

Daniel Bensaïd

## Utopia and Messianism Bloch, Benjamin, and the Sense of the Virtual

Ernst Bloch's and Walter Benjamin's bodies of work seem to aim at a common target through parallel trajectories. Both combine the promises of future liberation with the redemption of an oppressed past. Both share the same suspicion of victories and the same feeling of debt towards the defeated.

*We interact with history in a living way. And in that way the others come back to life, transformed; the dead are resuscitated; with us their actions are to be taken up [s'accomplir] once more. Müntzer saw his work brutally broken, but his desire opened onto three vast perspectives. When we consider him as a man of action, we grasp the present and the absolute through him, farther and higher than in a hurried lived experience, and yet with equal vigour. Müntzer is before all else history in the deep sense of the term: himself and his work, and all that happened that merits retelling is there to give us a task, to inspire us, to always greatly support our permanent project.<sup>1/</sup>*

This passage from Bloch's Introduction to his *Thomas Müntzer* echoes Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: 'Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious'. The combatant in the

struggle for emancipation requires a feeling of hatred and the necessary 'spirit of sacrifice... nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren'.<sup>2/</sup>

Utopia – a concept central to Bloch's work – does not appear in Benjamin's writings, replaced by the figure of the Messiah. Is this a simple terminological substitution? Certainly not: at this point, we will note that there is a radical difference in context between the two thematics.

Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia* first appeared in 1918 and was republished in 1923, the same year that Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* was first published. *The Principle of Hope* dates from 1954-1959. These two major books make direct references to the traumatic experiences of the two World Wars as well as the periods of failed revolutionary activity that followed them.

By contrast, Walter Benjamin's principal texts on history and messianism (*Central Park*, the *Arcades Project*, the *Theses*) are responses to the double defeat of revolution at the hands of Nazism and Stalinism. Before the declared coming of catastrophe, these works are comparable to kicking one's heels in order to overcome the deepest despair. From this simple analysis, it would be too easy to conclude that Benjamin's Messiah is only the negative (inverted) Utopia of times of crisis and hopelessness.

### The Spirit of Utopia as Knowledge of the Goal

#### 1. The Dialectical Anticipation of the Possible

For the early Bloch, Utopia marks the inscription of a morality within the practical horizon of politics. The romanticism and nostalgia of

the corporate State have repressed from memory even the traces of the terrible peasant wars. From that moment onwards, *[f]rom this place of the self-encounter, so that it may become one for everyone, there consequently also springs, inevitably, the arena of political-social leadership: toward real personal freedom, toward real religious affiliation... To be practical in this way, to help in this way on everyday life's structural horizon and put things into place, precisely to be political-social in this way, is powerfully near to conscience, and is a revolutionary mission absolutely inscribed in utopia.<sup>3/</sup>*

While it remains distant, the revolutionary project is no longer abstract or inaccessible. It becomes 'an absolutely constitutive presentiment of the goal, knowledge of the goal'.<sup>4/</sup> Utopia emerges here as a modality of knowledge. It answers the causal knowledge of the past with an exploratory knowledge of the future, a 'constitutive presentiment' or 'knowledge of the goal'. It is the dialectical anticipation of what will later be defined as 'real possibility [*reale Möglichkeit*]'.

#### 2. A Critical Conception of Positivist Marxism

In the context of the First World War, this rehabilitation of utopia is infused with a critical and polemical purpose against the prevailing Marxist orthodoxy within the prewar Social-Democratic movement. From the famous opposition between scientific and utopian socialism the major theoreticians of the Second International derived a positivistic Marxism, dedicated to clarifying the laws of reality and to educating the proletarian students. As for revolution, it was only the outcome of economic laws that had reached maturity. Yet, to change the world, Marx did not

1/ Bloch 1975, p. 17.

2/ Benjamin 1968, p. 260.

3/ Bloch 2000, pp. 236-237.

4/ Bloch 2000, p. 237.

advocate waiting for favourable conditions, but 'to produce them'. However, in spite of tracking fetishism in production so well, he appears sometimes to cross over to the cult of the productive forces. A powerful means of disenchantment, his materialism could also give rise to new fetishisms. For Bloch, 'this manifestation of the problem of the relationship between "subjective" Will and "objective" Idea proves the necessity of a fundamental metaphysical rethinking neglected by Marx'.<sup>5/</sup>

### **3. Utopia and Heresy**

To the research of these metaphysical foundations, Bloch restores the relation of connivance, of hidden complicity that reconnects contemporary revolutionary sentiments to older heretical rebellions. In this vision of the world, the French Revolution becomes a 'breakthrough of heretical history':

*And in this age, where God's desperate red sunset is already sufficiently in all things and neither Atlas nor Christ holds up his heaven, it finally appears that Marxism is no special philosophical accomplishment if it remains aesthetically fixed in the status quo in order to posit nothing but a more or less eudaimonistically instituted 'heaven' on earth – without the music that ought to resound out of this effortlessly functioning mechanism of the economy and of social existence.*<sup>6/</sup>

The 'active and intelligent gaze' has destroyed much, and for good reason. It was undoubtedly correct to have rejected 'abstract-utopian' socia-

lism, but the depth of the concrete utopian tendency was lost in the process.

*Only someone who speaks not just for the earth but for the wrongly surrendered heaven will truly be able to demystify the fabrications of bourgeois-feudal state ideology... Hence utopia's distant totality offers the image of a structure in no way still economically profitable: everyone producing according to his abilities, everybody consuming according to his needs, everyone openly 'comprehended' according to the degree of his assistance, his moral-spiritual lay ministry and humanity's homeward journey through the world's darkness.*<sup>7/</sup>

### **4. Utopia as Disalienation**

Read in conjunction with Lukács's critique of reification and commodity fetishism, Utopia appears as an initial antidote to alienation. What was negated and disfigured, what 'stirs and dreams within the lived darkness', pulses inside of it. 'Toward it we now reverberate, force what is inmost outward. None of our constructs may still be independent of us; man may no longer let himself be absorbed by the means and the false objectifications of himself'.<sup>8/</sup>

### **5. Utopia as Negation of All State Condensations**

This active Utopia forms [organiser] a liberatory distrust against the authoritarian ambitions of the State.

*Only after what is false has fallen away can what is genuine live. And not many are aware of how much coercion remains to be unlearned. It is not possible to imagine precisely the state unceremoniously enough. It is nothing if it does not let us manage things in a beneficial way, then obsolesce correspondingly. Everything else in which the state oppresses or lulls us should finally fall away, and it must hand*

*back everything but the dreary matters. If fear and lies depart, it will become difficult for the state to exist, let alone arouse great respect.*<sup>9/</sup>

Confronted with the legacy of Prussian authoritarianism and the experience of social militarisation during the war, Bloch indicates in it the proper essence of the State, which is 'coercion in-itself'. Although a provisionally necessary evil, the Bolshevik state must rapidly wither away, and transform itself into 'an international regulation of consumption and production'.<sup>10/</sup> Benjamin will share the same libertarian suspicion of all institutional power; coming from a tradition of a people without a state or territory, he carries its floating roots with him.<sup>11/</sup>

### **Hope 'Surrounded by Dangers'**

**1.** Thirty terrible years pass between the *Spirit of Utopia* and *Principle of Hope*, during which the victory of Nazism and the concentration camps, the bureaucratic counterrevolution and the Gulags, the war and Hiroshima, the crushing defeat of the Spanish Republic all occurred... It is difficult after such experiences to give credit to History; difficult to believe that History has its twists, deviations, or contretemps [counter-times] on the assured road of progress.

*The Spirit of Utopia* became the principal critique of illusions of Progress: not a misguided confidence in the promises of the future, but a hope, curved like an arc pointed towards the target of the simply possible. 'It is a question of learning hope', Bloch insists, so as to be able to preserve the joyous love of success rather than the morbid taste of failure. Searchful hope is the active expectation of a day-dream. It is the 'concrete hope' for a 'Not-Yet-Conscious' or the 'Not-Yet-Become', Lenin's 'forward dreaming' where 'what is truly hoping

<sup>5/</sup> Bloch 2000, pp. 241-242.

<sup>6/</sup> Bloch 2000, p. 244.

<sup>7/</sup> Bloch 2000, pp. 245-246.

<sup>8/</sup> Bloch 2000, p. 278.

<sup>9/</sup> Bloch 2000, p. 238.

<sup>10/</sup> Bloch 2000, p. 239.

<sup>11/</sup> See Löwy 1988.

in the subject, truly hoped for in the object', are called to encounter each other.

Historical experiences forced a redefinition of utopia, enriched by the intellectual developments of the 30s – notably the contribution of psychoanalysis. Bloch begins by searching for often-imperceptible traces of 'daydreams' in art, heresies, philosophy. He looks for the imprints of the utopian will that 'guides all movements of liberation', involving 'little... wavering' daydreams, robust 'castles in the air', or the confused 'discovery of the Not-Yet Conscious' in 'daydreams of the average kind'. This repressed social imaginary resonates in the everyday fantasies of play, fashion, spectacle, in the embryonic forms of coexistence:

*The anticipatory thus operates in the field of hope; so this hope is not taken only as emotion, as the opposite of fear (because fear too can of course anticipate), but more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind (and here the opposite is then not fear, but memory). The imagination and the thoughts of future intention described in this way are utopian, this again not in a narrow sense of the word which only defines what is bad (emotively reckless picturing, playful form of an abstract kind), but rather in fact in the newly tenable sense of the forward dream, of anticipation in general. And so the category of the Utopian, beside the usual, justifiably pejorative sense, possesses the other, in no way necessarily abstract or unworldly sense, much more centrally turned towards the world: of overtaking the natural course of events.<sup>12/</sup>*

It involves seeing beyond, not to avoid the proximity of what is most near, but to penetrate it: to seize, at the moment of take-off, the

not-yet manifest in a subterranean relation with the 'Emergent in history'. This is what illustrates the study of 'wish-images' (travels, tales, films, landscapes, dances, theatre). These contain the seeds of Utopia. When they evolve into 'free and considered' projects, and only then, they reach Utopia properly speaking, as constructive anticipation. The history of fragmented utopias (medical, technological, geographical, architectural), 'All this is full of overhaul[s]', of 'pre-appearances', of the contents of the 'not-yet' and what is hidden or repressed.

**2.** A static and non-dialectical thought was incapable of exploring this potential utopia, lying fallow, to make it into a project. The virtualities of a forward-looking philosophy remain blocked by the dominant contemplative attitude within philosophy: 'materialistic dialectics becomes the instrument to control this process, the instrument of the mediated, controlled Novum... Marxist philosophy is that of the future, therefore also of the future in the past... the still unbecome'. Bloch's utopic quest opens onto the need for a projective philosophy, a thought finally capable of giving a philosophical dimension to the hope situated in a world:

*Longing, expectation, hope therefore need their hermeneutics... Philosophy will have conscience of tomorrow, commitment to the future, knowledge of hope, or it will have no more knowledge. And the new philosophy, as it was initiated by Marx, is the same thing as the philosophy of the New... Only thinking directed towards changing the world and informing the desire to change it does not confront the future (the unclosed space for new development in front of us) as embarrassment and the past as spell.<sup>13/</sup>*

Ironically, Bloch finds the proclamation of such a form of thought in a place where professional philosophers would never have thought to look for it: in his famous (and infamous) *What Is to be Done?*, Lenin cites a long quote from Pisarev:

*If a person were completely devoid of all capability of dreaming in this way, if he were not able to hasten ahead now and again to view in his imagination as a unified and completed picture the work which is only now beginning to take shape in his hands, then I find it absolutely impossible to imagine what would motivate the person to tackle and to complete extensive and strenuous pieces of work in the fields of art, science, and practical life... The gulf between dream and reality is not harmful if only the dreamer seriously believes in his dream, if he observes life attentively, compares his observations with his castles in the air and generally works towards the realization of his dream-construct conscientiously. There only has to be some point of contact between dream and life for everything to be in the best order.<sup>14/</sup>*

'In our movement', Lenin comments, 'there are unfortunately precious few dreams of this kind. And those people are chiefly responsible for this who boast how sober they are and how "close" they stand to the "concrete," and those are the representatives of legitimate criticism and the illegitimate politics of trotting behind'.

This break with the contemplative attitude frees up the explosive potentialities of 'wishful images', by relating them to the political horizon of their fulfilment. It radically questions all archaeological investigations of Being as opposed to the 'Where To' of the real. If Being is to be understood through its origins, it is also to be understood, henceforth, as an open tendency towards an end: 'Essential being is

<sup>12/</sup> Bloch 1995a, p. 12.

<sup>13/</sup> Bloch 1995a, pp. 6-7.

<sup>14/</sup> Quoted in Bloch 1995a, p. 10.

not Been-ness; on the contrary: the essential being of the world lies itself on the Front'.<sup>15/</sup>

Creative anticipation responds to the plitudes of creative evolution. A forward-looking philosophy now requires a reorganisation of its central categories around the concepts of Front, Ultimum, and Novum:

*And there is no other place for militant optimism than the place which the category of Front opens up... Philosophy of comprehended hope thus stands per definitionem on the Front of the world process [...] Bergson, however, in equating all foreseeability with static prediction, has not only ignored creative anticipation, this reddening dawn in the human will, but the genuine Novum as a whole, the horizon of utopia... To sum up: appropriate to the Novum, so that it really is one, is not only abstract opposition to mechanical repetition, but actually also a kind of specific repetition: namely of the still unbecome total goal-content itself, which is suggested and tended, tested and processed out in the progressive newnesses of history. Thus moreover: the dialectical emergence of this total content is no longer described by the category Novum, but rather by the category Ultimum, and with this of course the repetition ends.*<sup>16/</sup>

These linked categories come to break the 'dogged cycle' of repetition – the infernal prison of *The Eternity According to the Stars* [*L'Eternité par les astres*] – where Blanqui teeters on the edge of madness.<sup>17/</sup>

**3.** In this reorganisation of the utopian field, the dual thread of hot and cold – or authoritar-

ian and liberatory – utopias is exhausted. With the bourgeoisie's rise to power, the theological Utopia of the kingdom of God is erased for the practical and political programme of natural right. Utopia found a second life in the unfinished project of the French Revolution, through the displacement from grand legislative constructions to social experimentation. Marx put an end to the 'reified dualism between what is and what ought to be'. By struggling against an 'empiricism that clings to things' and a 'utopianism that skims over them', he inaugurates a 'realism full of future', as his 'whole work serves the future and can only be comprehended in the horizon of the future', in a 'realistic anticipation of what is good'. With Marx, 'what is best in utopia is given a firm practical footing' through 'the unity of hope and knowledge of process': he also eliminates 'everything inflamed in the forward dream' and 'everything mouldy in sobriety'. For the first time, history is presented as a conscious construction, and the 'illusion of fate' as an unfathomable and uncontrollable necessity 'vanishes'.<sup>18/</sup>

On the side of the bourgeois imaginary, fragmented, broken utopias, always prepared to cooperate with the established order, no longer remain; specialised and fragmented, from now on incapable of great upheavals, are the shortest route between separation and reconciliation or resignation.

**4.** In light of *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch develops his distinction between a 'warm stream' and 'cold stream' of Marxism, between a positivist stream entranced by the laws and equilibrium-states of reality, and a warm stream haunted by crises and the sudden appearance of the virtual. It draws on the weapons of a resistance to the bureaucratized

reason of state and the arguments of a clandestine dissidence. It is always possible to call this the negative against the positive, the incompleteness of the virtual against the accomplished facts of the real.

*Both the critical caution which determines the speed of the path, and the founded expectation which guarantees a militant optimism as regards the goal, are determined through insight into the correlate of possibility. And in such a way that this correlate, as it is now becoming possible to say, itself again has two sides, a reverse side as it were, on which the measures of the respectively Possible are written, and a front side on which the Totum of the finally Possible indicates that it is still open. In fact, the first side, that of the existing decisively conditions, teaches conduct on the path to the goal, whereas the second side, that of the utopian Totum, fundamentally prevents partial attainments on this path from being taken for the whole goal and from obscuring it.*<sup>19/</sup>

The reworked utopianism of *The Principle of Hope* also becomes a line of resistance to the Stalinist bureaucratic order, and a response to the 'undernourishment of the revolutionary imagination'. If the first act of the socialist order is the overturning of the old regime, its second act must be a 'utopianre-remembering'. It serves as the unthought in Bloch. Henri Lefebvre describes utopia as the non-practical feeling of possibility. Anti-bureaucratic utopia would then be the expression of a non-practical feeling of democratic socialism and of the actual withering-away of the state. Whether Bloch does not see, in the Europe of the 1950s (Khrushchev's secret speech on Stalin's crimes, the 1953 uprising in East Berlin, the uprisings in Poland and Hungary in 1956) the necessary force to translate this feeling into practice, or whether for him, in the binary world post-

<sup>15</sup> Bloch 1995a, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Bloch 1995a, p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> Blanqui 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Bloch 1995b, pp. 621-624.

<sup>19</sup> Bloch 1995a, p. 206.

Yalta, the utopian line of flight is a form of provisional compromise with a bureaucratic order that he refuses without daring to confront head-on, at the risk of 'playing the enemy's game'.

Under the folds of Utopia, for want of clearly posing the determining question of power, the 'revolution in the revolution' tends then to be reduced to a cultural revolution. Hope appears, however, as the opposite of confidence in the future. Restless, critical, worried, it is perpetually 'surrounded by dangers'.<sup>20/</sup>

### Walter Benjamin's Messianic Reversal

**1.** Benjamin excludes the category of Utopia from his writings to make way for the uncertain coming of the Messiah. This is not a simple change in vocabulary. Benjamin often found inspiration in Blanqui and Sorel, who were fervent opponents of Utopia. For the latter, the makers of 'wholesale [*sur plan*]' monumental happiness are always ready to sell their fantastic inventions retail, on the black market of small reforms. Utopia is a cold architecture, opposed to myth as the vibrant expression of a will.

Benjamin's political and philosophical itinerary is very much exemplary of an epoch. Taking a late interest in the Russian Revolution, he ran aground, in 1927 Moscow, on the triumph of the bureaucratic counterrevolution and its edifying aesthetic. A man of thresholds and passages, he smashed into the closed borders near the Pyrenees... A witness to the collapse of a world, he subjected the secular religion of Progress to a critique that exposed its ultimate foundations: a homogeneous and empty understanding of time.

<sup>20/</sup> Bloch 1989, p. 17.

<sup>21/</sup> Droysen 1990.

<sup>22/</sup> Bloch 1995a, p. 16.

A unitary vision of history is no longer possible. There is no cumulative movement, no edifying grand narrative of universal history, propelled by the motor of progress or sucked up into the black hole of utopia. There is not, for all that, a history in pieces, aesthetic and brilliant, whose fragments would be at an equal distance from God. At the same moment when Baudelaire was enunciating the enigma of modernity, Droysen was rejecting the illusions of an objectivist narrative: the 'illusion of a closed series', the 'illusion of a first beginning and a definite end', the 'illusion of an objective image of the past'. He asserted that our knowledge of the past is limited by our ignorance of the future, and established a productive analogy between the work of art and the historical event: 'What was is not interesting to us because it was, but because it is in a certain sense, active again, because it is implied in the greater context of these things that we call the historical world, that is, the moral world, the moral cosmos'.<sup>21/</sup>

History, according to Benjamin, is cosmic. It does not follow linear and mechanical successions, but attractions and gravitations. In this gravitational history, past and future are under the condition of the present. The eventual truth of minor history deafeningly rings out on the drums of the larger. The past no longer determines the present or future, according to the order of a causal chain. The future no longer retrospectively clarifies the present and past, according to the unique meaning of a final cause. The present becomes the central temporal category. It dwindles and thins out, stretched to the minute of the current moment, the fugitive instant, the ungraspable 'at-present', where past and future permanently start over, always in future.

The present, and the present alone, can order the beam of the 'maybes'.

**2.** For Bloch, the future remained the dominant category: the past only comes later and the authentic present is not yet there. They presuppose this radiance of the future, which contradicts the prophecies of decline and decadence, under the nihilistic slogan: *in the absence of the future*, dedicating man to nothing. The blooming of wishful-images shows the desire for an authentic present. This present is only possible at the limit of times, once the principle of hope is fulfilled:

*The final will is that to be truly present. So that the lived moment belongs to us and we to it and 'Stay awhile' could be said to it. Man wants at last to enter into the Here and Now as himself, wants to enter his full life without postponement and distance. The genuine utopian will is definitely not endless striving, rather: it wants to see the merely immediate and thus so unpossessed nature of self-location and being-here finally mediated, illuminated and fulfilled, fulfilled happily and adequately. This is the utopian frontier-content which is implied in the 'Stay awhile, you are so fair' of the Faust scheme.*<sup>22/</sup>

For Benjamin, each present is charged with a redemptive mission. The revolutionary class pursues its emancipatory project in the name of the defeated generations, as the last enslaved class.

*This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century. Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the*

*redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.*<sup>23/</sup>

The 'now-time' or present moment [*Jetztzeit*] is this point of suture between past and future, which did not cease in negating itself. Evanescent instant of freedom, it is our recourse against the domination of the past and the future. This time of origin is that of a permanent beginning. Not a before, but a now. 'It is a reconciliation of the beginning and end: every now is a beginning, every now is an end. The return to the origin [*origine*] is a return to the present. The present has become the central value of the temporal triad'.<sup>24/</sup>

Thus Benjamin finds a third way between the linear and historicist conception of a homogeneous universal History oriented in the ineluctable direction of progress, and a piecemeal history, reduced to chaotic fragments equidistant to God. He discovers it in a gravitational representation, where attractions and correspondences across epochs and actors are knotted together, and where the present, occupying the central place of a fallen God, exercises a resurrectional power on the past and a prophetic power on the future.

This solution clarifies the reason why Benjamin claims a new alliance between historical materialism and theology. In *The Children of the Mire*, Octavio Paz perhaps delivers us the secret: 'The theme of the establishment of another society is a revolutionary theme, which places in the future the time of the

beginning; the restoration of original innocence is a religious theme which places the past before the Fall in the present'.<sup>25/</sup>

**3.** This shift in temporal order is first translated into a transformation of the imaginary. While Bloch focuses his attention on the emancipatory potential of the daydream, Benjamin, above all, looks to awaken the world from its nightmares inhabited by the fetishes of capital. A world enchanted by the dance of commodities, and given to catastrophe rather than the peaceful road of progress, can no longer dream. It is destined to nightmares. The index of the revolution is the privileged instant of awakening – the resurrective awakening of Proust or the insurrectional awakening of Blanqui – and not a banalised dream.

Next, there is a transformation of the Messiah and an inversion of the wait. In this secular messianism, we no longer wait for a Messiah full of promises. We await, in our own way, the interminable procession of the defeated and oppressed from the past; we possess the formidable power to either prolong or interrupt their agony. In fact, the present can always redistribute the cards and roles, changing the meaning of the past by contradicting the history written by the victors. The last word is never spoken, and we always have obligations to messianic debts. This secularised messianism is no longer the passive patience waiting to be met, but the active and restless expectation of the sentinel, always ready for the sudden appearance of possibility.

A new conceptual constellation is born, where the notions of expectation, awakening, event, bifurcation, and now-time respond and shed light on one another. They outline the veins of a reason enriched by theology, a reason armed in order to attack the tenacious

growths of madness and myth. In contrast to the mechanistic reason of Newtonian physics, this messianic reason is open towards the aleatory, capable of seizing determinations in unforeseeable outcomes, and differentiating the necessary and the possible. Curiously, this reason, emerging from the unexpected crossroads of a critical materialism and Jewish theology, shows itself to be less disoriented than the other by the epistemological mutations whose importance Benjamin could not yet foresee: whether faced with the star-shaped plans of strategic games or the 'strange attractors' of chaos theory, it found itself on familiar terrain.

**4.** The conceptual apparatus of messianic reason culminates in the concept of politics. 'Politics thus attains primacy over history',<sup>26/</sup> since it is in charge of its meaning; in no way predetermined by the origin or guided by the end. Likewise, the politicisation of aesthetics becomes communism's necessary response when faced with the ornamental aestheticisation of politics in the form of Nazism and Stalinism. This does not consist of dressing up in a ceremonial costume of propaganda, but of releasing the virtual hidden in the real, blasting apart the routines of technique, progress, and language. Proust, Kafka, and the surrealists are the emblematic figures of this disconcerting politics.

By reassembling fragmented practices, this politics of the non-politicians articulates expectation and possibility, awakening and event, interpretation and bifurcation. To change the world is no longer to just interpret it, but it is still to interpret it, like a text whose 49 layers of meaning are never encountered at once.

Messianic reason is connected to a prophetic tradition rather than to a utopian tradition.

<sup>23/</sup> Benjamin 1968, pp. 253-254, 260.

<sup>24/</sup> Paz 1991, p. 170.

<sup>25/</sup> Paz 1991, p. 37.

<sup>26/</sup> Benjamin 1999, pp. 388-389.

Secularised utopia, hope is not always exempt from ambiguity. It is enough to recall that for Spinoza, hope, more than fear, produced submission.<sup>27</sup> From the sole fact of its announcement, prophecy can neutralise its own threats by modifying the future. The present of discourse dominates the conditional of the prediction.

Through both his itinerary and his subject matter, Bloch appears as a Marxist who is, although atypical, more classical than Benjamin. Under the sign of utopia, however, he preserves a religious nostalgia; Benjamin only assumes it in order better to challenge it. The utopian experience allows Bloch to take on Stalinism patiently; the primacy of politics forbids Benjamin from such compromises.

His rare explicitly political texts undertake a struggle of principle against the bureaucratic dictatorships and Social-Democratic quietism. With his understanding of the profane, Benjamin detects better than many of his contemporaries the essential continuity between the politics of the Popular Front and the Soviet-German pact.

Stalinist thought has the same ideology of progress, the same conception of empty and homogeneous time (which does not treat catastrophe as a serious matter) as its sister-enemy, Social Democracy. In this lazy approach, what did not happen that same day would be made up for tomorrow. Nazism is only a snag or counter-movement on the pre-drawn path of

the Enlightenment, just as Stalinism is only a price to pay for the delays of the revolution.

But it is these delays which cause encounters to be missed. It is the missed encounters that are irreparable.

In Blanqui's understanding of 'bifurcations', one is rarely allowed to turn back. Instinctively, Benjamin senses the enemy at the gates: in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, he declares a ruthless war against them. At stake is not only the safety and comfort of future generations, but the infernal repetition of the pain of the defeated, those who are eternally trampled upon in the march of the victors.

*Translated from French by Patrick King*

## References

- Albiac, Gabriel 1986, *Todos los héroes han muerto, y otras crónicas de una devota*, Madrid: Ediciones Libertarias.
- Benjamin, Walter 1968, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken.
- Benjamin, Walter 1999, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Blanqui, Auguste 2009, 'Eternity According to the Stars', translated by Matthew H. Anderson, *The New Centennial Review*, 9, 3: 3-60.

– Bloch, Ernst 1975, *Thomas Münzer, théologien de la Révolution*, Paris: 10/18.

– Bloch, Ernst 1989, 'Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenberg, Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press.

– Bloch, Ernst 1995a, *The Principle of Hope*, Volume 1, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press.

– Bloch, Ernst 1995b, *The Principle of Hope*, Volume 2, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press.

– Bloch, Ernst 2000, *The Spirit of Utopia*, translated by Anthony A. Nassar, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

– Droysen, Gustav 1990, *Cours sur la méthodologie et le savoir historiques*, Paris: Gallimard.

– Löwy, Michael 1988, *Rédemption et Utopie*, Paris: PUF.

– Paz, Octavio 1991, *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, translated by Rachel Phillips, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

*Historical Materialisme* 24.4  
*La Discordance des temps*, Éditions de la passion, 1995, danielbensaid.org

<sup>27</sup>/ The Catalan philosopher Gabriel Albiac goes so far as to write: 'to situate oneself from a revolutionary viewpoint today is to situate oneself within the space of rejection of all hope'. See Albiac 1986.