

AD HOMINEM: ANTINOMIES OF RADICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Ubi Lenin, ibi Jerusalem.

Ernst Bloch

There are probably few entries in our political lexicon more unstable and ambivalent than ‘radicalism’. Frequently associated with extremism, and with the supposed affinities between the termini of the political spectrum, it emerged in the wake of the modern revolutions and was often used to qualify a now faded or corrupted term, ‘reform’. In recent memory, it was even enlisted to sublate the deflation of political ideologies under neoliberalism, in the guise of Giddens’s ‘radical centre’. Throughout, its relationship to the idea of ‘revolution’, especially with the recoding of the latter by Marx and his epigones, has been uncertain. Is radicalism a premise, a prelude or a diversion from a totalising transformation of human affairs? Or is it a sign of debility or defeat, when the objective possibilities of change either vanish or are fundamentally curtailed? Immature premonition or impotent passion, the disabled realist might regard radicalism pejoratively as a ‘philosophical’ (i.e. ideological) supplement or surrogate for the political. Radical philosophy would thus come onto the scene when, for whatever reason, revolutionary politics has been shunted into the background. Vice versa, radical philosophy would be made obsolescent by the upsurge of real politics. Something of this relationship is invoked, with a characteristic blend of melancholy and intransigence, by Adorno’s well-known declaration: ‘Philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, remains alive because the moment of its realisation was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world is

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itself crippled by resignation before reality, and becomes a defeatism of reason after the transformation of the world failed'.¹

The advantages of backwardness?

The decisive inquiry into the volatile link between philosophy, revolution (as philosophy's simultaneous realisation and termination) and the 'radical' is arguably Marx's 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right: An Introduction*', written in 1843 and published in 1844 in the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher*. It is there that we encounter – as the answer to the riddle of German backwardness – the proletariat, not as a given reality, but as a tendency and project ('the formation of a class with radical chains').² It also in that famous – and thus often hastily read – text that, in a much-quoted passage, the crucial link between philosophical radicalism and revolutionary political 'humanism' makes itself manifest:

The weapon of criticism certainly cannot replace the criticism of weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses. Theory is capable of seizing the masses once it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* once it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp matters at the root. But for man the root is man himself.³

As countless of Marx's writings attest to, from *The Holy Family* to *Herr Vogt*, from *The German Ideology* to *Capital* itself (whose footnotes are gems of the genre), the *ad hominem* in the guise of blistering polemic, satire and 'character assassination' was part and parcel of Marx's mode of thought.

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London 1990, p. 3. See also the stimulating reflections on the syntagm 'radical philosophy' in Peter Osborne, 'Radicalism and Philosophy', *Radical Philosophy* 103, 2000, pp. 6-11. Though Osborne's attempt, after Rancière, to discern the dialectic of (re) politicisation and depoliticisation (or realisation) within radicalism is instructive, his contention that radicalism 'is the political correlate of the temporal logic of modernity, the logic of the new' (p. 8) is underdetermined, and does not do justice to the specific temporality of Marxian radicalism, which cannot be reduced in this respect to 'romantic naturalism' (p. 7).

² Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right: An Introduction*', in *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, edited by Joseph O'Malley, translated by Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1970, p. 141.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Inverting Althusser's formulation, one might even say that it was the *practical* anti-humanism required by his theoretical humanism.⁴ But though the 1843 Introduction is not devoid of dark wit and invective, the stakes lie elsewhere. It is temporality, in the multiple and interacting dimensions of religious secularisation, socio-economic development and revolutionary timing, which illuminates the articulation between philosophy and radicality, and which might provide us with some orientation as to the current fortunes of 'radical philosophy'.

Marx's plea for radicalisation is insistently contextualised in terms of German *backwardness*. What is perhaps most arresting about this text is precisely how the most generic of programmes, universal social emancipation ('the total redemption of humanity'), is meticulously and strategically situated in a very singular political predicament. Having lyrically encapsulated the results of the critique of religion ('the prerequisite of every critique'), which he regards as having been 'essentially completed' for Germany, Marx is faced with the obstacle that prevents the prolongation of the unmasking of religious abstraction into the unmasking of social abstraction, of 'the critique of heaven [...] into the critique of earth, the critique of religion into the critique of law, the critique of theology into the critique of politics'. The retrograde character of the German state and the underdevelopment of its civil society obviate the role of critique as a productive, immanent negativity. In Marx's biting words: 'For even the negation of our political present is already a dusty fact in the historical junkroom of modern nations. If I negate powdered wigs, I still have unpowdered wigs'.⁵ Only the *ad hominem* in its most violent and undialectical guise is called for, criticism as the 'brain of passion', organising the destruction of an enemy which it is not even worth refuting, because 'the spirit of these conditions is already refuted'. When faced with an anachronistic regime that 'only imagines that it believes in itself', a laughable 'German ghost', criticism can only play the role of a particularly brutal and unflattering mirror: 'Every sphere of German society must be described as the *partie honteuse* of German society, and these petrified conditions must be made to dance by singing to them their own melody'.⁶

⁴ Perhaps only Guy Debord, with a brilliance that was often wasted on desultory targets, tried to follow Marx in marrying these two senses of the *ad hominem*. See especially "*Cette mauvaise réputation...*", Gallimard, Paris 1993, and the texts in Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International*, translated by John McHale, Pluto, London 2003, where he and Sanguinetti write: 'We want to bring a radical critique to bear – a critique *ad hominem*' (p. 171).

⁵ Marx, p. 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

But the German anachronism is double: on the one hand, the farce of restoration without revolution in practice ('the *oeuvres incomplètes* of our actual history'); on the other, the anticipation of the future in theory ('the *oeuvres posthumes* of our ideal history, philosophy').⁷ It is the latter which alone is worthy of the kind of immanent critique that would be capable of extracting, from the productive negation of the purely speculative image of 'future history', the weapons for a genuine overturning of the status quo. In other words, the radicalism of (the critique of) philosophy is dictated by the paradoxical coexistence of practical backwardness and theoretical advance. More specifically, the fact that the German 'thought-version [*Gedankenbild*]' of the modern state is an abstraction which is adequate to its real correlate outside of Germany ('just across the Rhine') makes the 'criticism of the speculative philosophy of right' into one which, though enunciated from a position of backward specificity, is capable of attaining a real universality, and thus opening onto a practical horizon of transformation. In order to be properly radicalised, the situation surveyed by Marx is thus compelled to pass through philosophy. Neither a practical repudiation of philosophy nor a philosophical overcoming of practice are possible: 'you cannot transcend philosophy without actualising it', nor can you 'actualise philosophy without transcending it'.⁸

Again, it is important to stress that though these may appear as universally-binding statements – and they certainly are concerned with the universal, with man as 'the world of man, the state, society' – they are strictly singularised by Germany's temporal anomaly, its disjunctive synthesis of political retardation and philosophical anticipation. This anomaly even permits Marx to hint at Germany's comparative revolutionary advantage, when he asks: 'can Germany attain a praxis *à la hauteur des principes*, that is to say, a revolution that will raise it not only to the official level of the modern na-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136. See also the important interpretation of Marx's radicalism, as crystallised in the 1843 Introduction, in Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx*, translated by G.M. Goshgarian, Verso, London 2003. Kouvelakis makes the following germane comment about the link between criticism, radicalism and politics: 'How to make criticism radical and how to make it practical are henceforth inseparably linked questions, each of which presupposes the other. Solving them requires going beyond the philosophical form of criticism, which also means going beyond the unreflected character of practice' (p. 325). I am indebted to Kouvelakis's book for its elucidations and suggestions regarding the link between radicalism and time.

tions, but to the human level which will be the immediate future of these nations?⁹

But, notwithstanding Marx's faith in theoretical emancipation and his conviction that theory is not a mere collection of ideas but 'an *active* principle, a set of *practices*',¹⁰ its practical conversion appears thwarted by the absence of the 'passive element' or 'material basis' for revolutionary praxis. This basis would ordinarily be found in the domain of civil society, in the sphere of needs: 'A radical revolution can only be a revolution of radical needs, whose preconditions and birthplaces appear to be lacking'. In other words, the 'theoretical needs' that emerge from the immanent critique of philosophy do not translate into 'practical needs'. Furthermore, whilst in other (economically and politically advanced) societies, political revolutions take place where a class of civil society lays claim to 'universal dominance [...] in the name of the universal rights of society', the slackness and amorphousness of German civil society means that it possesses neither a distinct class of liberation – a momentary 'soul of the people' – nor a class of oppression, a 'negative representative of society'.¹¹ This further symptom of backwardness, though initially appearing to quash the latter's virtues, reveals itself as the supreme, if in many respects supremely aleatory or even desperate, opportunity for revolutionary change. The sheer disaggregation of the German polity means that the 'classical' model of partial and political revolution is inoperative: 'In France it is the actuality, in Germany the impossibility, of gradual emancipation which must give birth to full freedom'.¹² But, notwithstanding his allegedly enduring Feuerbachianism,¹³ Marx could not countenance a praxis simply determined at the level of essence or of philosophy. As he unequivocally put it: 'It is not enough that thought strive to actualise itself; actuality must itself strive toward thought'.¹⁴ This embryonic version of Marx's later 'method of the tendency'¹⁵ dictates that radical emancipation find its objective or 'positive possibility' in 'the formation of a class with radi-

⁹ Marx, p. 138.

¹⁰ Kouvelakis, p. 324.

¹¹ Marx, p. 140.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 141. The concluding paragraph puts this both boldly and ironically: 'Germany, enamoured of fundamentals, can have nothing less than a fundamental revolution' (p. 142).

¹³ Louis Althusser, 'Marxism and Humanism', in *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster, Verso, London 1996, pp. 225-7.

¹⁴ Marx, p. 138.

¹⁵ 'Freedom and subordination, whether in theory or in practice, are only given within the tendency, within the movement, within the specificity of the class struggle that materially prepares the destruction of the existing order'. Antonio Negri,

cal chains', the proletariat. And it is here that the radicality of philosophy is matched by the radicality of a social and political subject: 'Just as philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its spiritual weapons in philosophy'.¹⁶

The theology of revolution, from the standpoint of the proletariat

The singular constellation of concepts that emerges in the young Marx's confrontation with the predicament of Germany in the early 1840s – binding together the results of the critique of religion, the analysis of economic backwardness, the function of philosophy and the dislocated and dislocating character of historical time – has arguably beset radical philosophy ever since. And it is the themes of the 1843 Introduction that we can still find at work 80 years later in an emblematic and instructive confrontation between two intimately related but conflicting ways of thinking philosophy's radicalism, a confrontation that might even allow us to delineate some of the antinomies of radical philosophy that persist into the present. Toward the conclusion of his seminal 1923 essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', the theoretical core of *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács directly addresses the 'theology of revolution' that Ernst Bloch had examined and dramatised in his 1921 book on the sixteenth-century radical reformer and leader of the German Peasants' War Thomas Müntzer.

From around 1910 through World War I, but especially in the years 1912–14, Bloch and Lukács – both of whom were associated with Georg Simmel and participated in Max Weber's Sunday seminars in Heidelberg – had entered into an intense theoretical dialogue, even a symbiosis. As Bloch put it, reminiscing in his final years on his relationship with Lukács: 'We were like communicating vessels; the water was always at the same level in both. [...] I was as much Lukács' disciple as he was mine. There were no differences between us.'¹⁷ But while Bloch, even once he 'reconciled' himself

'Crisis of the Planner-State', in *Books for Burning*, edited by Timothy S. Murphy, Verso, London 2005, p. 15.

¹⁶ Marx, p. 142.

¹⁷ Michael Löwy, 'Interview with Ernst Bloch', *New German Critique* 9, 1976, p. 37, 40. The entire interview is devoted to this matter. On the relationship between Bloch and Lukács, see also Löwy's *Georg Lukács – From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, translated by Patrick Camiller, NLB, London 1979, pp. 52–6.

with Stalinism,¹⁸ maintained alive his ‘anarcho-Bolshevik’ leanings,¹⁹ Lukács – first with his properly Leninist ‘turn’ in 1922 and far more intensely in his later repudiation of *History of Class Consciousness* and turn to a realist, ‘neo-classical’ Marxism²⁰ – broke drastically with his tragic, utopian and messianic inclinations of the 1910s. The ‘Reification’ essay is a remarkable document in this respect. Not only does its theory of the proletariat as subject-object of history effectively expunge Lukács’s tragic dualism of an ethical subject with no worldly effect; the dialectical and epistemological claims made on behalf of the proletariat²¹ are also intended to serve as a critique of any (pseudo-) revolutionary or radical thought which abides within the ‘antinomies of bourgeois thought’ – that is, any thinking that cannot critically grasp and practically terminate the pernicious effects of reification and the contemplative attitude the latter induces.

In keeping with our discussion of Marx in the first section, it should be noted that the entirety of Lukács’s essay can be regarded as an excavation of Marx’s dictum from the 1843 Introduction, which serves as its epigraph: ‘To be radical is to go to the root of the matter. For man, however, the root is man himself’. One angle into Lukács’s 1923 essay involves considering how the thesis of reification, which critically combines the Marxian analysis of commodity fetishism with the insights on rationalisation and calculation of his erstwhile mentors Simmel and Weber, permits Lukács to separate true, Marxist radicalism from those political philosophies which – incapable of identifying the sole subject that can break the spell of contemplative capitalism – only simulate radicalism while remaining within the confines of bourgeois thought. Such philosophies ignore at their own peril the lapidary in-

¹⁸ See his remarkable 1937 attack on those who broke with the USSR over the Moscow trials, which is entirely organised around the comparison between the divergent reactions to the French revolutionary Terror by German writers (Klopstock, Schiller, Goethe) and philosophers (Kant, Hegel), with the latter striking the proper attitude of comprehension, rather than facile moralism. See Ernst Bloch, ‘A Jubilee for Renegades’, *New German Critique* 4, 1975, and the article by Negt in the same issue.

¹⁹ I borrow the term from Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe – A Study in Elective Affinity*, translated by Hope Heaney, Athlone Press, London 1992. This excellent and captivating work deals at length with Bloch and Lukács under this rubric.

²⁰ For a compelling periodisation of Lukács’s political and theoretical trajectory, see Löwy’s *Georg Lukács*.

²¹ ‘The self-understanding of the proletariat is therefore simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society’. Georg Lukács, ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, in *History and Class Consciousness*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1971, p. 149.

junction that governs 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat': 'there is no solution that [cannot] be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure'.²² In this regard, Bloch's *Thomas Müntzer* seems a natural target, inasmuch as, despite its fervent allegiance to the Bolshevik revolution, it strives to identify a supra-historical, meta-political and meta-religious *Ubique*, a utopian directionality that cannot be exhausted or contained by socio-economic dialectic or political strategy. I will consider Lukács's attack and then assess the extent to which it captures the thrust of Bloch's theology of revolution.

The critique of Bloch is situated in the midst of Lukács's treatment of the fate of humanism in Marxism, which is to say in the revolutionary theory that adopts and intensifies the political-epistemological 'standpoint of the proletariat'. Almost as if to correct what might have appeared as the prolongation within the analysis of reification of his own early romantic anti-capitalism – in the guise of the protest against capitalism as an engine of dehumanisation – Lukács tries to purge humanism of myth, which is to say of its debilitating compromise with reified bourgeois conceptuality. In keeping with Lukács's Hegelian fidelities (the antidote to his earlier Kantian leanings), if humanism is really to dislocate the structures of reification, its immediacy must be overcome. Accordingly: 'If the attempt is made to attribute an immediate form of existence to class consciousness, it is not possible to avoid lapsing into mythology: the result will be a mysterious species-consciousness [...] whose relation to and impact upon the individual consciousness is wholly incomprehensible'.²³

The picture that emerges is that of a battle between two humanisms: the first, which founds itself on the results of what Lukács calls 'classical philosophy' (up to and including Hegel), identifies a transcendental and trans-historical kernel of humanity to be ethically and cognitively rescued from its capitalist dehumanisation (this also the most general matrix of romantic anti-capitalism); the second, a proletarian, revolutionary humanism, reinvents Protagoras's adage to argue that 'man has become the measure of all (societal) things', insofar as 'fetishistic objects' have been dissolved into 'processes that take place among men and are objectified in concrete relations between them'.²⁴ The articulation of this revolutionary humanism possibly constitutes Lukács's most unequivocal act of separation from his ethically rigorist and dualist past, and from any trans-historical opposition

²² Lukács, p. 83.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

to the bourgeoisie. Capitalism can only be exploded from the inside, by an agent formed by the process of reification itself. Conversely, a revolutionary humanism can only emerge when social life is thoroughly subsumed under capitalist relations, when ‘in this objectification, in this rationalisation and reification of all social forms [...] we see clearly for the first time how society is constructed from the relations of men with each other’.²⁵

Lukács is accordingly opposed to any theory of ‘communist invariants’²⁶ that would posit a trans-historical revolutionary drive. This is explicit where he canonically opposes slave revolts to proletarian revolutions, but adds a specifically dialectical and epistemological twist to the traditional Marxist differentiation. Unmediated by the objectivity of social form (the commodity), slave consciousness can never, for Lukács, attain to ‘self-knowledge’: ‘Between a “thinking” slave and an “unconscious” slave there is no real distinction to be drawn in an objective social sense’. While it might be politically mobilising, the slave’s awareness of his oppression has no true and lasting effect because it is not rooted in social objectivity. In other words, it is only because the worker is the ‘self-consciousness of the commodity’, and thus a subject-object (rather than a powerless alternation between these two poles), that ‘his knowledge is practical. *That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge*’.²⁷ Moreover, it is only this ‘privileged’ position within the logic of the social totality that permits the worker – if and when he is able to politicise his consciousness – not to struggle against seemingly inert ‘facts’, but rather to grasp the *tendency* inscribed in his very exploitation. The epistemological and political specificity of Marxism is to be located in this relation to tendency, in its being a ‘theory of reality which allots higher place to the prevailing trends of the total development than to the facts of the empirical world’.²⁸

It is on the grounds of this dialectical and political epistemology, which radically distinguishes the proletariat’s self-knowledge from that of any ‘pre-historical’ class, that Lukács examines Marx’s humanism. Lukács refuses the idea that Marx ever hypostasised an abstract general man, arguing instead

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²⁶ On this concept, formulated by Alain Badiou, see Alain Badiou and François Balmès, *De l'idéologie*, Maspéro, Paris 1976 and my analysis in ‘Communism as Separation’, in: *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, edited by Peter Hallward, Continuum, London 2004. Badiou has returned to this notion in his recent polemic on Sarkozy, see ‘The Communist Hypothesis’, *New Left Review* II/49, January-February 2008.

²⁷ Lukács, p. 169.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

that the 'standpoint' of man is such only when, qua subject-object of the historical dialectic he is 'integrated in the concrete totality' (i.e. when he is singularised as proletarian...). The upshot of this is that man '*both is and at the same time is not*'.²⁹ It is the specificity lent by capitalism to this ontological uncertainty or intermittence of man which for Lukács – set on burning all of his bridges with utopianism, messianism and religiosity – separates Marxist humanism from all of those forms of anti-capitalism which begin with the human (essence) and treat in unmediated, non-dialectical terms the impossibility of attaining humanity under capitalism. By contrast, the very concept of reification is aimed at surpassing 'the dilemmas of empiricism and utopianism, of voluntarism and fatalism' that beset any (romantic) anti-capitalism which has yet to discover the materialist philosopher's stone: the commodity form. The understanding of reification allows Lukács to grasp the antinomies of anti-capitalist radicalism as derivative forms of the overall antinomies of bourgeois thought, stemming from the latter's incapacity to think tendency and to identify the subject-object capable of revolutionising the totality from within.

The harshness of Lukács's judgment of Bloch's Müntzer arises from the foregoing specification of a revolutionary Marxian humanism. As the foremost communist exemplar of that utopian strand which Lukács depicts as the historical counterpart of the Christian dualism that left the City of Man unscathed, deporting human wishes to the City of God, in Lukács's account Bloch-Müntzer is unable to extricate himself from a theology – however 'revolutionary' – which impotently juxtaposes a transcendent humanisation to a dehumanised world, the empirical to the utopian. Within this 'utopian counterpart' to a quietist and servile Christian ontology, Lukács isolates two strands (themselves forming a further antinomy, another blocked duality): on the one hand, a view of empirical reality for which the latter can only be transformed by an Apocalypse; on the other, a radical interiorisation, whereby humanity can only be attained in the figure of the saint. In either case, change is but a semblance. Giving short thrift to the 'intrinsically praxeological' character of Müntzer's vision,³⁰ Lukács intensifies Engels's judgement

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

³⁰ See the critical comments on Lukács's treatment of Bloch's *Thomas Müntzer* in Tommaso La Rocca, *Es Ist Zeit. Apocalisse e Storia – studio su Thomas Müntzer (1490–1525)*, Cappelli, Bologna 1988, pp. 191–5. This is to my knowledge the only text that specifically deals with these revealing passages in *History and Class Consciousness*. It would be interesting to consider the manner in which this dissension of the 1920s is prolonged in the dispute over expressionism that pitted Bloch against Lukács in 1938. See *Aesthetics and Politics*, NLB, London 1977, pp. 9-59.

on the role of theology in the German Peasants' War, not treating merely as an anachronistic 'flag' and 'mask' for concrete social, but as an impediment and a diversion: 'Real actions then appear – precisely in their objective, revolutionary sense – wholly independent of the religious utopia: the latter can neither lead them in any real sense, nor can it offer concrete objectives or concrete proposals for their realisation'. What's more, the duality between man's inner being and his empirical conditions – joined but not mediated by a theology of history (predestination, chiliasm, etc.) – is viewed by Lukács, in a variation on Weber's thesis, as 'the basic ideological structure of capitalism', such that it was 'no accident that it was the revolutionary religiosity of the sects that supplied the ideology for capitalism in its purest forms (in England and America)'. Thus, whether we look at Bloch's attempt to supplement the 'merely economic' dimension of historical materialism with a utopian spark, or at 'the way in which the religious and utopian premises of the theory *concretely impinge* upon Müntzer's actions',³¹ we encounter the same symptom of the incapacity to overcome bourgeois thought, the same *hiatus irrationalis* between principle and practice, the spirit and the letter, the spiritual and the economic. For Lukács, only the proletariat, 'as the Archimedean point from which the whole of reality can be overthrown', is capable of suturing this hiatus, and heralding a 'real social revolution' capable of 'restructuring [...] the real and concrete life of man', thus abolishing the reified duality between the utopian and the economic.³²

In many respects, Lukács's harsh if exceedingly brief critique of Bloch's utopianism remains emblematic of dialectical arguments against transcendent, religious or messianic radicalisms, and it is mainly for this reason that I have presented it here. Needless to say, I cannot do justice to Bloch's own proposal in these remarks, but I think it is worth identifying those points of contrast between Lukács and Bloch that might shed some light on the persisting tensions, contradictions and antinomies within the contemporary understanding of philosophical radicalism. The clue lies perhaps in Bloch's 1924 review of *History and Class Consciousness*, 'Actuality and Utopia', which, though recognising Lukács's towering achievement, chastises him for carrying out 'an almost exclusively sociological homogenisation' of the processes of revolution, transformation and humanisation.³³ What does Lukács homogenise?

³¹ Lukács, p. 192.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 193. 'Already the mechanical separation between economics and politics precludes any really effective action encompassing society in its totality' (p. 195).

³³ Quoted in John Flores, 'Proletarian Meditations: Georg Lukács' Politics of Knowledge', *Diacritics* 2.3, 1972, p. 21. See also the reflections on Bloch's review in

Turning to Bloch's *Thomas Müntzer*, it is evident that Lukács's criticism, by aligning the theology of revolution on the antinomies of bourgeois thought – as a paroxystic transcendence of the world which is powerless to unhinge the latter's material constitution – papers over the specificity of Bloch's treatment of the religious and his conceptualisation of a utopian excess which, thought not simply transcendent, is both metapolitical and metahistorical. This much transpires from Bloch's own reflections on Weber's sociology of religion. In a crucial passage of the book, which also relies on Marx's account of the historical masks of revolution in the 18th *Brumaire*, Bloch argues for the relative autonomy of 'moral and psychological complexes' without which it is impossible to comprehend the appearance of phenomena such as the German Peasants' War, but also to capture 'the deepest *contents* of this of this tumultuous human history, this lucid dream of the anti-wolf, of a finally fraternal kingdom' – which is an indispensable stimulus to collective revolutionary action. To quote Jameson's perspicacious commentary on Bloch: 'in Müntzer's theology, the very truth-coefficient of a theological doctrine is measured by collective need, by the belief and recognition of the multitudes themselves. Hence a theological idea, in contrast to a philosophical one, already implies in its very structure a church or group of believers around it, and exists therefore on a protopolitical, rather than a purely theoretical level'.³⁴ Recalling, after a fashion, Marx's own treatment of Germany's potentially revolutionary anachronism in the 1840s, as discussed above, Bloch – unlike Engels, Kautsky, and even more intensely Lukács himself – does not see the theological impetus of the 'revolution of the common man' of 1525 as the mere index of socio-economic immaturity. On the contrary, he views it as one of those situations that bears witness to the fact that 'the superstructure is often in advance of an [...] economy that will only later attain its maturity'.³⁵ Once again, we see how the configuration of the relationship between social transformation and historical time is among the foremost sources of divergence in how the very project of a radical philosophy may be understood. The positive use of anachronism suggested by Marx, and given an extreme

Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*, Pluto Press, London 1979, pp. 184-6, and Anson Rabinbach, 'Unclaimed Heritage: Bloch's *Heritage of Our Times* and the Theory of Fascism', *New German Critique* 11, 1977, pp. 17-19.

³⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1971, pp. 156-7.

³⁵ Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 2nd ed, Reclam, Leipzig 1989 [1962], p. 51. I have relied on the French translation by Maurice de Gandillac: *Thomas Münzer. Théologien de la révolution*, Julliard, Paris 1964.

form by Bloch – as a recovery and repetition of Müntzer for a revolutionary present – is denied by Lukács, for whom the revolutionary utopianism of the German Peasants' War was simply a by-product of a situation wherein a real restructuring of life was 'objectively impossible'.³⁶ In effect, as the tone of the several references to the Russian Revolution suggests, Bloch saw a link between the theological-utopian impulse and a certain socially determinate backward and peripheral place within capitalism as a possible revolutionary advantage. Some of the comments on the social base of the Peasants' War likewise echo the critique of a linear and developmental philosophy of history that transpires from one of the drafts of Marx's famous letter on the Russian *mir*, where he approvingly quotes the following line from an American writer: 'the new system to which the modern society is tending will be a revival in superior form of an archaic social type'.³⁷

The rejection of what Bloch perceives in Lukács and in aspects of the Marxist tradition as an excessive homogenisation of the historical dialectic, as the purging of all non- or anti-social contents, carries over into his treatment of the dualities of inner and outer, heavenly and worldly, theological and political, utopian and empirical – the very dualities that Lukács perceived as the antinomies that ultimately reduced pre-proletarian politics to impotence. Rather than a historically-determined contradiction or an irrational hiatus between theological semblance and political weakness, Bloch sees in Müntzer – as the very emblem of the tensions and potentialities of the peasants' revolt – the short-circuit or disjunctive synthesis between the poles of these supposed disjunctions. Joining the 'absolute natural right' of a millenarian Christianity (theocracy qua equality) to a very strategic grasp of social forces and political forms (the alliance with the miners and the formation of the league of the Just), Bloch's Müntzer combines '*the most efficacious at the real level and the most efficacious at the surreal level* and puts them both at the summit of the same revolution'.³⁸ Perhaps more than any other, this formulation captures Bloch's ideal of a revolutionary (and therefore realist) inscription of utopian content into the course of history. It also governs his reading of Marx.

³⁶ Lukács, p. 193. For Bloch, on the contrary, Müntzer's tragic defeat should never be hypostasized into a historical inevitability, and he should never be treated as a mere 'Don Quixote'.

³⁷ Karl Marx, 'The "First" Draft', in Teodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, Monthly Review Press, New York 1983, p. 107.

³⁸ Bloch, pp. 93-4. For a historical treatment of how 'millenarian revolutions' may synthesize political realism with theological surrealism, see Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Verso, London 2001, pp. 177-209.

Rather than the undertaker of utopian illusions, Marx is for Bloch the real heir to a subterranean lineage of chiliastic communism, whose pivotal contribution lies in soberly identifying the immanent means for the realisation of a supra-historical drive to 'mystical democracy'. 'His aim', writes Bloch, 'is to impose on the world through a hard-fought struggle, waged according to the wisdom of this very world, the edenic order required by rational socialism, which is profoundly millenarian, but which had been conceived hitherto in a far too arcadian manner, as a kind of beyond'.³⁹ Or, as Bloch puts it in a remarkable image in *Spirit of Utopia*, Marx is only homogeneous with capitalism in the same sense that the detective must somehow mimic the criminal. Bloch's view of socialist revolution and planning, which Lukács dismisses in *History and Class Consciousness* as a misunderstanding of the economy, separating it from the political, also stems from this attempt to think through a kind of rational millenarianism. It also echoes Bloch's captivating treatment of the relationship between interiority and political action in Müntzer.

Sharing with Lukács an interest in the antinomic relationship between theological transcendence and political immanence, Bloch spends much of *Thomas Müntzer* dissecting and castigating Luther's capitulation to earthly authority and denial of mystical interiority. Luther's ultimate Manicheanism 'remains static, it does not entail any demand to suppress the tension, to re-establish, at least in the heavenly Kingdom, the very unity of this Kingdom'.⁴⁰ In a sense then, Bloch discerns in Müntzer not an overcoming of the antinomy of the empirical and utopian, which is perhaps ultimately irreducible, but another way of articulating it, which would simultaneously do justice to social needs and spiritual drives. More strikingly, Bloch's Müntzer approaches the stringent demands and risks of collective revolutionary action in order to free up the religious subject from the burden and the distraction of an exploitative order. In a remarkable twist, rather than a humanist effort to merely alleviate suffering, Müntzer's theologically-driven revolt is aimed at freeing up subjects from vulgar economic suffering, *so that they may*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89. See also 'Karl Marx, Death, and the Apocalypse: Or, the Ways in This World by Which the Inward Can Become Outward and the Outward Like the Inward', in *Spirit of Utopia*, translated by Anthony A. Nassar, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, where Bloch writes that 'Marx thoroughly purified Socialist planning of every simple, false, disengaged and abstract enthusiasm, of mere Jacobinism' (p. 236). For Bloch's provocative treatment of Marx's alleged 'secularisation' of Christian and utopian contents, see 'Karl Marx and Humanity: Stuff of Hope', in *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

⁴⁰ Bloch, p. 136.

finally be free for Christian suffering (and redemption). As Bloch writes, when Müntzer ‘straightens up the bent backs, it is in order to allow them to bear a real burden. If the people has fallen low enough so that, having itself become creature, it has more to fear from the creature than from God, it is entirely mistaken when it imagines that its masters are still established and commanded by God’.⁴¹ This vision of communism as a freeing up of radical and economically irreducible utopian drives is also evident in Bloch’s treatment of the state in the same period. In *Spirit of Utopia* he writes of the state as ‘a great instrumental organisation for the control of the *inessential*’, armed with a ‘purely administrative Esperanto’, and whose only ‘justification [...] is the simplifying, frictionless functioning of its organisational method, placed in the middle of illogical life, its only, entirely instrumental logic, the logic of a state of emergency’.⁴² Thus, correcting Lukács’s negative estimation, it is not the demarcation of politics from the economy that is at stake in Bloch, but the excess (though not the outright separation) of the utopian over the empirical. Radical political struggle and violence – the ‘categorical imperative with a revolver in hand’, as Bloch has it – are necessary not for their own sake, but as the stepping-stones for an incommensurable and metapolitical aim. Or, to borrow Bloch’s effective allegory, ‘the Messiah can only come when all the guests have sat down at the table’.⁴³ Likewise, Bloch is not merely juxtaposing millenarian immediacy to economic mediation, but thinking through the kind of immediacy that could be produced on the basis of a rigorous traversal of worldly determinations (class struggles, planning, material needs, etc.). Adorno captured this aspect of Bloch’s thinking well: ‘For just as, in the words of Bloch’s master, there is nothing immediate between heaven and earth which is not mediated, so too there can be nothing mediated without the concept of mediation involving a moment of the immediate. Bloch’s pathos is indefatigably directed to that moment’.⁴⁴

Whither radical philosophy?

This all-too-brief exploration of Bloch’s and Lukács’s divergent responses to the injunctions of Marx’s early radicalism has merely sought to make

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴² Bloch, *Spirit of Utopia*, p. 240.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘The Handle, the Pot and Early Experience’, in: *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. R. Tiedemann, trans. S. Weber Nicholsen, Columbia University Press, New York 1992, p. 219.

manifest some of the principal directions within the volatile force-field of radical philosophy. In particular, I think that this communist differend from the early twenties reveals that, at least within a Marxist ambit, the relation between the concrete situation and its horizon of transformation can be seen to split according to two conceptually differentiated but intertwined axes. First, in temporal terms: while Lukács's position stresses the articulation between capitalist tendency, the critical present and the revolutionary *kairos* which is to be seized by the organised proletariat, he appears to dismiss the benefits of anachronism mooted in Marx's 1843 Introduction. Inversely, it is by exacerbating this element of anachronism, by locating radicality in the anticipation of the superstructure over the base, that Bloch can dismiss the canonical view of Müntzer's theology as an obstacle or an appendage, and instead give it pride of place as the bearer of revolutionary and utopian content. Second, this divergent appreciation of the temporal coordinates of revolutionary change is bound up with two incompatible views of historical and political agency. Where Lukács presents the proletariat as the practical and epistemological 'Archimedean point' capable of unhinging the capitalist totality, Bloch reveals in a subjective metahistory of a utopian kernel whose drive and directionality – despite all of the changes in instruments, organisations and motivating ideologies – remains invariant from the Taborites to the Bolsheviks. To borrow Lukács's formulation, we are thus confronted with two potent, and alternative ways, to politically and conceptually grasp the statement that man '*both is and at the same time is not*', or, in Blochian terms, both is and is not-yet. Whether the antinomy signified by the names and texts of Lukács and Bloch is resolvable or not, or whether we should indeed treat it as a constitutive tension that maintains 'radical philosophy' in a perennial state of incompleteness and unrest, is an open question. What is clear is that the insistence of contemporary radical thought on the enigmas of philosophical anthropology (in the writings of Virno and Agamben on human nature and bare life),⁴⁵ the political repercussions of messianism (from Derrida's *Specters of Marx* to the various strands of the Paul 'revival') and the possibility of a rational and partisan subjectivity (Badiou, Žižek)⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The entire debate over the 'biopolitical' can be conceived in many respects as a way of folding the singularity of the capitalist present (conceived in post-workerist thought under the Marxian aegis of 'real subsumption') onto a metahistorical and metapolitical anthropological content. See my 'Always Already Only Now: Negri and the Biopolitical', in *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri, Vol. 2: Lessons on Constitutive Power*, edited by T. Murphy and A.-K. Mustapha, Pluto Press, London 2007.

⁴⁶ I've investigated the contemporary legacy of Lenin's 'political epistemology' of partisanship in 'Partisan Thought', *Historical Materialism* 17.1, forthcoming 2009.

suggests that there are still rich seams to be mined in the problematic of radicalism inaugurated by Marx and so compellingly, if incompatibly, recast by Lukács and Bloch.