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Summary Article: **Bloch, Ernst**

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Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) was a German Marxist philosopher and cultural critic who developed a utopian hermeneutic that influenced the New Left of the 1960s and '70s. His work continues to influence literary and cultural theorists, particularly Marxists and those who have an interest in science fiction, fantasy, fairytales, film studies, and popular culture in general. Bloch saw in all cultural artifacts not only the projections of ruling-class ideology, but also projections of a collective socialist-utopian unconscious, which he called the “not-yet conscious” or, alternatively, the “hope principle.” Furthermore, he argued that art is for the sake of hope, rather than for the sake of art. Bloch's publications include numerous essays and 14 books, the best known of which is the three-volume *The Principle of Hope* (1986[1959]), consisting of more than 1,500 pages. It is an encyclopedic investigation of daydreams, political and social utopias, philosophy, religion, fairytales, myths, architecture, and popular culture.

The son of a Jewish railway official, Bloch studied philosophy, psychology, music, literature, physics, and Jewish and Christian mysticism. His second published book, following *The Spirit of Utopia* (2000 [1918]), was a monograph on Thomas Münzer, a sixteenth-century German-Christian mystic who led a failed peasant rebellion and was beheaded. Bloch was in his thirties during the Bolshevik Revolution, and in his forties when the Nazis came to power. Hitler placed him at the top of his list of intellectuals who should be promptly killed. He was in his sixties when he returned to Germany from exile in the United States for his first academic post. He died of heart failure in 1977 at the age of 92.

Compared to the Western Marxists, who were Bloch's friends and among his first critics - for example Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin - Bloch's work has been neglected. His prose can be provocative, impenetrable, elliptical, idiosyncratic, hyperbolic, and euphoric. It is filled with quirky hyphenated neologisms and with Greek, Latin, and Hebrew phrases, which may require the use of a multilingual dictionary. For some readers, Bloch's prose is too poetic for philosophy, too philosophical for poetry, too Hegelian and idealistic for Marxism. And of course for non-Marxists, his utopian hermeneutic is too Marxist. He believed that philosophy, cultural production, and cultural criticism could and should be a part of a collective praxis. His philosophical vision of a socialist-utopian ontology that does not yet exist except as illuminated fragments of future possibility, part of a not-yet conscious that appears in the past and in the present, could be called - and has been called - metaphysical, mystical, or theological. Fredric Jameson, whose practice of identifying a political unconscious in cultural productions derives from Bloch's utopian hermeneutic, evokes the “suspicion that Bloch is not so much a Marxist philosopher, even a Marxist philosopher of religion, as he is rather (in the terms of his description of Thomas Münzer), a ‘theologian of the revolution’” (1971: 117). Jameson suggests that “mainly, however, the neglect of Bloch is due to the fact that his system, a doctrine of hope and ontological anticipation, is itself an anticipation, and stands as a solution to problems of a universal culture and a universal hermeneutic which have not yet come into being.” Indeed, it “lies before us, enigmatic and enormous, like an aerolite fallen from space, covered with mysterious hieroglyphs that radiate a peculiar inner warmth and power, spells and the keys to spells, themselves patiently waiting for their own ultimate moment of decipherment” (158-9).

Bloch, who was an atheist, insisted that his vision of the not-yet conscious, of the fragmented hope

principle, has a material and scientific basis, and he never forgot the Marxist notion that the economic class struggle is the historical basis for revolution. For Bloch, cultural productions are, as Karl Marx says of religion, “*the fantastic realization of the human being inasmuch as the human being possesses no true reality*” (1978 [1844]: 54; emphasis original). Thus, Bloch argues that all cultural artifacts contain “latent” and “expectant” figures of hope, providing us with clues or signs as to our true reality, as to what humanity is struggling to become. Arguably, moving a step beyond Marx, and certainly beyond Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Bloch asserts the existence of the not-yet conscious as a site where new collective material, not old material that has been repressed or forgotten, begins to enter consciousness. He calls this new material the “novum.” It is because of the existence of the hope principle that the novum found in the past as “cultural surplus” emerges in the present urging us toward a better future, humanity its necessary agent. Bloch calls this site at which the past, present, and future meet the “Front.” Furthermore, he argues, after Aristotle, that matter, in nature and humanity, is dynamic, as is language, while space and time, contra the Euclidean unilinear model, are variable and plural because the material world is itself dynamic and changeable, incomplete and unfinished. Douglas Kellner & Harry O'Hara explain: “Crucial is Bloch's claim that what could have been can still be; for Bloch, history is a repository of possibilities that are living options for future action.” It is Bloch's conviction “that only when we project our future in the light of what is, what has been, and what could be can we engage in the creative practice that will produce the world we all want and realize humanity's deepest hopes and dreams” (1976: 16).

Bloch's tendency was to oppose ossified norms of life, norms of philosophies, and norms of genres, and to oppose developing norms wherever he found them, even among, or especially among, proto-socialists and Marxists. Marxist-Leninist thought dismissed certain concepts of utopia as individualistic wishful thinking that may or may not be harmful, but which mostly weren't helpful. Furthermore, according to traditionally developing Marxism, all art produced in capitalist society couldn't help but contain and perpetuate ruling-class ideology, at the very least by encouraging intellectual escapism and by providing pleasurable aesthetic consolation, or by enabling people to think that, by thinking about the world, they could change it. In contrast, Bloch argued that imaginative works can produce a shock value of recognition in readers or viewers, altering previously acquired false perceptions of reality (1980[1938]).

Siding with his friend, the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht, Bloch argued against Lukács regarding the significance of modernism, identified with expressionism and surrealism. Grounded in Marxism-Leninism, Lukacs said that only historical realism avoided the ideology of escapism, and, for Lukács, as for many Marxists, scientific rationalism overturns and supersedes superstition, religion, fascism, and capitalist ideology, which are, in essence, irrational. For Bloch, as for Brecht, and sometimes for Adorno, so-called irrational art expresses the fragmentation of capitalist reality, revealing the rationalizing irrational contradictions of capitalist ideology and capitalist practices. In Bloch's view, Lukács's view of reality was impoverished because it excluded daydreaming, really-existing emotions, and the emerging future, which also constitute reality along with the nightmare of history. For Bloch, the real enemy of humanity and socialism is nihilism, the loss of the ability to dream and hope, and the loss of the ability to recognize the extraordinary in the ordinary, the future in the present. Ignoring or critically dismissing the value of daydreaming, of hope, of “expectant emotions” - the immanence of the future - automatically cedes daydreaming, hope, expectant emotions, and the future to the manipulations of fascists, nationalists, and capitalist profiteers. For Bloch, “Marxist reality means: reality plus the future in it” (1988[1935]: 162).

In defending the value of imaginative art and creative daydreaming, Bloch defended artistic and scholarly genius, religious-visionary genius, and poetic genius. Indeed, for Bloch, poetry - which, like the hope principle, can appear anywhere - is synonymous with the utopian function of art. The "subjective factor of the poetical," he says, is the "midwife of the artistic anticipatory illumination" (160). Thus, genius, a term that Marxists typically dismiss, is always poetical, condensing and intensifying illuminations of, or prefiguring anticipations of, our true reality, which is, as Marx (1988 [1884]) suggests, the convergence of nature and humanity, humanity and nature, subject and object, and the end of class-divisions and of alienation. Furthermore, some artists, and some scholars, such as the young Marx, in Bloch's view, are able consciously to combine passion and imagination with rigorous analysis, rupturing the empirical reality of false consciousness, of each-against-each competition. Genius thus shows us the existence of our true consciousness: the real possibility of a classless society in which the individual flourishes because everyone flourishes.

In Bloch's view, the prefiguring anticipations of our true reality are not limited to the productions widely recognized as the creations or visions of genius. For him, as he asserts in *The Spirit of Utopia*, "everything that is has a utopian star in its blood" (2000 [1918]: 171). Developing and supporting his utopian assertion more thoroughly in *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch notes that certain debased forms of hope can be limited and misleading, such as transforming "every real and possible need into a weakness" (1986 [1959]: 334). And yet, commodified kitsch and adventure, even fascism, are dim prefigurations of our yearning for socialist species-being. For Bloch, we must recognize and reveal this dimension of utopian collectivity, our not-yet realized socialist ontology, to nourish revolutionary consciousness and thereby guarantee the fulfillment of our deepest longing for utopia, fulfillment achieved as a dynamic process, never as a final static or absolute condition. Utopia, virtually by definition, is a process.

Bloch was influenced by Hegel's philosophy, and by Jewish and Christian mysticism. He often borrowed messianic and apocalyptic language and imagery from the Bible. However, his hope principle and his spirit of utopia are natural and human. The future consists of multiple possibilities because the present consists of multiple tendencies. Barbarism may triumph over socialism, modernist angst and despair or apathy over hope. For Bloch, the future depends upon what we as human beings collectively do, whether or not we realize and shape, according to our deepest yearning, according to our desired rebellion against everything that exploits and degrades us. Moses is a key figure for Bloch because Moses signals the first religion that began not in the realm of astral myth, but with rebellion, originator of a religion of opposition, the earliest leader of a people out of slavery. Furthermore, the Judeo-Christian God is the God of the future: not "I am what I am" but "I will be what I will be" (1972[1968]: 56). More importantly, God is not a transcendent spirit of never-changing ultimate reality, separate from humanity. God is humanity surpassing itself, or socialist ontology.

Kellner & O'Hara (1976), demystifying Bloch's work, explain that in Bloch's view, "the human being is incomplete, unfulfilled, laden with unsatisfied needs and unrealized potentials which are the motor of human self-activity." Thus, for Bloch, "art, philosophy, and religion are the repository of needs and potentialities struggling for expression" (21). Bloch demands our attention because he revitalized Marxism "against a theory or practice which purposefully refrains from positing alternatives or dealing with the future, as well as against a mechanical, non-dialectical, economic sort of dogmatic Marxism" (13). Furthermore, Kellner & O'Hara say: "One should note that the wild revolutionary-apocalyptic-chiliasm of *Spirit of Utopia* gives way in the later Bloch to more sober evaluations of religion as found in

such works as *The Principle of Hope* and *Atheism in Christianity*" (21). However, Bloch's later work may be less sober than Kellner & O'Hara acknowledge. In 1963, he wrote an afterward to *The Spirit of Utopia*, in which he says: "Its revolutionary Romanticism (as my monograph on Thomas Münzer) attains measure and definition in *The Principle of Hope* and the books that followed. There, what was specific to *The Spirit of Utopia* became especially definite, something entrusted peculiarly to evil, as to its remedy: revolutionary gnosis" (2000 [1918]: 279).

In the midst of enthusiasm, Bloch knew that hope and gnosis, of any kind, and wishful thinking alone, or thinking about the world, don't change it. He remains adamant that all forms of utopian yearning are better than anti-utopian or materialist attitudes that deny future possibilities and that ridicule utopian thinking. But he distinguishes between "abstract" and "concrete" utopia. Abstract utopia is wishful thinking, but the wish is "not accompanied by the will to change anything," or the wish goes no further than the wisher's changed position in a world that remains unchanged - "perhaps by a large win in the lottery" (Levitas 1997: 67). Concrete utopia is always oriented with a plan toward a real-possible future. And for Bloch, concrete utopia is always socialist, while real-possibility requires class-consciousness, collective praxis, and, eventually, a violent revolution: the less necessary bloodshed, the better. Thus, whether we consider Bloch a mystic-visionary prose-poet of the future, a scientific Marxist, too Marxist, or not Marxist enough, our response to his hope principle, to his utopian hermeneutic, as Ruth Levitas indicates, "involves explicit value-based choices" (1997: 79). Indeed, though Levitas doesn't say so, we can argue the same about our response to any hermeneutic, to any cultural or literary artifact, toward any material practice. However, as prominent Marxist science fiction scholar Darko Suvin asserts, with Bloch "we should hold a steadfast orientation toward the open ocean of possibility that surrounds the actual and that is so immeasurably larger than the actuality" (1997: 135).

SEE ALSO: Adorno, Theodor; Benjamin, Walter; Fantasy; Film Theory; Freud, Sigmund; Jameson, Fredric; Lukács, Georg; Marx, Karl; Marxism; Modernism; Science Fiction; Suvin, Darko

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