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Hollow space with sparks
Ernst Bloch between World War I and Utopia

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Abstract:

Aim of this paper is to investigate the connection between the topic of the Utopia and the themes linked to the First World War in Ernst Bloch's major work of his youth The Spirit of Utopia *(1918 and 1923). The focus of these reflections of Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) is the question of the anachronism (Ungleichzeitigkeit), as it appears in the context of a new possible beginning, after the destruction of the world. In this perspective the utopian vision of Bloch finds in the pages of* Der Untergang des Abendlandes *(The Decline of the West) by Oswald Spengler, appeared in the same year, an interesting counterpart.*

1.

The year 1918 was a crucial turning point in the history of Austria and Germany. But it was also a crucial year for its philosophy and literature. In that year, besides Thomas Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (*Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*), two other now canonical texts of German-speaking culture met and clashed in the libraries:

Der Untergang des Abendlandes (*The Decline of the West*) and *Geist der Utopie* (*The Spirit of Utopia*). The first was by a solitary and little-known erudite, Oswald Spengler (1880-1936). The second was by Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), a young philosopher from Ludwigshafen, a student of Georg Simmel and Max Weber, and a friend of György Lukács – who was also an influence on his ideas and writing style. The pages of *Geist der Utopie* contain many observations that were developed, or rather »entrenched and carried out by night« (as Bloch remarks in the Afterword dated 1963)[1] , during Bloch's exile in Switzerland.

What certainly struck the first readers of this poetical- philosophical treatise in Weimar Germany was its style and its baroque diction: strange, unusual, obscure but fascinating, a language at once philosophical and poetic, rhapsodic, nourished by the rebellious culture of the avant-garde. The extraordinary poetics of expressionism that permeated both Bloch's book and Spengler's, despite their being opposites in many ways: crisis and utopia; twilight and dawn; beginning and end.

A taste of Bloch's eccentricity is already offered by the opening words of his first major work:

> I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin. Life has been put in our hands. For itself it became empty already long ago. It pitches senseless back and forth, but we stand firm, and so we want to be its initiative and we want to be its ends [*Ich bin. Wir sind. Das ist genug. Nun haben wir zu beginnen. In unsere Hände ist das Leben gegeben. Für sich selber ist es längst schon leer geworden. Es taumelt sinnlos hin und her, aber wir stehen fest, und so wollen wir ihm seine Faust und seine Ziele werden*][2].

"Incipit vita nova": the utopia of the beginning, of a beginning, a theme recurring throughout Bloch's work, a work published just after the First World War, that must necessarily confront the void left by the fall of the previous order[3]. The urgent questions that are the starting point for *Geist der Utopie* can be summarized as following: what foolish expectations had led to the war? How had it been possible to realize such a »triumph of stupidity, guarded by the gendarme, acclaimed by the intellectuals who did

not have enough brains to provide slogans [*Der Triumph der Dummheit, beschützt vom Gendarm, bejubelt von den Intellektuellen, die nicht Gehirn genug auftreiben konnten, um Phrasen zu liefern*]«?[4]. What led an entire generation to sacrifice its youth »for ends so alien and hostile to the spirits [*für die fremdesten, geistfeindlichsten Ziele*]«[5], to defend the foul, wretched, the profiteers [*die Faulen, die Elenden, die Wucherer*]«[6]? Even more bitter are the pages added after the failed revolution: »The War ended, the Revolution began and with it, seemingly, the open doors. But correct, these soon closed again [*Der Krieg ging aus, die Revolution ging an, und mit ihr die offenen Türen. Aber richtig, die haben sich bald wieder geschlossen*]«[7]. The triumph of the restoration – which politically was the ultimate result of the Great War – had as its counterpoint, from a cultural perspective, the spread of nihilism. For Bloch, it was the war that paved the way to the resurgence of the Romanticism of the new reactionaries, which »in its pathos of the "autochthonous" [was] capable only of eliciting the decline of Western Civilization [*aus dem Pathos ihrer "Bodenständigkeit" schließlich noch nur den Untergang des Abendlandes hervorzulocken*]«[8].

The reference for this passage by Bloch is Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes*/*The Decline of the West* – (who is elsewhere included by Bloch, along with Arnold Toynbee and Leo Frobenius, in the legion of the *Untergängster des Abendlandes*). What Bloch's sees lying hidden between the lines in Spengler is an apology of imperialism, which he labels "reactionary Romanticism," a Romanticism who has lost its soul and has given up on Münzer, the peasant war, and the German popular tradition for a phony world of knights, coats of arms and medieval castles. Significantly, Bloch's next book was dedicated precisely to Luther's antagonist: *Thomas Münzer as Theologian of Revolution* (*Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*), 1921[9]. A Theology of Revolution, therefore, which evokes *Geist der Utopie*, and completes it. In this sense Bloch seeks to rethink the history of Western civilizations as a process of revolutionary disruptions and to reinterpret from this perspective its arts, religions and philosophies.

Bloch's ambitious project is therefore that of marking a new beginning and identifying, among the ruins of post-war conscience, the only possible route to the "Jerusalem of the Soul". In Bloch we find a focus on those spiritual, expressive, utopian forces that have

never been productively channeled. Bloch's answer to a fragmented Europe is an effort to found a new humanism and discover traditions alternative to those of the Western State and Church, which are the model for modern society. Bloch's perspective is a singular amalgam of philosophical, Marxist and collectivist-economic ideas and heterogeneous religious elements: Christian-apocalyptic, Revolutionary Gnosis, traditional Judaism, the Qabalah and messianism. Different strands that weave a visionary utopian synthesis of Jewish and Russian spirituality.

As we read in a passage taken from *Geist der Utopie*:

> But we also, we most of all, later Western men and women, search further; like a dream the East rises again. Our souls also, sick and empty, move according to an *ex oriente Lux* […] In Russian warmth and expectancy: the rivers, the steppes, an India covered in fog, is how the whole of measureless Russia seems to us. And above all, once again, pertinent, thinking mysticism and metaphysics themselves, the spirit of the North, is probably joined to a supplicant Asia through a related inner turbulence, through a properly theurgic piety [*Aber auch wir, erst recht wir, die späten westlichen Menschen, suchen weiter, traumhaft zieht der Osten wieder auf. Auch unsere Seelen, siech und leer, gehen nach einem Ex oriente lux* […] *In russischer Wärme und Erwartung, die Ströme, die Ebenen, ein Indien im Nebel, als das uns das ganze maßlose Rußland erscheint. Und vor allem doch wieder die betreffende denkende Mystik und Metaphysik selber, der Geist des Nordens, ist mit dem beschwörerischen Asien wohl verbunden durch verwandte innere Aufwühlung, durch eigentlich theurgische Frömmigkeit*][10].

Meister Eckhart, Kierkegaard, Tolstoj, Dostoevskij, Weitling, Baader, these are the authors that in a scintillating *Multiversum* inspire the form of sociality and of mystic community outlined by Bloch in *Geist der Utopie,* which is also very influenced by Bloch's dialog with Lukács during the Heidelberg years and, through Lukács, by the teachings of Ludwig Kassner[11]. In this utopian *Gemeinschaft*, the social construction is finally freed from the narrow confines in which it was trapped in »Weitling's, Baader's, Tolstoy's utopianly superior world of love, into the new force of the human encounter in

Dostoevsky, into the Adventism of heretical history [*in die utopisch überlegene Liebeswelt Weitlings, Baaders, Tolstois, in die neue Mächtigkeit Dostojewskischer Menschenbegegnung, in den Adventismus der Ketzerbewegung*]«[12]. Like Lukács, Bloch reacts to the catastrophe of the First World War by searching for the way to the renewal of humanity, centered no longer on the State, but on solidarity. In the reflection carried out in *Geist der Utopie*, an important place is occupied by the idea of an ethics of goodness, beyond profit, as an alternative to the bourgeois State and institutions. The context is the same: the conflict has led to a resurgence of nationalisms and special interests, and has made the West the cradle of individualism and the search for power. In this dehumanizing process, Germany too has revealed its militarist and imperialist side, its authoritarian, pagan, Satanic essence, »against all bourgeois rationalization, all socialist misunderstanding, did the state reveal itself as a discrete, heathenish, satanic coercion-materiality in itself [*so völlig hat sich, gegen alle bürgerliche Erhellung, alles sozialistische Mißverstandnis, der Staat als eigene, heidnische, satanische Zwangs-Wesenheit an sich enthüllt*]«[13].

2.

Bloch's answer to the spiritual crisis of Europe is the hope in a *Wiedergeburt* of a new humanism, in the wake of a discovery of traditions alternative to that of the Western State and Church. Bloch hopes in the rise of a new Church, an "invisible Church (unsichtbare Kirche)", based on the model of Socialism and permeated by a new revelation. A community that in Bloch, if not in Lukács, is inspired by a spiritual, meta-political and meta-religious principle, the expression of the unexpressed religiosity of the current period: »a church with no *poleis* and infused with the paraclete [*einer polislosen, parakletisch durchdrungenden Kirche*]«[14]. There is here an evident assonance with the theme of the "Zweite Ethik" and the "invisible Church" in Lukács, which bears witness to the result of their frequentation in Heidelberg. But Bloch's interest in the spiritual dimension is also a result of the teachings of Martin Buber. To Buber we owe Bloch's interest in the Qabalah, and Jewish mysticism, around which centers the perspective of a Messianic end of history and the interest in transcendence. It is worth remembering here that Bloch's original title was to be "System des theoretischen Messianismus (*System of*

Theoretical Messianism)" and that in the first edition there is a chapter on Jews (*Symbol: die Juden*). In all its various nuances, what *Geist der Utopie* offers us is a sophisticated form of mystical extremism: an encounter between East and West, based on the categories of goodness and non-violence. Bloch too, like Lukács, sees in Dostoevsky's Russia the depositary of these values: »the Dostoevskyan and Strindbergian sphere of a pure soul-reality, a purely moral "trascendence" of encounters, of the vaults and panoramas of something which is human suprasocially as well [*die Dostoevskische und Strindbergsche Sphäre einer reinen Seelenwirklichkeit, einer rein moralischen "Transzendenz" der Begegnungen, der Wölbungen und Durchblicke eines auch übersozial Menschenhaften*]«[15].

It is in his article *Über den sittlichen und geistigen Führer* (*About the moral and spiritual leader*, 1920), published in the journal »Die weissen Blätter«, that Bloch assimilates Dostoevsky's "universal union in Christ" to the sudden revolts of men against any form of authoritarian oppression.

These are the interpretative guidelines adopted by Bloch, again in *Geist der Utopie*, for his reading of the expedition of Alexander the Great. Alexander represents a model of mediation, because his campaign in Persia is not aimed at subjugating a population, but rather at proposing a society of equals, based on the union of Easterners and Westerners[16]. It is for this reason that the figure of Alexander is hailed by Bloch as the *Träger* (mediator) of the German dream of a torch that will enlighten the darkened West. On these same theoretical bases, Bloch constructs his book on Thomas Müntzer (1921), which can therefore rightly be considered as a follow-up to *Geist der Utopie*. The categories invoked in the monograph *Thomas Münzer: Theologian of the Revolution* – brotherhood, goodness, and religious atheism – are precisely those through which Lukács too approaches Dostoevsky's work. It is Bloch himself who notes the intimate relation between his hero and the Eastern spirit: »Münzer has anticipated the Russian man, the most inner man (*Den russischen, den innersten Menschen hat Münzer in sich voraufgenommen*)«[17].

At the center of Bloch's study is not so much the intent of evaluating the historical-political aspects of the theologian and military leader in the peasant war, but rather that of making him into the "expressionist hero" *par excellence.* Müntzer condenses in himself that messianic *Gesinnung*, which does not belong exclusively to the Jewish people or to Russian spirituality, but can rather be found also in the heretic and millennial currents of the past, in original Christianity and in plebeian revolutionary currents, in the early Protestant movement, in socialist-anarchic movements. In an important passage, at the close of *Thomas Münzer*, Bloch appeals to the vital impulse of his time, to that present heritage that Russians and Germans must learn to inherit. Religious figures and currents are evoked: the brothers of the valley, the Cathars, the Albigenses, Joachim of Fiore, the Brothers of the Good Will, the Brothers of the Free Spirit, Meister Eckhart, the Hussites, Müntzer and the Anabaptists, Sebastian Franck, the Illuminati, Rousseau, Weitling, Baader, Tolstoy. These are the figures that embody the "non-eradicable" spirit of the utopia, to whose memory Bloch entrusts the hope of a rediscovery of a "non-false cathedral"[18].

In the figure of Thomas Müntzer, Bloch sees the embodiment of the utopian ideal, conceived as a critique of the present situation, which is clearly distinguished from ideology, and must rather commit to an eschatological approach. The figure of Müntzer is here taken as a symbol of people's rebellion to authority, as a paradigmatic example of the new man who places himself in direct contact with God, following the advice of the serpent in the garden of Eden: »eritis sicut Deus, scientes bonum et malum«[19].

3.

In this context, Bloch develops the theme of Lucifer, in which it is God himself who rebels against his own authority and announces the need to go beyond it. In perfect agreement with his Gnostic theories, Bloch takes a dualistic position, aimed at distinguishing a last God (*letzter Gott*) from the God of Evil, which coincides with the exercise of power. From here comes that divine duality described in *Geist der Utopie*: »the final God, the fluttering of the final God, can no longer find a place in any framework of mere opticality, or pictoriality, of material valences [(…) *kann auch der*

letzte Gott, das Wehen des letzten Gottes, in keinen Rahmen bloßer Sichtbarkeit und Bildhaftigkeit, Materialwertigkeit mehr eingehen]«[20].

Continuing, Bloch adds:

> And God within must not just become visible to us in order to be […] possesses himself within us only as a shadowy occurrence, something objectively not yet occurred, only as the coincidence of the darkness of the lived moment with the unconcluded self-symbol of the absolute question [*Und auch Gott darin muß nicht etwa für uns nur sichtbar werden, um zu sein* […] *hat sich in uns nur als schattenhaft Geschehendes, objektiv Ungeschehenes, nur als ein Zusammensein von Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks und unabgeschlossenem Selbstsymbol der absoluten Frage inne*][21].

The theme of Lucifer becomes thus that of the search for meaning (the "new God") in a world that has fallen victim to its *Sinnlosigkeit*. The demoniac-Luciferine theme expresses for Bloch the ancient ideal of the bringer of light, of the individual who is constantly in revolt against the forces of stagnation. However, any revolt against the existent ends up confirming the existent. It is a phase that must be overcome to finally arrive at the paraclete. Sometime the conquest of evil may succeed more quietly, »[…] but as a rule the soul must assume guilt in order to destroy the existing devil, in order not to assume even more guilt by an idyllic retreat [*Zuweilen mag das Überwinden des Bösen stiller gelingen* […] *aber es steht noch in dem Regel so, daß die Seele schuldig werden muß, um das blöde Bestehende zu vernichten*]«[22].

This means that for Bloch it is precisely by taking the "non-sense" to its extreme consequences that sense can be achieved, albeit in its continuing and inevitable evanescence. Inevitable because any earthly translation of the *Gemeinschaft* would imply, from Bloch's perspective, an unacceptable contamination with the trappings of power. The characterizing trait of Bloch's humanist and paracletic perspective is thus his utopian dimension, free of any notion of dominion and permeated by spiritual dimension.

The need to achieve a spiritual utopia to overcome the crisis of the world and of culture: this then is the common thread in both Bloch and Lukács. From this point of view, their

studies on Dostoevsky and on Müntzer represent precisely a comment on the eschatological hope of finding – as Lukács wrote in a letter to Paul Ernst dated March 25, 1915 – »the roads that lead from soul to soul [*die Wege zu finden, die von Seele zu Seele führen*]«[23]. And while it is true that the two companion travelers were soon to head in different directions, their common intellectual experience in the Heidelberg of the early twentieth century continued to represent for both of them a fundamental step in their philosophical development, which will influence crucial aspects of their mature work.

What the pages of *Geist der Utopie* are meant to suggest by evoking the light of the Orient, is the need to arrive at a sophisticated form of mystic extremism, founded on a peculiar alchemy of Oriental and European sensibilities. Which is very different from announcing the twilight of the West, like Spengler had done. If Bloch's gaze turns towards the Orient, it is not to abandon the West, but to glimpse the road that leads to the *Selbstbegegnung*, to the meeting with the self.

On this utopian-spiritual route, in his *Geist der Utopie,* Bloch evokes various representatives of utopia. The way pointed out in these pages is an eccentric one, in which there is room for Renano's "old pitcher (*Bartmann Krug*)" as a symbol of connection, a bridge between the outside and the inside, and the carpet, symbol of a changing form, the so-called *Negerplastik* (and here the figure of the German intellectual Carl Einstein is evoked), all the way to Raphael's Sistine Virgin Mary, from the Gothic ornament to Franz Marc, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. A route that is perfectly in line with the *Zeitgeist* of the period, a period of crisis, or new departures, of revolutions.

1   E. Bloch, *Geist der Utopie. Erste Fassung* (*Faksimile der Ausgabe von 1923*, in Id., *Gesamtausgabe*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1959-1977, vol. III, p. 3), Engl. transl. by A.A. Nassar: *The Spirit of Utopia,* Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000, p. 1.

2   *Ibidem*, p. 1 (German edition, 1923, p. 11).

[3]   About the position of different German authors in regard to the war, see: A. Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment*. University of California Press, Berkeley 1986; and E. J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War 1,* Cambridge University Press*,* Cambridge 1981.

[4]   E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, cit., p. 3 (German edition, 1923, p. 11).

[5]   *Ibidem*, p. 235 (German edition, 1923, p. 293).

[6]   *Ibidem*, p. 1 (German edition, 1923, p. 11).

[7]   *Ibidem*, p. 235 (German edition, 1923, p. 293). About the reflection on the October Revolution by Ernst Bloch, see: Oskar Negt; Jack Zipes, *Ernst Bloch, the German Philosopher of the October Revolution,* "New German Critique", 4 (1975), pp. 3-16. More generally for a comprehensive introduction to and an overview of the life and philosophy of Ernst Bloch, I refer to the recent monography by Jack Zipes, *Ernst Bloch: The Pugnacious Philosopher of Hope,* Palgrave, Chaim 2019.

[8]   Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, cit., p. 2 (German edition, 1923, p. 4).

[9]   E. Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologer Revolution*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1969. Bloch in the text writes, by his choice, Münzer instead of Müntzer.

[10]   E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia,* cit., p. 170 (German edition, 1923, p. 215).

[11]   About the connection between Bloch and Lukács, see: C. Ujma, *Ernst Blochs Konstruktion der Moderne aus Messianismus und Marxismus: Erörterungen mit Berücksichtigung von Lukács und Benjamin*, Metzler, Stuttgart 1995. Particularly, about the young Lukács, see: U. Dogà, *»Von der Armut am Geiste« Die Geschichtsphilosophie des jungen Lukács*, Aisthesis Verlag, Bielefeld 2019.

[12]   E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia,* cit., p. 245 (German edition, 1923, p. 306).

[13]   *Ibidem,* p. 239 (German edition, 1923, pp. 298-299).

[14]   *Ibidem*, p. 268 (German edition, 1923, p. 333). On the question of the Paraclete in Bloch, see Przemyslaw Tacik, *Ernst Bloch as a Non-Simultaneous Jewish Marx,*

"Religions", 9 (2018), pp. 366-286.

15   *Ibidem*, p. 117 (German edition, 1923, p. 152).

16   See *ibidem*, p. 167 (German edition, 1923, p. 203).

17   Transl. mine, from: E. Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1969, p. 110.

18   See Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, cit., p. 229 (German edition, 1923, p. 322).

19   See E. Bloch, *Atheismus in Christentum. Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reiches,* Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1968. Engl. Transl. by J. T. Swann, Introduction by Peter Thompson: *Atheism in Christianity. The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom,* Verso, London 2009.

20   Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia,* cit., p. 145 (German edition, 1923, p. 186).

21   *Ibidem*, p. 201 (German edition, 1923, pp. 253-254).

22   *Ibidem*, p. 242 (German edition, 1923, p. 302).

23   Transl. mine from G. Lukács, *Briefwechsel 1902-1917,* ed. by É. Karádi, É. Fekete, Metzler, Stuttgart 1982, p. 352.