

## THE GREEK "BOAT PEOPLE"

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### THE GREEK "BOAT PEOPLE": EXILE, THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMAGINARY AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

#### PART ONE OF A TWO-PART ESSAY

Given the upsurge of the Greek left and anarchic youth (beginning with the 2008 uprisings) in the last few years and the highly debatable results of the "victory" by the Left coalition party, SYRIZA, it is timely to reconsider one of the most significant periods in modern Greek intellectual life. This involves the passage and rather remarkable exit from right-wing tyranny and entry into new conditions and rhythms of everyday life predicated on a newly found freedom of movement of thought for the generation of the 1940's. This essay, which is divided into two parts ( the second in the next issue of *Situations*) has a threefold task: a description of the historical movement of this generation (which will focus primarily on the philosophers on the *Mataroa*). Secondly a descriptive analysis of the experience of a different exile and a redefinition of nostalgia which facilitates the openness for transformative politics that was encouraged and motivated in the Parisian intellectual and artistic milieu of the post war period. Thirdly, an engagement with the thought of two of the most prominent philosophers on the boat, Axelos and Castoriadis, which will demonstrate the role their practico-theoretical activity could play in reorienting the Greek Left today as well as grounding their Left-Heideggerian and Left-Aristotelian principles respectively. This will take shape in the second part of this two part essay in the role of poesis and the concept of Heraclitean play as subversion of dominant orders of thinking and structure which for Axelos becomes the way out of a totalizing thinking that was predominant in the Western Marxist tradition. Castoriadis' conceptualization of praxis as engaged and enlightened thinking activity brought a new force to the war of position. Both thinkers I will engage as our contemporaries from whom there is much to learn and may offer an **otherwise thinking** that marks the overcoming of the stasis consistently facing the international left with its emphasis on homo economicus rather than thinking otherwise and embracing the poetic spirit deeply suppressed in most discussions.

“At last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at last our ships may venture out again to face any danger: all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, our sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an “open sea.”

— Nietzsche, *What our Cheerfulness Means*. #343, *The Gay Science*

## LINES OF FLIGHT: NO COUNTRY FOR WISDOM

When the post-World War II Mediterranean imaginary is archived, a primary Epic story and its cinematic quality, especially in terms of narrative and exquisite imagery, will be the secret boarding of the ship, *Mataroa* on December 24, 1945 and the escape of over 200 scholars, artists, intellectuals and others from a right government bent on the assassination of some and the life imprisoning of others. An atmosphere of fear and violence had been created in the post-Metaxas era by the Greek Right in collusion with Churchill’s England and the early prefiguration of the Truman doctrine, whose chief political mantra and impetus was **anything but communism**. This ethos near the beginning of the Greek civil war (also known as the first battle of the Cold war) was captured brilliantly and adroitly by the novelist, Nikos Kazantzakis in his seldom read novel, *The Fratricides*. This novel is an excellent illustration of the levels of violence and madness that existed due to ideological strife, a primeval violence that led to, “Murder, that most ancient need of man, took on a higher mystic meaning... and the chase began— brother hunting brother.” Again, one is reminded of a prolonged Greek resistance that took the form of an active struggle towards a transformed world premised on a revolutionary drive for equality and freedom for humanity.

The *Mataroa* was the name of a New Zealand military transport ship that was commissioned by Octave Merlier, the director of the Ecole Francaise in Athens. It is not an accident that the ship’s name, *Mataroa* is a Polynesian word meaning “the women of great eyes,” suggesting the *mise en scene* of Athena in Homer’s *Odyssey*. The intention of Merlier and his assistants was to give safe passage ( Merlier was to coin the phrase the “boat of hope.”) to Italy and then by train to Paris to those dissidents who were on the executioner’s list. These executioners were composed of right-wing paramilitaries who had on December 8th 1944 literally murdered twenty-eight civilians and wounded hundreds of others. The physical location of the snipers was particularly revealing; they were positioned on the rooftop of Parliament and fired into Syntagma (Constitution) Square. It had only been six weeks since Greece

was liberated from the Nazi occupation and there was growing suspicion by the British (and by proxy, the US) that the Greek Left, particularly EAM and its military arm, ELAS had become much too strong and must be halted. To restrict and destroy this movement and begin a campaign of what was called "organized suspicion," required recruitment of supporters of Hitler and other fascist sympathizers to fight the threat of communism.

Neni Panourgia has chronicled some of the stories of those on the famous *Mataroa* in her book, *Dangerous Citizens: The Greek Left and the Terror of the State*. It is necessary to mention some of the more prominent of those escaping the state terror and its use of right-wing militia. These included the philosophers, Kostas Axelos, Cornelius Castoriadis, Mimika Kranaki and Kostas Papaioannou. Others were the architect, Georges Candilis, the painters, Constantin Byzantios (whose drawings were admired and introduced by Michel Foucault ) and Christian Zeros, the founder and editor of *Cahiers d' Art*, and the sculptor, Costa Coulemtianos, whose work with metal and bronze was acclaimed in Paris by the aesthetician, Roger Vaillard. I mention these figures in the thinking, spatial and plastic arts since they all come of age and reach creative maturity while in Paris and become major contributors to their respective fields of practice. Others of lesser public notoriety on the transport ship included philologists, historians, classicists, and some poets. The great composer and musician, Yannis Xenakis was not on this boat as some have thought but did escape possible execution two years later and as is well known landed in Paris through a journey through Italy carefully mapped out by members of the Italian Communist Party. And most of the persons on the *Mataroa* were of bourgeois background and in varying degrees class traitors, those who rejected their class and its values and this moment figures prominently in their productive lives.

It is crucial to remember that the three wise men, Axelos, Castoriadis, and Papaioannou were active in the Resistance in Greece before their legendary escape from potential imprisonment and possible execution. Castoriadis was a Communist Youth member and later left to become a Trotskyist activist and historical actor. Both Axelos and Papaioannou were active in the Greek Communist Party and the Germans sentenced Axelos to death for mobilizing the Resistance of the Youth league and he served as one of the party's leading theorists. Of course, the World War II period and their respective actions were to shape their later political and intellectual engagements and one consistent thread stayed the course, that of an active dialogue with Marx and a critique of Stalinism, given the failure of Soviet intervention against the British and Greek right coalition and the return of the monarchist forces. These three

plus one were significantly the “dangerous citizens” that required exile to continue to live and produce. The other philosopher of the group, the wise woman, Mimica Kranaki wrote of the experience: “Je n’aurai plus rien a moi, plus rien, meme pas un coin de terre a aimer. Je ne serai de nulle part. Seulement cette grande blancheur beante, l’avenir, et ce qui reste a faire.” (I will no longer have anything that belongs to me, nothing at all, not even a little patch of earth to love. I will be from nowhere. Only this immense gaping whiteness, the future and what remains to be done).

Cornelius Castoriadis called the voyage of the *Mataroa* in the life of modern Greece a historic event, one that must seriously be written one day, an event which may be one of several which shocked Greece, a country which essentially had been static for twenty five centuries had in the course of twenty years been subjected to a massive and rapid invasion of the consumerist culture of modern western “civilization” affecting not only the country but the quality of life and general comportment of the population. Now subjected to exile beginning with an odyssey from the sea through a bombarded train station near Rome, changing trains multiple times, and boarding another train near the Swiss border and finally through a long and arduous trip through Italy into France, the most prominent and radical group of Greek intellectuals entered the city of light, traumatized yet undergoing an ecstatic newness and openness to the Kantian maxim, that possibility is higher than actuality. The Greek “brain drain” had begun and the “open horizon” of which Nietzsche had remarked was there for a new and young generation of the philosophers of the future in France. Clearly early post-World War II Greece had become no country for Wisdom and creative praxis.

### EXILE, NOSTOS, AND THE CREATIVITY OF A “FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT”

Maurice Blanchot has written that, “The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact.” Certainly, this could be rethought in terms of the fragmented and exiled relationship to the concept of home and the creative nostalgia that remains for those on the *Mataroa* and those who entered Paris on December 28, 1945. It is through these remains that the Greek exiles were not only able to function once in Paris but use that ethos to its fullest. Almost all of the persons on the boat went on to live very productive lives such as Byzantios the artist, Coulentianos, the sculptor, who both gained international reputations from gallery showings and sales in Paris. It could be said the city of Light brought greater sharpness and

clarity to the Mediterranean imaginary in that the culture of Post war Paris was open-ended and accommodating to thought and artistic practice. This intellectual ethos was dominated by a post-war Sartrean existentialism with its deep emphasis on the freedom of subjectivity, i.e., we are condemned to be free. Into this space, the Greek philosophers, Axelos, Castoriadis, Kranaki, and Papaioannou were thrown and challenged through their escape to freedom and exile from home.

It is here that I would like to examine the kind of exile these philosophers experienced. Of the four mentioned, two are somewhat known in the Anglo-American world: Axelos, minimally and Castoriadis whose work has been widely translated. I will concentrate on Axelos and Castoriadis and their thought-activity but will also give a sense of the contributions made by Kranaki and Papaioannou.

First, it is necessary to look at what *exile* means to this group. It is not a kind of linear exile (a nineteenth century notion of exile, (footnote on the romantic notion of exile from Byron saving Greece to the revolutionary approach as in Marx, developing a plan of revolution)), in the sense of a moving elsewhere or forced to move elsewhere, a sentiment of feeling foreign in the new place where one has landed. Although displaced with their lives in danger, linear exile is not predominant, or for that matter other than the obvious, necessary to their thought. For the Greek boat people, it is not a matter of the past recaptured, but one of the **future taken**. In juxtaposition to linear exile, is the exile of the nomad, that of the process of becoming other. Gilles Deleuze has characterized the intellectual-artist in our epoch through the concept of nomad thought, a dynamic and unrelenting process of becoming, thought and movement that cannot be coded and contained within the State. The Greek philosophers on the *Mataroa* who landed in Paris are prefigurations of the exiled nomad with the emphasis on the future and a past left behind. No longer a romantic notion of exile moving from point A to point B, the nomad exile is a Nietzschean moment of the *übermensch*, overcoming the past without longing for a lost world of meaning and superceding historical repetition thus breaking the fetters of the "old" country or for that matter, "another country." No longer predicated on a Byronic sentimental nostalgic quest to save and perhaps invent modern Greece, or the Promethean challenge of the romantic revolutionaries, the nomadic is closer to the Orphic poesis of the future or in another register, exile as a liberating place, the u-topia that is forthcoming, a non-place in which the Kantian maxim of the future, "Possibility is higher than Actuality" demonstrates the emergence of ethical action, the concept of praxis that we will turn to with Castoriadis' thinking.

Post-war Paris afforded this kind of nomadic thought. Freed from the policing and murderous apparatus of right-wing forces in power in Greece, Axelos, Castoriadis, Kranaki and Papaioannou are opened to a new kind of radical imagination, one of the Mediterranean imaginary, but doubly, cosmopolitan and nomadic. The exile experienced moved from a productive imagination, one transcendent and categorical to a radical imagination, immanent and deconstructive (as we will see later in the case of Axelos). This exile experienced is a primary impetus and condition of the group's varying contributions to radical thought, mixing in the Mediterranean imaginary and a self-reflective approach to the dangerous days of political activity in Greece with that of a new openness and creativity. A dominant cultural subjectivity becomes radicalized, that is oriented to a new critical stance to Marx and Marxism as well as the beginning of the production of new concepts that demonstrate the idea of exile (from the Latin: *exilium*: outside this place ) as a liberating odyssey and the conditions for a possible course of ethical action (*praxis* in Castoriadis' sense). The determinism of formal perception is freed in relation to the home and an outside of cultural subjectivity is proposed in different ways of how to transform the world.

There is another kind of relationship that the Greek thinkers undergo in the Parisian ethos in addition to anti-romantic exile. This centers on the sentiment and very profound experience of nostalgia. Etymologically, nostalgia has two Greek roots: *nostos* as a return home and *algos* as a longing. Through this etymological meaning, nostalgia could be defined as a longing for a home that is no longer there and in another sense as longing for a place (*topos*) that never existed. We can read the journey and myth of Odysseus as one historical example of the first longing whereas the Myth of Er in the tenth book of Plato's *Republic* as an example of the second. Albert Camus insightfully characterizes both in his notebooks of the 1930's: "Odysseus is given a choice (by Circe) of immortality or a return home. He chooses the latter." It is crucial to think of nostalgia as a historical emotion, one in cinematic language called double exposure and wherein time and space are understood differently in which a division of the singular and universal, the local and global becomes possible.

In terms of temporality, nostalgia can be both retrospective and prospective. What can be learned from this is that the future forces us to take responsibility for the poetry of the past (Marx) and in this process nostalgia overcomes any melancholy attached to loss and can promote transformative activity that refuses to submit to the irreversibility of time. The city of light gifts the Greek philosophers with a prospective temporality, one not burdened

but responsible to the longing of the Mediterranean imaginary. It could be asserted that the gift of the Parisian ethos included a relationship to Marx that is not burdened by the dominant currents of the pasts and its icons.

Nostalgia can also be tentatively divided into two main types. First, a reflective nostalgia that is best defined as dwelling in the longing, and a sentiment/action that ironically postpones the return home and the actual homecoming. It lives in the longing, ambivalently yet accepting fragmented memories, embracing modernity and prefiguring post modernity. This is an anti-Heideggerian nostalgia in that there is productive longing and creativity in the moment, not the call for an interiorized dialogue with the ancient pre-Socratic Greek. More analogous with Walter Benjamin's conception of historical memory, the reflective nostalgia gathers the fragments without the aura of the past and the lamentation of lostness. The Parisian philosophical ethos (one of futural existential angst and freedom alongside a collective drive for enlightenment) for these modern Greek thinkers becomes responsible for the provocation of the new philosophical imaginary and displaces their need for homecoming. This kind of nostalgia is restorative in that it is not bound to the past and is complementary to the now of the present and capable of meeting the place (topos) of the future armed with the full concept and a more radical set of categories. The philosopher and classicist, Rachel Bepaloff has poignantly captured this restorative nostalgia by her insightful intuition that Homer's universe is what our own is from moment to moment. We do not step into it, we are there (Rachel Bepaloff, *On the Illiad*). Homer is on the threshold where myth crosses over into poetry and the act of creation (poesis) is restorative in the moment and engaged towards the poetic praxis of the future. In this context, Marx's restorative "nostalgia" at the end of the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, that the "The Greeks still afford us an artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model is still prescient."

Those philosophers on the *Mataroa* carried with themselves into the city of light and its post-World War II milieu the healthy nucleus of a nostos futurally driven. They embraced this nucleus that destroyed forms of linear exile and opened the path towards new forms of radical imagination. This process could be described ironically as specific to those Greeks who entered Death backward: what they had before them was their past, the moment that Philosophy lives on because its moment had not yet been realized and as the horizon from which to think.

Crossing the threshold of the “immense gaping of whiteness,” that Kranaki eloquently describes, new ways of philosophizing and new strategies of praxis emerge, not the longing for home. A Sartrean freedom, a living in full contingency became these modern philosopher's starting point and one that carried the burden of revolutionary commitment, one what was principled in thought and decisive in action.

These combinations of forces contribute to the production of a new form of radical (in the age of when the term itself both explicitly and implicitly has been demonized and reified by journalistic means and linked primarily to religious fundamentalist terrorism ) imagination. They possessed a radicality that is faithful to the material etymology of the word **raxis**, which is to re-root radically.

## IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

The France, namely Paris, into which these philosophers entered was a space of free spirited thinking and liberated zones of political imagination. Dominated by two major currents of thought, Sartrean Existentialism and its parallel in Kojève's philosophical anthropology and on the other hand, the textual practice and dedicated Hegelian pedagogy of Jean Hyppolite, the French intellectual milieu was situated between German metaphysics, Soviet Marxism (the Parti Communiste Francaise avatars) and American Pragmatism. Two journals were prominent in the tradition of critical and transformative thought, *Les Temps Modernes* and *Critique* (headed by Georges Bataille). In terms of Leftist practice, the post-1945 parisian ethos was the greatest testament to the radical imagination since the great period of creative activity and practice in the Soviet Union from 1917-1924.

In particular, Castoriadis became politically involved and by the 1950's was one of the crucial members of the Socialism or Barbarism group with Claude Lefort and the very young Jean-Francois Lyotard. Axelos became an editor of the publisher, *Editions Minuit*, one of the most radical publishing house outside the academic mainstream. He headed the Arguments series, which was an avant-grade attempt to situate intra-leftist debates in the 1960's until the turn of the century. Kranaki and Papaioannou were considered excellent pedagogues in the French system of higher learning. For example, Papaioannou's lectures on Marx and the Marxists were engaging, exacting, and highly erudite and provided a horizon (with, of course Henri Lefebvre's metaphilosophy) from which to think the most salient debates of creating a



transformative culture in the post-World War II horizon. Marx and Hegel's conception of civil society was also addressed in a short text by Papaioannou, *De la Critique du Ciel a La Critique de la Terre*. In Kranaki's case, she finished her studies at the C.N.R.S. in 1957 and worked for 18 years as a professor of German Philosophy at the Universite de Nanterre (1967-1985) and her philosophical work included expertise on Emil Lask and neo-Kantianism. However, her reputation rested firmly as an experimental novelist. *Philhellenes: 24 lettres d'une Odysee* was a masterpiece of the Greek literature of the migration. Of all those on the famous boat, she captured the active longing for the land of the ancients in the most poignant metaphorical style. Kranaki is exemplary in her capture of the effects of subjective exile in a style reminiscent of the best of poetic prose. Unfortunately for us, none of her work nor that of Papaioannou are translated into English but they did have an impact on the French scene of writing and thinking in pedagogical force and in Kranaki's case in modernist experimentation.

Finally, the work of Kostas Axelos must be mentioned, who perhaps was the most interesting and alongside Castoriadis, the most original of the thinkers from the *Mataroa*. Axelos embraced a new form of thinking that was a synthesis of the best of the Heideggerean destruction of western metaphysics and an ontological rewriting of the Western Marxist tradition's focus on alienation and *techne*. Axelos was one of the first post war thinkers that elaborated a non-teleological reading of Marx, and who in opposition to economic determinist and closed philosophical readings so dominant in the Marxian tradition and particularly in the Party avatars, developed a new sense of alienation as a rupture from the fulfillment of humanity and the predominance of technique over *techne* in the epoch of industrial-technological Capital. His conception of play opened a new way of thinking that was beyond significance and absurdity, truth, and error. Play takes the role of transcending duality and of a different way of experiencing time. The innocence of Heraclitean becoming and world as the letting-be of play is heightened in much of Axelos' later work and in the next part of this essay, I will discuss and engage these radical and liberating conceptions developed by him. What I will elaborate is the parallel movement of two originally different conceptions of Castoriadis and Axelos, that of praxis and poesis and show how relevant these are for our time and perhaps offer a path out of the subjection and servility to which we have now become accustomed and habituated. Despite SYRIZA's failures and lack of imagination, we can focus on what Castoriadis advised in 1964 in that we must think before acting and in the case of Axelos, we need to return to a restorative nostalgia by combining the poetizing activity of the play of the world with that of understanding

the political rhythms of everyday life and praxis. In what will follow in the second part of this intervention will be an embrace of the poetry of the future and a notion of praxis as activity that subverts dominant regimes of ideology and everyday life. Concluding this section, a quotation from early Marx is appropriate for the transition to the second part and the interplay between Castoriadis and Axelos: "Modern Philosophy has only continued the work begun by Heraclitus and Aristotle." (Marx, in *Rheinische Zeitung*, 1842).

End of Part I

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