

Translated by Kenneth Mills, Edited and Introduced by Stuart Elden

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Reviewed by George Tomlinson

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Regrettably, the Greek-French philosopher Kostas Axelos (1924-2010) remains relatively unknown by Anglo-American readers of the modern European philosophical tradition. For those familiar with Axelos's work, his 1961 *Alienation, Praxis, and Techné in the Thought of Karl Marx* is generally the first, and only, port of call: it has been – until now – his only major work to be translated into English. As Stuart Elden's excellent introduction to *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought: On Marx and Heidegger* makes clear, the situation is quite different in continental Europe, where the availability of Axelos's corpus in multiple languages is a testament to the wide-ranging character and rich complexity of his thought. Axelos was at the forefront of postwar French intellectual life: a prodigious author, editor, translator, and interpreter, his writings were read – and commented on – by the likes of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Henri Lefebvre, and his editorship of the journal and later book series *Arguments* yielded new works by writers including Georges Bataille, Jean Beaufret, Maurice Blanchot, Deleuze, Karl Jaspers, Karl Korsch, Lefebvre, and Herbert Marcuse, not to mention the first French translation of Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*.

The English translation of *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought*, skilfully done by Kenneth Mills (no small feat considering the Heideggerian provenance of Axelos's language), is therefore a crucial step towards familiarising Anglo-American audiences with Axelos's philosophy. Published in 1966, and comprised of texts originally written in German and French, this book is a determined attempt to push thought to its limits by way of a philosophical encounter between Marx and Heidegger. One of its inspirations is unmistakably Heidegger's 1951-2 lecture courses at the University of Freiburg, better known as *What is Called Thinking?* Given both the philosophical and political differences between Marx and Heidegger (made all the more explicit by the recent publication of the latter's so-called 'Black Notebooks'), one might be forgiven for wanting to dismiss this encounter from the outset. But Axelos's point is *not* to establish some form of 'synthesis' between Marx and Heidegger. This is not an appeal to convergence. Rather, the book is a speculative attempt, as Laurence Hemming has also recently made, to foster a 'productive dialogue' between Marx and Heidegger.

The caution and nuance with which Axelos handles this encounter is beyond dispute. 'At best', as he puts it, this encounter 'can indicate what Marx and Heidegger – in differing ways – attempt to think of as the same thing: within the cohesion of disjunction' (56-7). In this regard, *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought* represents a distinctive contribution to the history of philosophy written between phenomenology and Marxism, first because it never takes for granted the very possibility of this philosophy (this is the precise reason why it is creative), and second because it is driven by the belief that 'by thinking through Marx and Heidegger, we can eventually think *beyond* them' (37, emphasis added). It is this 'beyond' that sets this work apart from much, if not all, of the existing literature within 'Heideggerian Marxism' (an association, to be fair, that Axelos would likely not accept). And it is this 'beyond' that ultimately constitutes the standard by which this book must be judged, not as something that it either realises or not (this overlooks Axelos's insistence that failure is not only necessary but philosophically productive), but as the *opening* towards which it directs the future of thought itself. This 'beyond', after Heidegger, is radical possibility.

Introduction to a Future Way of Thought is divided into three parts, each of which was written at different times and for different audiences. Each possesses its own tone, tenor, and style – the presentation is an eclectic mix of argumentative prose, philosophical theses, poetry, and interview – and thus the relations between each lend themselves to a book that is, as Elden depicts it, ‘a whole composed of fragments’, although he also points out that ‘only a few of [Axelos’s] books have a stronger narrative arc than this’ (24). Far from constituting a weakness, this structure not only reflects but amplifies the openness of Axelos’s thinking. However, it is the first part, entitled ‘Marx and Heidegger: Guides to a Future Way of Thought’ – originally a lecture in July 1957 at the Freie Universität Berlin – wherein the most substantive philosophical ideas are expressed. It is here where Axelos presents the various different levels of the Marx-Heidegger confrontation. The central importance of objectification and alienation in Marx’s early works, particularly the *1844 Manuscripts*, is recast within the framework of the ‘forgetting’ and ‘oblivion’ of being that is the mainstay of Heidegger’s postwar writings. This is itself tied to the essence of nihilism, which Axelos suggests is the fundamental ‘core of Marxism, its driving truth’ (68), as well as that to which ‘the oblivion of being, homelessness, and unconditional objectification of beings’ (72) belongs. Marx and Heidegger’s shared interest in the thinkers of Greek antiquity and Christianity is highlighted, but Axelos is quick to assert that both explicitly reject any appeal to a return to a premodern, seemingly ‘idyllic’, past. Their respective visions of the ‘end of philosophy’ – Heidegger’s identification of the ‘completion of metaphysics’ and his attendant desire to overcome it, Marx’s conviction that philosophy’s worldly realisation is at once its loss – represent a potential point of conjuncture. To be sure, Axelos regularly stresses the extent to which difference permeates this cross-reading: one thinks ontically, ‘on the basis of the emptiness of beings’, whereas the other thinks ontologically, ‘on the basis of the oblivion of being’ (55, 87). Yet there is something about the demands that each of them make ‘which allow elementary forces to express themselves and which put these forces to practical application’ (49).

In other words, there is, in Marx and Heidegger alike, a commitment to uncovering the ‘originary ground’ (to use a Heideggerian expression) of world-historical existence, be it from a materialist conception of history or an investigation into the ‘unfolding’ of being itself. Yet Axelos prioritises one elementary force over all others, insofar as he weaves it through alienation and the oblivion of being, and thereby situates it as their condition of intelligibility. This force – a consistent feature of Axelos’s work and the linchpin upon which *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought* rests – is *technology*. In this regard, ‘If Heidegger’s *What is Called Thinking?* is a central inspiration for this book, his 1954 essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ is undeniably another. Following Heidegger, Axelos engages an ontologically basic understanding of technology. Exceeding its everyday and minimal meaning as the vast array of tools, techniques, and machines that humans imagine, create, and use in order to satisfy social needs and other ends (this is the means-ends, which is to say instrumentalist, understanding of technology), the technology at work in *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought* is a unique appropriation of the originary technology at work in ‘The Question Concerning Technology’: the clearing and revealing (from the ancient Greek word *aletheia*) of the truth of a particular region of being, a particular ‘world’.

There is a tension between the humanism of Marx’s grasp of technology and the anti-humanism of Heidegger’s (the instrumental definition of technology is for Heidegger an anthropological one), but nevertheless Axelos’s wager is that technology ultimately secures a conversation between Marx and Heidegger. When, in *Capital*, Marx states that ‘technology reveals the active relation of humans to nature, the immediate production-process of their lives, and thus ... the production-process of their social relations and intellectual conceptions arising from these relations’ (80, translation modified), Axelos is urging us to catch a glimpse of how Heidegger’s work reframes, modifies, and extends the philosophical (and controversially, one might add, political) promise of Marx. (Axelos would surely

be tempted to cast a Heideggerian lens upon William Haver's contention that, in Marx, 'the tool is...not merely a means to an end, not merely instrumental in the ordinary sense of the term, but is prosthetic; this prosthesis is in fact *what we are*' (Haver 2010, 107)). Departing from the premise that technology is 'the innermost driving force of world history' (134-5), Axelos makes multiple, in equal measure persuasive and provocative, assertions about the extent to which 'the question concerning technology' pervades Marx and Heidegger and thus renders their dialogue unavoidable. Various, 'Heidegger attempts to trace the materialism of Marxism and communism back to the essence of work and technology' (44); Marx 'stands behind' Heidegger's endeavour to grasp technology (50); and 'Marx and Heidegger ... strive for the same thing: to expand our awareness of technology' (87). 'For and only "if we open ourselves explicitly to the *essence* of technology,"' Axelos declares, quoting Heidegger, "'we find ourselves unexpectedly taken up by a liberating claim'" (87).

This possibility of a liberating claim brings to centre stage two more, crucially important, dimensions of *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought*: the concepts of 'the planetary' and 'play'/'the game' (*le jeu*). The planetary, Axelos notes, 'does not only determine a particular age, epoch of world history, phase of development, cultural sphere, or stage of civilization' (140). More fundamentally, it is the nascent consummation of being within a unitary, if already always fragmentary, 'one-all', such that 'being as a whole ... become[s] established in the history of human essence' (140). The intimate tie between the planetary and Heidegger's concept of 'world' (at the forefront of this and other works by Axelos) is vital, particularly because it generates the concept of 'mondialisation' (as opposed to 'globalisation'), summarised by Elden as 'the process of becoming-worldly, the seizing and comprehending of the world as a whole, as an event in thought, rather than on the spread of phenomena of economics and politics across the surface of the globe' (18). This context is necessary, because the technology at issue in *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought* is, to be specific, 'planetary technology': technology that is the revealing of being, and hence the world, *as a whole*. Yet, echoing Marx, this revelation is at once a loss, indeed the speculative culmination of the destruction of the truth 'of the whole of being in its genesis' (129). Invoking the 'monstrous' power of modern technology in Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology', planetary technology is 'planning and planing all that exists' (128), reducing each and every mode of being to what Heidegger calls a 'standing-reserve': something to be expropriated and used. The conceptual, and now historical, relation between technology, alienation, and the oblivion of being is clear.

Yet despite all this, planetary technology is precisely what introduces us to the possibility of 'the future thought of tomorrow' (64), which Axelos names 'planetary thought'. Herein lies the doubled ambiguity at the heart of this work: planetary thought – which is the door to Heidegger's 'liberating claim' and the aforementioned 'beyond' upon which this book depends – arises from the ambiguity within planetary technology (the simultaneous revelation and destruction of being as a whole), and represents a different, 'higher-level' (56, 90) ambiguity itself. Axelos does not consider this ambiguity as much as he might, but what is clear is that it, and thus planetary thought, is 'inextricably tied' (81) to another recurring motif across Axelos's writings: play/the game. Axelos's use of *le jeu* is difficult to pin down, but it is undeniably motivated by the place of '*das Spiel*' in Heidegger. Broadly speaking, play/the game is the framework through which Axelos understands the world: it signifies the sense in which the world 'deploys itself' (21) as the 'play of time', whereby being 'act[s] as a *game*' (71) that points us in the direction of the whole: 'the one, the only, the all-unifying' (89). *Errance* is of critical importance to this framework, not because it blocks planetary thought, but because it is its condition of possibility: the higher-level ambiguity – the creative openness – of planetary thought is predicated on 'the ability to think truly-errantly the world ... as a game' (81). *Errance*, and this comes directly out of Heidegger, is the essence of truth; it must therefore be experienced and grasped by thought.

If all of this sounds far more Heideggerian than Marxian – if Marx seems to have been lost in all of this – this is because this book is, to address the heading that frames Elden’s introduction, a work of Marxist- (or Left-) Heideggerianism, *not* Heideggerian-Marxism. This is at once the source of its philosophical creativity, the strikingly fresh reading of Heidegger and Marx that Axelos presents, but this is also its defining limit. Consequently, the Axelosian dialogue between Marx and Heidegger is an asymmetric one: Heidegger holds the upper hand, inasmuch as the vast majority of this dialogue is on his terms. The ‘openness of the open horizon’ (77) that structures this book is Heidegger’s, not Marx’s. Marx, not Heidegger, must be ‘elevated into ... and borne by’ (90) the higher ambiguity of planetary thought, because it is Heidegger, not Marx, who first gives us access to this thought. The superior thinker of technology is obvious: ‘Marx reduces the world to the productive aspects of technology; Heidegger demands that we explicitly open ourselves up to the essence of technology’ (89). On the whole, this book offers little to no sense of how Marx’s work *problematizes* Heidegger’s, and thus it shuts itself off to questions that would certainly reduce the scope of their dialogue, but also, I argue, enrich it in the same stroke. Foremost amongst these is the way in which Marx’s work destabilises – and one could easily say demolishes – the highly dubious notion of ‘being in general’. Axelos’s desire, after Heidegger, to explain being ‘without having to explain through beings’ (76-7) is completely at odds with Marx’s *historical* ontology. In other words, in Marx, explaining being through beings is precisely the point: the category of ‘being’ is only ontologically valid from the standpoint of the *difference* between one mode of production and another, precisely because the capitalist human is a completely different kind of subject than the feudal human. This delimits, but does not foreclose, a conversation between Marx and Heidegger on the issue of being: it compels Axelos (and Heidegger) to recognise that capitalism is the historical-ontological condition of thinking ‘the oblivion of being’. This also reposes the question, insufficiently examined by Axelos, of the relation between planetary thought and the thought of ‘communism’. The argument here is not that Heideggerian-Marxism, as opposed to Marxist-Heideggerianism, is necessarily the opening to a future way of thought. But it is to state that a more symmetric dialogue is required, particularly if, after Sartre, one believes (as I do) that Marxism is still ‘the unsurpassable philosophy of our time’.

References

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George Tomlinson is a recent graduate of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University, London. His PhD thesis, *Marx and the Concept of Historical Time*, is currently being transformed into a book for Brill’s *Historical Materialism Book Series*. (gstomlins@gmail.com)