

**Socializing Hope:
Bloch and Beyond**

The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia | Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) / Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

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The philosophy of Ernst Bloch, that once seemed an obscure remnant of German radical thinking, is currently entering a vibrant moment of scholarly interest and metaphysical enquiry. Nothing could provide a better case for this claim than the *Privatization of Hope*, the new volume edited by Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek. Before discussing the book itself it might be helpful to address the current status of Bloch's reception.

First, there is still a significant bundle of philological work do – bringing to light the unpublished manuscripts, translating the texts previously available only in German, providing the contexts and filling the important, intellectually significant gaps both in Bloch's biography and in the hermeneutics of his texts. Second, Bloch's writings are singular in their suggestive and powerful style. Bloch saw himself as a philosopher of the Expressionist generation – his

texts engage the readers and are only comprehensible in view of this dynamic and poetic engagement. That is why I find it still promising to look at the *form* of utopian thinking both in historical and speculative way. Finally, Bloch's philosophy itself, as a never-to-be-finished project of utopian imagination, as an ontology of the Not-Yet, messianic philosophy of history or aesthetics of pre-appearance, should concern us here and now, as something to be hinted at, defended, taken up, developed, but also criticized and consciously abandoned.

These tasks are not incompatible. *Privatization of Hope* is mainly oriented towards the last one, but pays tribute to the others by exploring Bloch's style (Johan Siebers, David Miller) and contexts (Roland Boer, Ruth Levitas). This collection of voices is quite heterogeneous, and a reader is certainly not guided by any single general theme, but several most prominent aspects can be easily discerned. While admitting an obvious oversimplification, I would, however, locate them under general headings: ontology, politics, and aesthetics.¹

Bloch's metaphysical project

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1 Needless to say, these topics overlap with each other and within particular contributions. This simple structure is needed only as a ladder to be thrown away once we get an overall intuition of what Bloch's philosophy is about.

is interpreted in the book as an ontology of the material. This reflects the risk contemporary thought takes upon itself in an attempt to think the world (or 'reality') as a whole. Bloch scholars explore the challenge of new materialist philosophies by reclaiming the imminent dialectics at their core, as demanded by Catherine Moir, by referring to contemporary versions of anti-(or post)humanism (Vincent Geoghegan), and by envisaging the parallel developments in the contemporary thought (Thompson and Wayne Hudson).

Bloch's philosophy of nature, developed mainly in the 1930s but conceived much earlier, stressed the inherent dynamics and utopian subjectivity in the core of material universe. As Moir shows convincingly, this reconsideration of older themes – stemming in part from Böhme and Schelling – can be usefully applied to the internal difficulties of 'speculative realism' (of the sort advocated by Quentin Meillassoux) and resolve its tendencies to transcendentalism and abstract anti-humanism by providing a dialectical account of *natura naturans* and thus bringing the agency and creativity back to the natural realm.² This move is radical

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2 Still more parallels and possible interlocutors for Bloch's ontology are provided by Hudson (who is able to see the potential of associating Bloch, among others, with Roy Bhaskar's critical realism and the philosophies

in admitting both that everything in the world we have can be otherwise *and* that no rational necessity is underlying this open process. It can have a clear emancipating message as demonstrated by Geoghegan: we get a new vision of humanity by contemplating its limits. This stance can also be reinterpreted in a quite pragmatic manner, as Rainer Zimmermann proposes, by turning from utopian (as, allegedly, laden with internal contradictions) to *metopian* worlds (as possible - virtual – realities), from a complete existential overturn to the structural change in the organization of reality. Zimmermann draws on some recent attempts to conceptualize possible worlds in science fiction and mathematical topos theory and traces their common theme: to explore the potentialities of creating the new with/in language. This technological grasp of utopian theme is interesting not just in the consequences to be expected, but also as particular social practices to be studied. Francesca Vidal and Welf Schröter argue that the utopian perspective can become part of our own everyday life in the virtual realities of contemporary working relations that differ from traditional contexts and require a new social doctrine, going beyond

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of Bergson and Deleuze) and Thompson (who draws upon Lacan, Badiou and Žižek).

Marxism in order to deal with the new ways of oppression, exploitation, and emancipation – a doctrine in which Bloch's philosophy will definitely play a significant role.

Most troubling in Blochian accounts of radically incomplete reality is their version of teleology that, as Thompson suggests in the introduction (p. 7), goes beyond a simple divide between full contingency and full determination, splitting (and at the same time dialectically integrating) the world into the infinity of moments each creating its own *telos*. But how can this multitude of the utopian new stay meaningful, how can hope keep its eternal spring? How to be faithful to the utopian *telos* without relapsing into teleology (cf. p. 210)?

And this is precisely what Bloch invites us to think – to deal with 'the existence of the inexistent' (p. 92), to get a grip on the shaky phenomena of utopian excess, of 'something's missing', to walk tall in the vague and deceptive realm of hope, in the (sometimes unbearable) darkness of the present. In a remarkable twist, Hudson suggests that this project should be seen as instituting the more intricate realist version of rationality (p. 24) that would eventually correct the relativist and voluntarist bias in the philosophy of the New Left (p. 31). This interesting promise, however, remains only a promise in his contribution, for only too

general allusions to Hudson's own project are given – 'Being-Not-Enough' sadly replacing the glorious 'Not-Yet.'

General ontological difficulties are best resolved by rendering them politically meaningful. This *political* aspect of the book is also usefully introduced by Thompson who shows how important a pragmatist, performative moment is for Bloch's project. Utopia is something we are creating right now, it is always in the making and requires our active participation. This is further developed by Hudson – who argues that utopian philosophy is constructive since utopia permeates our actuality – and by Siebers reminding us that 'history itself is made in and by the promise of the eschaton' (p. 63). They both emphasize the inherent normativity of Bloch's discourse, the tendency to preach which is, importantly, quite explicit and thereby challenging for contemporary thinking, all-too immersed in the overwhelming suspicion towards any dreams and 'warm' images of emancipation.

This outspoken normativity distinguishes Bloch from the pessimism and melancholy of philosophical critique – he does not merely embrace a more 'positive' worldview or more sanguine emotions, but rather gives an ontological index to the 'militant optimism'

of hope. This is nicely formulated by Thompson who shows that Bloch overcomes (or sublates) the traditional ideology critique by vindicating 'failure, mistake, perversion, and distortion [as] essential to the human project' (p. 85). Bloch's theory of non-synchronicity (laid out primarily in the 1930s in the *Heritage of Our Times*) is also implied when Thompson posits that 'the symbolization of change... has to be "unveiled" but with as much, if not more, attention paid to the veil as to the face which is covered' (p. 86).

This is, I argue, one of the most significant messages of Bloch's political philosophy today. Instead of debunking and renouncing ideology altogether, one has to recognize in it this utopian excess, the unfulfilled promises of the past (also invoked by Žižek in his preface). Boer illustrates this by recalling Bloch's critique of Robert Bultmann's theology. Bultmann wanted to free theological discourse from myth, while Bloch demonstrated the liberating potential of mythology and could not dispense with myth altogether. Boer argues that revealing subversive elements of religion is something we have to retain from Bloch's utopian thinking. Not only theology, I would add, but also literature, history, social science can be subject to utopian hermeneutics which, in its overt partiality, should be open and free

from prejudice. A cultural critic too often proceeds with strict separations Bloch wants to avoid. Bloch always looked for the spirit of heterodoxy as a wind of revolution in the *Schein* of symbolic forms. This was, perhaps unwittingly, the impulse behind much of Marxist and feminist criticism or cultural studies. It is thus not a coincidence that, as Caitríona Ní Dhúill shows, despite major differences Bloch's work can be fruitfully reconfigured in view of contemporary feminist critiques. In particular, Bloch's own 'truth of gender' trope, as Ní Dhúill calls it, as well as his appeal to the 'humanization of nature' can be strategically important in envisioning alternatives to existing orders. The call to authenticity can have emancipatory potential and, like every impulse of utopian energy, also implies the risk of becoming oppressive (p. 152). This is similar to the Platonic *pharmakos* or the Biblical serpent that contains 'both poison and healing' (p. 194), as Frances Daly indicates. Bloch's dialectical perspective, his commitment to radical democracy and the quest for alternatives may prove relevant even in those contexts in which his own position seems outdated and opaque.

Bloch's political ideas should, however, be subject to critique far wider than particular tensions concerning his views on

gender. Henk de Berg offers, in a deliberately provocative manner, eleven theses that should 'unlearn how to hope.' Of course he does not mean it literally. What he provides is, rather, a liberal/conservative alternative to the leftist thought, somehow associating Bloch's political philosophy with these more general picture. In fact, the arguments de Berg proposes could be traced back not only to the writings of the 'Ritter School' to which he explicitly refers, but, closer to our context, to Helmut Schelsky's critique of Bloch's political stance. But, unlike Schelsky (whose arguments are also often problematic), de Berg only roughly relates the position he criticizes to Bloch's views, his critique is thus too general and misses the point. I do not want to claim that nothing from what de Berg attributes to Bloch cannot be found in Bloch's texts, moreover, one readily finds some passages that should be honestly criticized in a merciless manner and from any reasonable political standpoint. But I do claim that precisely what is distinct about Bloch's political philosophy – his preoccupation with existential and utopian meanings of the everyday and his openness towards 'superstructure' as well as, particularly, non-Marxist thinking – is missing in de Berg's account. What, however, makes de

Berg a Blochian³ (and, somehow, a Marxist) is his belief that the real change of capitalism is deeply immanent and should emerge from the latent unrest within capitalist society and not from some totally external force which would overthrow the existing injustice.

The power of utopian politics lies in the change of perspective and in the new opportunities to universalize. On the one hand, once we recognize utopian elements in a given social order or discursive formations, they cease to weigh upon us, and gain a positive meaning as premonition of the future adequacy – in the best tradition of Marxian dialectics! On the other hand, any discourse, any form of thought or action is allowed to participate in the utopian process, this is the radical democracy of Bloch's vision we have to reconsider today.

But how can we hold true to this promise? I would argue that one of the many possible answers is to reflect upon Bloch's *aesthetics*. This would amount to a double movement of exploration and participation. Bloch's texts, in this respect, are exquisite machines of estrangement, not only provoking us to think, but also inviting to

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³ I mean the later work, not the Spirit of Utopia that is still ambiguous on the transcendence of the Messianic.

witness the emergence of the new. This double structure is reproduced in many studies, including those from the *Privatization of Hope*, when discussion of Bloch's poetics as a reflective discipline merges with poetics of his texts.

Thus, Miller considers Bloch's philosophy as a kind of writing and stresses the disturbing effects of his style precluding any form of finite understanding or reception. For Miller, to write utopia is to allegorize, to confront and superpose the literal and the figural, the cold and the warm.

This general ambiguity of the utopian is also accounted for by Siebers. On his view, Bloch's thinking evades full verbal articulation and becomes *dramatic*, its style is something shown and enacted, but not said (p. 68). Bloch's prose seems indeed to be a struggle to find an expression, to bring to light the second - always obscure – dimension, the hidden core of things, 'a different system of reality that exists as the shadowy and veiled counterpart to the everyday world of habitual experience', as Miller puts it (p. 206). The unavailability of such an expression becomes constitutive of the utopian philosophy as such. Words are inadequate, since 'the inconstruable origin of discursiveness' (p. 68) still lies ahead. And here Siebers is perfectly right that the most adequate form for the literary

engagement with this experience is that of the essay. The only claim I cannot fully share is that one has to possess 'personal access to the type of experience of an absolute question Bloch starts with' (p. 71) in order to understand him at all. Although Bloch does suggest that certain kinds of experience must be in place in order to enter philosophical thinking, and he does try to elicit this experience within the practice of reading, I would tend to see it as a highly uncertain process. There can be many ways to enter Bloch's philosophy, and all of them might once be adequate to it.

Bloch himself, however, tended to specifically appreciate music as such a way. Levitas explores Bloch's musical philosophy and thereby helpfully contributes to the topic indispensable for understanding his aesthetics. Music is the most appropriate medium to enact the new, it communicates us the intensity of time, of historical time – to become a vehicle of revolution. In fact, an important message of Levitas' contribution is to show how critical were particular historical and scenic contexts for Bloch's interpretations of music. The effect of utopian thinking has to be paralleled with the effect of particular musical performances, philosophy and music are entangled in the common movement of historical time, time we listen to.

Now, what is the bottom line and is there one? Apparently, the merit of this volume is that it approaches Bloch's thinking from very different perspectives, and often in an ingenious way. I would not stage Bloch as 'irregular' or incommensurable, as Hudson seems to suggest (p. 23). For, as Hudson himself shows, Bloch's singularity is susceptible neither to the mere historical classification nor to the notorious emphasis on 'uniqueness.' Rather, one should only welcome the multiplicity of discourses inspired by Bloch and inspiring us to follow the appeal of hope and to venture beyond.

However, this should not be an 'economic' way of working with texts by exploiting them in order to extract and simply augment one's symbolic capital. Bloch's philosophy resists such appropriation, it is excessive in its generosity and, moreover, always leaves something unsaid, as a utopian trace forbidding to draw up a final balance. "A good story belongs to all of us,"⁴ it is not to be privatized, one cannot gain credit for it and expect a guaranteed return. Bloch is reported to be a fantastic narrator who kept in memory all the characters of Karl May, but what he shared with us is not only the diversity of utopian dreams, but also the human sense of lack,

incoherence, bewilderment, and unawareness to which all of us are exposed. By thinking we transgress, but the limit is still here, the night of ultimate death, or zero-point, as Daly proposes to call it, still threatens us. What we have to do is to reveal this coming to the limit and to share it, as once suggested by Jean-Luc Nancy. Utopian community, for all its productivity, is inoperative, because it faces absolute contingency. Every confidence will be ruined and every hope frustrated. But this utopian lack can overcome the fragmentation of desires by creating new dimensions of sociality. With our private hopes and fears, we all are living through the condition of fragility and uncertainty, something that will – in whatever form – be present in any community to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bloch, Ernst 2006, *Traces*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

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⁴ Bloch 2006, p. 96