

Rosa Luxemburg,
Lenin and the Didactics
or Marxism as Morality:
Ernst Bloch in
conversation with
Rainer Traub and
Harald Wieser

Abstract: At the heart of this discussion lies the relationship between morality and Marxism. German philosopher Ernst Bloch converses with Rainer Traub and Harald Wieser about the moral foundations of Marxism, the need to incorporate both rational and irrational elements in Marxist theory and practice, and the importance of the imagination in the struggle for social and political transformation.

QUESTION: Years ago, regarding [your book] *Heritage of our Times* [*Erbschaft dieser Zeit*], your friend Walter Benjamin said that the book itself is in some respects non-contemporaneous. Presumably he meant that the mediation of what you have detected philosophically in reality and in the errors of communist politics, the mediation of politically unmediated principles in this book was not really successful. There is arguably a fundamental problem behind this criticism, the problem of the relationship between philosophy and politics in Marxism. Do you think that there must be something like a natural division of labor between philosophy and politics in Marxism as well? I think you have also occasionally articulated an assessment of the future of philosophy that differs from Marx's view, one that, contrary to what Marx imagined, will not be canceled by its realization.

BLOCH: Well, Marx and Engels are also in dispute. For Engels, compared to Marx, philosophy is much more concerned with individual sciences and with practice, as a result of the influences of the second half of the 19th century. The first half is still the time of Hegel; the second half is the time of the laboratory and a time that is becoming banal, with contempt for philosophy. At the end of the last century, students in Heidelberg wrote with chalk in the philosophical lecture hall, Kuno Fischer's lecture hall: "Sulphur house" ["Schwefelbude"]. That was the usual attitude towards philosophy. Philosophy only received a small pardon again around 1900, 1905. And Engels lived longer into the second half of the 19th century than Marx. That explains the difference a little. But other than that: the realized philosophy is communism, and the conceived and desired communism is still philosophy. But it does not cease as a philosophy when it is fulfilled or –this is a long process anyway– as long as it is fulfilled. So what communism, what the matter has hitherto possessed only in theoretical bills of exchange, it should now finally possess in cash – but it is the same matter, only in two different forms, and the practitioners Marx and Engels have favored the cash, i.e. communism as a practical movement, over the bond, i.e. philosophy, which has suffered a lot of inflation, not with Hegel, but with others. This is not a dispute over rank; theory and practice are both necessary. Practice without theory comes down to breaking windows and nothing more. But both together make a very happy marriage.

QUESTION: Perhaps we should clarify the question again, and I want to refer to [your] essay *Socrates and the Propaganda* [*Sokrates und die Propaganda*].² There you write a sentence that is particularly thought-provoking: “Being clever yourself is only half of being clever” [“Selber klug sein ist nur die Hälfte der Klugheit”]. For us, this sentence raises the question of what one could call “revolutionary didactics”. And furthermore it raises the question about the relationship between philosophy and politics. Is there a division of labor, or is it safe to say that philosophy is, so to speak, the spiritual nurturer of practical politics, philosophy however must transform itself, it must find another language in order to grasp the minds of the masses. How do you see then this relationship?

BLOCH: There is that old saying: “Weigh first, then dare” [“Erst wägen, dann wagen”]. One is the theory; the other is the practice that emerges. But if something is not weighed first, if it is not practiced beforehand, if it is not experimented with conceptually, you are in the dark and you will have to pay dearly for it. Brecht’s theater consists of educational plays, even if he did not use the word later on, where on stage, theoretically so to speak, with not so much expense, with not so much blood, without blood at all, people try out how it looks, when the yes-man is right. Then, in the opposite model, we try out on stage, what it’s like when the no-sayer is right. Then maybe a third model will be tried out, perhaps the maybe-sayer is right. “No,” “Yes,” “Maybe” will first be dealt theoretically on stage through estrangements [Vefremdungen].³ To close the curtain and leave all the questions unanswered is too pessimistic; but some questions remain open, others do not. Nevertheless this is in an area, in which theory is hardly ever strained, although it does occur in abundance in the theory of drama. Schiller writes about it, for example in the essay: *The Theatre Considered as a Moral Institution* [*Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet*], or Gustav Freytag in the *Theory of Drama* [*Theorie des Dramas*],⁴ a very mediocre dramatist, Aristotle [writes about it] and so on. It is an old story that you can think about things philosophically and then proceed with the realization, with the practice, and of course without blood, without particular cost and so on. It is conceived in the head, but it is not left there. This is practice and something, which not only occurs here, but naturally in the technique as well. There is an *ante rem* of theory everywhere, from which the practice only benefits, so that it will become a concrete one and not just a fiddling around. Without theory there is no practice, and without practice, theory remains empty, inconsequential, indifferent, distorted and outdated. Practice is the principal thing, not theory; but practice is blind if there is no theory, and theory is empty if there is no practice. Both belong together.

QUESTION: Can we once again address the intermediary link between theory and practice, what we previously described with the keyword

“revolutionary didactics”. This is particularly interesting in connection with Benjamin’s aforementioned objection to the *Heritage of our Times*, namely that the book itself is in a certain sense non-contemporaneous.

BLOCH: Non-contemporaneous or over-contemporaneous? There is a big difference. Over-contemporaneous definitely, non-contemporaneous also a little, because not everything that has disappeared is dirt, since there is a future in the past, something that has not been settled, something that has been given to us as a legacy. I quote the sentence from the Peasants’ War all too often: “Defeated we go home; our grandchildren will fight it out better” [“Geschlagen ziehen wir nach Haus, unsre Enkel fechten’s besser aus”]. That means the Peasants’ War is not over, it has remained as something that persists as a legacy, as our duty, because it has not succeeded. In this respect, what I am saying is also non-contemporaneous. And above all, the book uses, with moderation and purpose and with great caution, so that no reactionary romanticism emerges, the non-contemporaneous, which naturally lies far from our view. Even if it is not true, it is important for propaganda purposes, for the purpose of abolishing right-wing radicalism, isolating it and making it impossible, unthinkable, grotesque, that people feel they are being addressed and that they will be cared for and fed not only with the contemporaneous and not only with the over-contemporaneous, i.e. poorly utopian categories. The solution to your distress can only be found in the over-contemporaneity, not in the non-contemporaneous, but the non-contemporaneous has to be remembered, preserved and adapted to the over-contemporaneous, since so much of the past is not yet completely gone, but still contains a legacy for us. Well the great architecture, for example, contains a legacy; so it should be addressed. And the new is never completely new; the good new is never completely new at all. Only now has the time come, with the mature economic and social conditions, in which this old new can also be put into practice. But it is not entirely new, there exists a story, that the most modern fighters, who appear to be completely modern, call themselves Spartacists, after Spartacus from antiquity, which was a very long time ago! Some people no longer want to deal with something so old – with something so historical and antiquarian, the petty bourgeois might say. But the communists do not share the feeling, that the matter is devalued by being named after Spartacus, not after Scheidemann.⁵ There will hardly be any enthusiastic Scheidemannists, even though he is much closer to us in time, compared to Spartacus.

QUESTION: You are now talking about change, about social upheaval, and you write in *Political Measurements [Politische Messungen]*: “There is no revolution in this Germany that is not anointed with a drop of irrational oil.”⁶

BLOCH: Yes, that is right. What do I mean by that? I mean a rationalism of the irrational. Do not leave irrational things irrational, but solve the problem inherent in the irrational in such a way that a rationalism of the irrational emerges. In art, if it is any good, there is always a drop of irrational oil. These clarities are not as clear as day. But there are other clarities, most of which are over-contemporaneous, because their time has not yet come. And this is what the order of my books, if I may say so, seeks to accomplish, from *Traces* [*Spuren*] to the last book, *Experimentum Mundi*. A highly modern term, experiment, applied to the over-contemporaneous. The world is not finished, it is a fragment. The world itself has no idea –to put it figuratively– where its head is. There are not only models that we create for ourselves, but there are real models in the world, in which the thing experiments, tries itself out. We are at the forefront of the process. So a very modern word, experiment, is used in a Latin title: *Experimentum Mundi*. The Latin title indicates the past, the education, the cultural history and all sorts of things; but it refers to the present and in the past, it means a future past. So I say all good new things –which I consider to be good–, are never completely new. There are sentences of this kind where you do not think you will find them at all, in Jean Paul⁷ for instance, you do not think you will find them, even though they are in all of us. The time has not yet arrived when the well-known eureka effect occurs, or, more commonly put, when the penny has dropped: Yes, that is it! Or it is something else, but it is in line. Take, for example, psychoanalysis, where it is always about what is no longer conscious, about the unconscious, impressions from childhood above all, and the traumatic effects of these impressions, but never about what is over-contemporaneous and hardly ever about anything contemporaneous. Where does the students' frustration, their nervousness, their suicides, their despair come from? Not being able to reach a goal, maybe seeing the goal but not knowing how to get there. Why is there a depression of the homeless Left, it does not come from childhood trauma alone – that too, there is that too, but it is not enough. And you see that the penny has not dropped yet for these simple things. The psychoanalysts continue with the sunken unconscious and understand nothing at all about the other unconscious out of over-contemporaneity. There is an inkling, an anticipation, there is a not-yet-conscious, which is not simply unconscious, otherwise I could not say: a not-yet-conscious. This too needs to be formulated, also formulated practically, because it blocks the way to fascism, because it is not just the beautiful, the true, the good in the most antiquarian version possible and as rigid and silent as possible, but because it is the life that we all live, which in the youthful state, in the state of a turning point, i.e. in late antiquity, in Renaissance, in Sturm und Drang, in Expressionism, occurred with more or less success wherever there was something new in the air; this you can sense, the productivity itself: how can something new be achieved? Why do we not only have

the music trara, trara, trara or as a bridge-passage [Pausenbrücke], but we also have Bach and Beethoven? Something new is coming, about which nobody had any idea beforehand, or nothing more than an inkling. Isn't that reality? And it is also over-contemporaneous, and when does it expire, when is it renewed, what role do economic conditions play in this, and so on. These are all conditions from what I first called concrete utopia, and which every fool now calls concrete utopia, but uses for something entirely different. It is good, that it has been understood. Not that I have been understood, that is completely indifferent, but that the matter, of which I happen to be the voice has been understood.

QUESTION: The relationship between morality and politics has always played a special role in all of your writings. That is why it was certainly no coincidence that you supported the student movement from the start because it expressed the will to reconnect with the old socialist unity of morality and socialist politics. Unfortunately, in recent years there have been a whole series of tendencies in the West German Left to tear apart this unity, which the classicists always took for granted, and to push morality back into the pre-scientific, pre-Marxist corner. It is claimed that Marxism has overcome morality and replaced it with science.

BLOCH: But why did Rosa Luxemburg give up her life? Why did Marx, the son of a wealthy judge, and Engels, a rich manufacturer from Elbersfeld, become the founders of Marxism? It was not out of their own economic need and out of economic contradictions, but out of morality, pre-Marxist morality, because they first developed Marxism theoretically. What are the motivations for this, why can someone act against the interests of their class? He can only do it for moral reasons. And then what is morality? That's how you saw off the branch on which all the Marxist classics are sitting. With the exception of Weitling,⁸ there is not a single person who became a Marxist out of economic interest, out of class interest, which in this case is also self-interest. With the exception of Weitling – and Marx was enthralled by the “children's shoes of the proletariat”.⁹ Then again Weitling disappointed him very much, well, that may be a matter of intellect. But all the Marxist classics did not need to become Marxists for reasons other than moral ones. Now we move on to the non-Marxists. What interest did Kropotkin or Bakunin have? And Saint-Simon, who certainly made socialist utopias, he is a direct descendant of Charlemagne – and such a descendant is not prophesied at Charlemagne's cradle. Where does that actually come from? If you are looking for the social causes, then there is one too. And where do you end up if you turn completely against morality? It is an extremely propagandistic tool, a revolutionary tool. Is there a better weapon against the by no means minor violations of the most common morals by Franz Josef Strauss?¹⁰ The fact that he is lying to Parliament is certainly bad, even from a larger

point of view than can be found in his case. That is a weapon, morality. What kind of Marxist mission is there in abolishing morality? Well, the criticism of mere do-gooder nonsense without any economic and social basis is inherent in communism. The pastoral care and the word of God on Sunday, I understand that it makes you want to vomit, but that is not morality. I understand it, as I said, but I wrote an early essay in the *Internationale Literatur* in Moscow, it appeared in the early 1930s, *Saving Morality [Rettung der Moral]*,¹¹ its intention was to save morality in Marxism and at the same time against the Nazis. What kind of categories did we have against the Nazis? They are all moral, right down to schemes like: “blood-stained Hitler regime”. That is not enough, of course, but there were not any others. And if more morality had been employed, the fight against fascism would have been easier.

QUESTION: These are obviously different words for what you also called the unity of cold stream and warm stream in Marxism...

BLOCH: Yes, it is part of the warm stream, but it is also part of the cold stream. On its own, the cold stream is nothing but economism – it is a caricature, an extreme – in which nothing at all appeals to the imagination. The cold stream is very justified, but not on its own. There is also a warm stream. The French Revolution is full of warmth, especially at the beginning, the embraces on the Field of Mars, the Marseillaise, full of warmth and fire, fire and warmth. “Allons enfants de la patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé”,¹² this song is full of excitement, an original song of the French Revolution, which is at least not yet completely rejected as a failed prelude to the socialist revolution. And Babeuf is also a man from the French Revolution who demanded equality and was executed. So cold and warm stream together. The warm stream is that of an exact imagination, I emphasize: an exact imagination, a concrete imagination, no wishy-washy chatter and mumbo-jumbo. So: morality is no good without an economic basis. But morality also entails the possibility of being worshipped. We have Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht – they are respectable, they do something not just for their private interest, but against it, and not out of economic knowledge alone. *This* respectability is not at all vulgar Marxist; I only mentioned two names, there are more.

QUESTION: So Marxism cannot live without morality?

BLOCH: It cannot survive and cannot live either. It would no longer be Marxism. What happened in the Soviet Union under Stalin is not moral, and we do not judge it solely on economic terms. Economically, it is almost understandable. The difference is that morality is no longer just insight, but contains a plus-minus, a rejection or an approval, an inspiration, liveliness or a great, great disappointment. The disappointment

is a moral one, not an economic one. Whether the 7th ECCI [Executive Committee of the Comintern] Plenum was economically right is of course not a moral question; but you cannot do business with that alone. Whether it corresponds to what one has wished for, dreamed of, imagined, and that is bright, the categories “bright” and “light” are already moral categories. The phrase dark man did not come into the world by chance. So there are dark men, gloom in the world, and these are all categories against the Nazis and they are part of the propaganda. And the integrity of the speaker is also part of the propaganda. For example: The dubious role –a dubiousness that, in my opinion, is often exaggerated– that Lassalle played is also related to moral categories. A founder and supporter of the workers’ movement takes part in a duel over a countess. He can love her, he can do whatever he wants; but the duel is not a communist form of behavior.¹³ And morality is about forms of behavior and ways of life. Lenin is completely flawless; otherwise he would not be Lenin. Lassalle was a very clever man, but that alone does not help. The English and Engelsian saying also applies here: “The proof of the pudding is in the eating” [“Das Essen ist der Beweis des Puddings”]. This refers to the doctrine of the right, good, true action. And the revolution as such is moral: the fact that we can no longer tolerate that there are two types of people, master and servant, is not an economic judgment, but a moral one. Economically, I can define master and servant quite precisely, but I have not seduced anyone with it. But the fact that this should not happen, that we have had enough of it – this is the fire in the revolution.

QUESTION: Now some younger Marxists in the Federal Republic have recently objected to Lenin, saying that in the end he only had a moral understanding of Marxism and not a scientific one, namely –it is claimed– because he did not understand Marx correctly.

BLOCH: I see! But *they* understood him better... These fools do not lack self-awareness; but that is all they have of awareness. What is so amateurish about Lenin, and what do these young Marxists have to offer against it? The fact that Lenin is outdated is part of Leninism, it is proof that he has achieved something or brought something into consciousness, a fruit that demands a new consciousness. The same applies to Marx. Marx is not enough, of course he is not enough, but it is through Marxism that he is not enough; this is not a complete dogma. Therefore it is no longer true. Well, that is proof of the truth, a historical-philosophical truth, not a dogmatic one. Furthermore, this happens very often: Euclidean geometry no longer exhausts modern geometry because new things have now been discovered. Euclid is not refuted. Euclid fully applies to his time. And the red shift of the fixed stars has also revealed non-contemporaneous processes in the firmament, in the image of the firmament. Einstein did not, however, eliminate Newton. Therefore,

without “obsolescence” there would be no progress in science, and this also applies to Lenin, it is a sign of his triumph, not his shame. And these young Marxists, if something is achieved, will also be obsolete in a generation or two. Who will even care about Marxism once it has won? I will give you an example with the steam engine. At the beginning of the industrial revolution, i.e. in the 1870s, when the steam engine was no longer sufficient to provide enough energy to drain the mines –the English mines were in danger of drowning– the English Academy of Sciences offered a prize to the person who could resolve this. James Watt won the prize by inventing the slide valve and the flywheel. The flywheel has drifted past the dead point, because when the piston and the connecting rod are in line, there is no more movement, they just press on each other and may crush each other, but there is no external movement. The flywheel accomplished this according to the law of inertia. Good, James Watt won a great price and is now a world famous man. But today the steam engine is sold in every toy store and given as a gift at Christmas, and it would be completely outdated to think about how one could invent such a machine. If Marxism has triumphed like the steam engine, it will fare no differently. It will be then discarded like James Watt. If the classless society exists, no one will be interested in thinking about the average rate of profit, not even in the most meticulous economics seminar, it no longer exists. On the other hand, there are truths and areas of research that do not become outdated. But Marxism, as a theoretical-practical theory, is one of those that become obsolete through their success, through their victory. We will probably have other questions when master and servant are abolished, completely new ones that we cannot even see or suspect at the moment before all master and servant. But obsolescence is a sign of success, it can be. Being refuted is different from becoming obsolete. An error can be refuted; a truth can become historically obsolete while it prevails.

QUESTION: Back then you celebrated the student movement as a new Vormärz.¹⁴ In retrospect, doesn't that seem a bit idealizing, or was it an “over-contemporaneous” leap, if you will?

BLOCH: Undoubtedly an over-contemporaneous leap, perhaps a premature leap, abstract-utopian. It looks like it, but it is not all over yet, and failure and defeat are also part of the fight. In any case, the student movement is better than nothing, and it is also a legacy and a sign that things cannot continue like this. Well, let's make a new model, let's do it differently!

QUESTION: But this movement is a legacy with which many leftists engage rather carelessly, namely the leftists whose political theory and practice is limited to “donating flyers”, as you once put it.

BLOCH: Well, isn't it due to a lack of imagination that the student movement has so little to fuel it today? And isn't it just a coincidence that capitalism recovered so strongly under Adenauer,¹⁵ while Marxism had its difficulties – and now it is just the other way round, now Marxism has fewer difficulties than capitalism. That is something to think about too. And isn't it a great and happy paradox that despite Stalinism, Marxism is not discredited, that it has recovered so powerfully despite the [Moscow] trials and after the slump that it experienced during the Adenauer era? You can talk about Marxism; people have an idea, which was not the case at the end of the 1940s and up until the 1950s. We certainly would not have been able to have a conversation like the one we are having now in 1949; I think you would not have been there yourself.

Translated by Chrysa Katsogridaki

1 'Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin und die Lehren oder Marxismus als Moral', in *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch*, ed. by Rainer Traub and Harald Wieser (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975).

2 'Sokrates und die Propaganda', in *Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe. Politische Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1934-1939* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972).

3 See Ernst Bloch, 'Entfremdung, Verfremdung : Alienation, Estrangement', *The Drama Review*, 15.1 (1970), 120–25.

4 Bloch is probably referring to Gustav Freytag's *Die Technik des Dramas*.

5 Philipp Heinrich Scheidemann (1865 - 1939) was a leading figure of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and served as Chancellor from February to June 1919.

6 'Wettkampf der Irrationalen', in *Politische Messungen, Pestzeit, Vormärz* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985), p. 133.

7 Jean Paul or Johann Paul Richter (1763 - 1825) was a German novelist, best known for his sentimental and humorous novels.

8 Wilhelm Christian Weitling (1808 – 1871) was a German political activist and communist theorist.

9 A reference to Weitling's book *Guarantees of Harmony and Freedom [Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit]* first published on 1842. See Karl Marx, 'Kritische Randglossen zu dem Artikel "Der König von Preußen und die Sozialreform. Von einem Preußen"', in *MEW Bd. 1* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1981), p. 405.

10 Franz Josef Strauss (1915 – 1988) was a German politician and longtime leader of the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU).

11 'Rettung der Moral', in *Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe. Politische Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1934-1939* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972).

12 French in the original.

13 Bloch recalls Ferdinand Lassalle's love affair with Helene von Dönniges, whose fiancé (Iancu Racoviță) he challenged to a pistol duel. Lassalle was shot by Racoviță and died on 31 August 1864.

14 The term Vormärz refers to the period of German history that preceded the revolution of March 1848. Some historians place its beginning at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, while others place it at the Revolution of July 1830.

15 Konrad Adenauer (1876 – 1967) was the first leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and served as the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 to 1963.