

Romanticism, Marxism and Religion in the “Principle of Hope” of Ernst Bloch

Michael Löwy

Translated by: Rodrigo Gonsalves

The **Principle of Hope** from Ernst Bloch is undoubtedly one of the major works of emancipatory thought in the twentieth century. Monumental (more than 1600 pages), it occupied the author for a large part of his life. Written during his exile in United States, from 1938 to 1947, it would be reviewed for the first time in 1953 and a second in 1959. Following his condemnation as “revisionist” by authorities of the German Democratic Republic, the author eventually left East Germany in 1961.

Nobody had ever written a book like this, stirring in the same breath the visionary pre-Socratic and Hegelian alchemy, the new Hoffmann, the serpentine heresy and messianism of Shabbataï Tsevi, Schelling’s philosophy of art, Marxist materialism, Mozart’s operas and the utopias of Fourier. Open a page at random: it is about the man of Renaissance, the concept of (material) substance in Parecelse and Jakob Böhme, of the **Holy Family** in Marx, of the doctrine of knowledge in Giordano Bruno and the book on the **Reform of Knowledge** of Spinoza. The erudition of Bloch is so encyclopedic that very few readers are capable of judging the entirety of each theme developed in the three volumes of the book. His style is often hermetic but with a powerful, suggestive quality: the reader must learn how to filter the lighting jewels and the precious stones planted by the poetic and esoteric feather of the philosopher.

Unlike so many other thinkers of his generation – starting with his friend György Lukacs – Bloch remained faithful to the intuitions of his youth and never denied the revolutionary romanticism of his early writings. In this way, **The Principle of Hope** frequently references **The Spirit of Utopia**, his first book published in 1918, including many themes that recur in the 50s – especially the idea of utopia as anticipatory conscience, as a figure of “pre-appearance”.

The fundamental challenge of Ernest Bloch is the following: will philosophy be the conscience of tomorrow, the bias of the future, the knowledge of hope, or will it not have any knowledge at all? In his eyes, the utopian will guides the libertarian movements of the history of mankind: “Christians know it in their own way, sometimes with a slumbering conscience, sometimes with a very awake interest: isn’t that bequeathed from the passages in the Bible related to exodus and messianism?”.

The philosophy of hope from Bloch is primarily an ontology of the **not-yet-being** in its various manifestations: the not-yet-conscience of the human being, the not-yet-becoming of history, the not-yet-

manifested of the world. For him, the world has its full disposition to something, a tendency towards something, **latency** to something, and that something to which the world strives is the culmination of the utopian intention: a world free of unworthy suffering, anxiety, alienation. In his research on anticipatory functions of human spirit, the dream occupies an important place, from its most quotidian form – the waking dream – towards a “dreaming forward” inspired by the images-of-wish.

The central paradox of the **Principle of Hope** is that this powerful text, fully facing the horizon of the **future**, the **Novum**, the **Not-yet-being**, says almost nothing about the future itself. It practically never tries to imagine, predict or prefigure the next moment of human society except in terms of the classical Marxist perspective, of a classless society without oppression. In fact, apart from the most theoretical chapters, the book is a fascinating journey through the **past**, consisting of the images of desire and the landscapes of hope scattered in medical, architectural, technical, philosophical, religious, geographical, and artistic utopias.

In this very particular form of the typically romantic dialectic between past and future, the challenge is to **discover the future aspirations of the past** – in the form of unfulfilled promise: “The barriers erected between the future and the past collapse by themselves, the future is not now visible in the past, while the past avenged and collected as a heritage of the publicized past and the minnow becomes visible in the future”. It is not to sink into a dream or a melancholic **contemplation** of the past, but to make the past into a living source for revolutionary **action**, for a **praxis** oriented towards the achievement of utopia.

The necessary complement of anticipatory thinking is the critical view back **towards this world**: the vigorous indictment of the industrial/capitalist civilization and its harm is a major theme. Bloch pilloried the “pure infamy” and “ruthless ignominy” of what he calls “the current world of business” – a world “generally placed under the sign of the swindle”, in which “the thirst for gain chokes any other human impulse”. It also attacks the cold and functional modern cities that are no longer homes – **Heimat**, one of the key-terms of the book – but “machines for living” reducing human beings “into the state of standardized termites”. Denying organic forms, refusing the Gothic heritage of the three of life, modern constructions resemble the crystal of death represented by the Egyptian pyramids. In a last analysis, “the functional architecture reflects and even doubles the glacial nature of the world of automation,

its people divided by the work of its abstract art”.

Bloch's critique of modern technology is primarily motivated by the romantic exigency of a more harmonious relationship with nature. The bourgeois technique does not maintain with nature a relationship other than the hostile relationship of the market: it “is installed in nature like an army occupying an enemy country”. As the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the author considers “the capitalist concept of technique as a whole” reflects “a wish of domination, a master and slave relationship” with nature”. This is not to deny the technique as such but to oppose the existing one in modern societies to the utopian one of “technical alliance, a technical publicized with the coproduction of the nature”, a technique “understood as deliverance and publication of the slumbering creation buried in the lap of nature” – a formula borrowed (as often with Bloch, without reference source) from Walter Benjamin.

This sensitivity, which could be called “pre-ecological”, is directly inspired by the romantic philosophy of nature, a **qualitative** conception of natural world. According to Bloch, it is with the rise of capitalism, exchange value and mercantile calculation that we assist the “forgetfulness of the organic” and the “loss of sense of qualitative” in nature. Goethe, Schelling, Franz von Baader, Joseph Molitor and Hegel are some of the representatives of the return to qualitative, which developed as a reaction against this omission. Habermas was not wrong to call Ernst Bloch the “Marxist Schelling” insofar as he attempts to articulate, in a unique combination of romantic philosophy of nature and historical materialism.

Bloch also shares with Schelling a philosophical interest in religion – even if he is radically opposed to conservative ideas of the romantic German thinker. Of all the forms of anticipatory consciousness, religion occupies a privileged place because it constitutes for its author the utopia par excellence, the utopia of perfection, the totality of hope. It is nevertheless clear that the religion which Bloch subscribes to – to use one of his favorite paradoxes - is an atheistic religion. It is a kingdom of God without God, which reverses the Lord of the World settled in his heavenly throne and replaces it with a “mystical democracy”: “Atheism is such little enemy of religious utopia, that has same presupposition: **atheism without messianism has no place**”.

However, Bloch tends to distinguish, in a sufficient trench, his religious atheism from any vulgar materialism, “bad disenchantment” conveyed by the flatter version of the Enlightenment – that he calls

Aufklärlicht, distinct from the **Aufklärung** – and by the bourgeoisie doctrines of secularism. It does not oppose the banalities of free thought, but attempts to save it by transporting to immanence the contents of desire of religion, treasures which include under the most diverse forms **the idea of communism**: from the primitive communism of the Bible (remembering nomadic communities) to the monastic communism of Joachim de Flore and the chiliastic communism of millenarian heresies (albigensian, hussites, taborites, anabaptists). To demonstrate the presence of this tradition in modern socialism, Bloch concludes maliciously in his chapter on Joachim de Flore with a little known quote by the young Friedrich Engels: “The self-consciousness of humanity is the new Holy Grail where people come together around with joy... this is our task: to become knights of the Grail, gird the sword for him and risk our lives joyfully in the last holy war to be followed by the millennial Kingdom of freedom”.

This is a major reference for Bloch’s Marxism as well as part of his **heritage** from utopian traditions from the past, not only social utopias from Thomas More up to Fourier and William Morris, but of all the waking dreams and wish-images of the history of humankind – including those in the Bible and the history of Christianity. Bloch’s opponent is “the old enemy” of humanity, the millenary selfishness that, “as the capitalism has conquered more than ever before”, transforms all things and all human beings into commodities.

The Marxism that brings about the new is the **docta spes** (hope learned), the science of reality, the active knowledge directed towards the horizon of the future. Unlike abstract utopias of the past – which were content to oppose their wish-image to the existing world – Marxism starts from the trends and objective possibilities present in the reality itself: thanks to this real mediation, it allows the advent of the **concrete utopia**.

Brackets: despite his admiration at the time (before 1956) to the Soviet Union, Bloch did not confuse “really existing socialism” with the concrete utopia - it remained in his eyes unfinished, a wish-image that has not yet been accomplished. His philosophical system was entirely based on the category of Non-yet-being, and not on the rational legitimization of any “actually existing” State.

To define Marxism as utopia does not mean, for Bloch, to deny its scientific character: it cannot play its revolutionary role without an inseparable unity of sobriety and imagination, reason and hope, the rigor of the detective and the enthusiasm of the dreamer. According to

an expression that has become famous, the cold and warm current of Marxism must merge - both are indispensable even if there is a clear hierarchy between them: the cold current exists **for the warm current**, in the service of it, just as Marxism needs scientific analysis to get rid of abstraction and make concrete utopia.

The “warm current” of Marxism inspired what Bloch calls his “militant optimism”, that is to say, its active hope in the **Novum**, in the fulfillment of utopia. However, it differs very explicitly between the militant hope and “flat automatic optimistic faith in progress”. Considering that this dangerously false optimism tends to become a new opium of the people, he even thinks that a “pinch of pessimism would be better than this blind and flat faith in progress. For pessimism concern of realism is less easy to be surprised and disoriented by setbacks and catastrophes”. He therefore insists on the “non guaranteed character” of utopian hope.

Reinterpreting a famous formula of Marx – “We still live in the prehistory of humanity” – Bloch concludes the book by stating his conviction that “the genesis is not at the beginning but at the end”. The last word, significantly, is **Heimat**, the native home.

Theodor Adorno, one of the most pessimistic thinkers of the century, argues that the author of the **Principle of Hope** is one of the few rare philosophers of our time that never gave up the thought of a world without domination of hierarchy.