

What Remains is Future: Kostas Axelos and Heideggerian-Marxism

An Encounter with:

Kostas Axelos. *An Introduction to Future Ways of Thought: On Marx and Heidegger*. Ed. Stuart Elden. Trans. Kenneth Mills.
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The recent publication of Lawrence Paul Hemming's *Heidegger and Marx: A Productive Dialogue over the Language of Humanism* and Kenneth Mills' translation of Kostas Axelos' 1966 text, *Einführung in ein Künftiges Denken: Über Marx Und Heidegger* (*Introduction to a Future Way of Thought: On Marx and Heidegger* henceforth *Future Thought*) suggests a renewed interest in placing Martin Heidegger's phenomenology into proximity with work of Karl Marx. Significant attempts at developing something that might warrant the name "Heideggerian-Marxism" have been relatively few. To my knowledge, such projects are undertaken by Herbert Marcuse,¹ Karel Kosík in *Dialectics of the Concrete*, Michel Henry in "The Concept of Being as Production" and Kostas Axelos. These works emerged throughout the 1960 and 1970s out of the consensus that Marxism needed to be reimagined if it was to keep its relevance. By the 1960s, the idea that the desolate condition of workers under capitalism would be cause enough to incite revolution had failed. One of the main issues that Marxism would have to address was the role that modern technology played in determining life and labour. This led some thinkers to address the reversal of capitalist alienation through phenomenology—particularly the phenomenology of Heidegger. Typically, Heideggerian-Marxism is grounded in the consensus that Heidegger's phenomenology gives primacy to the experience of human labour. Labour is a relation

¹ A handful of Marcuse's early essays connecting Heidegger's fundamental ontology with the philosophy of Marx have been edited into a collection entitled *Heideggerian Marxism*. Despite renouncing Heidegger as an influence traces of Heidegger's late critique of modernity as technology is evident throughout *One-Dimensional Man*. In chapter 6, for example, Marcuse connects capitalism, science and technology on a fundamental level: "when tecnics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality—a 'world'" (144-169).

between human beings and nature that is mediated by technology. Though this basic schema holds for both Heidegger and Marx, Heidegger provides a deeper insight into the ontological implications of technology's utilization in the labour process, from a basic tool in *Being and Time* through to advanced technology in his post-war critique of modernity as technology. When Marxism combined with phenomenology, it would better address a world determined as much by technology as by capitalism.

Though not well-known in English language scholarship, Axelos is in many respects the most imaginative reader of Marx and Heidegger. His approach is not to look backwards to reconcile the key differences between the two, but instead to draw on their parallels to describe the dawning planetary epoch characterized by a synthesizing of capitalism and technology. Stuart Elden, the editor and author of the introduction to *Future Thought*, is the biggest advocate of Axelos in the English-speaking world.² His introduction provides an overview of many of Axelos' core concepts. He also provides a bibliography of all of Axelos' work available in English. A key figure in the French intellectual world, Axelos wrote nineteen books and numerous articles on Marxism heavily influenced by Heidegger. His thought has had a tremendous impact across European intellectual culture. However, he has been left out of English-speaking scholarship due to the lack of translations. His 1961 doctoral dissertation, *Alienation, Praxis, and Techné in the Thought of Karl Marx*, was translated by Roland Bruzina in 1976 and, until now, served as the sole full-length example of his work available in English. The present translation of *Future Thought* anticipates the unique vocabulary of Axelos' later work. This provides a glimpse into the development of Axelos' thought as it relies on but, ultimately, breaks away from strict readings of Marx and Heidegger. It gives the broad outlines of the conditions under which the "productive dialogue with Marxism" (Heidegger, "Humanism" 243), that Heidegger hinted at in his "Letter on Humanism", may be possible. Axelos' position is clearly that if Heidegger and Marx are in dialogue, their conversation is about the global reach of technology and capitalism.

My aim in this essay is to discuss Axelos' three unique contributions to the Heideggerian-Marxist project. First, Axelos' understanding of the planetary epoch (or globalization) relies on a reading of Marx that is heavily influenced by Heidegger's concept of "world", developed in Division 1, Chapter 3 of *Being and Time*. This allows Axelos to paint the broad strokes of a future thinking to correspond to what he sees as emergent. Second, he builds on the idea of an "open world" meant to combat the technological over-determination characteristic of the planetary era. In an open world, Being and thought are free and

² For a general introduction to Axelos in English, see Elden (125-148).

correspond, their possibilities not predetermined by the technological system. Third, Axelos preserves the significance of Heidegger (technology) and Marx (capitalism) to outline the potential of a thinking that, as of yet, remain a future undertaking. It thus has continued relevance today. I conclude on some ideas about how this thinking may be further developed.

It is clearly Axelos' view that a failure in Marxism does not necessarily demand its abandonment. The sense that a thinker may still be onto something is an important starting point for the imagination. It allows us to revisit the original ideas and adapt them to the present situation. Articulating what went wrong, what can be salvaged, and what can be added to a theory or philosophy is the stimulus for reinvention: "The thought of the future [that] we must be introduced to is inseparable from the thought of which has gone before and from current thought—as well as that which has not yet been thought" (Axelos, *Future Thought* 37). *Future Thought* may be said to be organized around the above statement, and its three parts could be divided into past thinking, current thinking, and future thinking. The text is divided up as follows: I. Marx and Heidegger; II. On Marx and Heidegger; and III. The Planetary. Broadly speaking, Part I explains Marx and Heidegger as philosophers of technology each pursuing similar phenomena (past thinking). Part II is Axelos' own interpretation and critique of each (current thinking). Finally, Part III on "the planetary" is Axelos' call for a new type of thought that must coincide with the globalized world, brought forth through its planetary technology (future thinking). The question he ultimately asks is, what sort of thinking does the future require to address our planetary condition?

Future Thought stands as Axelos' most significant contribution in English to the debate on the very possibility of aligning the two thinkers. In a 2006 interview, he explains his reading of their work as follows:

I did not read Marx through Heidegger, but I read Marx along with Heidegger. Despite their important differences, I was impressed by their concurrent affinity—between what Marx calls alienation and Heidegger oblivion of Being. This double reading led me to comprehend that Marx belongs to the history of metaphysics, which in its recent period regards Man (subject) as its basis. Marx simply socializes subject-Man, believes in universal society, but this remains very prosaic, deprived of world. (Memos 135)

Heidegger's writings on technology, both his early understanding of a tool in *Being and Time* and late critique of modern industrial technology, are phenomenological accounts of how the relations between humans,

technology and nature underscore the ontology of the human being. The emphasis on human labour as a mode of relating the *human* being to all other beings, as well as Being itself, is an important addition to Marx's theory insofar as it allows us to understand labour outside of its specific conditions and derive a larger string of relations from it. Heidegger calls this meaningful structure of experience "world". The world is a realm of interplay between humans and other beings. Since human beings are the beings able to perceive and derive meaning from other beings, they cannot be understood outside of these relations. Axelos' main contribution is that he gives Marx, and Marxism, world. The misstep by Marx is that he "dissolves worldly essence into human essence," and forgets that the "human essence cannot rest upon itself as it could on its own foundation" (Axelos, *Future Thought* 99). By adding world to Marx's thinking, he opens its application to possibilities that lay beyond the labour process. The clearest benefit of such an addition is the better ability to address technology through phenomenology.

Axelos' chapter on Heidegger echoes Heidegger's attempts in *What is Called Thinking?* to develop a thinking that tries to get beyond the metaphysics of the will. The difference is that Axelos puts a stronger emphasis on the world as a building block of that thinking. He articulates his own path as follows: "nowadays, a multifaceted and ambiguous, productive and questioning form of thought seeks its way and its style, internally connected and intertwined with the attempt to achieve a uniform and multidimensional lifestyle" (Axelos, *Future Thought* 105). He further states that future thinking is "inseparable from past, current, and future experience. The experience of the world" (37). It is unclear if this unity is one that needs to be strived towards, or if it will simply emerge. The task is to create a worldly form of thought to correspond with our worldly experience. For now, experience is one of full submission to technological over-determination:

Our technical activities intervene everywhere in order to alter things systemically and pragmatically. In this way, the history of the world is realized in a uniform and total manner as world history, all humans and peoples of the earth think according to the same plan, endeavor the same things, and are driven by the same things, all are the same breed. (122)

Axelos speaks of the dawning planetary era as though he is certain of its current state and future course. This allows him to make bold predictions based on the assumption that the particular social and political arrangement is "set in motion by an ever-advancing homogenizing technology" (147). His argument has explanatory power on a larger philosophical or macro level. The argument, however, does not add much

to micro level discussions of things like specific details of laws, political policy, or other such means of regulating life. The planetary epoch is a characterization of a historically situated ontology. It is the ontology of life as it is lived today and as Axelos predicts it will be lived in the future.

Axelos describes the planetary epoch that has been set into motion. In the planetary epoch, all being becomes the object of the human will (129). The argument is that what exists will only have meaning insofar as it has a purpose within the technological system: “there ‘is’ no more meaning of being, being has become an errant and wandering genesis, and everything that is has become the object of a planetary technology according to a plan, which grasps violently into this emptiness” (129). The world, Axelos claims, has become over-determined by technological forces. Being has closed itself off. And if Being has been restricted, so too have the relations that make the meaningful structure of world. To be closed off is to be restricted to a particular form. A new and future thinking is the precondition of the world’s opening. An “open world”, as Axelos describes it, is a world where our understanding of being emerges from its free play. In free play, being is unrestricted in its meaning.

Heidegger formulates his conception of world through a basic account of the use of a hammer in *Being and Time* (68-69). His later work applies his idea that a world is revealed to human beings when they use the things that occupy it to modern technology. In “The Question Concerning Technology” Heidegger explains the essence of modern technology as Enframing (19). Enframing characterizes the modern standpoint from which everything is viewed as either an object of technical manipulation or a component in a large system. Human beings too fall prey to the Enframing as they become resources ready to be utilized or the system’s control function. Axelos’ conception of the dawning planetary epoch clearly elaborates on Heidegger’s critique of modernity as Enframing. While it is true that we live in a globalized world that has planetary technology, we cannot describe that world through technology alone. It is not that human beings simply demand that everything coincides with our planning through technology, but that this demand is grounded in the need to preserve and proliferate the capitalist system. The explicit addition of the capitalist production process seems to be what distinguishes, for Axelos, the planetary and modernity. The planetary is utterly totalizing:

The age before which we stand...is planetary: planning and planning all that exists, placing it on the faceplate according to a plan, consummating a total plan. A planned economy and the stubborn economic struggle leading to planification constitute merely an extremely visible façade as well as one of the effective powers

within this holistic plan of gradation; although economic operations are intended to lead to the satisfaction of all drives and needs, and is viewed from an impetus (in Marxism), it still remains subservient to the power drive. (128-129)

One might ask: is Axelos' future thinking meant to better correspond to the world and its course, or is it meant to emancipate from it? Does a call for a future, planetary thinking that corresponds to our planetary condition change our planetary condition or does it merely make us better understand? It would seem that Axelos is saying, much like Heidegger did about the Enframing, that it is an unalterable course. It is something that simply must be lived through. If that is the case, Heidegger's suggestion that human activity cannot lift us from one era into another, and that only "human reflection can ponder the fact that all saving power must be the higher essence than what is endangered, though at the same time kindred to it" ("Question Concerning Technology" 33-34), may ring true for Axelos as well. *Future Thought* prescribes no plan of action, but calls for a new thinking. Because it cannot will us out of an era, it remains future. It remains a possibility. The issue of the response to this condition is the point at which Heidegger and Marx come into conflict. To will change in the form of a revolution, as Marx would suggest, is to act according to the same principles as the planetary technology we seek to get beyond. On this question, all Heideggerian-Marxism will either have to choose a side or imagine a compromise. In focusing on thinking, Axelos aligns himself with Heidegger.

Axelos employs a strange vocabulary of games and play. His terminology is generally appropriated from a handful of utterances by Heidegger. A crucial idea that stands behind much of *Future Thought*, but is not pursued outright, is found in Heidegger's 1957 text *Identity and Difference* where Axelos, quoting Heidegger, suggests that "the essence of Being is Play in itself" (*Play* 21). We might understand play as the unconstrained, free movement of an open world. The idea is that when thought, understood as play, is constrained, so too is Being in general. The most significant source of constraint is, for Axelos, the globalized world which deploys planetary technology in its demand to make everything coincide with strict planning. One interpretation could be that an open world can only be arrived at when thought and action unite in the form of play. As play, they would not be constrained by the social and political arrangements that are the result of technological ordering. I quote the key passage at length:

Perhaps a holy-profane game can bring into play the "non-being" of the openness of the being of beings as a whole, the horizon of the rotational motion of the world,

the difference itself of that which is distinct from being in genesis, the never concluded and never completed totality, and even the course of the planet—a deadly serious world-game into which mortals are playfully plunged in play. In this way, the harmonious and planetary essence of world-being would appear in the playroom of ‘time without aim’ neither as a tragedy nor as a comedy, but as an ‘open world.’ (*Future Thought* 145)

One possible direction that may shed some light on Axelos’ point is to take his game metaphor further. A game works by having its own set of internally derived rules. If a game ceases to run smoothly, its players can always alter its rules in order to continue playing. A game of tag, for example, ceases to work if the same player is always “it”. The point is that games are “open” to structural change at any moment. Perhaps Axelos is suggesting that, taken together, Heidegger and Marx tell us that technology and capitalism have been “it” for too long. This metaphor may be what inspires Axelos to ask, “we humans, will we succeed in entering the game in a harmonious and planetary manner, and how can we—put at risk—live playfully and perish?” (81). We need to further develop a thinking from within this game, so that we can start to play in a way that does not put us and the world at risk. What remains, for now, is the thought of the future.

We have seen how Axelos lays the path for a thinking that draws on both Heidegger and Marx. His synthesis works to imagine human possibilities within the horizon of a dawning era. Heidegger’s understanding of the world as a meaningful structure of experience that is revealed to human beings serves as the basis for Axelos’ interpretation of planetary technology and capitalism. The merging of these two forces impose a great number of constraints on life and being. Heideggerian-Marxism describes these forces as mutually imbricated. Is it even feasible that “humanity inhabit this place in a harmonious and planetary way, and find its place and hour within this wandering space and time?” (141). The answer to this question lies in the opening human beings and our world; the freeing of the constraints of our situation. Though written in 1966, *Future Thinking* today is as prescient as ever. The social, technical, scientific, political, and economic assemblages of our time too are planetary. Our reach is further than ever, but withdraws when change is requested of it. Is what remains for our thought only the future as well? I hope not. Perhaps we should think up a new game—where time, play, and thought meet without restriction. A game whose rules only come to light when our actions and thoughts restrict those very possibilities for others. Maybe only then can our thinking accept Being on its own terms.

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