Beyond a Global Horizon

Vers la pensée planétaire (1964) and the Discourse of Planetarity 1930-2020

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Introduction

> Today the planetary is on everyone's lips, and yet they don't know what they are talking about. They think the planetary is the global: what concerns Chicago and Singapore at the same time, or whatnot and whatnot. … By planetary I mean errant thinking, an errant world'. (Axelos in Gauvin 2009: min. 43, author's translation)

With these words taken from a 2009 *France Culture* interview, Kostas Axelos cautions against confounding what he calls the planetary with globalization. Now, it is certainly questionable whether planetarity is indeed the talk of the town. However, in her 2005 book *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Spivak also urged the errant thinking this paradigm stands for (the word planet comes from the Greek 'planâsthai': 'to err, to wander') and thus revived a discourse that goes back to Weimar Germany and the likes of Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger (cf. Apter 2006: 60). Likewise Achille Mbembe announced he would offer 'Reflections on Planetary Living' in his opening speech at the 2020 Ruhrtriennale that was cancelled due to COVID-19. The critique of a 'technological escalation' and 'unshackled markets' he wanted to articulate there (Mbembe 2020a) brings to mind the early developments of planetary thinking provoked by Ernst Jünger's (1930) essay on 'The Total Mobilization' of all resources, economic and technological as well.[1]

In this chapter, I would like to sketch the alternative way in which planetarity addresses the developments that are today commonly referred to as globalization. It gives voice to a fundamental critique of the presuppositions implicitly guiding discourses of globalization and to the global horizon that

allows for such presuppositions, without falling into a merely negative critique of globalization. Instead, planetarity needs to be understood as a distinct practice of worldmaking, one that grants a novel kind of perspective and agency. This is why its analysis proves an important contribution to this volume, a contribution I am tempted to characterize as a supplement to the phenomenological and epistemological paradigms that are key to the project. As a particularly economic approach to the complex discursive field of planetary thought and action, I will focus on the book *Vers la pensée planétaire* (*Toward Planetary Thinking*) that Kostas Axelos published in 1964.[2]

Axelos, a Greek communist revolutionary and exile who lived in Paris since 1945, provides somewhat of a 'missing link' between the conservative revolutionaries of Weimar and today's postcolonialism. He was influenced by Heidegger's phenomenology and the so-called 'Kehre' (turn) away from it and he was implicated in the shift to post-structuralism that French thought underwent since the 1960s. Axelos contributed to this shift by questioning the Freudo-Marxist presuppositions upon which many French (and also quite a few German) left-wing intellectuals had relied since the end of the Second World War. That *Vers la pensée planétaire* is supposed to play an active role in this intellectual and political shift is already clear from its title vector 'toward planetary thinking'. Indeed, by means of a rereading of Freud and Marx, the book seeks to inspire the 'step and leap' (Axelos 1964: 27) from a 'Western and European modernity' to what it envisions as a new 'planetary era' (Axelos 1964: 307), one that moves beyond the global horizon which gave rise to this modernity. That is to say that Axelos's project engages in a specific practice of worldmaking, a practice that leaves behind not only the grand narratives of modernity, but also the *horizon* of the *globe* in and from which they gain their 'sense' and 'self-evidence'. Thus, one might characterize the contribution the discourse of planetary provides to this volume as a distinctly post-phenomenological and post-structuralist attempt at world-making.

In what follows, I will show that planetarity moves beyond the global horizon thanks to a non-dialectical notion of becoming ('devenir') aporetically oriented toward a decentralized universe. In order to think such a becoming, Axelos playfully engages central political, philosophical and psychoanalytical arguments which allow him to swerve away from the globe's (phallo-)heliocentrism. In a second step, I will unfold the political implications of *Vers la pensée planétaire* and the understanding the book has of its own agency in the passage to a 'planetary era'. My closing remarks will turn to what I suggest calling the prefigurative style of Axelos's thinking and writing, a style whose

figurative dimension does not point back (or forward) to a literal dimension. As the future – or better: 'what is to come' ('l'à-venir') – remains structurally open, the book uses prefigurations in a manner that anticipates the way Gayatri Spivak will later speak of literature's planetary promise: it 'cannot predict, but it may prefigure' (Spivak 2005: 49).

In order to outline what is at stake in the 'planetary … leap' (Axelos 1964: 27) let me begin by outlining the globe as a different horizon of world-making.

The global horizon and total mobilization

Axelos rejects the global because it implies a model of circularity and circulation bound to the emergence of heliocentrism. Although already implicit in the metaphysical heliocentrism that goes back at least as far as Plato's parable of the sun and the cave, an actually global horizon can only emerge thanks to the 'Copernican and Galilean revolution' (Axelos 1964: 311). Throughout the Middle Ages the distinction between the sublunary realm of physics and the superlunary world of astronomy (or metaphysics) developed in Greek thought continued to prevail. It was only with modern astrophysics and its empirical heliocentrism that the movements of heavenly and earthly bodies were conceived of as following the same laws. One of the major points of Hans Blumenberg's monumental study *The Genesis of the Copernican World* is that the heliocentric model of the universe should not be misconstrued as a decentralization and humiliation of the human being. On the contrary, the shift away from a geocentric worldview allowed the human subject to imagine itself in the solar centre of the world with the earth (and all other stars) revolving around it (see Blumenberg 1987: 540ff.).

This imaginative dimension is complemented by the geographical and technological inventions of the modern age. The discovery of the Americas, the circumnavigation of earth and the innovations in cartography established a global political economy that could be mapped onto the globe; in the words of Carl Schmitt: 'For the first time in history, man was holding the terrestrial globe in his hand, the real one, as if it were a ball' (Schmitt 1997: 33). The universal model of bodies revolving around a solar centre and the political economy of circulation and accumulation began to reinforce one another, letting a global horizon emerge in which Europe could stage itself as a quasi-solar centre that accumulated the surplus gained from the global circulation of wares, persons, peoples and ideas. In other words, the figure of the globe

is bound to a nascent Eurocentrism. The human being that Schmitt sees venturing out to grasp the globe as a whole is clearly marked as a European male. In *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (originally published in 1949), Schmitt argues that free trade in a liberal world market is complicit with the emergence of Europe as a political geography of nation-states set apart from the rest of the earth (Schmitt 2003: 140ff.), which is why the modern world is both global and Eurocentric (see Schmitt 2003: 86f.). Schmitt here articulates an influential geopolitical argument that ties the emergence of global capitalism to the political, legal, scientific and technological developments in Modern Europe in a way that is already intimated in *Capital* where Marx once speaks of a 'terrestrial globe' which has been 'monopolized' by the 'revenue' system and its cycles (Marx 2000: 531). In the 1990s, Jacques Derrida referred to precisely this geopolitical paradigm when he addressed the European 'cape' as an articulation of 'capital' in the monetary and in the political sense (as 'capital' and 'capitale') (Derrida 1992: 35f.). In the global horizon of a 'European and Western Modernity', scientific objectification and economic reification from an outside – and in this sense transcendent – point of view go hand in hand. The common logic of heavenly and earthly cycles finds a philosophical justification in the (transcendental) *ego cogito* that imaginatively positions itself at the centre of the universe in an attempt to mobilize, and dispose of, everything (including all empirical egos) around this phantasmatic Archimedean point.

The consequences of such a complicity of Copernican astrophysics, modern subject philosophy and the Eurocentric political economy of colonialism and imperialism come to the fore once modernity has run its course and has, in a certain sense, already moved beyond itself. What 20th-century history shows for Axelos is that neither the universe, nor global capital, nor the so-called subject has a fixed centre. As a result, these points of reference are decentralized and dispersed in multilateral networks. From now on 'everything influences everything else, opening the field for all possible combinations and interferences' (Axelos 1964: 303). The expansion of such networks follows a 'double movement' that 'continues to accelerate,' as it simultaneously fosters 'abstraction' and 'automation' as well as 'dislocation' and 'non-adhesion' (ibid.) in such a way as to strip off any reference to an empirical centre (such as Europe or the sun). However, it does so without breaking with the cyclical model that initially arose from such a centre. The cycles continue to reinforce one other because

> the interactions and interdependences, the connections, correlations and the mutual concessions, the coordinations, the integrations, the operating, operative, and operational operations, the intercommunications and telecommunications, the reciprocal implications, the causes and causalities all act one upon the other and upon the whole of their ensemble. (ibid.: 303)

This network of networks (of networks…) sprawling across the entire global sphere is an experience Axelos shares with the Weimar intellectuals as well as with Derrida (1992: 42) who sees the European 'cape' paradoxically coming to a head in the decentralized networks of an 'extreme capillarity'. Consequently, Axelos characterizes this double movement of automation and dislocation using a famous phrase coined, and popularized, by Ernst Jünger in 1930: 'total mobilization' (Axelos 1964: 303). This is probably the most acclaimed formulation by this right-wing German writer. Not only did Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger readily embrace the phrase because it addressed the most urgent developments of the 20th century (see Schmitt 1999: 10 and Heidegger 2004: 10ff.), it also made, as Beatrice Hanssen (2006: 86) has pointed out, 'an indelible impression' on Walter Benjamin. In a book review that deals with the collection of essays in which Jünger's essay on 'The Total Mobilization' appeared – and that is extremely hostile to that volume in every possible respect – Benjamin stated that all 'precise formulations, genuine accents or solid reasoning' speak to a 'reality' which is 'that of Ernst Jünger's "total mobilization"' (Benjamin 1979: 126; for Benjamin's marginal role in the discourse of planetarity see Wohlfahrt 2002: 70 and Auer 2013: 45ff.). That even Benjamin acknowledged that Jünger's phrase has a significant bearing on reality signals why the term was later able to cross into the left-wing political camp, attracting, for example, Paul Virilio (1995: 135) or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 26, 421).

What Jünger means by total mobilization implies nothing less than the end of the global worldmaking practices outlined above. Unbridled technological progress levels all political hierarchies and dissolves all geopolitical boundaries, thus spelling the ruin of Eurocentrism and the sovereign nation-state alike. Schmitt draws the consequences this has for international law and politics. Western modernity distinguished between economy and politics along the legal lines of a liberal society (and its *bourgeois*) on the one hand and the sovereign state (and its *citoyen*) on the other. These classifications were all, in turn, mapped onto the geopolitical lines Europe drew to separate itself from the rest of the world (cf. Schmitt 2003: 140ff.). As soon as these lines

differentiating a European centre from its global periphery became obsolete, the fundamental distinctions organizing the global horizon – such as public vs. private sphere, domestic vs. foreign policy – were superseded as well. For Schmitt, this moment was reached at the Washington Meridian Conference of 1884. The Greenwich Meridian agreed upon there drew a geopolitical line that no longer defined legal spaces, but rather technologically unified the earth in terms of time and space. That Schmitt so prominently referred to the Meridian Conference is the reason that the discussion of planetarity in 1950s Germany revolved around global and planetary lines (cf. Auer 2013).

Planetarity speaks to a situation in which technological and economic innovations override all conventional political categories. Jünger and Schmitt see the end of the nation-state leading to a planetary 'civil war' in which transnational nongovernment agents fight each other on the legally unregulated battlefields that modern technologies carry onto the entire planet: 'For the first time, earth as a ball, as a planet, has become a battleground, and human history presses on towards a planetary order' (Jünger 1948: 43). What Schmitt and Jünger thus diagnosed in the 1930s to 1960s appears today in the guise of failing states, Net Wars, (cyber)terrorism or GPS-based drone warfare. It is in addressing challenges such as these that a discourse of planetarity develops which is not only interested in diagnostics, but also articulates a new kind of politics in a time threatened by worldwide warfare. Needless to say, the suggestions Schmitt, Jünger, and Heidegger, Virilio, Derrida and Spivak make for a possible planetary 'order' or 'disorder' vary significantly (and not even the German authors agree on this). In what follows I will focus on two poles of this discourse: a politics of enmity associated primarily with Carl Schmitt and a politics of friendship first introduced as such in *Vers la pensée planétaire* (but already implicit in Jünger or Heidegger, although with different consequences (cf. Auer 2013).

Axelos, who was introduced to the discourse of planetarity in the 1950s at the very latest, is also convinced that Eurocentrism and the sovereign nation-state belong to the past. 'Planetary Politics' (thus the title of the final chapter of *Vers la pensée planétaire*) begins once the distinction between domestic and foreign policy no longer holds (see Axelos 1964: 298). Since a globalized world admits of 'no outside anymore' (ibid.: 298), 'sovereignty' has become a power that 'no person or institution could wield any longer' (ibid.: 302). When interpreted within a global horizon, such a situation would inevitably call for an 'administration' – or management, governance – 'of the globe' and its cycles of 'production, distribution, and consumption' (ibid.: 309). It is remarkable that

the Cold War did not make a difference in this respect; despite the fact that *Vers la pensée planétaire* was published in 1964 during the Vietnam War and only a few years after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Beyond the ideological differences however, Axelos sees both the United States and the USSR as headed towards this kind of globalized management of circulation and accumulation.

That alone serves to show that planetarity was not a Cold War discourse and explains why it revived after the fall of the Iron Curtain. That was the case with Derrida, whose *L'autre cap* (translated into English as *The Other Heading*, not literally as 'the other cape') was prompted by the end of the so-called Second World. In it he mentions the articulation of the European cape and head (*caput*) as political and economic capital because he sees himself witnessing 'a planetarization of the European model' (Derrida 1992: 36) which might be opening itself 'not only to the *other cape* and especially to the *cape of the other*, but also perhaps to the *other of the cape*' (Derrida 1992: 15, translation modified by the author). The techno-political dispersal in networks of decentralized capillaries fosters, and exacts, an orientation toward transnational and post-Eurocentric encounters. And such is the case of Gayatri Spivak, whose plan for a planetary study of literature, in a double twist, employs Area Studies to wrest Comparative Literature from its Eurocentric bias and employs Comparative Literature to wrest Area Studies from its Cold War investments in a US *raison d'État* (see Spivak 2005: 1ff.). These are anti-state and anti-Eurocentric strategies that seek to institutionalize the discourse that Axelos introduced to France in the 1960s and that tries to conceive of 'a universe that has surpassed the solar system' (Axelos 1964: 307), instead 'breaching the cape that still conceals the abstract landscape of the planetary era' (ibid.: 311).

Since this attempt to break with the political economy of the globe – and the contemporary notion of globalization it gives rise to – raises the question of how a planetary 'avant-garde' can gain and give orientation in such an abstract landscape, it entails a new understanding not only of politics, but first and foremost of thinking and its relation to action.

The errant trajectories of 'planet-thought'

Axelos was probably introduced to the discourse of planetarity by Heidegger with whom he studied in the 1950s and who approached it from a distinctly philosophical angle. For Heidegger, Jünger's total mobilization is the final form of Western metaphysics, which is why Jünger accomplished the

feat of a reversal of Platonism set out for by Nietzsche. In his book *The Worker: Domination and Gestalt*, Jünger fully wrests 'that which is' (the essence) from the transcendence it was couched in by Plato and invests his planetary worker avant-garde with it (cf. Jünger 2007; Heidegger 2004; for a reading of Jünger in the context of the avant-garde see Groys 1999). In this reversal – that Heidegger sees preconceived in Marx – transcendence becomes what he critically calls 'rescendence [*Reszendenz*]' (Heidegger 1996: 398). Instead of leading to a genuinely planetary form of thinking and action, Jünger's avant-garde fails to move beyond the horizon of globalization it meant to leave behind. For, by establishing the 'Gestalt of the Worker' as the epistemological lynchpin and the avant-garde agency of his *soi-disant* 'planetary' order, Jünger posits a central figure around which everything is made to revolve. In other words, Jünger's practices of envisioning and making the world are intent on generating a new solar system, except that now the central luminary is not a transcendent, but an earthly, and hence 'rescendent', figure.

This is where Axelos enters the debate. To be sure, besides pointing out that *The Worker* shows one facet only of a far more complex development (Axelos 1964: 307), Axelos has very little to say about Jünger – but all the more about Marx. And it is evident that his readings of Marx are inspired by Heidegger's critique of Jünger. For example, when characterizing Marx as the last philosopher because of his shift from a conventional ontology to a conception of 'techno-logy' (ibid.: 175), Axelos is obviously thinking in Heideggerian terms. Marx brings philosophy to a close because he sees the onto-theology of Western thought culminating in an ensemble of technologies that manage everything by means of autopoietic and self-regulatory cycles. This 'cyberneticization of thought' (ibid. 1964: 18) – and with it of economy and politics, culture and civilization – operates on a necessarily earth-encompassing scale. Thanks to the abstraction and dislocation behind this mobilization of earth itself, the circulation of cycles is not bound to a geographical centre or a concrete ideological framework anymore. Since globalization has, as it were, 'emptied' out everything – and in this sense Axelos will call it 'nihilistic' – it can be defined like Leonardo da Vinci's void: 'Its centre and circumference are nowhere and everywhere' (ibid.: 25).

And yet, Axelos stresses, the nexus of cybernetics and technology only apparently overcomes the onto-theological horizon circumscribed by globe and sun. Instead of moving beyond the Eurocentric system that implemented heliocentrism economically and politically, globalization needs to be understood as a specifically technological 'occidentalization of the world' (ibid.: 198).

Technology, in other words, does not free the planet from the circulation paradigm, it rather begins to 'corset the entire periphery of the planet that is precipitated into its rotating movement' (ibid.: 303f.): 'The circle seems vicious and magical' (ibid.: 17). Globalization admits of no outside anymore because, in universalizing itself, technology always already occupies any Archimedean point from where it could be called into question and thereby veils its onto-theological character as the objectivity of a system that has stripped off any empirical centre. Axelos's term for this objectiveness is 'dépouillement total' (ibid.: 283): the original meaning of 'dépouillement' being 'skinning'. Hence, by being predicated on the nexus of dislocation and abstraction, globalization's alleged 'total objectiveness' amounts to the pseudo-objectivity of a 'total skinning.'

In pointing this out, Axelos calls attention to the implicit philosophical presuppositions of globalization. Technology's cybernetic grip on the world is predicated on the Hegelian and Marxian dialectics of 'absolute truth' and 'total reality' (ibid.: 198), which assume that world history and the history of thought converge in a common teleological movement. This brings the end of history in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to mind where absolute thinking divests itself of history and externalizes historical progress as 'a gallery of images' because it can come to itself in a 'circle that presupposes its beginning and only reaches it at the end' (Hegel 1977: 492, 802). Axelos sees this 'total and absolute spirit' (Axelos 1964: 198) spinning everything in cycles while absolving itself from any position within these cycles. Absolute thinking fully reflects itself in itself by, simultaneously, dispersing in what Hegel called a 'circle of circles' (Hegel 1991: § 15). A totality thus constituted by subtracting any localizable centre corresponds to technology's global grip on the planet. In a globalized framework – which has managed to seal itself off from any difference that could make a difference – progress is reduced to the ever-increasing technological and economic implementation of a dialectic that has, in principle, already come to fulfilment.

Axelos addresses the philosophical presuppositions of such a global discourse in an equally philosophical manner. This is why he urges that the *ego cogito* should not 'interpret itself as a sun, but rather as a planet' (Axelos 1964: 18). This paradigmatic shift would allow for a new understanding not only of the human being and human thinking but also of the world as a whole. It would thus perform the 'planetary … leap' (ibid.: 27) beyond the cyclical logic of rotation, circulation, revolution or feedback loops, which all tie into the onto-theological model of globe and solar system. Axelos was not the first,

and will not be the last, to advocate a distinctly planetary thought. This call was already articulated in Heidegger's exhortation that Jünger follow through with a truly 'planetary thought' (Heidegger 1996: 424) and it will be echoed in Spivak's 'Imperatives' of 'Planet-thought' (Spivak 1999: 49): 'In our historical moment, we must try persistently to reverse and displace globalization into planetarity – an impossible figure' (Spivak 2005: 97).

The question is how to trace such an impossible figure if even the avant-garde remains trapped in a global horizon. Axelos tries to escape this problem by drawing a planetary 'trajectory' (Axelos 1964: 46) that follows an 'impossible necessity' (ibid.: 294). Such a trajectory cannot presuppose a central body for orientation or revolution. Instead, it has to conceive of a constellation of wandering stars forever erring through a decentralized universe, or better: *pluriverse*. This errancy of thought provides a continuity between conservative revolution and deconstructive postcolonialism that lays in more than the mere word 'planetary.' For, when Axelos speaks of planetarity's 'errant course' – a course which cannot, moreover, simply be understood as 'aberrant' – (ibid.: 46), he introduces a word that harks back to Heidegger's '*Irre*' (Heidegger 1996: 196f.) and anticipates the 'grounding errancy' that Spivak – by way of Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* (which, in its turn, is a critique of Schmitt's politics of enmity) – sees guiding her model of planetarity as well (Spivak 2005: 30). Achille Mbembe's (2016) study *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Politics of Enmity) also understands itself as an intervention in this planetary debate. Already in Heidegger, the grounding 'errancy' of human existence cannot be thought as an 'ab-errancy' because it is the precondition of 'truth,' not its opposite (Heidegger 1996: 197). Axelos – and after him Derrida and Spivak – will use the term to implode what is left of a metaphysical notion of truth in Heidegger's 1920s text. What Axelos will later say about planetary politics holds true for all things planetary: 'it is completely *errant*: its "truth" itself consists in errancy' (Axelos 1964: 310).

As the remarks on Hegel and Marx have shown, overcoming metaphysics implies distancing oneself from a dialectical logic of thinking and history. The errancy of planetary thought, in other words, has to shatter the teleological course implicit in globalization and thereby has to show that history cannot have a preordained end. Accordingly, Axelos calls for an abandonment of all hopes for an 'eschatology' (ibid.: 45) and supplants the dialectic of 'absolute truth' and 'total reality' by a never-ending 'dialogue' (ibid.: 29) of thinking and world. The word dialogue, however, is not meant to provide an answer or a solution. Instead, it marks 'a question and a problem' (ibid.: 29) and thus

gestures towards the re-conceptualization of thought and world programmatically announced in the subtitle of *Vers la pensée planétaire*, a subtitle that rewrites a quotation from the early Marx: *Le devenir-pensée du monde et le devenir-monde de la pensée* ('the becoming-thought of the world and the becoming-world of thought').

In his dissertation on *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, Marx speaks of the 'becoming-philosophical of the world' [*das Philosophisch-Werden der Welt*] and a concurrent 'becoming-worldly of philosophy' [*Weltlich-Werden der Philosophie*] (Marx 1975: 85, translation modified by the author). Marx uses the terms to critique the Hegelian school (including the avant-garde of *Junghegelianer*) that he sees showing an increasing tendency to dismantle itself. This observation leads Marx to posit a dialectic inherent in philosophy which equates its realization and self-destruction:

> By the way, I consider this unphilosophical turn in a large section of Hegel's school as a phenomenon which will always accompany the transition from discipline to freedom.
>
> It is a psychological law that the theoretical mind, once liberated in itself, turns into practical energy, and, leaving the shadowy empire of … *will*, turns itself against the reality of the world existing without it. (From a philosophical point of view, however, it is important to specify these aspects better, since from the specific manner of this turn we can reason back towards the immanent determination and the universal historic character of a philosophy. We see here, as it were, its *curriculum vitae* narrowed down to its subjective point.) But the *practice* of philosophy is itself *theoretical*. It is the *critique* that measures the individual existence by the essence, the particular reality by the Idea. But this *immediate realisation* of philosophy is in its deepest essence afflicted with contradictions […].
>
> The result is that as the world becomes philosophical, philosophy also becomes worldly, that its realisation is also its loss, that what it struggles against on the outside is its own inner deficiency, that in the very struggle it falls precisely into those defects which it fights as defects in the opposite camp, and that it can only overcome these defects by falling into them. That which opposes it and that which it fights is always the same as itself, only with factors inverted. (Marx 1975: 85; translation modified by the author)

In this process inside and outside, self and other, action and reflection, friend and foe implode – without leading to a final synthesis. The passage appeals to Axelos because it envisions an a-teleological encounter of philosophy and

reality setting free an 'energy' that overrides the distinction of theory and practice. Here, Marx's own critical discourse opens the space for a thinking that withdraws the apparently safe foundations it relies upon. If all critique indeed leads to self-annihilation then this must also be true for Marx's critique of the Hegelian school. Axelos will follow the (impossible and yet necessary) 'trajectory' this insight opens for a thinking which is, in its own self-critical movement, already a political action that undermines a Schmittian distinction of friend and foe.

The importance Axelos attributes to the anti-dialectical tendencies at work in Marxian dialectics shows why Marx is a thoroughly ambiguous figure for him. Although his dialectical theory of historical progress has fostered Marxism and the totality and totalitarianism that this (both philosophical and political) ideology has led to, Axelos stresses that Marx himself escapes these tendencies and rather gives in to a fundamental errancy: 'Marx did not prepare a new philosophy and he did not believe in worldviews. The truth he took upon himself, which includes his errancy, can lead toward an open thinking that is not philosophy anymore' (Axelos 1964: 183). This is the reason Axelos engages with Marx in order to prepare the planetary leap away from globe and globalization, which means unleashing the practical energies theory contains for Marx in such a way as to swerve away from what is known as Marxian and Marxist philosophy. This is why Axelos rewrites Marx's *Feuerbach Theses*, amongst them the famous Eleventh Thesis. Where Marx stated that, instead of interpreting the world as the philosophers have always done, it is time 'to *change* it' (Marx 1976: 5), Axelos now holds that it is time 'to *think* it' (Axelos 1964: 177), with all the implications this has for Marx's 'theoretical mind' that is 'liberated in itself' (Marx 1975: 85).

Thus, reading Marx against Marx, Axelos develops the aporetic a-teleological movement of liberation (whose critique of self and other remains suspended between ideality and reality) into 'a unique becoming that carries and carries away ['porte et emporte'] world-and-thought' (Axelos 1964: 30) beyond a global horizon. For, the reason 'we cannot start with the world and reach thought, or gather élan from thought in order to encounter the world' is because this 'we' is always already 'at odds ['aux prises'] with the circularity and the sinusoidal movement' (ibid.: 30). Everything – from the economic model of circulation to the multiple astronomic rotations of the solar system, from the micro-technological feedback loops to the grand narratives of history and philosophy – loses its self-evidence in this becoming. It is a 'mystery' that is, at once, 'cosmic and ontological, gnoseo-logical and anthropo-logical' (Axelos

1964: 30). All these 'logical' disciplines are undone by what Axelos here and elsewhere calls the 'jeu du monde', the 'game' or 'play' of the world, that is, in which 'world' is what is, simultaneously, 'at stake' and 'at issue' ('l'enjeu') (ibid.: 20; for the 'jeu du monde' cf. Malette 2014).

It is no coincidence that Axelos' often playful language, which likes to engage in the game it speaks of, is reminiscent of Derrida. In fact, as the thinker of the 'game of the world' Axelos had a verifiable influence on nascent deconstruction. In its attempt to 'reach the point of a certain exteriority in relation to the totality of the age of logocentrism', *Of Grammatology* marginally refers to *Vers la pensée planétaire* and its 'game of the world' (Derrida 1998: 161, 326). The reason Derrida can name 'jeu' (game or play) 'the absence of the transcendental signified' (ibid.: 73) is that this concept tries to overcome the problem inherent in any attempt to gain access to a point external to logocentrism: that assuming such an outside reinforces logocentrism inasmuch as it implies an inside and a centre from which it tries to break away. It is only by suspending the difference between inside and outside, centre and periphery, Derrida holds, that one might be able to move away from logocentrism. Thus, Derrida is faced with a problem that is (at the very least) analogous to Axelos's problem and Derrida formulates his solution in terms that seem taken from *Vers la pensée planétaire*. The 'errancy' that *Of Grammatology* envisions follows an '*exorbitant*' course and undermines the distinction of inside and outside, centre and periphery by managing to '*exceed* the metaphysical orb in an attempt to get out of the orbit (*orbita*)' (ibid.: 161f.). That these parallels are more than coincidental comes to the fore when Derrida explains why his grammatology will never be able to attain the status of a science, because this would mean setting itself up as yet another transcendental signified. When calling attention to this impossibility Derrida again refers to Axelos, playfully and self-ironically founding grammatology on the 'game of the world' which, consequently, haunts every 'concept' such a pseudo- and para-science works with, first and foremost, its central category: the supplement. 'The supplement can only respond to the nonlogical logic of a game. That game is the play of the world' (ibid.: 259).

The stakes in Axelos's planetary thought are at least as high as those of Derrida's *Grammatology*. The, in its own right, 'exorbitant' claim of *Vers la pensée planétaire* is to seek an errancy that succeeds in remaining external to the horizon circumscribed by sun and globe. This is why Axelos – just like Derrida in his critique of logocentrism – does not critique globalization head-on ('caput'), as such a critique would itself get caught up in what it is critiquing. It

would have to assume a stable position from where it could be voiced, falling into the rescendent trap of the avant-garde. Instead, Axelos develops a strategy of writing that inspires a new kind of thinking by trajectories found in the texts of others, prefiguring something that runs counter and askance to the apparent and official results of these texts. An effort to move beyond a global horizon, thus, relies on a performance of thinking animated by unforeseen encounters with others – and others' texts – that unsettles commonly held convictions in a much more radical way than a Jüngerian or Marxist avant-garde could. Since Axelos's errant thinking and world is put into practice in a reading and writing process, the performative aspects of his own textual trajectories already figure as an integral part of the political commitment he is advocating. It is by means of a specific 'performativity' of writing that a markedly planetary thought hopes to overcome what Spivak will call 'the logofratrocentric notion of collectivity' (Spivak 2005: 32).

From onto-theology to an onto-erotology

Given that he was writing in early 1960s France, it probably comes as no great surprise that Axelos turns to psychoanalysis in order to conceive of such an alternative notion of collectivity. *Vers la pensée planétaire* features a chapter-length rereading of Freud as an 'analyste de l'homme' (Axelos 1964: 243) which promises to prepare a shift from the onto-theological character of heliocentric metaphysics to an 'onto-erotology' (ibid.: 294) intended to overcome the philosophical fixation on the sun and, with it, the psychoanalytic fixation on the 'phallus' (ibid.: 291). The philosophical overtones of Eros are already present in Freud who once pointed out that 'the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato' (Freud 1953a: 134). Planetary thought means swerving away from phallocentrism and heliocentrism alike, that is from the phallo-heliocentrism that inevitably emerges on the horizon of globe and globalization. Axelos's plea that the human being should 'not interpret itself as a sun, but rather as a planet' (Axelos 1964: 18) therefore involves a gender aspect. The French word for planet ('la planète') is feminine, while the word for sun ('le soleil') is masculine. Axelos is playing with this grammatical circumstance when he suggests that the world's (and, with it, thought's) gender 'is becoming female, if it is permissible to speak in this manner' (ibid.: 291). Spivak will take this game very seriously when she advises: 'let us all

imagine anew imperatives that structure all of us, as giver and taker, female and male, planetary human beings' (Spivak 1999: 88).

Just like Marx before him, Freud plays a pivotal, but also extremely ambiguous, role in the passage from the global to the planetary. As an 'analyste de l'homme' (Axelos 1964: 243), Freud remains an 'analyst of man,' not an 'analyst of the human being' (the French word 'homme' means both). After all, Freud infamously holds 'that libido is invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature' (Freud 1953a: 219). Nevertheless, some passages of his writings can be read as invitations to veer away from the heliocentric cycles of globalization. Axelos here follows the path of *Civilization and its Discontents* where psychoanalytical concepts are employed to account for the complexities of modern society and its 'global malaise ['mal global']' (Axelos 1964: 243). In spite of this approach, Freud markedly abstains from offering a medical or psychological cure. This 'merit of renouncing any enterprise of social therapeutics' (ibid.: 271) allows Axelos to refer solely to the diagnosis which attracts him because it introduces another non-teleological becoming. For in his text Freud calls attention to an 'antagonism of forces within Eros' (ibid.: 268) tying it in a 'more than dialectical manner' to its 'opposing powers' (ibid.: 295). As elsewhere, Axelos again tries to release the 'energetic' potentials in this thought and is thus able to read Freud's interpretation of the 20th century's *global* malaise as the indication of a 'civilization about to become planetary' (ibid.: 262).

Civilization and its Discontents lends itself to such a strategy because it casts 'the dispute within the economics of the libido' (Freud 1953b: 141) in astrophysical terms. Before distinguishing it from the 'contradiction – probably an irreconcilable one – between the primal instincts of Eros and death' (ibid.: 141), Freud compares this 'dispute' to the movements within the solar system and, at one and the same time, introduces the possibility of calling this entire model into question:

> Just as a planet revolves around a central body as well as rotating around its own axis, so the human individual takes part in the course of the development of mankind at the same time as he pursues his own path in life. But to our dull eyes the play of forces in the heavens seems fixed in a never-changing order; in the field of organic life we can still see how the forces contend with one another, and how the effects of the conflict are continually changing. (ibid.: 141)

These sentences are indicative of how Axelos sees Freud employing natural phenomena in his arguments. At first, the natural order of the solar system

seems to illustrate the forces at work in history, but the comparison with history ultimately serves to undermine the appearance of order in the natural world.

That their movements – or again 'trajectories' – unsettle conventional notions of history and nature alike is one of the most important reasons why Freud's writings appeal to Axelos. There are three things he gains by way of the passage in question. Besides tracing a path that is not dialectically oriented, Freud here suggests an 'energetic nucleus' of 'love' (Axelos 1964: 283) that constitutes itself as its own self-division, and he does this by mapping nature and culture onto each other in such a way as to undermine their distinction. In overriding the heliocentrism of the analogy, Axelos adds a fourth aspect that radicalizes Freud's anti-dialectical trajectory. From now on, the contention within Eros is not only supposed to suspend the fundamental empirical distinction of nature and culture, but also the fundamental logical distinction of individual and universal. Inspired by Freud, Axelos does not simply use the astrophysical language of constellations, suns, and wanderings stars in order to illustrate the erotic forces in history and society or to render them clearer by way of analogy. On the contrary, the way he brings the astrophysical model to bear involves a kind of 'backlash' that calls into question the status of the model itself. This backlash is supposed to undo a 'language that speaks in terms of predestination and reminiscence, of a terrestrial reprise of a celestial game' (ibid.: 281). To this end, Axelos unhinges the 'universal Eros' and the 'individual Eros' (ibid.: 288) from their association with the annual revolution (of earth around sun) and diurnal revolution (of earth around its own axis), making it unmistakably clear that the individual, or earthly, Eros does not revolve around a universal, celestial Eros. Instead, 'the 'celestial' and the 'common' guise ['visage'] of Eros' (ibid.: 288) infinitely mirror and multiply one another, dissociating into an infinite number of encounters with others. Eros is split into a constitutive tension between a 'universal Eros' and a 'particular, individual Eros'. Their conflictual interaction within Eros renders the 'fortune of humankind open. What is to come remains unpredictable' (ibid.: 288).

This movement of dispersal does more than simply change the interrelation of universe and individual, it calls into question what 'individual' or 'universe' can mean. Instead of envisioning an erotic solar system of global individuals revolving around the sun of a universal Eros, Axelos's planetary Eros moves within 'a play of centrifugal and centripetal forces' (ibid.: 279) that are 'not centred on' the *ego cogito*'s 'axis of subjectivity' (ibid.: 289). Drawing vectors between 'centering and decentering' (ibid.: 276), this play of forces can

give rise to 'constellations' (e.g. ibid.: 275, 279) – but it can certainly also lead to 'disaster' (ibid.: 291), another astronomical pun since 'aster' is Greek for star.

Against a phallo-heliocentric melancholy

Axelos's 'onto-erotology' (Axelos 1964: 294) of wandering stars that do not revolve around a common centre or around themselves anymore goes a step further than Freud. For, despite his gestures toward the *devenir* of an onto-erotology, Freud does not abandon the onto-theological model of globe and sun. As he did Marx, Axelos is reading Freud against the grain. His ensuing critique of these two thinkers that are so crucial for him is modeled on Heidegger's critique of Jünger and Nietzsche (the two most prominent writers for the latter's take on planetarity). Inasmuch as Marx's and Freud's 'reversal of the perspective of metaphysics' remains 'beholden ['tributaire'] to metaphysics' (ibid.: 253) the reversal amounts to what Heidegger called a 'rescendence' (Heidegger 1996: 398) of transcendence: 'Marx socializes the *ego* of the *cogito*, the subject, and wants it to socialize the objects of the *res extensa*. Freud analyses the *ego*, descending into its unconscious and sees it at odds ['le voit aux prises'] with its objects' (Axelos 1964: 253). The consequences are a 'brutally anti-dualistic dualism' (ibid.: 253), which, in Marx's case, leads to a conception of the end of history in a class Armageddon and, in Freud's case, reintroduces a conception of social dynamics following a 'simple dialectic of love and hate' (ibid.: 283). Thus, the clear-cut distinction between friend and foe that Carl Schmitt did not cease to advocate re-enters the stage. Since neither Marx nor Freud follows the openings provided by their own texts, they always swerve back into the cyclical models they wanted to break away from and thus end up trying to reconstitute lines that could separate inside and outside, self and other, friend and foe. In this respect at least, they point back to Carl Schmitt's global and Eurocentric world where the 'Self' was still able to subtract itself from what it deemed to be a mere outside. Axelos's post-Freudian planetary Eros and post-Marxian planetary politics seek to undermine such distinctions, in the hope that this will overcome the melancholy haunting every avant-garde.

Axelos parts ways with psychoanalysis when he characterizes Freud as a 'melancholic' with 'anti-metaphysically metaphysical convictions' (ibid.: 263). While the latter knows that he is overcoming metaphysics, he does not know *what it is* that he is thus overcoming; just like the melancholic who knows

'*whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him' (Freud 1953c: 245). Freud's debunking of the *ego cogito* shows the 'ambivalence' (ibid.: 251) inherent in the way it models, and relates to, objects in the world (reifying everything including itself). But because he cannot move beyond his fixation on the (masculinely coded) I (to which he must always himself 'regress' – again just like a melancholic), Freud has to conceive of this ambivalence in the dualistic terms of 'narcissism' and 'sadism', 'love' and 'hate' (ibid.: 251). This also holds true for all avant-garde movements (such as the ones articulated in Marx or Jünger). Love (of the self, i.e. the either individual or collective identity) and hatred (for the either individual or collective other, the enemy) give rise to 'countless separate struggles …, in which hate and love contend with each other' (ibid.: 256). The 20th century has globalized the repetition compulsion fuelling these conflicts by spinning the entire planet in an 'infernal cycle of revenge and resentment' (Axelos 1964: 278). Such a globalization compulsion would indeed be ruled by the Hobbesian 'maxim' Axelos attributes to Freud: '*homo homini lupus*' (ibid.: 259). The errant trajectories Axelos' text follows are meant to evade the civil war lurking on this horizon.

Such an eccentric errancy is necessary because Freud's critique of a globalized modernity rides on the implicit assumption of an essence of man (which is moreover defined as 'the wolf of the other'). In order to veer away from the dualisms of metaphysics, and the global conflicts such an assumption gives rise to, one has to jettison the concept of an essence altogether. And, since Freud's essence of the human is modelled on an alleged essence of man ('homme') – Axelos now argues with Lacan against Lacan – this will also mean conceiving of a 'phallus' that is 'owned' by no-one (ibid.: 291). Thinking will only be able to address the radically 'historical' character of any putative 'ontological essence of the human being' once the impossibility of 'fixing the essence of the male or the female' has blurred sexual difference, instead testifying to the 'fundamental bisexuality' of any human being (ibid.: 292). Jacques Lacan, whom Axelos knew personally, famously argues that the phallus is not an (albeit partial) object or a phantasm, but 'the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole' (Lacan 2006: 579). This process of signification constitutes the barred subject of psychoanalysis by means of a 'not-having ['manque à avoir']' (ibid.: 582) that appears in males as the fear of castration and in females as penis envy. In the talk that Lacan gave on 'The Signification of the Phallus' in 1958 in Munich (and I am not sure whether Axelos knew this precise piece), he used an astrophysical term dear to Axelos to refer to the tension within the couple to which this *manque à avoir* gives rise. Ev-

ery heterosexual relationship manifests 'a centrifugal tendency of the genital drive' (ibid.: 583) on both the male and the female side, demonstrating that Eros itself is not only defined by the centripetal tendency toward monogamy and monandry, but also by an opposite force toward polygamy and polyandry.

To conceive of a phallus owned by no-one means reappraising the role of this centrifugal tendency, and with it the role of lack, privation and negativity in Lacan's thought. To this end, Axelos propagates a 'negative onto-erotology where plenitude and void are not distinguished by the criteria of a massively positive reality or ideality' (Axelos 1964: 294). In an onto-erotological perspective, any 'fixation' would appear as one possible 'modality' of the 'fundamental errancy' of planetarity amongst others (ibid.: 294). Consequently, if the centrifugal und centripetal forces are articulated here in terms of 'a polygamous monogamy and a polyandrous monandry' (ibid.: 278f.), this is not only meant to emancipate women from a patriarchal paradigm, but also to reconsider the relation of Other, others, and selves. Instead of enabling all relationships to the self and to others, Lacan's Other is here dissolved into endless encounters with others that constellate, de-constellate, and re-constellate what could be called selves. In other words, the centripetal and centrifugal forces inspiring the planetary encounters in their ever-changing movements of (de- and re-)constellation are not directed toward the (phallic) sun, but toward a decentralized pluriverse.

This is how, following certain trajectories of the Freudian text, Axelos is able to dissolve the heliocentric fixations of metaphysics without having to assume a rescendence. In an 'encounter with another being,' Axelos points out, 'it is *as if* we already knew what we are about to know and what we cannot know because we do not know it' (ibid.: 281). So far, this passage simply restates the paradox of seeking for knowledge formulated, for example, in Plato's *Meno*. However, since the planetary Eros has unmoored itself from the anamnetic fixation on the sun, it does not follow Plato in positing a past knowledge that could be retrieved in such a search. Instead, Axelos underscores that 'we cannot know' what we are on the verge of experiencing 'because we did not know it beforehand' (ibid.).

'Perhaps': the practical energies of planetary politics

Thus, the exorbitant claims planetarity is making should have become clearer. *Vers la pensée planétaire* sets out to unsettle the fundamental distinctions be-

tween nature and culture, individual and universe, self and other, man and woman, friend and foe. This is supposed to contribute to a new form of politics that might meet the challenges of a world where all cycles are turning into decentralized networks of technological feedback loops. Such a distinctly planetary thinking and politics are all the more necessary because the technological revolution that has swept away the classical Eurocentric global world order is in danger of reinforcing its onto-theological model of an absolute totality, and of thereby leading to new forms of totalitarianism based on what one might call a globalized 'white' ideology (cf. the 'white mythology' in Derrida 1974).

In order to meet the new and unforeseen challenges globalization poses, thought and politics 'must dare to be planetary' (Axelos 1964: 182). For Axelos, the only hope that they will indeed be 'in no way totalitarian' (ibid.) resides in the leap beyond the global horizon. A truly planetary thought comes to a (paradoxically self-beheading) head ('caput') in a political activity that unleashes the potentials granted by the dissolution of national borders and the end of Eurocentrism. This means engaging the technological ensemble of networks in ways that turn their graphs into open trajectories leading to encounters that cross all boundaries. In 'breaching the cape that still conceals the abstract landscape of the planetary era' (ibid.: 311) these encounters attest to a decentralized, trans-national, post-sovereign, a-teleological thought and world. When Axelos sketches the unforeseen opportunities the planetary leap will afford, he again refers to Freud's auto-antagonistic Eros. Genuinely planetary politics will have become possible, he argues,

> Once we remember that Eros is what connects the beings and things of the world by opening a conflict with opposing forces that are more than just dialectically tied to it, and once we establish – now already and in anticipation of what is to come – relations of camaraderie that are more profound and more trembling [*frémissante*] (in which terms can we still speak of friendship without lying?) between the men and women that we are and are becoming. (ibid.: 295)

Whatever Axelos's direct influence on Spivak might be, it is clear that the hybrid camaraderie outlined here prefigures what she will – with reference to Derrida's critique of Schmitt's notion of politics as a distinction of friend and foe – call a 'politics of friendship': 'I am not advocating the politicization of the discipline. I am advocating a depoliticization of the politics of hostility toward a politics of friendship to come' (Spivak 2005: 13).

Axelos sees this friendship stimulated by the aporetically 'practical energy' which, according to Marx' dissertation, 'accompan[ies] the transition' from theory to practice, 'from discipline to freedom' (Marx 1975: 85). That this energy does not fuel a new avant-garde, which would or could lead the way into a better future, brings up the issue of what status Axelos's own text has; how a book whose title reads 'toward planetary thinking' is involved in the 'planetary step and leap' (Axelos 1964: 27) it speaks of. Since *Vers la pensée planétaire* is admittedly geared to giving attention and articulation to the 'unique becoming that carries and carries away world-and-thought' (ibid.: 30), it thus in a sense, 'enacts' this *devenir*. This is why the constative and cognitive aspects of the text cannot be separated from its performative and rhetorical aspects. Here the full philosophical implications of the planetary Eros come into perspective. For, in order to articulate the ever-changing constellations of a planetary era, Axelos sees the need to 'prepare the way to a different language' (ibid.: 32), a language that has freed itself from the 'copula' just as Eros has freed itself from 'copulation' (ibid.: 296). This argument again alludes to Lacan for whom 'sexual intercourse ['copulation']' was signified by the phallus which, in its turn, stood in a close relation to the '(logical) copula' (Lacan 2006: 581). Deviating from the phallo-heliocentrism of the global model thus entails a conception of language that disperses the 'whole' of Lacan's 'meaning effects' (ibid.: 579). Instead of subsuming the specific under the general, the individual under the universal, (the 'global' under the 'solar'), Axelos breaks with a language that assumes subjects and objects brought in correlation by 'copulative judgements' (ibid.: 295).

Unmoored from their function within the totality of a universe meaningful in and of itself, the chains of 'signifiers' would open trajectories leading into the errancy of a decentred text (and in this movement the chains would cease to be 'signifiers'). In neither referring to a 'reality' nor signifying an 'ideality', such trajectories of language suspend the difference between literal and figurative sense, becoming what Axelos calls 'non-figurative figures' (Axelos 1964: 47), figures, that is, that are neither imaginary nor simply real. This is the language in which the always problematic and questionable 'dialogue' (Axelos 1964: 29) of world and thought could take place. Thus, Axelos's planetary trajectories are populated by figures defying the distinction of the rhetorical and imaginary on the one hand and the material and real on the other. They are supposed to invert and displace the onto-theological model that assumes a central being that could eminently embody being. Here it is the other way around: Planetary trajectories give rise to figures that are poised, and open,

toward what is to come, but cannot be decoded as if there were a plaintext behind them. This is why the figures that populate such planetary trajectories are prefigurations gesturing toward a future – an *avenir* – that necessarily remains open. Or, one last time, in Spivak's words: 'The figure "is" irreducible' (Spivak 2005: 52).

The necessary self-defiguration of any prefiguration is why *Vers la pensée planétaire* will never establish a meta-discourse. Instead it sees itself – and the figure of planetarity it argues for – as one among many non-figurative figures. This is written into the figure of planetarity itself which, according to its own aporetic (Derrida might have said: supplemental) logic, brackets all its statements inasmuch as it shows that every apparent truth and reality is a mere prefiguration open to an other that is not phallo-heliocentric. This paradox is echoed in the tone of Axelos's book which questions and probes, suggests and alludes more than it pretends to give definitive answers. Entire paragraphs are mere catalogues of questions that may be maieutic, but are not supposed to serve the establishment of a philosophical system. And instead of giving closure to itself, *Vers la pensée planétaire* opens upon what is to come on its final pages. The book ends with an 'Interlude' (Axelos 1964: 321) of markedly 'Non-Final Remarks' (ibid.: 319).

The key word in the book might be the probing word 'perhaps' ('peut-être'). At least, one has to take Axelos's statement 'perhaps we are on our way to a planetary thought' (ibid.: 45) seriously. The we that is speaking here is not a *pluralis maiestatis*, it is the open place of encounter with others. Axelos invites his readers to the dangerous and endangered space opened by this shifter (or fader) because he hopes it can provide 'a hotspot ['foyer'] of resistance and attack' (ibid.: 277) against the self-veiling heliocentrism of the concept of globalization, a hotspot in which a multitude might conceive of 'a camaraderie' that is 'deeper and more trembling ['frémissante']' (ibid.: 295) than the self-veiling phallocentrism of a brotherhood of man.

Notes

1 On 5 August 2020 the Süddeutsche Zeitung published a German translation of what was allegedly the text Mbembe was going to present at the Triennale. Its focus on Covid-19, however, makes it unlikely that this was in fact the original text (cf. Mbembe 2020b).

2 Since the book has not been translated into English yet, all translations from *Vers la pensée planétaire* are my own.