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Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* after a Century: A Janus-Faced Reading on the Trail of Hope

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Sie scheinen allein zu sein, doch ahnen sie immer.[1]

Hölderlin, "Wie wenn am Feiertage"

We seem to be living in times which have made us forget how to hope. Amid the many pressing issues of our day—climate change, failing political and public institutions, the widening gap between rich and poor, geopolitical tension and conflict, the encroaching force of technology into the fabric of our lives—people seem to feel fatalistic, powerless in the face of developments that we may have set into motion ourselves, but which no one can claim to control or steer anymore. The world seems adrift and moved along by uncertain currents which leave no room for active hope, for informed praxis aimed at creating a better future. The canon of progress has been brought to a grinding halt, except for those who still claim to believe in the invisible hand of unaccountable, global finance. They will say that, on the whole, more people are better off than ever before. But the erosion of democratic participation, of a meaningful perspective for social development, the withering away of structures that embody solidarity, and the economic instrumentalization of education stare also these people in the face. In this situation, we might well ask where we find the resources for hope. For without hope, without a sense of vision and purpose, it seems the apathy cannot be broken. Ernst Bloch argued that hope can be

[1] "They seem to be alone, but their foreknowledge continues." Friedrich Hölderlin, "As on a Holiday," in *Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*, trans. James Mitchell (San Francisco: Ithuriel's Spear Press, 2004), 17.

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disappointed, and in a way even has to be disappointed, for otherwise it would not be hope but assurance. Yet it seems that today the talk of hope, or of its disappointment, has receded into irrelevance. There are no hopes to disappoint; what we find is resignation that has even forgotten it is that. What can we learn from reconsidering *Geist der Utopie*?

In his recent acceptance speech for the Ernst Bloch Prize of the city of Ludwigshafen, Axel Honneth considered the contemporary malaise.[2] He argues we can learn from Bloch that hope is both an affect and a virtue, and that we need grounds to hope. Following Kant, who faced a similar general lack of faith in progress in his time, Honneth divides the grounds for hope in a cognitive and a volitional side. Hope is strengthened by reasons that show the plausibility or achievability of what is hoped for, as well as by exhortations of the will to act and bring about the desired situations. For Kant, Honneth reminds us, this dual approach meant on the one hand the necessity of developing a social history that shows how progress has always happened, even if not unchecked or at all times, and what the mechanisms of progress have been. On the other hand it meant the presence, in the public sphere, of *Geschichtszeichen*, signs of the times—concrete remembrances from living memory of individuals or groups who had successfully brought about social transformation. In this way, Kant argues, the will for active engagement in processes of social transformation is stimulated because we become aware of people just like us, who have been successful in pursuing the type of ideals we also strive for or at least subscribe to. At the same time this can be effective because of our understanding of the causes and reasons of progress. This is, in broad outline, Kant's idea of a "universal history with a cosmopolitan

[2] Axel Honneth, "Hoffnung in hoffnungslosen Zeiten," in *Bloch-Almanach* 34, ed. Klaus Kufeld (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2017), 15–27.

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purpose."[3] Honneth's own theory of the dynamics of social progress, summarized in the phrase "struggle for recognition," combines both these factors. Building on Dewey's idea of the will to believe (that the realization of a goal becomes more likely if we believe in its realization) and Marx's idea of class struggle as the basic form of social transformation, Honneth shows that there have been many instances in the recent past of disenfranchised groups claiming social recognition. We can think of the suffragette movement, feminism in general, the American civil rights movement, acceptance of sexual diversity, and the broad acceptance of children's rights since the Second World War. In all these cases we are dealing with recent examples, from living memory, of social change that follows the structure of the struggle for recognition and results in a situation hardly anyone would now wish to turn back, while at the time these struggles were fought precisely as that—struggles. If we continue to create better, empirical, concrete, historical understandings of the social dynamics underlying these transformations and at the same time create more space for contemporary *Geschichtszeichen*, motivational representations that show us what we are capable of, we might find the way back to hope.

In all of this Bloch's philosophy of hope can only guide us so far, Honneth argues:

> an dieser Stelle, an der es auf empirische Wahrscheinlichkeiten und Plausibilitäten ankäme, lässt uns die Philosophie Blochs, überspitzt gesagt, im Regen stehen; sie fertigt uns mit ontologischen Versicherungen ab, wo wir doch nach konkreten Anhaltspunkten für Möglichkeiten des Fortschritts im Hier und Jetzt hungern.[4]

[3] Immanuel Kant, "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in Weltbürgerlicher Absicht," in Kant, *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, vol. XI (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), 33–50.
[4] Honneth, "Hoffnung," 19.

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> [At this point, where empirical probabilities and plausibility matter, Bloch's philosophy, strongly put, leaves us out in the cold; it serves us ontological reassurances, while we hunger, after all, for concrete indicators of possibilities of progress, here and now. (my translation)]

Only Bloch's *Naturrecht und menschliche Würde* does not engage in the ontological assurances of a phenomenology of hope or the archaeology of bygone utopian imaginations, but offers a concrete remembrance of the struggles for human dignity and integrity that have run through the modern period.[5] If Honneth is right, Bloch's work is now largely historical, itself a sign of the struggles for recognition in the twentieth century. Perhaps it can function as a public monument with motivational force because of the pathos of its prose. Perhaps it can still help us to understand, at a purely theoretical level, what hope is, as affect and as virtue or capability for action, but that is all.

This analysis of contemporary hopelessness fits into the concept of a social pathology of reason, one of Honneth's central ideas.[6] Here the general hopelessness results from a lack of understanding about the causes of social progress and an absence of motivational, real examples of where progress has been achieved. In a paradoxical sense Honneth's analysis of the causes of hopelessness suffers from an overly abstract picture of social transformation. A reminder of how social transformation works and of the successes achieved so far may not be enough in the present context. The institutional mechanisms that might bring about social progress are no longer available the way they were in the past. In many democracies, political representation can no longer rely on the party as a leverage of concrete change because the way the political system

[5] Ernst Bloch, *Naturrecht und menschliche Würde* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1961).
[6] See Axel Honneth, *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2007).

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has become gridlocked in economic interests has reduced its capacity for independent action supporting the ideals of social progress. At the same time the public sphere is less and less able to resist colonization by the interests of power and money, thus compromising its epistemic function, on which both sources of Honneth's awakening of hope depend.[7]

It is instructive to note that the founding text of the Frankfurt School, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, was written during the Second World War, also a time of despair, and that *Geist der Utopie* was written during the First World War, a similar time. Horkheimer and Adorno's text offers considerably less ground for hope in the actual dynamics and transformational potential of Enlightenment rationality than Honneth is looking for today in that same history. Not just an exhortation, Bloch's text sought to offer a real, existential access to hope as an active connection to what is open in the world, what might be—a connection to, as the final words of the book say, "Wahrheit als Gebet" [truth as prayer]. We have four stages: Kant at the end of the eighteenth century, Bloch at the beginning of the twentieth century, Horkheimer and Adorno in the middle of the twentieth century, and Honneth in the early twenty-first century.

It is doubtful that for Kant the situation was exactly the way Honneth describes it. His text concerned history from a cosmopolitan perspective, but for Kant the secular perspective was distinguishable, although not removable from the absolute moral dimension, because it relies on the immortality of the soul and the punishment of the wicked after death, without which there is strictly speaking no moral fact of reason and no categorical imperative. The horizon of mortality plays a constitutive role for Kant, even if this does not amount to a theoretical demonstration of our ultimate destiny, only a morally postulated one. Yet without this horizon, the persuasive

[7] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," *Communication Theory* 16, no.4 (2006): 411–26.

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power of history becomes precarious. Like Bloch, Kant does give, and rely on, "ontological reassurances" to underpin his concept of universal history. Bloch was keenly sensitive to this dimension of Kant's thought. In many places in his work he cites Kant's metaphor of the scales of hope and reason with respect to the afterlife from *Träumen eines Geistersehers erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik* (1766):

> Ich finde nicht, dass irgendeine Anhänglichkeit, oder sonst eine vor der Prüfung eingeschlichene Neigung meinem Gemüte nach allerlei Gründen vor oder dawider benehme, eine einzige ausgenommen. Die Verstandeswaage ist doch nicht ganz unparteiisch, und eine Arm derselben, die die Aufschrift führet: *Hoffnung der Zukunft*, hat einen mechanischen Vorteil, welcher macht, dass auch leichte Gründe, welche in die ihm angehörige Schale fallen, die Spekulationen von an sich größeren Gewichte auf der andern Seite in die Höhe ziehen. Dieses ist die einzige Unrichtigkeit, die ich nicht wohl heben kann, und die ich in der Tat auch niemals heben will."
>
> [I do not find that there are any attachments in my mind, nor do I find that any unexamined inclination has insinuated itself into my mind, which had deprived it of its readiness to be guided by any kind of reason, for or against. But the scales of the understanding are not, after all, wholly impartial. One of the arms, which bears the inscription: Hope for the future, has a mechanical advantage; and that advantage has the effect that even weak reasons, when placed on the appropriate side of the scales, cause speculations, which are in themselves of greater weight,

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> to rise on the other side. This is the only defect, and it is one which I cannot easily eliminate. Indeed, it is a defect which I cannot even wish to eliminate.][8]

At the end of this text, Kant explicitly links the irrational but literally *durchschlaggebende* bias to the stance in which we leave abstruse and hubristic speculations regarding our final destiny for what they are and, like Candide, go into the garden, work, and achieve happiness for ourselves, "da […] unser Schicksal in der künftigen Welt vermutlich sehr darauf ankommen mag, wie wir unseren Posten in den gegenwärtigen Welt verwaltet haben" [But since our fate in that future world will probably very much depend on how we have comported ourselves at our posts in this world].[9] Here we see quite a different complex of relations between secular and divine history, and between hope and grounding reason, than the picture that might emerge from the *Idea of Universal History* alone.

It may not be impossible to extract parts of Kant's thought from the whole of it and develop these in different directions (indeed that has always been done and is still done today) and it may be necessary to reinterpret the religious form in which Kant thinks. However, from the point of view of pathologies of reason we can use the organic, interdependent connection between the empirical and the transcendent dimensions in Kant—*Wissen* and *Glauben* [knowledge and belief]—to trace a problem with Honneth's analysis of the social pathology of hopelessness. Here the work on radical hope by psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear can help us. He shows that there is a distinction between mere optimism and radical hope.[10] We can capture this

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[8] Immanuel Kant, "Träumen eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik" in Kant, *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, vol. II, 961 (A 75). In English: "Dreams of a spirit-seer, elucidated by dreams of metaphysics," in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770*, trans. and ed. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 337.

[9] Ibid., 989 (A 128); Kant "Dreams," 359.

[10] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

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distinction by contrasting hopes in the plural with hope in the singular, a distinction made by Matthew Ratcliffe on the basis of Lear's work.[11] We may, in many different ways, lose our hopes that certain desirable situations may be brought about, or that we will be able to meet certain challenges, either individually or collectively, but this does not have to mean that we lose hope in a more fundamental sense. By this Lear means hope that there can be a meaningful future at all, that new things are still possible, and life may be found. Ratcliffe links the loss of hope in this radical sense to depression. Lear shows, by retelling the harrowing story of the demise of the Crow Native American people, how a way of life, a culture, may become irredeemably caught up in the grip of a loss of radical hope. In the words of Plenty Coups, the last Crow Chief: "When the buffalo went away, the hearts of my people fell to the ground and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."[12] Lear argues that Plenty Coups was able to regain radical hope by transforming his traditional understanding of what it means to have courage. He did this by staying faithful to a prophetic dream he had, which seemed to him to come from the spiritual world, and which signified that a new life would be possible, even if it was now unimaginable and would be completely different from the life his people had lived before. He was not far away from the helpfully imbalanced and anticipatory dream of a spirit seer Kant confessed to, and could not have done without. Plenty Coups found a way to connect with, and derive a sense of agency and identity from, the open future, which, because of his dream, he no longer experienced as a waste land. He sought to unify his people around this dream, as an instrument of solidarity. In a now not Honnethian-ironical sense Plenty Coups found a meaningful ontological reassurance, which allowed him to regain and reclaim radical

[11] Matthew Ratcliffe, "What is it to Lose Hope?," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 12, no. 4 (2013): 597–614.
[12] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 2.

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hope, as an act of courage, rather than as the result of motivational propaganda and historical explanation. It seems that the experience of the Crow shows us a side of what Bloch so often calls "dreaming," or "forward daydreaming," that cannot be reduced to the dialectic of myth and enlightenment to which Honneth's analysis seems to want to revert under more credulously promising stars.

We have to ask if the material changes in society today amount to the cultural devastation that befell the Crow people, and here we must be careful. The contemporary state of hopelessness is not induced by the total destruction of a way of life. And so I claim that we can take up *Geist der Utopie* today and read it as a Janus-faced book: when we look back, we can see how it shaped, in a fundamental and not yet adequately recognized way, the use of the idea of utopia in the philosophy and cultural theory of the past century. If we look the other way, into the future, we do not so much find cognitive, causal insights into social change, nor the exhortative remembrance of past achievements, but rather the book can provide insight into the nature of reality that still sheds light on what it means for people to have a future, and how to relate to this aspect of our existence, to futurity, in a way that is not colonizing and not determined by the fear of insecurity or by wishful fantasy. Like Plenty Coups, Bloch offers us access to the courage of radical hope by exploring a dream about a possible future, but we lack, as yet, the imaginative, intellectual, artistic, philosophical, religious, and cultural resources to articulate it. The book shows us what dreaming might yet be. In the chapter on the aesthetics of the ornament, or in the opening reflection on the jar and its merely intimated interior, the baroque prose of *Geist der Utopie* circles around a still, dark, ineffable core about which the book speaks, or better which contains what it says. Far from losing itself in ontological reassurances, Bloch's philosophy opens up the existential access to hope, without which well-founded optimism, social history,

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and the pragmatic will to believe retain that tiny dose of the gratuitous that can easily become fatal. As in the case of the Crow people, as in the case of the mechanical skew on the side of hope for the future, this dreamed access to an open future has the power to establish collectivity. The self-problem, Bloch likes to say, becomes a we-problem. There is a connection between on one hand the ability to relate, to others as well as to self, and on the other creative openness to an indeterminate future.

In May 1917, Bloch sent off the manuscript of *Geist der Utopie* to the printer. There was a paper shortage because of the war, and so it wasn't until early 1918 that the book was published. Otto Klemperer had been asked to read the manuscript because by far the longest chapter (150 pages) was devoted to the philosophy of music. He recommended publication. Margarete Susman wrote one of the first, enthusiastic reviews, claiming that the book contained nothing less than "a new metaphysics." Encountering it was like finding a house where a light is still shining when you are out in the forest on a cold, dark night in a snow storm. Walter Benjamin read the book shortly before meeting Bloch. He wrote to Gerschom Scholem that this was the only book he could measure himself against as an equal, and that he owed essential elements of his thought to it. It does not take much effort to see that Benjamin recognized notions that were to remain central to his own work: *Eingedenken*, *restitutio ad integrum*, messianic time, future in the past.[13] Also the young Adorno, still a teenager at the time, read the book. In a late text (1965) he recalls his experience:

> Der dunkelbraune, auf dickem Papier gedruckte, über vierhundert Seiten lange Band versprach etwas von dem, was man von mittelalterlichen Büchern sich erhofft. […] Der "Geist der Utopie" sah aus, als wäre er von des Nostradamus

[13] For an overview of the early responses to *Geist der Utopie*, see Sylvia Markun and Hans Heinz Holz, *Ernst Bloch: Monographie – System und Fragment* (Halle: Projekte-Verlag, 2010).

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eigener Hand geschrieben. Auch der Name Bloch hatte diese Aura. Dunkel wie ein Tor, gedämpft dröhnend wie ein Posaunenstoß, weckte er eine Erwartung des Ungeheuren, die mir rasch genug die Philosophie, mit der ich studierend bekannt wurde, als schal und unterhalb ihres eigenen Begriffs verdächtig machte. (…) Ich hatte das Gefühl, hier sei die Philosophie dem Fluch des Offiziellen entronnen. (…) Es war eine Philosophie, die vor der avancierten Literatur nicht sich zu schämen hatte, nicht abgerichtet zur abscheulichen Resignation der Methode. (…) Das Buch (…) dünkte mir eine einzige Revolte gegen die Versagung, die im Denken, bis in seinen pur formalen Charakter hinein, sich verlängert.
[The dark brown volume of over 400 pages, printed on thick paper, promised something of what one hopes for from medieval books (…). The *Spirit of Utopia* looked as though it had been written by Nostradamus himself. The name Bloch had the same aura. Dark as a gateway, with a muffled blare like a trumpet blast, it aroused the expectation of something vast, an expectation that quickly rendered the philosophy with which I had become acquainted as a student suspect as shallow and unworthy of its own concept. (…) I had the feeling that here philosophy had escaped the curse of being official. (…) Bloch's was a philosophy that could hold its head high before the most advanced literature; a philosophy that was not calibrated to the abominable resignation of methodology. (…) The book (…) seemed to me to be one prolonged rebellion against the renunciation within thought that extends even into its purely formal character.][14]

[14] Theodor W. Adorno, "Henkel, Krug und frühe Erfahrung," in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 557; in English: "The Handle, the Pot, and Early

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Again, in this short fragment the connection between an existentially lived radical hope that remains inaccessible to the coordination by method is contrasted with a resignation of thought to its official, technological, and formal character that even falls behind despair.

It is not my intention here to trace the intellectual history of the idea of utopia in twentieth-century German thought, but from these few references it becomes clear that Bloch's first book marked the start of a new epoch, or at least that people wanted to read it in that way. Conditioned by the war, by academic philosophy which had become increasingly dry and barren under Neokantianism (it would not be until 1927 that Heidegger would revolutionize the academic philosophical landscape), and by the waning significance of Nietzsche (who was, of course, to make a huge come-back later in the century), *Geist der Utopie* gave voice to a generation and indeed to a range of constituencies within it: young Jewish intellectuals, expressionist painters, communist activists, pacifists, surrealists. Adorno referred to *Geist der Utopie* as the philosophy of expressionism; Oskar Negt called Bloch the philosopher of the October revolution.

The idea of utopia would not disappear from German thought, at least for a generation. It was only after Adorno's death, when Habermas rose to power in the Frankfurt School, that the critique of utopian thinking started. Nonetheless, the notion of domination-free communication (*herrschaftsfreie Kommunikation*), which underpins his version of critical theory, has many utopian overtones—although he would probably not acknowledge this himself. It is more than a regulative idea because it must obtain in democratic public rational debate; it cannot come at the end when all has been put right, but rather it is the mechanism that allows for progress. At the same time and by the same token, it is the yardstick of critical theory in that it functions as a

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Experience," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 211-212.

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principle of critique of practices and institutions in modern societies that fall short of it. Habermas never changed his position on this point. Still, to use the words of Adorno, the sheer formal nature of the idea of communicative rationality also exposed Habermas's thought to the resignation about which Adorno spoke. This lands Habermas in problems as it forces him on the one hand into a social theory that cannot provide motivations for action because it has no material view of the good life; this is the point where Honneth seeks to make amends with the idea of pathologies of reason, as the stronger version of Habermas's distortions of communication. On the other hand the underlying philosophy of language or rationality is, in the eyes of many critics, far too forceful in the universality to which it must ascribe its version of rationality. This is so because that concept is based entirely on the formal properties of communicative interaction, and these are, presumably, universal, simply because they follow from the characteristics of linguistic interaction. The theory of communicative rationality, as a critical theory, is in other words both too weak and too strong.

Later on, in the years of postmodernism, the end of grand narratives, and the end of history, the light of utopia shimmered even less than in the snow storms before 1918. In those years Klaus Berghahn did much for utopian thought by emphasizing the parallels between Bloch's notion of the trace and the postmodern use of this notion. He kept hope alive. Bloch's utopia was never the massive, programmatic, linear-historical, teleological vision of which his critics had accused him, but a much more fragile and variegated experience of the possibility that things could be different, and it was Berghahn who reminded us so insistently of that.[15] Today, we find ourselves in a different world again, forcing us to recognize that the dynamics of

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[15] Klaus L. Berghahn, "A View Through the Red Window: Ernst Bloch's *Spuren*," in *Not-Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, eds. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London: Verso, 1997), 202–14; Klaus L. Berghahn, *Zukunft in der Vergangenheit – Auf Ernst Blochs Spuren* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008).

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capitalist social structure, which earlier critical theory had theorized, have not disappeared, and that we are more than ever in need of new ways to understand where our agency lies, how transformation might be possible, and what, in the words of Kant, we may hope for. Bloch's philosophy, which he himself called a *docta spes*, a learned hope, a hope that has lived through disappointment ("militanter Optimismus mit Trauerflor" [militant optimism with a mourning wreath]), has become relevant again, in a new way. Now, the indeterminacy or openness at the heart of the idea of utopia in Bloch's thought can function as an inspiration for creative, new thinking. If we look back in time, *Geist der Utopie* appears as the starting point of the critique of positivism in philosophy; if we look forward, the idea of indeterminacy stands out. Bloch sees the world as not yet finished—*die unfertige Welt*. Not just our experience or understanding of it is incomplete; reality itself is not yet what it is or can be. This includes the sphere of human existence. But what does it mean to say that the world is not yet finished?

We have to go back to the beginning. What was Bloch contending with in *Geist der Utopie?* He writes:

> Wir haben Sehnsucht und kurzes Wissen, aber wenig Tat und was deren Fehlen mit erklärt, keine Weite, keine Aussicht, keine Enden, keine innere Schwelle, geahnt überschritten, keinen utopisch prinzipiellen Begriff. Diesen zu finden, das Rechte zu finden, um dessentwillen es sich ziemt, zu leben, organisiert zu sein, Zeit zu haben, dazu gehen wir, hauen wir die phantastisch-konstitutiven Wege, rufen was nicht ist, bauen ins Blaue hinein, bauen uns ins Blaue hinein und suchen dort das Wahre, Wirkliche, wo das bloss Tatsächliche verschwindet. [We have longing, and brief knowledge, but little deed, and—which also explains this lack—no breadth, no outlook, no ends, no inner threshold, presentiently

> crossed, no utopian principled concept. To find it, to find the right thing, for which it is worthy to live, to be organized, and to have time: that is why we go, why we cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, and build ourselves into the blue, and there seek the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears.][16]

The positivist criteria of verifiability and meaningfulness, the worship of facts and reference, of the way things are, are here completely repudiated in the name of a conception of truth and reality itself that is located in the sphere of fantasy (Bloch indeed speaks of "objective fantasy" in other texts[17]), a fantasy that is constitutive of the ways in which we realize and actualize ourselves. This quotation also gives us an indication of the way in which utopian fantasy works. Bloch speaks of an "innere Schwelle, geahnt überschritten." The hunch, presentiment, or intimation, the *Ahnung*, is the way in which we overcome inner thresholds, and this is the way in which we seek for truth and reality beyond what is factually the case. Creative transformation is not a smooth rolling out of what exists already within ourselves, but a movement that transgresses a threshold in the light of an *Ahnung*. Bloch continues, right after this paragraph: "Incipit vita nova." In this movement we encounter the new, and in this movement we also take possession of ourselves as in the process of becoming. Agency is at work here beyond the distinction between activity and passivity, perhaps in the way in which artistic creation, romantic love, or the *Gelassenheit* [serenity] of which Meister Eckhart speaks can be experienced beyond that distinction, or involving both at the same time. The *Ahnung* has a receptive quality of

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[16] Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie, Faksimile der Erstausgabe 1918*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 16 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 9; in English: *Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3, translation altered.
[17] Ernst Bloch, *Philosophische Aufsätze zur Objektiven Phantasie*, Bloch, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1969).

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openness, but the transgression is a self-determination. We become what we are by going out of ourselves. But if language is determined by reference, and if we say, as Bloch does here, that truth and reality are to be found beyond the facts, in an intimation that pushes us beyond a threshold, presumably a threshold thrown up by the facts, into the new, then how can we speak meaningfully about it? It seems that only a negative, apophatic language could hint at that which is not yet the case and its temporal dimension, the future in the radical sense in which we are speaking about it here and not as a projection or anticipation informed by what is presently the case.

The idea that philosophy, conceived as a thinking of the real, runs up against impossibility is not new. It can be identified in almost all philosophers, from Plato and Plotinus to Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. Whether the point is articulated in terms of the discrepancy between the discursiveness or mediatedness of reason and the immediacy of intuition, or whether it is conceived in terms of reason's innate drive to ask questions it cannot answer, or in terms of language running up against its limits, or in terms of language's tendency to overstep its limits and thus, negatively, to indicate what it wants to say in the moment of its collapse, it is easy to see the parallels, not just in modernity with its avowed penchant for apophansis but going back to the beginnings of philosophy. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. Where this attitude becomes a positivism of meaning that forgets what it was we could not speak about, it hardens into ideology and silencing (as we have seen happen with analytical philosophy, which has sometimes been the ideological loin cloth of the functionalization of reason). For Bloch, as later for Adorno, the attitude is a different one: of all

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the things philosophy has to speak about, none is more important than that which cannot be said, and which is said in the failure to say it or the halting before saying it.[18]

Many people who start reading Bloch have the experience that the ineffable core is always equidistant from every point in this vast corpus. We can open almost any page at random, which in its totality spans seventeen volumes plus at least five additional volumes of texts not included in the carefully planned *Gesamtausgabe*, and it is there. Underneath the rational analysis, the literary commentary, the hermeneutical interpretations, and the speculative creation of new concepts and ideas lies the sustaining intuition that the world is not yet finished—like a wellspring that remains hidden but never far. Bloch repeats himself, saying the same things about the same thing on every page; his writings are a perfect illustration of Bergson's remark that all philosophers have one intuition, which they can never fully articulate, which is why they continue to try and say it again and again. Like the world, Bloch's prose is *unfertig*, unfinished; his language, like Hegel's, stretches and extends the expressive power of language up to and beyond its limits, perhaps not even German, but a utopian German, lit up by the illumination of the not-yet: "Das einfachste Wort ist schon viel zu viel, das erhabenste Wort wieder viel zu wenig" [the simplest word is already far too much, the most sublime word again far too little].[19] Bloch tries to get closer to the nature of the experience of the unfinished world, "der prinzipielle utopische Begriff," our access to the real, by a reflection on basic wonder and the specific linguistic form of the question that is implied in it.

At the base of philosophical thinking lies an openness to wonder in the face of the world, in the face of existence, that has the affective charge of a question—a question we ask of the

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[18] Heidegger makes a closely related point in his scattered meditations on *sagen* and *versagen*, but I will not explore these parallels here. See Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, *Gesamtausgabe*, section 1, vol. 12 (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1985).
[19] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie, Erstausgabe*, 365.

world as much as a question the world asks of us—but one that cannot be further specified in terms of a possible answer. Even the familiar form that Leibniz gave to it: "why is there something and not rather nothing?" doesn't exhaust the depth of the question contained in basic wonder. For we do not ask being for reasons only, and being asks more of us than reasons. Bloch calls it therefore "die unkonstruierbare Frage," a questionability of being that cannot yet be bent or construed in the direction of a possible answer. Being is divided in itself against itself, it is not identical with itself, but a question onto itself.[20] Because of its unconstructability, its content (latent as much as tendentious) is always the same wherever this wonder is found, so much so that it functions as an invariant of direction, a kind of magnetic North Pole at the core of all human projects, including the political project of creating a society of free and equal people, living in alliance with nature. In the concept of the invariant of direction, Bloch has found a way to combine an absolute conception of end or goal ("Zweck," "Identität") with a radical indeterminacy that cannot be specified other than in terms of what it is not, only accessible through the experience of ineffability.

The experience of philosophical wonder provides the basis for the articulation of the world as unfinished, still "in prehistory."[21] To be means not-yet-being; and the implication of the centrality of the ineffability for all understanding is that, in a new way as compared to Plato, we have to become philosophers if our world is ever to realize the utopian light of which Bloch speaks. Not philosopher-kings but philosopher-citizens, philosopher-creators, philosopher-lovers and friends, and philosopher-workers.[22] This absolute concept of goal, the invariant of direction,

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[20] Bloch, *Geist der Utopie, Erstausgabe*, 343–89.
[21] Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1959), 1643.
[22] Alain Badiou makes this point in Badiou, *Plato's Republic: A Dialogue in Sixteen Chapters*, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). See Bloch, "Über den Begriff Weisheit," in Bloch, *Philosophische Aufsätze zur Objektiven Phantasie*, 355–411.

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is the safety pin that prevents our utopian projects both from becoming totalitarian or programmatic, as well as from defeating themselves in relativistic practicality. This "warm stream" of thought, containing the whole spectrum of human longings and the ultraviolet of the unconstructable question, is complemented by the "cold stream" of disillusioned ideology critique. Both require each other.[23]

The ontology of the not-yet is an attempt to articulate the "unfinishedness" of the world in terms of a radical openness towards novelty. The silent core of existence, which has not yet been brought out, is the site of indeterminacy, openness, what might be but might also never come to pass, the inarticulate core within more articulate or definite desires and aims. Something is missing. This aspect is central to the way Bloch understands the utopian, as we have seen, and it is a fundamental feature of the real as such. Reality is at a distance from itself; there is a gap that cannot be grasped or pinned down. At the same time the utopian moment, the non-place of which he writes at the very end of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, is the light that shines into the childhood of each of us. In *Geist der Utopie* the final formulation of "der prinzipielle utopische Begriff" is as follows:

> Die bestehende Welt ist die vergangene Welt und das geistentleerte Objekt der Einzelwissenschaft; aber die menschliche Sehnsucht in beiderlei Gestalt: als Unruhe und als Wachtraum, ist das Segel in die andere Welt. Dieses Intendieren auf einen Stern, eine Freude, eine Wahrheit gegen die Empirie, hinter ihren satanischen, und erst recht hinter ihren Inkognito-Nacht, ist der einzige Weg, noch Wahrheit zu finden; die Frage nach uns ist das einzige Problem, die Resultante aller Weltprobleme, *und die Fassung dieses Selbst- und Wir-Problems in Allem,*

[23] Bloch uses the concepts of warm stream and cold stream extensively. See, for example, Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Part III, *passim*.

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die weltdurchschwingende Eröffnung der Pforten der Heimkehr ist das letzthinnige Grundprinzip der utopischen Philosophie. Nur dann müßte das Intendieren auf die geheime, noch nicht seiende Freude über unserem Haupt, auf die Enthüllung des allösenden Existenzworts verzagen, wenn auch dasjenige in uns, was noch nicht geleuchtet hat, bereits geleuchtet hätte; so aber beginnt endlich die Philosophie nicht nur gewissenhaft zu sein, aber zu ahnen, wozu, und gewissen zu haben; ihr eingedenken, ihr synthetisch erweiternder Messianismus a priori schafft endlich das reich der zweiten, der allein wahrhaftigen Wahrheit: in der Welt, gegen die Welt und ihre bloße Tatsachenwahrheit die Spuren, die konzentrischen Promiskuitäten der Utopie zu suchen, zu beschleunigen, zu vollenden.

[The existing world is the world of the past, and the despiritualized object of science, but human longing in both forms—as impatience and as waking dream—is the mainsail into the other world. This intending toward a star, a joy, a truth to set against the empirical, beyond its satanic night and especially beyond its night of incognito, is the only way to still find truth; the question about us is the only problem, the resultant of every word-problem, *and to formulate this Self- and We-Problem in everything, the opening, reverberating through the world, of the gates of homecoming, is the ultimate basic principle of utopian philosophy*. Only then should the intention toward the secret, still not existent joy above our Head, the disclosure of the all-redeeming existence-world fail, when that within us which has not shone will also have shone; in this way, however, philosophy finally begins not only to be conscientious, but to suspect what for, and to have a

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> conscience; its mindful remembrance, its synthetically expanding messianism *a priori* finally creates the Kingdom of the second, the alone truthful truth: to find, to accelerate, to consummate, in the world and its mere factual truth, the traces, concentric promiscuities of utopia.][24]

Here we see how the transgressive move of transcending without transcendence, the gateway or door, "geahnt überschritten," is explicitly identified as the principle of Bloch's philosophy. We find here, as later in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, the term "principle," but not as founding ground (of which Adorno quipped that hope can be anything, but not a principle). Rather it is the axiomatic base and remaining center of philosophy, around which the dreams of a better life circle.[25] The phrase "concentric promiscuities" relates to the invariant of direction that the center as principle is, and the transgressive nature of the utopian. The traces of the utopian can be found everywhere and they are always a matter of a threshold and a transgression, a kind of surplus, excess, or ontological generosity, but they all have the same ineffable and empty core: both dimensions are needed for a genuinely utopian trace. With this, the idea of utopia is not just a theoretical or reflective notion, but it becomes a principle of action, although in a different way from Honneth's exhortative remembrances. It provides a criterion, as it were, to distinguish false from true utopias. Philosophy as the rebellion against the worship of the facts and the resignation of method, Adorno's "curse of the official," has been given hands and feet.

From the point of view of the not-yet, the history of philosophy can be read as a series of

[24] Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie: Bearbeitete Neuauflage der zweiten Fassung von 1923*, Gesamtausgabe vol. 3 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1964), 251–2; in English: *Spirit of Utopia*, 206–7, translation altered.

[25] Perhaps it is helpful to recall that Heidegger explains the term *axioma* (*Principium*, *Grundsatz*), as referring to that which is held in the highest regard or esteem, that which is most worthy of thought, from the verb *axio*, to value. See Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), 34.

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more or less conscious attempts at articulating the unfinished world, attempts that succeeded to some extent and failed in other aspects, but the liberating and enlightening goal of philosophy has always been allied to the unfinished world. Here, in a roundabout and more philosophical way, we can salvage Kant's idea of a universal history. The liberating, progressive aspect of philosophy throughout its history is what Bloch would call its speculative materialism, understood as the immanent transgressive movement of matter.[26] But philosophy also has, and has had, an ideological function; this is its idealism, and this has been its most visible, because institutionalized, form up until now. For Bloch in *Geist der Utopie*, idealism is the idea that the forms of creativity, the forms of the possible new, are already defined in advance and have to be understood from their origins—as pre-given in the structure of being or in the mind of God. Here philosophy becomes usurped by the powers that be, a legitimization of the status quo, an instrument of fear instead of hope, oppression instead of liberation. Where this has happened, philosophy has been compromised. It has happened most obviously in those situations in which philosophy is an official discipline in its own right, part of an institutional framework of government, science, or religion. This is not philosophy as the nomadic remembrance of something that we miss when we think we grasp it, as the image from Petrarca's "Sonnet VII," which Schopenhauer put over his essay on academic philosophy: "povera, e nuda vai, filosofia" [philosophy, you go poor and naked]. In a sense the idealist compromise pervades its history, starting with Parmenides' insistence on the unreality of change, and Bloch does not stop short of drawing the conclusion, with Marx, that the liberation of the proletariat and the realization of philosophy (and therefore the end of it as we know it) coincide: we can understand the full

[26] Ernst Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem. Seine Geschichte und Substanz*, Bloch, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 377.

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meaning of each only in terms of the other. Idealism in philosophy is the reification and fetishization of the mind and its homogenizing understanding of the world.

The ontology of the not-yet is, thus, a self-avowed materialism. It does not recognize a separate, transcendent realm of the world that provides logical structure, mind, or form to a substrate that is somehow in-formed by it. There is certainly an aspect of neutral monism, as much as an aspect of panpsychism here, but the crucial aspect of Bloch's conception of matter is its dynamic process and immanent form—and not "Klotzmaterie," lump matter. The goal of process is not given in advance, but has to be created first by the process itself. There is in Bloch a teleology without a pre-given telos, which is another way of saying "indeterminacy." There is a contingency in the metaphysical structure of reality such that what, for example, a particular human being is what she has perchance become up until now, and this determines at least what she can become at this moment. There is equally a possible, even if indeterminate, horizon of what the human being as such, or in principle, might yet become, although this is not, as in Aristotle's entelecheia, determined as a fixed possibility in advance. That aspect of Aristotle's ontology is, for Bloch, a direct result or reflection of his idealism, of his inability to think form itself as dynamic and changing. But we can see that this inability is not grounded in any conceptual necessity or conceptually necessary limitation. Genuine novelty is possible, or better: the realm of real possibility is the realm of the new.

There are differences of opinion as to the question whether Bloch's contingency is absolute in Bloch's ontology. Peter Thompson has argued that there is no basis for anything but a pure future contingency, and that where Bloch seems to indicate a teleological dimension, he is simply not willing to draw the radical conclusion that follows from his own materialist axiom,

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namely that the gap in the real itself will never be closed.[27] This would put Bloch in near proximity to Žižek who re-interprets Hegel in this manner. He claims that substance on the one hand (self-sufficient, immediate reality, or nothingness: *Sein = Nichts*) and subject on the other (the self-divided negation of nothingness that is therefore the sphere of *creatio ex nihilo*) are incommensurable, but both need to be acknowledged. Hegelian reconciliation is the "reconciliation of incommensurability" by which the subject will never be identical with itself and will therefore always be "something," while at the same time "objectively, nothing exists."[28] Žižek ontologizes the postmodern constellation (the real is divided in itself); that which we have come to recognize about the subject, language, and meaning (difference) also applies to the real as such—but this now becomes itself a story of identity. We know what we are, we know what the world is—namely the failure to be itself, a failure that the real tries to keep from itself, but in doing so, it just repeats the alienation. We can summarize Žižek's position as follows: Reality is a *Fehlleistung* [Freudian slip]. But this cannot be the bottom line of the idea of utopia, the bottom line of the idea of the world as unfinished. This way of thinking about the real misses the crucial point that Bloch makes about hope as a principle. Just as skepticism becomes dogmatic once it closes off the possibility that knowledge might, after all, be possible, so hope becomes guarantee—indeed an ontological assurance of the bad kind—when we insist we "know" that identity (as a chiffre for completion or fullness) cannot be. The point of hope, as of philosophical ignorance, is to keep those questions open. As we have seen, hope is both an affect and a virtue in classical philosophy as much as in Bloch's philosophy. In *Geist der Utopie* it now also becomes a mode of knowing or consciousness, in yet another meaning of the term: the way we

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[27] See Peter Thompson, "Introduction," in *The Privatisation of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia*, eds. Slavoj Žižek and Peter Thompson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 1–20.
[28] Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 950–62.

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relate to identity or fulfilment (the "Enthüllung des allösenden Existenzworts"). As we saw above, Bloch speaks of the need to learn how to hope—*docta spes*—a clear reference to Cusanus's *docta ignorantia*. The lack of metaphysical evidence for a position of closure becomes the realization that openness, possibility, is real.

In fact, the new cannot exist without this open, unconstructable orientation towards identity, what Bloch calls the dimension of the *Ultimum*. We saw it before in the invariant of direction. If we want to think the new without reference to completion, we end up thinking mere variety, which is reduced to a form of sameness. What appears as new is then actually a mere mechanical repetition of what always already was, like the man going from spouse to spouse, and we have not moved beyond idealist philosophy and its understanding of all knowledge and form as rooted in anamnesis, memory of identity already known. Repetition and difference require each other, but they also require reference to the *Ultimum*, to identity as completion, because without it they would, paradoxically, collapse into each other. On this basis we can then see that in all areas of life experimentation is the creative mode of being attentive to the new and the ultimate. In this sense all utopian formations are centered around the openness of becoming. An ethic is implied, one in which the "self- and we-problem" come to be seen as matters of experimentation and innovation. A valuation of daring, reaching out, and relating to others, including nature, with sensitivity, respect for self and other, in freedom; forgiveness when things go wrong, care for what has become, and the willingness to try and learn—these all replace most of the traditional utilitarian ethical maxims of virtue and duty. True to Marx, the common utopian experiment of the world replaces the traditional categories of morality.

It is illuminating to draw two final parallels, one to Adorno and the Frankfurt School, one to Jean-Luc Nancy and his thoughts about community. In both we find the idea that the

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foreclosure of identity is a requirement of openness, philosophical thinking, and ethical action. Adorno puts this, in the famous last aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, in terms of the responsibility of a thinking that is not "mere technique" to "contemplate the world as it will one day appear in the messianic light."[29] Only in this way can the "more" in life that we saw earlier be accessed, although Adorno himself finds no real way of doing this. The negative space not occupied by the facts is inaccessible for him, and his thought ends in the remembrance, the *Eingedenken*, of an impossibility and the unspoken glimmer of the hope. At least in this precarious attitude a witnessing occurs that might be communicated to others as both the minimum and the maximum of a community of mutual recognition which escapes the otherwise all-pervasive interhuman coldness that made Auschwitz possible: *minima moralia.* In the absence of an access to the movement *Geist der Utopie* tries to articulate ("innere Schwelle, geahnt überschritten"), there is indeed no other recourse than to the minimum form of morality, a balancing act between the minimum of solidarity necessary to sustain recognition without turning into a massive form of identity thinking.

Jean-Luc Nancy formulates a related point in his conception of the inoperative community:

> Thinking of community as essence assigns to community a common being, whereas community is a matter of something quite different, namely of existence inasmuch as it is in common, without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance. Being in common means, to the contrary, no longer having, in any

[29] Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 247.

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> form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this lack of identity.[30]

The non-place of utopia is, indeed, neither an empirical nor an ideal place, but it is real. A Blochian approach would emphatically agree with much here, but Nancy's view suffers from a problem similar to Žižek. An essentialized notion of identity as already-become is replaced with its opposite, but this merely leads to a repetition of the original reified notion of identity, now as absence, a nothingness that cannot be thought and offers no more concrete handles for engagement and letting-be than Adorno's way of non-identity thinking. The real advance that Bloch's philosophy makes possible is to move beyond this stalemate in a genuine ontology of not-yet-being, in other words of real novelty that is grounded in the—cognitive, affective, and active—attitude of hope. With the word attitude I try to capture a dimension that transcends and retains the distinction between affect and virtue. Only when a "lack of identity" is conceived as a lack, but now in the radical, creative way that Bloch has explored in his philosophy—despite the misunderstanding that he sometimes gives rise to and sometimes himself succumbs to—can the self- and we-problem, the question of the human community as much as the community of humanity and non-human reality, once again achieve the stammering articulations that it is the job of philosophy to foster and further. Especially today, when the question of how to live together on our planet becomes more and more urgent, and when both the alternatives of thinking of human communities as revolving around substantive identities of congealed shared pasts or as moving around in an endless circulation of meaning, entirely devoid of identity, in a post-historical marketplace, have exhausted themselves and become violent, Bloch's philosophy can help us to find new ways to shape openness, creative transformation, the new, and the

[30] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. and trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 5–6.

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ultimate: tradition and innovation. The spirit of utopia of the past century was the protest against the absolutist pretensions of positivism. The spirit of utopia of the coming century is the awareness of indeterminacy as a prerequisite for relationality and identity as much as for innovation and what of tradition is worth keeping—its indeterminate, that is, its utopian, invariant core. We need Bloch's philosophy, or at least some of the insights contained in it, in shaping our attitude to this elusive but all-important aspect of life. To find radical hope in hopeless times, we need more than what critical theory has to offer. Mutatis mutandis, Kant would agree.

Hope is not adequately theorized by the concepts of virtue and affect alone. Bloch stresses the active aspect of hope as something that, like an Aristotelian virtue, can be learned (*docta spes*). He also uses the term *affect* often, for example already on the first page of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*: "Der Affekt des Hoffens geht aus sich heraus, macht die Menschen weit, statt sie zu verengen, kann gar nicht genug von dem wissen, was sie inwendig gezielt macht, was ihnen auswendig verbündet sein mag." [The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly.][31] But even here the implication is that hope could be more than only an affect. Just as the existentialist tradition from Kierkegaard to Heidegger distinguished between fear, as the ontic affect directed at a particular threat, and anxiety or angst as a formal, ontological mood which discloses how things are with us and the world, so Bloch is careful to distinguish hope as an affect directed at a particular goal or outcome, and hope as mood or "Stimmung," which is diffuse, a field rather than a specific affect, and which therefore acts as the "medium" for the motivating, action-oriented wishes, desires and

[31] Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1; in English, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Steven Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 3.

day dreams which would run asunder and dry out without this medium in which they can "develop themselves most easily."[32] Hope thus becomes the counterpart to angst and boredom as moods with an ontological purport and an ontic orientation. But other than these two moods, which, as Bloch sees it, exile us into nothingness or nihilism, he argues that hope is a natural bridge between the ontic specific content and the ontological disclosure of the meaning of being—or, in the language I have explored here, that concrete hopes (and actions) and radical hope need each other. Hope makes manifest and inhabits the crack in things and keeps the world open precisely because it refuses a final statement, a guarantee, one way or another. This shows us that transgression towards identity is a figure of infinity. It shows us that hope is not the same thing as optimism, prediction, or anticipation but an existential and ontological mood beyond activity and passivity, which includes both of these within itself and makes possible an engagement with concrete acts of transformation, revolt, creation, community-making, and—to use one of Bloch's key words—homecoming. Here we finally find a way of understanding an old symbol of hope, which captures these dynamics in a single image: the anchor. Václav Havel apprehended its meaning in a way that resonates deeply with Bloch's philosophy. "Hope is anchored somewhere beyond the horizons."[33]

[32] Ibid., 119–20.
[33] Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (London: Faber, 1990), 181.

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