

Time and Revolution

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ABSTRACT. Revolution is about time. Theories on revolution need theories on time. True revolutionary endeavors rely on a clear understanding of history and how history unfolds. Above all, revolution is about how history ends. The questions posed by Bloch in the «Introduction» to *The Principle of Hope* address these radical issues by bringing to the surface the link between revolutionary thinking and theories on time, which are also to be found welded together at the very beginning of the philosophical venture. This contribution intends to outline the fundamental issues faced by critical thinking today, considering that its main task, as identified by the young Marx, lies in the fulfillment of the thoughts of the past as well as in conceding defeat when it comes to trying to set a time-limit to time. Indeed, critical thinking today has to deal both with history and with critique itself, namely, with the inexorable proceeding into boundless catastrophe and, on the other hand, with surrendering to an idea of the future which resembles the projection of all that exists in an indefinitely expanded present, thereby delivering itself to a position of alignment with the capitalistic *revolutio* of the world.

KEYWORDS. Future; Ernst Bloch; Walter Benjamin; Historical Materialism; Messianism.

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*The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance:
he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked*
Psalm 58, 10

1. On the front of novelty

Revolution is about time. Theories on revolution need theories on time. True revolutionary endeavors rely on a clear understanding of history and how history unfolds. Above all, revolution is about how history ends. A revolution might be unexpected, but its outcome is often long-awaited. Revolution demands we wait for it, but it also demands we work for it.

«Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we waiting for? What awaits us?»:¹ These questions posed by Bloch in the «Introduction» to *The Principle of Hope* address the abovementioned constellation of arguments. Insofar as they address genuine revolutionary arguments, they bring to the surface the link between revolutionary thinking and theories on time, which are to be found welded together at the very beginning of the philosophical venture. Plato's political reflections that articulate his grand utopia are accompanied by visions of the temporal structure of cosmic order. In the dialogues, these visions are of different natures, and even play different roles, but at least we can state that they are rather precise and comprehensive.

This is the case with the Myth of Er narrated at the end of the dialogue Πολιτεία (614a-621c);² or the distinction, established in the Πολιτικός (270a-274e), between the cycle of Chronos and the ongoing cycle of Zeus.³ Plato's «final work», Νόμοι, the work that Plato wished

1 BLOCH 1996, 3.

2 PLATO 1935, 490-521.

3 PLATO 1925, 50-69.

to keep safe from the future, namely, from all that would have followed it and which promised only decline and decay,⁴ makes the context of the dialogue clear, which is about the concrete foundation of an ideal society by expressing, in the third book, a grand mythical vision of cosmic time as «vast and immeasurable» (676b)⁵ within which the palingenesis of human civilization takes place cyclically (676a-684a).⁶

If Plato's utopia is tied to an astonishing vision of palingenetic regeneration, which begins with the shepherds, the only ones that had survived, who traverse the «fearful and widespread desolation» of a wasteland (677a-678a),⁷ Bloch's materialistic utopia implies a theory of the totality, of *totum*, which is also a theory on time. For Bloch, the global process of history assumes the dialectical structure of *Front-Novum-Ultimum*.⁸ True novelties in history, such as revolutions, are actualizations of that «intention», which addresses the whole picture. The *novum* draws from this intention, which gives the totality its specific identity, an identity which is a child of its time.⁹

While totality represents inexhaustible potentiality,¹⁰ the *novum* becomes possible, attainable, only as a historical attempt «against the light of utopia».¹¹ Consequently, the future does not consist of a «reiteration» of what has already been, which generates a simple quantitative difference from the past. It is quite the opposite: the future remains future, that is, still undetermined, because it can be the repetition of what has not yet become actual, and which in the course of history has been offered as a goal.¹² In Bloch's utopian view, the novelty that characterizes the future is not driven by the code word

4 CALASSO 2016, 234 and 236. In cases where there is no English version available of the cited texts, all translations are this author's own.

5 PLATO 1926, 165.

6 PLATO 1926, 164-91.

7 PLATO 1926, 169-71.

8 SIEBERS 2012b, 412.

9 SIEBERS 2012b, 414.

10 COLLAMATI 2019, 194-96.

11 SIEBERS 2012b, 414.

12 SIEBERS 2012b, 414.

“one more time”; rather, it welcomes the *novum* as it happens “for the first time, finally!”.

«The new is only truly new when it is in its own way an attempt that aims at the *totum*», as Siebers argues.¹³ However, the category of *novum* does not suffice to describe the «still unbecome total goal-content»¹⁴ that emerges as novelty in the course of history, which is determined by events rather than by linear progressions. The category of *ultimum* is needed in order to understand the *novum* event, in which repetition is appeased. In chapter 17 of *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch explains this shift as follows:

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.¹⁵

For Bloch, the German term *Front* should be understood as the *limen* of history, it is the threshold that the historical process has reached. This is also the threshold at which one can outline what has become concretely possible on the basis of that process. The *novum* is the trespassing, or transgression, of the *limen*, which is, at the same time, the starting point towards the new possibilities that already virtually occupy the present historical scene. The *novum* represents the transition to utopia, or better, the transition to the concrete possibility that corresponds to the utopian imagination, which is the theme of the chapter from *The Principle of Hope* mentioned above.¹⁶ Bloch uses the

13 SIEBERS 2012b, 414.

14 BLOCH 1996, 202.

15 BLOCH 1996, 202.

16 On the «transition» to utopia, see FARNESI CAMELLONE 2019, 164-75.

category of the *ultimum* to define the potential or virtual sphere to which revolutionary agency turns in order to prepare an attempt at radical change, which involves the *totum*, the historical contingency in its totality.¹⁷

The particular eschatological meaning with which Bloch entrusts the category of *ultimum* as a «borderline case»¹⁸ of the *novum* is not to be understood in a theological sense. Indeed, in this case, with the use of the category of *ultimum* itself, philosophy goes beyond theology. Bloch points out that in the European religious tradition, the *ultimum* is not thought of as *novum*, but as *primum*, as original. In this form, that is, in the form of a «*restitutio in integrum*» the *ultimum* as *primum* dominates Hegel's view of the historical cycle.¹⁹ Bloch, in turn, strives to think of what comes last no longer in the mode of «restoration», but as «fulfillment».²⁰

The *ultimum* triumphs precisely by creating a clear discontinuity with everything that precedes it. For the subjects involved, revolutionary endeavors imply their seizing the opportunity to abandon their current identity, which is reflected, as in a mirror, in the hitherto development of history. The beginning and ending «in a radical sense are found outside the historical process»,²¹ not as something pre-existing in a transcendent manner, but as what makes the process itself, its setting in motion and its tendency, possible. The *ultimum*, then, is not an eschatological term predetermined *ab origine*:

And the newness in the *Ultimum*—Bloch argues—really triumphs by means of its total leap out of everything that previously existed, but it is a leap towards the newness that is ending or identity. The category *Ultimum* has not been left as unconsidered as that of the *Novum*; the idea of the Last Thing has always been a subject of those religions which also set a

17 On this, see SIEBERS 2012b, 415.

18 SIEBERS 2012c, 587.

19 BLOCH 1996, 203.

20 SIEBERS 2012c, 582-83.

21 SIEBERS 2012c, 585.

time-limit to time, and thus above all of Judaeo-Christian [*sic*] philosophy of religion.²²

This does not mean that in Bloch's view an ἔσχατον is not set. The «*humanum*» construed as the «*eschaton*» that lies in the «destination point of progress» is the final and most important goal toward which the development of all past, present, and future societies is directed, as we read in the penultimate of his theses on the concept of progress published in the *Tübinger Einleitung*.²³

By connecting the *ultimum* with the *primum*, the circularity of mythic time neutralizes the *novum*. Hence Bloch's critique of that «kind of ancestor cult» perpetuated by philosophy to the notions of origin and original, a cult that Bloch detects as recurring throughout history from Augustine to Hegel.²⁴ In this cult, the *novum* is misunderstood as if it were the unveiled origin of historical time as such, which is brought back to the present day; the origin, in this case, is taken as a potential state of bliss that lies in the past and can be retrieved. Entrusting a

22 BLOCH 1996, 203. Bloch goes on: «However, this categorial treatment precisely indicated that the one which properly ought to precede it, that of the *Novum*, was as good as absent. Because in the whole of Judaeo-Christian philosophy, from Philo and Augustine to Hegel, the *Ultimum* relates exclusively to a *Primum* and not to a *Novum*; consequently the Last Thing appears simply as the attained return of an already completed First Thing which has been lost or relinquished. The form of this return incorporates the pre-Christian form of the self-combusting and self-renewing Phoenix, it incorporates the Heraclitean and Stoic doctrine of world-conflagration, according to which the Zeus-fire takes the world back into itself and similarly, in periodic cycles, releases it again». On these aspects, see HELLER 1993, 50-1, cited in BOELLA 2022. See also LÖWITH 1949, 3-6.

23 BLOCH 1970, 233. On this theme regarding «Progress and humankind», see KOSELLECK AND MEIER 2004, 397-403. In the last two pages of the entry, Koselleck cites chapter 15 of Bloch's *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie* (BLOCH 1970, 118-46) entitled: *Differenzierungen im Begriff Fortschritt* («Internal distinctions of the concept of progress», KOSELLECK AND MEIER 2004, 422-23).

24 BLOCH 1996, 203-4. He continues his argument as follows: «Consequently, as is evident precisely in the *Ultimum*, in the case of this [kind of] *Novum*, but also in that of all previous *Novum*, only antire-remembering, anti-Augustine, anti-Hegel is philosophically appropriate, anti-circle and denial of the ring-principle, that intended from Hegel and Eduard von Hartmann, in fact as far as Nietzsche» (204).

«fundamentally sterile cycle»,²⁵ to be perceived and celebrated through *anamnesis*,²⁶ this distorted view of eschatology embraced by philosophy hinders the view of «the utopian structure of being of human existence».²⁷

To Bloch, Jewish messianism had constituted a breakthrough in the mythical conception of time imagined as a cycle. Later, Christian salvation history came to interrupt the “fundamentally sterile” cyclical repetition of a time that is mythically intended as infinite and qualitatively neutral.²⁸ However, in some versions, which ended up predominating, messianism generated a «backward-looking utopia», which looks into the «future of the restored paradise».²⁹ «It is precisely here», Bloch argues, «that the myth of the *Thousand-Year Reich* begins, [the myth] of a happy final age towards which history is striving, or rather: which history has in store for the ‘just’».³⁰

In this perspective, opened up by Bloch’s critique of mythic time, the question arises: is it religion that “set a time-limit to time”, that sets

25 BLOCH 1996, 204.

26 On this, see SIEBERS 2012c, 587.

27 SIEBERS 2012b, 415. It is worth noting, incidentally, that the eschatological take on a brutal end of time, which we find expressed throughout Heidegger’s *Black Notebooks* from the war period, can be compared to Bloch’s “utopian structure” of unfolding history, despite the different perspectives on the subject. Indeed, Heidegger also considers the origins of Western historical destiny in order to grasp signs of a new beginning based on the tragic juncture of wartime. See, for instance, the opening paragraphs of *Ponderings VIII* (HEIDEGGER 2017a, 75): «*What is now happening* is the *ending* of the history of the great beginning of Western humanity; in this beginning, the human being was called to the stewardship of *beyng*, although this calling was immediately transformed into the claim of representing beings in their machinational distorted essence. Yet the end of this first beginning is not a stopping; instead, it is a genuine commencement, which, however, remains withdrawn from itself in its truth, because it must order everything according to mere surfaces». See, as a second notable example, also *Ponderings XV*: «If history is proceeding toward an end, then a beginning must already prevail. The inceptuality of this beginning, however, is concealed, though it can be sheer downgoing. Or the downgoing is the transition into the other beginning and already comes out of it» (HEIDEGGER 2017b, 200). On this point, see Trawny’s *Afterword* to *Ponderings XII–XV* (HEIDEGGER 2017b, 223–25), MAZZARELLA 2021, and ESPOSITO 2021.

28 See HARTMANN 2012, 674.

29 SIEBERS 1991, 128.

30 BLOCH 1991, 128.

the ultimate, extreme *limen* for time, that imposes the *σχάτον* on time—or is it time itself, by definition, that “has time”, that dictates time, that limits itself? And, in particular, the question can be posed with respect to Plato’s utopia: given that, as Hartmann rightly notes,³¹ according to Bloch, the future remains promised in all past events, and that tradition and utopia are not conceived of as opposites,³² is Plato’s concrete utopia described in the *Νόμοι* to be understood as tradition or as utopia? Is it to be dismissed as a past that has, by now, become, or does it remain to be rediscovered as a concrete possibility that has never been realized, namely, as a «possible future in the past»?³³

Insofar as it presents itself as a possibility that extends from the past, delivering itself to the future, the concrete Platonic utopia depicted in *Νόμοι* should be considered revolutionary. In the words of the 1966 radio conference, entitled *Gibt es Zukunft in der Vergangenheit?* («Is there any future in the past?»), which has already been quoted above: «tradition is the revolution of those who are gone, revolution is the tradition of those who are yet to come».³⁴ The concrete Platonic utopia depicted in *Νόμοι* is the material handed over to the revolutionary action, which is always virtually possible. Indeed, in the historical dialectic process envisioned by Bloch, the *Front* or *limen* is a constantly potential revolutionary front.

To Bloch, “*die Front*” means «the now [*Jetzt*] of the moment [*Augenblick*] lived as a possibility of action» and is, therefore, the opening of an opportunity for the *novum* to come along the «path of utopia», so that the *Front* is a sort of «preliminary stage» of the *novum*, as Siebers notes.³⁵ The *Front*— as we read in the *Tübinger Einleitung*—is that portion of time that we first encounter, it is that space of time we find ourselves in when we live and act. Therefore, the *Front* is each time in the present, it is always in the «now». But this latter is also «the now of the not» (*das Jetzt des Nicht*), namely, the negation that resists

31 HARTMANN 2012, 673.

32 BLOCH 1978, 290-1.

33 BLOCH 1978, 294.

34 BLOCH 1978, 291.

35 SIEBERS 2012a, 161 and 164.

life and action by pushing them away from itself and makes them rush forward again and again. The «not» of the human front is to be found in the «lived moment», which is “lived” «but nevertheless not lived», due to «its still completely non transparent immediacy».³⁶

In the section of the *Tübinger Einleitung* entitled *Logikum / Zur Ontologie des Noch-Nicht-Seins*, Bloch tackles the issue of the «not-yet» (*Noch-Nicht*), namely, of the time that is not yet given, by arguing that the «not-yet» is authentically made of time, since it designates what will take place in time, and since it always presents itself as «still possible *novum*, in the genuine future».³⁷ The non-genuine future, which is the time that just mimics the future, is the time in which events repetitively take place, but nothing truly new happens. In turn, a genuine future entails the *novum* towards which «a tendency is given», so that this *novum* appears as a concrete possibility of innovation, a plausible probability among many indifferent circumstances.³⁸

On the front of human time, then, as Siebers explains, the process of realization occurs not as a continuous, uninterrupted flow, but instead unravels through ruptures, it proceeds from event to event. *Limen*, *novum*, and *ultimum*, which belong together, since they are also «co-originary»,³⁹ constitute the dialectical polarities of revolutionary events.⁴⁰

Revolutionary action on the front of human time takes on the form of *καιρός*, of the “exact or critical time”, of the “opportunity”. Thus, the twofold feature of the front is made intelligible: the *Front*, or *limen*, presents an ontological feature, since it is the sole point of access to the experience of time, and it also displays an ethical one, since it is the

36 BLOCH 1970, 227.

37 BLOCH 1970, 227.

38 BLOCH (1980, 77). On this topic, see BECK 2019.

39 SIEBERS 2012c, 583.

40 SIEBERS 2012a, 163.

moment of decision, which gives direction and purpose to existence.⁴¹ Accordingly, the category of *ultimum*, too, plays an ethical role.⁴²

The *καιρός* offered to revolutionary action is made of a sort of interim time, which is neither historical nor, strictly speaking, messianic. This interim time is the time of an *interregnum*, which Bloch defines through class struggle, so that historical materialism is explained by drawing upon class struggle.⁴³

By addressing the conflict between classes, «the great force that moves historical progress»,⁴⁴ Bloch takes up the critique of bourgeois society in the wake of Marx and Engels.⁴⁵ Class struggle is indeed the key to understanding the progression of time in history, as is famously stated in the first chapter of the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*.⁴⁶ Bloch sees the global proletarian revolution as the final stage of the world-historical process.⁴⁷ The class struggle represents that agency which makes manifest the discontinuity that constitutes the historical process, and which ontologically reveals the nature of time: time is not a continuous flow, and is not, as such, quantifiable. Rather, time is a succession of pulsating, living, atomic “now” moments.⁴⁸ In Bloch’s words, «time is only through something that happens, and only where something happens».⁴⁹

The elusive, non-seizable “now-time” guards the genuine future, namely, the time which has not yet been, and that, however, insofar as it is time, can be, in other words, can become the present. Each present

41 FILAURI 2019, 68-71.

42 SIEBERS 2012c, 588. Elsewhere SIEBERS (2012a, 163-4) recalls the notion of *καιρός* by referring to Sophocles (*Electra*, vv. 75-6). *Καιρός*, which also meant a vital part of the body (Euripides, *Andromacha*, vv. 1120-1121), is one of the key concepts of Negri’s revolutionary theory expressed as a «materialist ontology of constituent power (*potentia*)» (GODDARD 2011, 186) in the “nine lessons to himself” (NEGRI 2013).

43 SIEBERS 2012c, 586.

44 ENGELS 2010, 306.

45 On this, see Koselleck’s reconstruction in KOSELLECK AND MEIER 2004, 417-20.

46 See MARX AND ENGELS (1955, 9): «The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles».

47 HARTMANN 2012, 674.

48 HARTMANN 2012, 674.

49 BLOCH 1970, 129.

time, then, guards the possibility of the future, i.e., of the time that has «not-yet-become», as Bloch states in *Experimentum Mundi*, the work devoted to the memory of the Marxist revolutionary and agitator of the Spartacus League Rosa Luxemburg.⁵⁰

2. Endless progress in catastrophe

The problem of time, and, consequently, the arduous question concerning the time-consciousness, is pivotal for Bloch's reflection from the outset. Starting with the *ante omnia* indication that opens the first volume of the *Gesamtausgabe*,⁵¹ down to the *incipit* of *Experimentum Mundi*, published in the penultimate volume of the *Gesamtausgabe*.⁵² The tentative, albeit decisive, solution to this problem stands at the threshold of *Geist der Utopie (The Spirit of Utopia)*, in the *Absicht* («Objective») of the first edition: «How now? That is enough. Now we have to begin».⁵³ And it is even more clearly expressed in the reprise of the *Absicht* in the 1923 second edition: «I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin».⁵⁴

However, a true concrete utopia, for Bloch, is revolutionary. And the revolutionary utopia is tied to a theory about *totum*: «the *ultimum* is the hope put on the totality», this latter being construed as the «all in all», as Siebers argues.⁵⁵ The *ultimum* concerns a kind of steady hope that breaks with the present. A theory about *totum* should thus also be a theory on time. But by defining historical time from within the structure of the dialectical triad *Front-Novum-Ultimum*, Bloch does not consider it in a strict temporal manner; rather, in a «transcendental-constitutive» fashion, as Siebers states.⁵⁶ Such a dialectical notion of

50 BLOCH 1975, 90-1.

51 BLOCH 1959, 1.

52 BLOCH 1975, 11.

53 BLOCH 1971, 9.

54 BLOCH 2000, 1. On this, see also BLOCH 1997a.

55 SIEBERS 2012c, 584.

56 SIEBERS 2012b, 412-13.

the historical process is modeled after human consciousness, and precisely after the «anticipatory consciousness» (which is the title of the second part of *The Principle of Hope*).⁵⁷

The dialectical process unfolding as *Front-Novum-Ultimum* is summarized in the aforementioned chapter 17 of *The Principle of Hope*. The first epigraph of this chapter cites a passage from the renowned letter that Marx wrote to Ruge in September 1843:

The critic can therefore latch on to any form of theoretical and practical consciousness and develop true reality out of the separate forms of existing reality as their obligation and their final purpose [...]. It will then become apparent that the world has long possessed the dream of a matter, of which it must only possess the consciousness in order to possess it in reality.⁵⁸

The “dream of a matter” is also considered by Bloch during the 1966 radio conference entitled *Gibt es Zukunft in der Vergangenheit?*. Regarding Marx’s letter to Ruge, Bloch emphasizes the belief according to which human beings “must only possess the consciousness” of such a dream “in order to possess it in reality.” The Marxian “dream of a matter”, Bloch argues, refers to a concrete

57 See BLOCH 1996, 45-336. As KELLNER AND O’HARA argue (1976, 16), «Bloch urges us to grasp the three dimensions of our temporality: he offers us a dialectical analysis of the *past* which illuminates the *present* and can direct us to a better *future*. The past—what has been—contains both the sufferings, tragedies and failures of humanity—what to avoid and redeem—and its unrealized hopes and potentials—what could have been. 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. The present, for Bloch, is characterized by *latency* and *tendency*: the unrealized potentialities that are latent in the present, and the signs and foreshadowings that indicate the tendency of the direction and movement of the present into the future. This three-dimensional temporality must be grasped and activated by an *anticipatory consciousness* that at once perceives the unrealized emancipatory potential in the past, the latencies and tendencies of the present, and the realizable hopes of the future».

58 BLOCH 1996, 195.

historical process, which is brought to being through praxis, and that improves utopia so that it becomes more and more concrete.⁵⁹

In his 1843 letter, Marx expresses to Ruge the program of a “reform of consciousness”, which should arouse the world “from its dream of itself.” Such a radical reform is explained as follows:

Our motto must therefore be: the reform of consciousness not through dogmas but through analysis of mystical consciousness which is still unclear to itself, whether it appears in religious or political form. It will then become apparent that the world has long possessed the dream of a matter of which it must only possess the consciousness in order to possess it in reality. It will then become apparent that it is not a matter of drawing a sharp hyphen between past and future; rather, of the fulfillment of the thoughts of the past. Lastly, it will become apparent that humankind will not begin a *ny new* work, but it will consciously bring about the completion of its old work.⁶⁰

Marx’s letter, partially published in the *Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbüchern* founded with Ruge in 1844, is all the more important since it documents the «new trend»⁶¹ of Marx’s thinking as it shifts from radical liberalism to communism, on the way to the elaboration of scientific socialism. The task presented to Ruge is thus the core of what will later become historical materialism.⁶²

59 BLOCH 1978, 298-9. The letter from Marx to Ruge is cited as epigraph and commented on by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*, at the beginning of the section devoted to the theory of knowledge and the theory of progress (BENJAMIN 1999, 456 and 467). In this section, Benjamin also notes a comment by Bloch on his ongoing work on the *passages* (BENJAMIN 1999, 463). In the *Passagen-Werk*, see also Benjamin 1991, 1033. On Bloch’s take on Benjamin’s arcades project, see the section of *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* entitled «Montage, indirect» (BLOCH 1991, 207).

60 See MARX ET AL. 2009, 488-89. This passage from Marx’s letter is commented on in chapter 15 of *The Principle of Hope* (see BLOCH 1996, 155-6), from which we also take the English translation with some modifications and additions.

61 BLOCH. 2009, 486.

62 PRETI 1947, 8.

Relying on the Marxian terms, one can say that the actual possibilities on which Bloch's concrete utopia is based are the thoughts of the past, the ideas that were never realized, which together shape the image of the «still unbecome total goal-content».⁶³ Among these revolutionary projects, one could include the Platonic republic, for instance, except that this is clearly not just any example, but a model. Indeed, as Calasso reminds us, «to speak of communism is futile, if one does not go back to Plato; and if, once one goes back to Plato, one does not follow his argument step by step».⁶⁴

According to Bloch, a concrete utopia is the one sought by Marxism, «the *concrete-dialectical utopia of Marxism, that grasped and alive in real tendency*»,⁶⁵ as he explains in his reflections *On the Original History of the Third Reich*, drawing upon both the 1843 letter to Ruge and the 1873 «Postface» to the second German edition of *Das Kapital*:

Lenin even extricated a good core in the concept of *ideology*, a core without mist and deception, and he emphasized it when he called socialism the ideology of the working class. The rescue of the good core of *utopia* is equally overdue (as a concept which at the most lay in mist, never in deception); the *concrete-dialectical utopia of Marxism, that grasped and alive in real tendency*, is such a rescue. The undialectically attached dreaming was the mist of the matter, and in the mist lay—although with distinctions—all the wishful times and wishful spaces of the old utopia. [...] Most old utopias also stagnated in the reality given to them, they condensed only the torpor out of it as it were and distilled out the spirit, they recognized no *process* and no *totality* of renewal. The *concrete utopia of Marxism*, on the other hand, runs with the process of the forces of production towards the classless society per se in tendency. Thus Marxism, on most careful mediation with the material

63 BLOCH 1996, 202.

64 CALASSO 2016, 238. It is worth noting that, according to Bloch, the goal of Thomas More was the *optima res publica*, the «best state» (ADORNO AND BLOCH 1988, 4).

65 BLOCH 1991, 136.

tendency, ventures forward into the not yet arrived, not yet realized.⁶⁶

The “good core” of utopia is an indirect reference to the 1873 «Postface» to *Capital*: with Hegel, Marx argues, the dialectic «is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel [or core] within the mystical shell».⁶⁷ The “rational kernel” of utopia is rescued in the concrete utopia of Marxism, since this latter “runs with the process of the forces of production towards the classless society per se in tendency”. In other words, through class struggle, Marxism can conceive both the “process and the totality of renewal.” So, Marxism can dream of the revolutionary matter (referred to in Marx’s 1843 letter) “without the mist and deception” in which “all the wishful times and wishful spaces of the old utopia” lay, as we read in the quotation above taken from *On the Original History of the Third Reich*.

The good core of utopia “without mist and deception” is, however, a temporal seed, and the *Front-Novum-Ultimum* dialectic will make it sprout and grow, allowing us to enjoy its fruits. The process and totality addressed by Bloch are the terms of this dialectical renewal described in the aforementioned chapter 17 of the *Principle of Hope*. One should not think of the totality, the *totum*, as a massive homogeneous identity without ripples: «in fact reality is never unbroken context even in times and great works of broadly possible mediation, but always still—interruption and always still fragment».⁶⁸ “Process” does not mean “progress”. The notion of totality does not imply the exclusion of transcendence, namely, the virtual presence of possible revolutionary renewal. On the contrary, Bloch can be counted among those «maverick» Marxist scholars who saw in Marxism the lack of reflection on transcendence and insisted on it, without,

66 BLOCH 1991, 136-37 (italics Bloch’s own). On the Marxian utopia by Bloch compared with critical theory, see TRUSKOLASKI 2020.

67 MARX 1982, 103.

68 BLOCH 1991, 253.

however, giving rise to the restoration of the strictly religious notion of transcendence.⁶⁹

The second epigraph placed at the beginning of chapter 17 of *The Principle of Hope*, right after the quotation from Marx's letter to Ruge is about progress.⁷⁰ A passage from Hegel's letter to Niethammer (5.VII.1816) is transcribed, in which Hegel states his beliefs regarding the «world-spirit», which proceeds «irresistibly like a closely drawn armored phalanx».⁷¹ As Borges explains in *Otras inquisiciones*, by working on the 1874 second "Untimely Meditation" *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche «ridiculed the Pythagorean thesis that history repeats itself cyclically» but then, «in 1881 he suddenly conceived that thesis on a path in the woods of Silvaplana» in Switzerland,⁷² namely, the revolutionary «*thought of eternal recurrence*».⁷³

Above all, however, it is «history understood in [the] Hegelian fashion»⁷⁴ that is targeted by Nietzsche in the second of the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, i.e., the idea of history and progress that is «still smouldering in older heads», particularly «in the brains of the contemporary *theologus liberalis vulgaris*».⁷⁵ «I believe»—Nietzsche writes —«there has been no dangerous vacillation or crisis of German culture this century that has not been rendered more dangerous by the enormous and still continuing influence of this philosophy, the Hegelian».⁷⁶ Nietzsche finds it «dreadful and devastating» that the misery of this philosophy has been «equated with a completion of world-history» and that such a vision of history «has accustomed the Germans to talk of a 'world-process' and to justify their own age as the necessary result of this world-process».⁷⁷ Rather than «'world, world, world'», Nietzsche comments that, «one ought more honestly to speak

69 KAINZ 1993, 140.

70 BLOCH 1996, 195.

71 HEGEL 1984, 325.

72 BORGES 1975, 71.

73 NIETZSCHE 2007, 65 (italics Nietzsche's own).

74 NIETZSCHE 1997, 104.

75 NIETZSCHE 1997, 96.

76 NIETZSCHE 1997, 104.

of 'man, man, man'!».⁷⁸ Moreover, according to this dogma of the "world-process", in which time proceeds "irresistibly like a closely drawn armored phalanx" (as we read in Hegel's letter cited as second epigraph to chapter 17 of *The Principle of Hope*) history is «still disguised theology» and «[i]n this sense, we are still living in the Middle Ages».⁷⁹

Still, as is well known, the «puppet» called historical materialism «is to win all the time» and it «can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today [...] is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight», as Benjamin states at the outset of his *Theses* on the concept of history.⁸⁰ Historical materialism, which is also intended by Benjamin as «historical dialectic»,⁸¹ is clearly distinguished from social democratic vision precisely through the concept of time that underpins the latter and the resulting anthropological doctrine. The «boundless» and «irresistible» progress on which Social Democrats rely, in fact, corresponds to the idea of an «infinite perfectibility» of humankind.⁸² However, «when the chips are down», the critique must be directed to the heart of the matter, as we read in Benjamin's XIII thesis:

The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a

77 NIETZSCHE 1997, 104. Borrowing the term from Marx's letter to Ruge, the Hegelian approach is the "dogmatic" way to understand the philosophy of history, i.e. the methodical approach that must be destroyed by the «ruthless critique of all that exists» (MARX ET AL. 2009, 487). On the «destructive energies of historical materialism» that would be unleashed by «a conception of history that has liberated itself from the schema of progression within an empty and homogeneous time», see Benjamin's «Paralipomena» to his *Theses* on the concept of history (BENJAMIN 2003b, 406).

78 NIETZSCHE 1997, 107.

79 NIETZSCHE 1997, 102. On the Hegelian notion of *Weltprozess* (world-process), see KOSELLECK AND MEIER 2004, 403-407 entitled *Hegel: Fortschreiten als Prozeß* («Hegel: progress as process»).

80 BENJAMIN 2003a, 389. On this strange, monstrous philosophical «apparatus» (BENJAMIN 2003a, 389), which entails the programmatic counter-alliance between historical materialism and theology, see TAUBES 2016, 203 and 208.

81 BENJAMIN 1974, 1258.

82 BENJAMIN 2007a, 260.

homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.⁸³

Benjamin's 1942 posthumously issued theses are driven by the aim of determining the «revolutionary chance»⁸⁴ kept as constantly, virtually present in the historical moment.⁸⁵ To this end, the theses contrast the messianic charge of the time yet to come with the idea of a homogeneous and empty time. This very notion of time presents itself as a two-sided coin, both practical and theoretical, and can be traced back to «historicism» on the one hand,⁸⁶ and to the political program of Social Democracy, which deludes the working class with the idea that progress can be favorable to its condition, on the other.⁸⁷

The «construction» that the revolutionary consciousness sees in history takes place in the «now-time» (*Jetztzeit*), construed as the space, or «medium», for revolutionary endeavors.⁸⁸ The now-time is accordingly construed «as a model of messianic time».⁸⁹ In a modification to thesis XIV, we read that as the «materialist research» finds one of these moments of “now-time” in the past, which are charged with «explosive material», it places «the fuse» under the

83 BENJAMIN 2007a, 261. See also the *Arcades Project* (BENJAMIN 1999, 470): «Historical materialism aspires to neither a homogeneous nor a continuous exposition of history. From the fact that the superstructure reacts upon the base, it follows that a homogeneous history, say, of economics exists as little as a homogeneous history of literature or of jurisprudence. On the other hand, since the different epochs of the past are not all touched in the same degree by the present day of the historian (and often the recent past is not touched at all; the present fails to 'do it justice'), continuity in the presentation of history is unattainable. [N7a,2]».

84 BENJAMIN 2003b, 402.

85 BENJAMIN 2007a, 261 and 263.

86 BENJAMIN 2007a, 262-3.

87 «Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that *it* was swimming with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was swimming» (thesis XI, BENJAMIN 2007a, 258, trans. mod.).

88 BENJAMIN 1974, 1256.

89 BENJAMIN 2003a, 396.

house of the «homogeneous and empty continuum of history».⁹⁰ Benjamin writes in thesis XVII.a that «[i]n the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing». The «catastrophe» happened when «the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an ‘ideal’», and this means, in Neo-Kantian terms, to an «infinite task» that is unattainable and unachievable during a lifetime.⁹¹ So, taken together, irresistible but boundless progress and the infinite task outline the very neutralization of the revolutionary situation, which is always restrained, always deferred. «For the revolutionary thinker», instead, as we read further on in thesis XVII.a, «the historical moment» works as a key for a «quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked»:

The entrance into this chamber—Benjamin explains—coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic. (Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption.).⁹²

Fascism will always have a chance if the struggle against it is made «in the name of progress» and this latter is treated as «a historical norm».⁹³ The so-called progress, on the contrary, is the «storm» that «irresistibly propels» the angel of history into the future.⁹⁴ The political reflections on the situation of the struggle against Fascism provided in the theses

90 BENJAMIN 1974, 1256. For this reason, too, the revolutionary endeavor acts first of all on the instruments for measuring time, such as calendars or clocks, see, e.g., thesis XV (BENJAMIN 2007a, 261-2).

91 BENJAMIN 2003b, 401-2 (trans. mod.).

92 See BENJAMIN (2003b, 402, trans. mod.).

93 BENJAMIN 2007a, 257. The caveat pertaining to philosophy expressed in this VIII thesis is still valid *a fortiori* today: «The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable».

94 BENJAMIN 2007a, 258.

on the concept of history are grounded on the premise according to which the «stubborn faith in progress» that moves the politicians «in whom the opponents of fascism had placed their hopes», together with «their confidence in their 'base in the masses'» and «their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus are three aspects of the same thing».⁹⁵

Moreover, the exaltation of progress and the «conformism which has marked the Social Democrats» are two sides of the same coin. Under the spell of Social Democracy, driven by technological development as «the fall of the stream» with which the working class thought it was «swimming»,⁹⁶ «the old Protestant ethics of work was resurrected among German workers in secularized form», Benjamin grimly observes.⁹⁷ The «vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labor» that values «only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society» also derives from social-democratic conformism. The latter holds an idea of labor that «already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism».⁹⁸

The Social Democrats are completely mistaken, then, about the catastrophic nature of the events that compose the mosaic of present time, in which progress celebrates its most remarkable achievements. «The concept of progress»—Benjamin notes in *Central Park*—«is to be grounded in the idea of the catastrophe. That things 'just go on' is the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching but that which is. Strindberg's thought: Hell is not something which lies ahead of us,—but *this life here*».⁹⁹

95 BENJAMIN 2003a, 393.

96 BENJAMIN 2007a, 258 (trans. mod.)

97 BENJAMIN 2007a, 258-9.

98 BENJAMIN 2007a, 259. On Social Democracy, see GORZ 1989, 187-88: «The political program of Social Democracy has never become socialism. Social Democracy strived to release enclaves within economic rationality, but without shaking the domination of this latter over society. On the contrary, these enclaves were embedded in the smooth functioning of capitalism and designed to promote it» (cited in BLOCH 1997b, 48).

99 BENJAMIN, SPENCER AND HARRINGTON 1985, 50 (italics Benjamin's own).

3. Giving up on the future

At the beginning of the last century, progress, in particular technical and scientific progress, was taken as a suitable means for the concretization of utopian or revolutionary political projects, in some cases with devastating consequences. It is worth noting that, at that time, the 'Third Reich' was considered a utopia that, for some, was very concrete, and for others, like Spengler, was an ideal still yet to come. Spengler calls the Third Reich «*the Germanic ideal*, an eternal tomorrow, to which all great men from Joachim of Floris to Nietzsche and Ibsen tied their lives—arrows of yearning for the other side of the river, as Zarathustra says».¹⁰⁰

According to Marcuse, the heroic realism of the *völkisch* kind, which was so deeply rooted in German culture at the beginning of the last century, was often combined with the exaltation of technical progress. Thus, it matched perfectly with the totalitarian political theory that would characterize the concrete establishment of the so-called Third Reich by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s.¹⁰¹ Heroic realism simply uses the term "liberalism" to refer to everything it is fighting against, as Marcuse notes. In addition to Ernst Jünger, he cites in this regard the famous book by Moeller van den Bruck, *Das dritte Reich*, published in 1923. In the chapter dedicated to the «mortal enemy» of the utopia of the new *Reich*, entitled «Liberal», we find added as epigraph the sentence: «With Liberalism, Nations collapse».¹⁰²

For Marcuse, we find the best exposition of this position, namely, the attack on liberalism on the basis of the theory of the totalitarian state,

100 See SPENGLER 1923, 467, cited in STERN 1961, 254. On this point, see Bloch's remarks on the «original history of the Third Reich», which is «long» and «a genuinely revolutionary one». In this context, by recalling Marx's letter to Ruge, he also notes that «[t]he somewhat dreamy essence of the matter» (namely, the ideas to which the ancient notions that were «purloined for the purpose of deception» by the Nazis can be traced back) «was often helpless against the abuse» (BLOCH 1991, 117, trans. mod.).

101 MARCUSE 1980, 161-3. On the myth of «Secret Germany», see LÖWITH 1949, 245.

102 See, respectively, MARCUSE 1980, 164 and MOELLER VAN DEN BRUCK 1923, 64. On Moeller van den Bruck, see also BLOCH 1991, 118 and 127.

in Schmitt's *Begriff des Politischen*.¹⁰³ In the third 1932 edition of this work, Schmitt's *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations* also appears. In this essay, which dates back to 1929, the series of progressive neutralizations that have marked the cultural life of European humanity are considered, up to the final stage of the «age of technology».¹⁰⁴ After observing that the «spirit of technicity»—as it would later be for Heidegger—cannot be «dismissed as mechanistic and attributed to technology», that technique is «not itself technical and mechanical», Schmitt points out—similarly to Bloch's aforementioned observations on the returning to the mythical origin—the temporal experience underlying the revolutionary shocks that have marked European history:

All new and great impulses, every revolution and reformation, every new elite originates from asceticism and voluntary or involuntary poverty (poverty meaning above all the renunciation of the security of the *status quo*). Original Christianity and all serious reforms within Christianity—the Benedictine, Cluniac, and Franciscan renewals, the Baptists and the Puritans—every genuine rebirth seeking to return to some original principle, every genuine *ritornar al principio*, every return to pure, uncorrupted nature appears as cultural or social nothingness to the comfort and ease of the existing *status quo*.¹⁰⁵

What Schmitt, at that time, considered an irreversible political process revolving around the historically pivotal technological expansion, Mann had already desperately tried to counter a few years

103 MARCUSE 1980, 165.

104 SCHMITT 2007, 85 and 89.

105 SCHMITT 2007, 94. Schmitt's reflection on the *ritornar al principio* ('going back to the start') continues: «It grows silently and in darkness, and a historian or sociologist would recognize only nothingness in its initial phases. The moment of brilliant representation is also and at once the moment in which every link to the secret and inconspicuous beginning is endangered» (ibid.). On progress and the «religious belief in technology», see SCHMITT 2007, 85-6.

earlier, at the beginning of the decade, in the 1922 lecture entitled *Von Deutscher Republik*, when he defended the Weimar Republic against Spengler's «extreme inhumanity».¹⁰⁶ In this case, however, it was not the hope for a utopia yet to come that drove the defense of the fragile *Republik*, but the dramatic awareness that the new democratic form for Germany was born already in the grip of the tension between aestheticizing solitude and dissolution of the individual in the totality; in other words, it was born in an unresolved tension between mysticism and ethics.¹⁰⁷

The concern expressed by Mann in his lecture is still valid today. The crisis of present time prevents us from grasping the possibilities of the future, prevents us from catching sight of «the future in the past».¹⁰⁸ The utopian vision, which from spatial has now become essentially temporal, as Bloch noted,¹⁰⁹ finds itself crushed under the weight of actuality, by poverty and war, by ignorance and slavery. Marxist utopia is part of this transformation. It bends under the weight of actuality more than other revolutionary theories. Its powerful idea is besieged and endangered by growing misery, and by an inequality gap, which seems unbridgeable. The crisis of the present time prevents it from gleaning the possibilities of the future, the possibilities that belong to the future inasmuch they remain preserved in the past.¹¹⁰

106 MANN 2007, 126.

107 STERN 1961, 254.

108 BLOCH 1975, 91.

109 Here is Bloch's explanation: «At the very beginning Thomas More designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas. This designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time. Indeed, the utopians, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transposed the wishland more into the future. In other words, there is a transformation of the topos from space into time. With Thomas More the wishland was still ready, on a distant island, but I am not there. On the other hand, when it is transposed into the future, not only am I not there, but utopia itself is also not with itself. This island does not even exist» (ADORNO AND BLOCH 1988, 3). On this conversation between Bloch and Adorno, see TAVANI 2019.

110 On this, see GENTILI 2021, esp. 35-58 and 99-129.

As Benjamin noted, «[t]he materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state. [N7a,5]». ¹¹¹ This state nowadays becomes incessant, and becomes «the rule». ¹¹² The past made of injustice continuously flows over the present, since the present increasingly takes the form of a perpetual spectacle of commemoration and mourning of what is behind us, i.e. the past as such. As a result of such a paludal situation, as a result of the swamp of spectacle, the future is simply abolished. Those who seek it are condemned to the most desolate marginality, and even when they succeed in imposing themselves on the scene of the present, they bring to light the bluntest and most ostentatious impotence. ¹¹³

In one of the letters circulating on the occasion of the foundation of the *Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbüchern*, Bakunin argued that thinkers and poets have the task of launching thinking and words into the future, and of pulling out of it the potential elements that can be used to give a new form to the present world. In May 1843, he writes to Ruge: «The thinker and the poet are allowed to grasp the future in advance and to build a new world of freedom and beauty right in the midst of the chaos of decline and decay that surrounds us». ¹¹⁴ But Marx would later disregard Bakunin's view, also implicitly revoking the concession this latter made to thinkers and poets. The project of the new journal, for which Ruge really counted on Marx, as he wrote to him in August 1843, had a few clear assumptions for the young philosopher from Treviri, which he made explicit in the famous reply sent from Kreuznach. If the reformers of censorship who, in a situation of «general anarchy», had made the intellectual atmosphere in Germany unbearable, did not have a clear and definite vision «of what is yet to come» as a result of their recently imposed restrictions, not even they, the fugitives who tentatively looked to France with

111 BENJAMIN 1999, 470.

112 This expression refers to Benjamin's eighth thesis on the concept of history (BENJAMIN 2007a, 257).

113 On this, see VIRNO 2021.

114 MARX ET AL. 2009, 481.

hope,¹¹⁵ knew the future.¹¹⁶ However, Marx goes on to explain persuasively that this situation is an important «asset» for the «new trend» of philosophy: «that we do not dogmatically anticipate the world; rather, that we only want to find the new world starting from the critique of the old one».¹¹⁷ Such a new trend stems from an inner transformation of philosophy, which «has made itself worldly». Philosophical consciousness now can no longer escape the «torment of struggle», it is «internally» involved in it.¹¹⁸

By situating itself in the “here and now” of perpetual crisis, philosophy also gains the “asset” of critique, which will constitute the seed of the reform program of Marxist communism to come, expressed in a few lines of the renowned 1843 letter to Ruge:

The construction of the future and establishing an end for all times are not a matter of ours. Thus, it is all the more certain what we have to accomplish at present: I mean the *ruthless critique of all that exists*, ruthless both in the sense that the critique is not afraid before its results and just as little of the conflicts with the existing powers.¹¹⁹

The «dream of a matter» to which Marx refers at the end of the letter takes shape within this specific elimination of the future from the horizon of the tasks of critique. This does not begin «any *new* work, but it will consciously bring about the completion of [the] old work», thus reuniting the *ultimum* with the *primum*.¹²⁰ Critical thinking finds its own place on the battlefield of political struggle; and this means—since crisis is the “rule” of the present time—that it is stationed in the midst of the crisis that the struggle fosters.

115 See MARX ET AL. 2009, 482.

116 MARX ET AL 2009, 486.

117 MARX ET AL. 2009, 486.

118 MARX ET AL. 2009, 486.

119 MARX ET AL 2009, 487.

120 MARX ET AL. 2009, 488-89. See CUNICO 2019, and BRUZZONE AND CARBONE 2019 for some reflections on the conflictual relationship established between present time and a possible future, in the wake of Bloch’s utopian thinking expressed in *Geist der Utopie*.

Thus, dimmed by the perpetual crisis, critical thinking no longer deals with the future, it no longer deals, as Bloch writes in *The Principle of Hope*, with «set[ting] a time-limit to time».¹²¹ Nowadays, the future is imagined as an expanded present, perhaps more just or fairer, but still in continuity with our present, i.e. with the present *status quo*. There are no radical changes, just amendments. By giving up on setting a time-limit to time, by giving up on the future, critical thinking agrees to inhabit the «swamp world» in which, according to Benjamin, Kafka's novels are set. And precisely as it appeared to Kafka, the age in which we live today is in no way an «advance over the beginnings of time» marked by injustice and the exploitation of human beings by other human beings.¹²² The “conscious” abandonment of the issue of the future undertaken by critical thinking is aligned with the capitalistic *revolutio* of the world, which falls into a complete state of despair. Hence critique, too, appears as a desperate endeavor. Such a condition of despair in our present time pertains to capitalism, established as «an essentially religious phenomenon». The novelty brought about by this «religious system», i.e., what is «historically unprecedented» in capitalism, is indeed that this religion leads «no more» to «the reform of being but [to] its destruction». The peculiar cult of this religion allows despair to become the «religious state of the world».¹²³ Regardless of the philosophy of history that guides revolutionary action, however, now that the «planet 'Human'» is passing through the «house of despair in the absolute loneliness of his trajectory»¹²⁴ it is necessary, before the end of time, to bring justice upon the earth by avenging the abuses of the iniquitous powerful rulers of the world, in whose hearts wickedness works, as Psalm 58 says. This psalm inspired the 1660 composition by Heinrich Schütz, based on a text by Cornelius Becker. The composition opens with the same pre-revolutionary question, which is still relevant today, with

121 BLOCH 1996, 203.

122 See BENJAMIN 2007b, 130: «Kafka did not consider the age in which he lived as an advance over the beginnings of time. His novels are set in a swamp world».

123 BENJAMIN 1996, 289 (trans. mod.). On the “principle of despair,” see CERA 2020.

124 BENJAMIN 1996, 289.

which the 1918 first edition of *Geist der Utopie* begins: «How now?»,¹²⁵
Wie nun?

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