

October 1917 and the everyday life of the Soviet masses

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The October Revolution is a break in world history, a cardinal moment of world socialist revolution, which radically changed the shape of the whole globe and the lives of millions of people.

It is thus of utmost importance today, when capitalism plunges in the worst crisis of its history, to draw the necessary lessons not just from the political October, but also from the **cultural October** of the early 1920s. In particular, to study the changes in the everyday life of people, in their attitudes, in their way of life.

The October Revolution acted as a condition of the possibility to bring about the **social creation of the masses** through the development of all kinds of initiatives.

According to Victor Serge, after rising to power, Lenin said to the members of the Bolshevik party: “Initiative, initiative, initiative. Only those who will throw themselves to the boilers of the living creativity of the masses will hold on to power”.¹

Indeed, this process of social creation in the aftermath of October took vast dimensions in every sector of economy, society and culture.

Despite the tragic conditions of life produced by the four years of civil war, hardships, diseases, deprivations, hunger, thousands of people, mostly young

¹ Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, Marxistiko Vivliopolio, Athens 2017, pp. 152 and 159 [our translation].

ones, took on an everyday basis the initiative to participate in an amazing process of **collective artistic creation** – painting, music, theatre, etc.

It is telling that from 1918 to 1920, 186 workshops opened in Petersburg alone, where thousands of people inspired by the Revolution were painting, doing theatre, writing and reciting poetry, in a collective creation. The same was true for other parts of the country too.²

As soon as a region was taken from the Whites, theatre, dance and visual arts workshops opened, as well as discussion clubs focusing on the emancipation of women, family violence, divorce, prostitution, etc.

It is no accident that the biggest participation was in theatre, in its most avant-garde forms, where thousands of young people rushed in to express themselves, to put questions, to give their own answers, to put forth new considerations. Moreover, theatre put together all forms of art, dance, music and visual arts alike.

The revolutionary outburst and the dynamic of the revolutionary events broke down the barriers that separated the masses from the political arena, and brought about a violent irruption of the masses in the field where their own destinies were determined.

To quote Trotsky: “the rapid changes in the opinions and dispositions of the masses in revolutionary times are not produced by the flexibility and mobility of the human soul; on the contrary, they are produced by its deep conservatism. The ideas and social relations lag constantly behind the new objective conditions, until they break down as in a cataclysm, and this, in revolutionary times, brings about outbursts of ideas and passions, which are thought by policing minds as the simple products of ‘demagogues’”.³

These outbursts of ideas and passions caused by the violent inspiration of History, these breaches in the political psychology of the masses, created the conditions for the “Russian Avant-Garde”, giving the post-revolutionary period in Russia the character of an unprecedented era in the history of global culture.

Collectivist avant-garde creation in every sector opened new paths not just for Art, but also for the thinking and the emotional disposition of the masses. It became a centre of attraction for great and already renowned artists who aligned themselves with the Revolution and the changes that were taking place.

A telling example is the great poet Alexander Blok. His alignment with the Revolution made his contemporary scholars turn their backs on him, while at the same time his work was being embraced by the masses as an inspiration and an impetus to their own energy and creativity. As Leon Trotsky wrote: “Blok was a

2 Ludmila Bulavka, “The dialectics of a course: From the cultural revolution of 1917 to the counter-revolution of 1997”, *Epanastatiki Marxistiki Epitheorisi*, No 3, July 1998.

3 L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. L. Michael, Promitheas Publications, Athens 1961, p. 10 [our translation].

part of the pre-October literature, but he crossed this gap and entered the sphere of October, writing *The Twelve*, the most important work of our age, which will live forever”.⁴

The wind of the October Revolution drew to its path all the great poets of Russia.

In this atmosphere, the museums opened their gates, granting free entrance in order for everyone to enjoy their artistic treasures, which had already been enriched through the confiscations of numerous private collections by the Soviet government.

The same was true for theatres and music halls, that were full every night with proletarians. The squares were occupied by the famous **conductorless orchestras**.

Through their cultural activities, the masses created for themselves the conditions of their practical emancipation, since cultural creation was experienced not just as a social need, but as their very desire. This desire had to do with autonomy, parity and collectivity. To quote L. Bulavka: “the social self-revelation of culture happened not just because culture was turning into a tool for the revolutionary masses to work towards the creation of new life, but because the maelstrom of the revolutionary events produced in the revolutionary masses the need to understand what was going on, to find their own interest in the events and to correlate them. In this process, they were discovering new meanings in the notion of culture, which was liberated now from the alienated social relations of yore and was becoming a product of their own collective creation in the forge fire of Revolution”.⁵ That is, culture as a working tool went out of the salons where it was held until then, out to the streets. In this way, all the necessary conditions for annulling the alienation of the masses were taking shape. This was a breathtaking process, in which great artists (such as Meyerhold, Malevich, Blok and others) participated actively in the creativity favoured by the **cultural politics of the Bolshevik party**. As Lenin said: “our focus now would be the **cultural** work, if we didn’t have to cope with the international relations, if we were not obliged to struggle for our positions in the international scene”.⁶

This is why we talk about the **cultural October** of the 1920s.

The historical importance of the proletarian revolution was that it laid the foundations for a truly human culture, shaping the conditions for the creation of the **universal human being** in world communism.

It was then in the social conditions of these revolutionary changes that

4 L. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. L. Michael, Allagi Publications, Athens 1984, p. 102 [our translation].

5 L. Bulavka, op. cit. [our translation]

6 Lenin, *Collected Works* [in Greek], vol. 18, part 2, p. 144 [our translation].

breaches were taking place in the consciousness of the masses, making them embrace the socialist ideology. Because the demand and the condition of social creation was an ideal, the ideal of justice, fraternity, equality. And this ideal was being materialized, in flesh and bone, in the revolutionary conditions of the age. It was becoming, as Ilienkoff was to say, “a historically created ideal”.⁷ “Social creation became a ‘yeast’ that included the very essence of the socialist ideal and the socialist ideology. And each took its essence within the movement that brought both of them together”.⁸

In other words, social creation was the centripetal force that connected everything, the revolutionary masses, the socialist ideal and the socialist ideology, in a whole, namely, the new **cultural universality of Soviet culture**.

In this context of epochal changes on every level, everyday life was changing too. “Despite the rise of bureaucratic reaction, despite the shortages and the cultural underdevelopment, the revolutionary urge remains palpable through the 1920s, thanks to the groundbreaking efforts to **transform daily life**: reforms in schooling and education, family laws, utopias centered on the city, creativity in writing and cinema”.⁹

Indeed, in times of social eruption, daily life loses its previous negative qualities of routine, repetition and conventionality. Each day becomes a new day, and the unforeseen, the unrepeatability as a quality of social action emerges from every pore of the social body, investing everydayness with a new meaning.

According to H. Lefebvre: “everydayness is not just prosaic things, a leveled ground: it is the main instrument of the state and the mode of production for retaining and perpetuating the social relations of production in the field of the everyday and the urban, in the city, in space”.¹⁰

In capitalism, everyday life becomes a generalized condition of universal alienation from the human essence.

Great Marxist thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci and Henri Lefebvre have analyzed the notion of everyday life, bringing to light its contradictory essence in which the prospect of change is founded. Within the conditions of alienation, the very conditions of a negation of alienation are born. In the prosaic, there is also the place of utopia, of the not-yet-existent, as Ernst Bloch, the philosopher of hope, would put it: the element that can be revealed

7 E. Ilienkoff, *Technocracy and human ideals [Ideals and Idols]*, Odysseas Publications, Athens 1977.

8 L. Bulavka, op. cit. [our translation].

9 Daniel Bensaïd, “The questions of October”, *Outopia*, No 77, September-October 2007, pp. 33-48 [our translation].

10 H. Lefebvre, *Nihilism and Dissent*, Ypsilon Publications, Athens 1990, p. 56 [our translation].

through the action of the masses.

For H. Lefebvre and the Situationists, everydayness takes on different forms, as the subject expresses in a variety of ways his or her resistance to routine, as a part of a collectivity formed through anti-hegemonic coalitions on multiple levels.

In the very places of the dominant cultural industry, the conditions of its critique are being shaped, through new cultural creation, which criticizes conventionality and becomes a focus of resistance to everydayness, a focus of cultural confrontation with the establishment and of its subversion, a condition of human emancipation.

By introducing a utopian surplus in all pores of society, the October Revolution made revolution itself a component of everyday life. According to Trotsky: “for an indefinitely long period, and through constant internal struggles, all social relations undergo a transformation. Society keeps changing its skin. Each phase of the transformation emanates from the previous one... Revolutions in economy, technology, science, family, morality and everyday life are developed in a complex interaction, making it impossible for society to strike any balance whatsoever...”¹¹

Revolution produces a kind of sympathy even in the minds of those who do not take part in it, a sympathy that can reach the heights of enthusiasm. According to Kant,¹² this sympathy can only have as its cause a “moral disposition of the human species”, what revolutionaries call a “sentiment of humanity” (*sentiment d’humanité*).¹³ This sentiment may take the form of an enthusiasm for Revolution itself, which represents the notion of the “sublime”. This is the “sublime” represented by the French Revolution, which filled even Kant himself with enthusiasm, making him, for once in his life, five minutes late in his traditional daily walk. This is also the “sublime” represented by the October Revolution, which produced torrents of enthusiasm not just among the Soviets peoples, but among all peoples worldwide.

It is thus in these conditions of revolutionary upheaval that the ideas of psychoanalysis also flourished in the land of the Soviets. To be sure, psychoanalysis had already been introduced in Russia by young physicians since 1908.¹⁴ But it was only after the October Revolution that the theory and the practice of

11 L. Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, trans. Th. Thomadaki, Allagi Publications, Athens 1982, p. 16 [our translation].

12 See E. Kant, *Le conflit des facultés* [1798], Vrin, Paris 1977.

13 See Sophie Wahnich, *La Révolution française n’est pas un mythe*, Klincksieck, Paris 2017.

14 See Martin Miller, *Freud au pays des Soviets*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond - Le Seuil, Paris 2001.

psychoanalysis was disseminated by politically active psychoanalysts. In 1919, Tatiana Rosenthal gave the first post-revolutionary lecture on psychoanalysis. In the autumn of 1920, she created in Petersburg a school for children with learning difficulties, where psychoanalytic psychotherapy was practiced. In 1922, the psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Ermakoff created in Moscow another school for children with behavioral disorders, the so-called “orphans of the civil war”. These children that had lost their parents, workers, farmers, intellectuals, during the civil war were estimated to 4.5 million.

In this particular school, directed by the psychoanalyst Vera Schmidt, the teachers had been trained in a new way of teaching based on the principles of psychoanalysis; without violence or punishments, with love and constant effort to enhance the children’s critical thinking and understanding, their trust in their educators and their self-respect.

The school was financially supported by the Commissar of Education Lunacharsky; it belonged to the Moscow Institute of Neuropsychology; its original pupils were 30 children from 1 to 5 years-old; and it’s name was “International Solidarity”. Vera Schmidt herself used to call it the “home of the children”. However, from the spring of 1923, negative rumors started to spread about the school, and although the special research committee that was set up for this purpose concluded that the school should continue its work, the political pressures eventually became too strong, and towards the end of that year this model school, which had been hailed by Freud and other psychoanalysts as a pioneering one, closed down following a government decision.

In 1922, the Russian Psychoanalytic Association was founded, with 3 branches. The first one continued the work on the psychopathological issues of creativity in art and literature; the second one focused on clinical analysis; and the third one had as its object issues of education.

That same year saw the creation, in Moscow, of the first Psychoanalytic Institute in the country, which carried out programs of psychoanalytic training and was the third centre of psychoanalytic training in Europe, after the ones in Vienna and Berlin. This institute operated also a hospital with a psychiatric polyclinic specialized in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. At the same time, it announced a series of publications, with translations of works by Freud, Jung and Melanie Klein. Its first publication was Freud’s *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, in 2 volumes.

Meanwhile, many leading Bolsheviks were speaking publicly in favor of psychoanalysis. Its advocates included, among others, Radek, Joffe, Bukharin, Trotsky and Reisner, who first expounded the Soviet constitution. Their interest in psychoanalysis was a result of their general theoretical considerations about the shape of the new, communist way of life.

Trotsky in particular¹⁵ thought that literature and psychoanalysis can reveal the hidden face of man. They can contribute to shaping the new, free human being in the transition towards the communist society. An important part of this process is creation, which is rooted in and fueled by the unconscious.

In 1921-1923, which is considered to be the “golden era of psychoanalysis in Russia”, the whole Soviet society, doctors, law specialists and other scholars, along with the Soviet government, had a vivid interest in psychoanalysis. The clinical activities and the seminars of the Moscow Psychoanalytic Institute were going strong, and more translations of Freud’s works were funded and published by the Party. The Party had a strong interest in the contributions of psychoanalysis towards the development of a Marxist psychology. It was also interested in the radical reformation of the educational system as a foundation for the character formation of the new Soviet human being, and not simply in view of an eventual change in his or her behavior. Towards this kind of formation, a psychoanalysis and a psychology engaged in an active dialogue with the discoveries of Marxism would have much to offer.

It is no accident that the ranks of the serious advocates of psychoanalysis in the post-revolutionary period include two great Soviet psychologists, Luria and Vygotsky, who had translated into Russian and forwarded Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Vygotsky in particular insisted that Freud’s theory of the unconscious was to be seriously taken into account. His faith in psychoanalysis is demonstrated by his phrase in the foreword of Freud’s aforementioned work: “The obstacles that block the success of psychoanalysis in Soviet Russia will fall upon the first critical reflection”.¹⁶ Let us remember that the cultural-historical psychology later developed by Vygotsky was also a product of the socio-historical processes that were taking place, with the active participation of Vygotsky himself, in the Soviet Union during the 1920s.¹⁷

In 1925, the Soviet state authorities published the work *Psychology and Marxism*, which included an article by Luria entitled “Psychoanalysis as a system of monist psychology” where the author defended Freud’s theory. The discussion was also joined by Vygotsky, with his article “Consciousness as a problem in behavioural psychology”, where he stressed that Freud’s work on the unconscious was to be taken seriously into account.

In 1927, Vygotsky gave a lecture on “The psychology of art in Freud’s work”.

15 See Jacquy Chemouni, *Trotsky and Psychoanalysis*, trans. N. Papachristopoulos & K. Samartzi, Opportuna Publications, Patras 2004.

16 See Jacquy Chemouni, *Trotsky and Psychoanalysis*, trans. N. Papachristopoulos & K. Samartzi, Opportuna Publications, Patras 2004 [our translation].

17 See Manolis Dafermos, “Cultural-Historical Psychology and Drama”, *Tetradia Psychiatrikis*, No 112, 2010.

In later years, the attack against psychoanalysis by the official journals of the Party was so ruthless that many well-known psychologists who had expressed publicly views in favor of psychoanalysis found themselves obliged to reconsider in order to avoid persecution. Even Luria, in 1932, accepted the line of the party, in his article “The crisis of bourgeois psychology”.

Clara Zetkin argued that psychoanalysis had no place in the Party, and attributed this thesis to Lenin himself. However, Lenin had in his library 3 volumes of Freud’s works edited by Ermakov. In one of them (*Introduction to Psychoanalysis*), one could see on the side of the pages notes written by Krupskaya. The doctor that attended him had worked with Freud in Paris and Vienna in the 1880s. Vera Schmidt and her husband Otto were also close with Lenin.

In March 1927, Vygotsky wrote “The psychology of art in Freud’s work”. Yet at the same time the book *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* by Voloshinov (who belonged in Bakhtin’s Circle) was published. Thus, in April 1927, the government decided to stop funding the Psychoanalytic Institute. Luria resigned from his position of Secretary of the Russian Psychoanalytic Association.

Nonetheless, psychoanalysts continued to publish, as was the case with “anti-Freudians” too. In August 1929, Wilhelm Reich visited Moscow and was warmly welcomed by the Party milieu. Of course, Reich had publicly renounced basic Freudian principles, and had declared himself as a loyalist of the communist cause. After his departure, the psychoanalytic movement was silenced for good. In the same year, the Party officially distinguished between the (accepted) practice of psychoanalytic psychotherapy and Freud’s (unacceptable) theory.

However, the attack against psychoanalysis escalated. It was Stalin that crushed its last strongholds within the Party.

The last translation of one of Freud’s works in Ermakov’s collection was published in 1930. The rest was silence... The general climate of the 1930s was suffocating; laws against homosexuality were passed, and Gorky argued publicly that homosexuals are to be punished. On the contrary, let us remind that one of the first decrees of the revolutionary government, in December 1917, ordered the abolishment of all discrimination against homosexuals.

The Stalinist bureaucracy imposed itself through the containment of the process of social creation and the enthusiasm of the masses. The danger of bureaucracy as a hindrance of revolutionary processes had been visible from very early on. A slogan that appeared in the *Red Newspaper* in late 1918 was eloquent: “The bureaucrats up against the wall!”. And, as we know, this danger became gradually a tremendous threat.

In 1923, Trotsky wrote: “The regime that gradually establishes itself within the Party is unbearable. It kills every initiative in the Party, it reduces it to an

instrument of appointed public servants”.¹⁸

It is true that four years of civil war had deprived the masses of their avant-garde. The best proletarian elements joined the Red Army in the war against the Whites and the Reactionaries, and perished in battle.

According to V. Serge, “the workers’ state had to form in a hurry a corpus of servants, managers and commanders that could not have been recruited from the working class alone”.¹⁹

As long as the Stalinist bureaucracy gained power, exploiting the isolation of the Soviet republic by imperialism, the process of development of a new Soviet culture was being halted. As a result, the cultural movements gradually lost their autonomy and became institutionalized. The sphere of material production was given absolute priority. Bureaucratic planning prevailed, Stakhanovism was propounded. Social creation started to become alienated from the masses. All decisions were now taken by the administrative (syndicalist, managerial, party) leadership, and the workers were simply called to bring these decisions into effect. They could not participate in the decision-making process, along with everybody else, from the beginning to the end.

In this way, the very logic of social creation was undermined from within. The intervention of the Stalinist bureaucracy in itself, let alone as a mediator between the subject and the object of artistic and social creation in general, annulled this process, annulling at the same time its relation with socialist ideology, which gradually took religious qualities.

In the first revolutionary period, culture gave meaning to every social relation and was considered to be identical with Life in its multifarious universality. When the Stalinist bureaucracy prevailed, the individual was reduced to a simple **consumer** of cultural products.

The bureaucracy prevailed feeding off the wounds of the young Soviet society: hunger, diseases (with about 3 million dead only in 1921-1922), millions of civil-war victims, defeats of the proletarian revolution in the West. In these conditions, “Stalin rose to power with the support of the bureaucracy against the people, with the support of the Thermidorians against the revolutionaries”.²⁰

Lenin was ill, his health had deteriorated since 1921, and in 1922 he suffered his first stroke.

Stalin, in his capacity as general secretary, started from 1921 on to grant the first serious privileges to the bureaucratic cast (salary increases, food supplies,

18 L. Trotsky, *Problems of everyday life*, trans. L. Theodorakopoulos, Marxistiko Vivlio-polio, Athens 2007, p. 15 [our translation].

19 V. Serge, op. cit., p. 561 [our translation].

20 L. Trotsky, *Stalin's crimes*, trans. L. Michael, Allagi Publications, Athens 1984, p. 311 [our translation].

etc.) according to their ranking.

Meanwhile, the new petty-bourgeoisie produced by the New Economic Policy started to gain power; the Bolshevik Party had been obliged to adopt this Policy in 1921 to save the country from disaster. Soon, the new orders of the kulaks started to bribe and buy off starving state officials.

Already in 1922, Lenin wrote: “My worst enemy is the bureaucrat, the communist who sits in a responsible (and then irresponsible) Soviet position. This is the enemy that our lines must be purged from”.²¹

The rapid bureaucratization of the party mechanism led Trotsky to form a working group of 25 workers, men and women, all members of the Bolshevik party, in order to gain a deeper insight into the problems of everyday life in post-revolutionary Russia.

These discussions were then published in Trotsky’s book *The problems of everyday life*, and focused on gender relations, masculine violence against women, the entertainment of workers in holidays, alcoholism, suicides, illiteracy, superstitions that survived from the past and generally the problems experienced by the workers in their daily lives.

Trotsky’s conclusion was that “only the collective creation of the vast masses, supported by the inventions, the creative imagination and the initiatives of the artists, can lead us gradually to the future, to the path of new life-forms that will be intellectually superior, subtler, governed by a collective theatricality. However, without codifying this creative process, we do have to help it grow from now, by all means necessary. And to do this, we have first to open our eyes to what is called a **way of life**”.²²

According to Trotsky, “in cooperatives, clubs, local councils and in every form of collective action, with the participation of men and women alike, we have to put forth the importance of revolutionary symbolism, by inaugurating new symbolic themes, new rituals, new celebrations, new habits and behaviors. The Revolution will not be genuine if it fails to practically liberate women and take a vivid interest in children. All Soviet citizens, men and women, have to engage in this direction, and develop a ‘cultural militantism’”. The writers, poets and artists who participate in the Left Front of the Arts define **the way of life as their new front**.

The Party had to be educated in this spirit in order to be able to educate the proletariat on the basis of proletarian pride, revolutionary initiative, revolutionary morality. The reorganization of everyday life on new bases was also the concern of Alexandra Kollontai, the great Marxist who swept the whole country throughout the post-revolutionary period, giving lectures about the new gender relations on

21 Lenin, *Collected Works* [in Greek], vol. 45, p. 15 [our translation].

22 Trotsky, *Problems of everyday life*, op. cit., p. 95 [our translation].

the basis of the “new morality”, that is, of absolute freedom, mutual respect, parity and companionship. Women and men have to express their feelings to one another not just through kisses and love-making, but in a **common creative activity**. “The sexual crisis is unsolvable without a fundamental reform of human psychology, without an increase in the ‘erotic potential’. But this reform is totally dependent upon the elementary reorganization of our social and economic relations on communist bases”.²³ Yet such a reorganization required constant clashes with the Stalinist bureaucracy that kept blocking this process. This blocking of the changes that had to be made in the way of life of the masses had a disastrous effect.

As the great Bolshevik leader Christian Rakovsky remarked in 1928, in a period when the proletariat had already secured power, one could note a decay in the proletarian zeal, passivity, indifference, pessimism and a lack of revolutionary spirit. He too concluded that “changes had to be made in the composition and psychology of the Party and the proletariat”.²⁴

Against conservatism and the policing spirit of the bureaucracy, Trotsky, who expressed the spirit of the October Revolution, envisaged the new communist way of life, where men and women would be educated in conditions of freedom, with all the possibilities of the future open to them. “Master of his economy, man will stir his stagnated daily life. The burdensome duty to feed and raise one’s children will pass from the family to social initiative. Women, finally, will throw off the yoke of their semi-slavery. Along with technology, pedagogy will form psychologically new generations, directing the public opinion. Experiments of social education will develop, and their momentum will be unimaginable with today’s standards. The communist way of life will not be developed blindly, like a coral reef in the sea. It will be built consciously, governed by rational thought. No, life in the future will not be monotonous”.²⁵

These changes were forever blocked by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which imposed a regime of terror and persecution of every independent initiative, every dissenting voice. Because Stalinists knew all too well that “the reform of the way of life, had it not been blocked almost from the beginning, could have become a decisive weapon in the struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy”.²⁶

23 A. Kollontai, *Gender relations and Marxism*, Govostis Publications – Synchroni Epohi, Athens (n. d.), p. 28 [our translation].

24 Ch. Rakovsky, *The professional risks of power*, Paraskinio Publications, Athens 1990, p. 14 [our translation].

25 Trotsky, *Problems of everyday life*, op. cit., p. 201 [our translation].

26 Anatole Kopp, Introduction in the French edition of Trotsky’s *Problems of everyday life*, translated as *Les questions du mode de vie*, 10-18, Paris 1976, p. 20 [our translation].

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The great October Revolution showed to all mankind that the human being can **transform itself** and reach the greatest heights, when she fights to abolish the relations of domination among humans, when she is inspired by the Revolution, and when she creates in a collective way, opening new horizons in her life, looking up, higher and higher. As the great futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov said: “All power to the starry sky”.²⁷

5 October 2017

27 See Savvas Michael, *Musica ex nihilo*, Agra Publications, Athens 2013.