Play as the System of Systems*

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Let us begin abruptly with two quotations. One is from Marx who writes in *Capital* that the capitalist system prevents the worker from enjoying his work "as play of his own physical and mental forces." The other quotation is from Heidegger who writes in the "Onto-theological nature of metaphysics" [*Identity and Difference*]: "the essence of Being is Play in itself." These two quotations are not at all isolated, infrequent or arbitrary. Again in *Capital*, Marx writes, letting the word "play" remain playful: "at the same time that routine work is an ultimate attack on the nervous system, it oppresses the varied play of the muscles and confiscates all free activity, physical and mental." On the other hand, in *The Principle of Reason* Heidegger asks: "must we think about Being . . . by beginning with the essence of play?" Marx thinks that alienation and exploitation prevent the worker from developing his activity as play. The desired suppression of capitalism would permit man's multiple activity to manifest itself in play and as play. Hence the distinction between work (necessary) and play (free) would be abolished. Marx did not pursue this inspiration thoroughly. Heidegger thought that play constitutes the essence of Being which can be conceived from the ground of play, but not vice versa. This was also a fleeting inspiration. Heidegger did not emphasize it, did not develop all its consequences. In fact, he seems to have abandoned it. Marx, on the ontological horizon, thinks *ontico-*(ontologically). He thinks about man's work as production and techné thanks to which the auto-production of the world is achieved. It is this practical world-making work which could become play. Heidegger, taken with the ontic, thinks *ontologico-*(ontically). He thinks about the meaning of Being which has been forgotten by man. Since Being and man's being are interrelated, it could be that the meaning of Being lies in Play.

Marx and Heidegger, with Nietzsche situated between them as that modern thinker about play influenced by Heraclitus, try to go beyond philosophy and metaphysics. One could call their thought "metaphilosophical" in the sense that it doesn't make World or Being dependent on a transcendent ideal principle, source of the True, Good, and Beautiful.

But how and where do we encounter the philosophy of play which goes

beyond this notion of principle? Let us begin by looking for the site and situation of play.

In the large system [*ensemble*] of elementary forces which link man's play to world's play, we encounter further play. In language and thought, work and struggle, love and death, this last type of play manifests itself as human play, as a set [*ensemble*] of play-events in the world. The elementary forces penetrate the great powers whose totality [*ensemble*] influences in turn the play of elementary forces and extends that play to the mediated play of the world. These great powers are: magic, myth, religion, poetry, art, politics, philosophy, science and techné. The play between the set of elementary forces and the set of great powers is grounded in the *play* between *logos* and *praxis*.

Since Plato the play which joins man's play and world's play has always been thought about metaphysically. It has been thought of in terms of non-play, in concepts which govern play and non-play. This idealist philosophy has been living its culmination and end since Hegel. What then is happening to philosophical thought? Philosophy was the ground of the sciences. Now its corpus [*ensemble*] is becoming explicit in the corpus [*ensemble*] of the sciences themselves. This corpus [*ensemble*] has two parts [*ensembles*] (although this division is not sufficiently problematic): a) natural sciences, and b) social sciences.

In the latter group the following set [*ensemble*] dominates: logic, logistics, linguistics, psychological anthropology, and sociology.

What has become of philosophy?

1. It has taken refuge in the history of philosophy.

2. As it should be, philosophy is letting itself be replaced by the sciences.

3. Philosophy has grown from pre-philosophy to meta-philosophy, to multi-dimensional and questioning thought which is global and fragmentary, open, world-wide and planetary.

In this process we should note, for those who like to square accounts, a gain and a loss. As a loss, the sciences produce rather than think. They operate and transform *techno*-scientifically. As a gain there is the possibility of getting beyond prejudiced thinking.

All philosophical thought has pondered the Being of the World—the becoming of being in the fragmentary and fragmented totality of a multi-dimensional and open world. It has been conceived in three forms but always as a reality in the world: 1) As *logos-physis* (in Greek thought), 2) As *logos*-God (in Judeo-Christian thought), and 3) As *logos*-man (in modern European thought).

These three notions constitute the only great thoughts of thinking humanity. They exist synchronically and diachronically, but the latter is more frequent and perhaps more important in the history of thought.

Physis dies when God reveals himself. God begins to die by becoming man—the son of God and the son of Man who dies on the cross—and will die absolutely when man kills him, man as the Subject who places himself at the center of all that is. However, man himself is racing toward his own *transcendence*. With the end of philosophy, humanism also perishes in the imperfection of incompleteness. Man, as an objective, thinking, active subject, has begun already to enter the epoch of his demise, a demise which will last for a very long

time. The social sciences do not constitute man. On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss, one of the protagonists of the social sciences today, has written, without understanding wholly the importance of what he has said: "the last task of the social sciences is not to constitute man, but to dissolve him." Dissolve him into what?

How has world's play already been formulated? It was more or less clearly, more or less completely, enunciated by Heraclitus and by Plato, by Solomon's *Proverbs,* by Schiller and by Novalis, by Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, by Fink . . .[1]

Little by little, the meaning of the word "play" in the sense of "world's play" is perhaps becoming more precise. Play here no longer signifies human play or play within the world, but world's play "itself," world as play, the unfurling of play in which man's play and world's play encounter each other perhaps to become one. Man is a player *par excellence,* but he is also constantly thwarted. The world no longer obeys—even though still obeying—given or assumed rules. It swallows up these rules along with all their possible combinations. For all rule-governed systems [*ensembles*] as well as the system of systems especially offer us interpretations and possibilities of meaning in the world. World's play which makes sport of man's play and of play in the world is superior to us as a player.

Elementary forces and great powers are bound in whole and in part in specific play systems. Linguistics views "language" as a combinatory system, as play between signs and rules. Logic, as a logistics, treats "thought" as cybernetic, self-regulated play. "Work," according to the "economics" and "political philosophy" of Marx, must become play, and various modes of play are put into motion in the struggle to seize power. The varied play of "love" seeks love's form and substance in the planetary era: from almost immediate sexuality through the erotic to the problematic nature of the family. Finally, we play with "death," fatal games which overwhelm us. At the same time, we perform several different types of play. Play itself is neither serious nor playful, neither necessary nor gratuitous. Contemporary "mythology" codifies all the myths and plays with them by using computers. "Religion" persists in playing with mythological play, though a bit demythologized, which in the sacred system ties man's play to God's play. Moreover, poetry and art are becoming more and more explicitly play.[2] The somewhat empirical play of world politics continues being played through and despite its protagonists. More and more it is determined by the play of techné, fed by play of the sciences. (Mathematical and political science, for example, consider probability theory and its corresponding strategies as the principle elements of Game Theory.) Thought itself, questioning defunct "philosophy" and the technical sciences which have replaced it, tries to conceive of play as world's play, the play which ties man to world. This play is indeed the system of systems [*l'ensemble des ensembles*].[3]

"World's play" is a concept before its time, but it is nonetheless a first step in the right direction: it forms the space-time of the play of all thoughts and all experiences, even those which mask and reject it. In an epoch of slogans and world views, it is not a rallying cry for a new world view. The planetary thought of world's play—already beginning to develop but remaining for the future—

constitutes our major task, a task to undertake even while we are motivated by different models and theories of play which we are trying to think out and experiment with, even though all partners and opponents in play are becoming problematic, even while we refuse to make something objective and absolute of what is in question—of what we question and what questions us.

Indeed, what can we think or do nowadays?

1. The ancient dead absolute, logos-God, can be revived by producing demythologized theology, by devoting oneself to the theology of the death of god or by sacrificing to the theories and rites of a profane religion.

2. One can undertake highly technical scientific research while attacking technoscientifically the other two ancient absolutes: nature and historical man. This is the beginning and the development of the natural and social science sets [*ensembles*], although the union of these sets does not fully constitute Science.

3. Pragmatic or messianic politics can be pursued in order to consolidate or overthrow management and power.

4. The quest for Being can be continued through a type of thought which can conceive itself forgotten and canceled, this cancellation canceling itself in its turn, leaving us in the lurch. This is the path traced by Parmenides, Plato, Kant, and Heidegger.

5. One can begin to think about world's play—taking on all difficulties of existence—by means of its grammar and syntax, by listening to its call, by thinking about it through a cunning, supple, and coherent, though baseless, type of thought which accepts the joining of opposites. This is the path of Heraclitus, Hegel-Marx, and Nietzsche.[4]

6. One can prolong with occasional innovations the exercises and trivial play of writing which, under theoretical, poetic, literary, and inscriptive [*scriptural*] pretexts, perpetuate the various more or less insignificant textual tracings of that which no longer has significance [*désignifiance*].

These six possibilities are open to us, while philosophy = metaphysics, even though it is finished and already superseded, will continue to survive itself in several ways.

For those who are tempted to think about world's play a problem arises: how do we get back and forth from man's play and play in the world to world's play? The likely response is: thanks to man, transitional being, being of transition. It is among men that the play of question and answer between man and world takes place. For these two zones [*ensembles*] tend to become one [*ensemble d'ensembles*].

The systems [*ensembles*] of matter-energy, living matter, neuropsychical, and socio-historical energy are not without antagonism, opposition, and contradiction both within each system and among the systems. Each system, each play structure, possesses forces of attraction and repulsion. To the process tending toward homogeneity (association) there corresponds—by thwarting it and by completing it—even if it means blowing it up—the process tending toward heterogeneity (dissociation). These two combined and alternating processes oppose each other both inside each system and in the system of systems. Why? Because there is never a rigorous and complete realization of a

state of the system. This is precisely because of immanent contradictions and antagonisms. Things are in play in the world. This is certain both potentially and in reality. That "is" what play is about.

What is our role as readers and parties to play, as parties to diverse forms of play? Our task consists in knowing how to read in a given instance of world's play every other type of play, and, principally, the play of the world. But we must not only read, we must play, turning the rules upside down when necessary, experimenting beyond the subject-object dichotomy with a plurality of perspectives on each problem. It is a question of matching, with serenity and sadness, to world's play the unspeakable, the unnameable, the unplayable without hurriedly forcing it into little systems which would exhaust it with their reductionist, unilateral, imperialistic methods. We must hold ourselves ready for play which summons us, play of language, thought, work, struggle, love, and death. (One cannot say that life is worth or not worth living since it is not a question of living it—with or without reason for living—but of playing it, of trying, if we wish, to attain its heights.) No doubt there are no longer elitist players or an elite of players. However there are those necessary individuals who productively amplify and intensify the rules, or rather the "style of play." As for us, we remain players always underway. For play constantly slips away from us. But it nonetheless inspires us. Doubtless we must learn to admit— vulnerable and daring—that all is thwarted, has lost its play since all games have already been played. Consequently, the only option is to thwart, to take the looseness [jeu] out of, the play of the system of systems which this lecture has presented, though, be it understood, not the play of this undeciphered text.

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NOTES

* Trans. note. The original title is "Le jeu de l'ensemble des ensembles." The term "ensemble" carries with it several precise meanings, and Axelos plays with them all. At times its use suggests "system," at others "a mathematical set," and yet again "whole" or "totality." We have marked in brackets occasions where this semantic richness has been necessarily reduced in translation. This translated excerpt from Axelos' *Horizons du Monde* is published with permission by Editions de Minuit.

1. Cf. "Brève introduction au jeu du monde" in *Arguments d'une recherche* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), and concerning nature, not game, *Le Jeu du monde* (Paris: Minuit, 1969).

2. Various novels and plays suggest play in language. It is not necessary to enumerate them all, but one thinks of Dostoevsky whose "Gambler" deals with man's situation in general. Herman Hesse in *Magister Ludi* tells the story of a small elitist republic which does not produce culture, but rather combines all the forms of past culture in a unifying relational game. Van Vogt, in a science fiction novel, *The World of Null-A* (i.e., non-Aristotelians), presents a game machine which decides governmental problems on planet Earth. Following Pirandello and his role play, Beckett stages the play of human foibles, the play of this *End-Game* which incessantly plays out *Krapp's Last Tape* beyond the sensible and the absurd, beyond tragedy and comedy in the (nihilistic) repetition of the game.

3. Cf. "Introduction à la pensée planétaire" in *Vers la pensée planétaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1964).

4. It goes without saying that possibilities 4 and 5 are related.