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Engendering the future: Bloch's utopian philosophy in dialogue with gender theory

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Wer uns nicht fruchtbar macht, wird uns sicher gleichgültig.
(Whoever does not make us fruitful ceases to matter to us.)¹
Friedrich Nietzsche

Insgesamt liegt der Unterschied der Geschlechter auf einem anderen Feld als die künstlichen Unterschiede, welche die Klassengesellschaft produziert hat; so verschwindet er mit dieser nicht.
(On the whole, the difference between the sexes lies in a different field to the artificial differences which the class society has produced; thus it does not disappear with the latter.)²
Ernst Bloch

Central to Ernst Bloch's philosophy is the thought that the unredeemed content of the past provides the desiring subject of the present with signposts to a future that has yet to be claimed. *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* accounts for the function and significance of hope in the dialogue between history and possibility. Complex relationships between past, present and future are expressed by Bloch in terms of anticipation, militant optimism and the forward glance: all modes in which the omnipresent phenomenon of hope can activate the world's latent utopian content and wrest a *Heimat*, a truly habitable world, from the wreckage of history.

This chapter inquires into the ways in which these modes of "not-yetness" relate to the structures of human reproduction, to their social articulation in the practice of gender, and to the experience of desiring gendered subjects. Contemporary feminist and gender theorists tend to conceptualize gender as a complex of changing and interactive social and cultural practices. What concerns us here is the relationship between current theoretical approaches to gender and the encyclopedic Marxist cultural critique carried out by Bloch, with its insistence on open horizons of possibility. By scrutinizing the processes through which the sexed and gendered

subject comes to be, gender theorists bring a specific focus to the critique of social conditions. As we shall see, much gender theory has a utopian core in the Blochian sense, in that it, too, involves a dialogue between history and possibility and an insistence on horizons that open out beyond the ‘badly existing’ (*das schlecht Vorhandene*). However, while feminist thought has developed in a lively awareness of Marxism,³ the reverse cannot be as easily claimed; both Bloch’s writings and the critical responses to them have tended to underplay the importance of feminist perspectives and questions of gender. For precisely this reason, it is worth bringing these two theoretical orientations into conversation with each other.

I have examined elsewhere the presence and function of gender discourse in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*.⁴ Here I seek to go beyond the analysis of the discursive residues of patriarchy in Bloch’s thinking and writing, in order to suggest more fundamental affinities between reproduction and the Blochian production of the future, and between gender and the generative force of hope. It is worth emphasizing from the outset the perhaps obvious point that gender, while it is related to and in part enacted through human reproduction — sex, family, child-bearing and child-rearing — is not reducible to these domains, but is played out in an array of identities, behaviors and practices that vary according to their social, cultural and historical location. The concept of reproduction thus exceeds the confines of procreation; it encompasses the reproduction of the social, the transmission into the future of established or prevailing structures, values and norms. This kind of social reproduction, in the sense used, for example, by Nancy Chodorow in her classic feminist psychoanalytic study *The Reproduction of Mothering*,⁵ has been a key target for gender-aware critique. Many feminist critics have scrutinized the processes through which gender norms are reproduced — in language, child-rearing, systems of education, the media and other social and cultural institutions. On the other hand, it is

precisely the reproductive moment in social practices which, while it seeks to guarantee their continuation into the future, constitutes the chink in the armor of their normative force. As exact reproduction — whether of bodies, values or behaviors — is impossible, always only ever approximate, it is in the fault lines between one generation and the next, one historical moment and the next, that possibilities for transformation, for the formulation of alternatives, can be realized. This seemingly paradoxical relationship between reproduction and transformation has long engaged the attention of gender theorists. Judith Butler, for example, has argued that the very *citatoriality* of gender — the fact that it is a social practice consisting of the iteration and performative imitation of an “original” that can never be traced — opens up spaces for critical agency and subversive or oppositional possibilities.⁶

Butler has written of gender as “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint,”⁷ and this is a useful starting point for a closer consideration of how gender theory and Bloch’s analysis of the relationship between history and possibility might speak to each other. Already in Butler’s pairing, we can align *improvisation* with possibility, and *constraint* with the limitations imposed by the social order, in this case sex/gender system (a term to which I return below), prevailing at a given moment in history. The two elements of the above pairing stand in a dialectical relationship to each other: constraint sets the conditions of improvisation, yet improvisation acts in turn upon constraint, and has the potential to undo or reconfigure it to some extent. A closer look at some of the most significant developments in recent gender theory will enable us to identify more precisely some illuminating parallels with Bloch’s dialectical thinking.

Gender theory is a diverse body of thought, a set of concerns and perspectives which arose in the first instance from feminism but has continued to evolve beyond it. A central tenet of recent theory is the idea that one’s gender is something one “does”

rather than “has” or “is.”⁸ Another significant feature is the cultivation of what has been called a “hermeneutic of suspicion”⁹ with regard to such concepts and categories as masculine and feminine, homosexual and heterosexual, nature and culture, norm and deviation, self and other. Gender theory not only inquires into the relationship between these categories, it questions the operation of categorization itself. Many contemporary theorists emphasize that gender is not, or at least not necessarily, a binaristic scheme according to which individuals are allocated pre-determined roles (although this traditional model does continue to determine gender practices), but is more usefully thought of as a field of tension between structure and agency. The linguistic and behavioral norms, cultural expectations, available roles and prohibitions to which we are variously subject as gendered beings come up against the negotiation, resistance, subversion and improvisation of individuals and groups in an infinitely varied array of practices and experiences of gender. Crucial to a critical understanding of this process has been the analysis of the ways in which masculinities, femininities and the spectrum of positions and possibilities in between are constructed and enacted (although the metaphor of a spectrum with opposite ends is itself problematic, indebted as it is to the binaristic model which gender theory has done so much to destabilize). In fact, gender “identities” and gender relations cannot be considered apart from each other; it is more apt to speak, as many recent theorists do, of “sex/gender systems” (a term coined by Gayle Rubin), in which subject positions are constituted through relation, including relations of difference. This is clearest where “masculine” and “feminine” continue to be understood as a mutually constituting binary, but also in contexts where this traditional opposition becomes self-questioning, parodic, opaque, diversified or unstable, as for instance in times of social transformation or crisis, in situations of intercultural encounter, through the cross-cutting effects of other differences (such as those of class, age, or ethnicity), or in

queer identities. The term “sex/gender system” has the further advantage of highlighting the embeddedness of gender within other systems of social and economic relationships, with which it interacts.

In seeking to establish gender theory’s supposed utopian core, we presuppose that any theoretical perspective critical of existing practices must be motivated by and committed to an alternative, even if this alternative is nowhere explicitly formulated. Beginning with the early feminists of the so-called “first wave”, gender theorists in all their variety have combined the analysis of existing sex/gender systems with the hope that these systems can be changed.¹⁰ Yet it is far from being the case that their efforts are underpinned by a shared vision. In fact, the alternatives to the sex/gender status quo that have been envisioned by different theorists and activists at different times are strikingly at odds with each other, as the following broad summary of key themes suggests: the reclaiming of a “true” gender in the face of inauthentic social roles; the overthrowing of constraining or oppressive gender norms; the utopia of gender equality; the utopia of authentically lived, or consciously cultivated, sexual difference;¹¹ and, provocatively, the negation of the future through a cultivated awareness of the void of death that undergirds all desire.¹² Even this schematic, incomplete summary of what we might call ‘utopias of gender’ (the last of which is decidedly anti-utopian) reveals serious tensions, even contradictions, a problem to which I return below.

Where might the Blochian dimension of transformative hope be located in all of this? The changes that have been effected in women’s rights and gender relations, from the weakening of social taboos such as those surrounding female virginity, unmarried motherhood and homosexuality, to concrete political gains such as improved labor rights and enfranchisement, cannot be solely attributed to the transformative power of hope. Nevertheless, we can usefully speak of a dynamic

interaction between vision, critique and changing social norms and cultural practices, one only partially, even grudgingly acknowledged by Bloch in his own remarks on the sex/gender system and the condition of women.

From “Truth” to “Construction”: Currents in Gender Theory

We have already seen the difficulty of attempting to harmonize the differences between various theories of, and approaches to, questions of gender through any reference to a supposedly shared vision or utopian horizon. Nevertheless, it can be claimed with some confidence that for all their differences, gender theorists are united by a concern with the tension between possibility and historical conditions: with what gender *has* been or *is*, and with what it *can* or *could* be. Critical analysis of the relationships, identities and practices that go to make up sex/gender systems makes it possible to envision changes to these systems. Evidence of the close relationship between critique and transformation is provided by the concrete advances in women’s rights, gay rights and reproductive freedoms that have been achieved in the last half-century, even when other, contingent factors are taken into account. Each of these social transformations effects systemic change, creating new, hitherto unforeseen conditions and challenges for individuals, for societies, and for gender theory. Changes achieved *within* a given order actually effect transformation *of* the order — the changes cannot be thought away, and no comparison with their absence is possible. Once women have entered large areas of the paid labor market, for example, the debate on women’s labor rights is complicated by the necessity to negotiate changes in childcare systems, to identify the social and cultural factors that contribute to the glass ceiling effect, and to pay heed to new relations of exploitation and vulnerability that arise through the increasing feminization of low-wage global migration.¹³

The formulation of possibilities for change, then, is utopian, not in the sense of an unreal or unrealistic fantasy,¹⁴ but rather in the Blochian sense: imaginable alternative futures provide the horizon for the critique of the now. Classic texts of feminism, from de Beauvoir to Chodorow and from Kate Millett to Christa Wolf, irrespective of the marked differences in their immediate context and in their approach to questions of political economy, share a utopian dimension insofar as they project possibilities, reaching beyond the rejected givens to imagine these givens overthrown,¹⁵ or, to use Bloch's words:

Bereits jede Schranke, wenn sie als solche gefühlt wird, ist zugleich überschritten. Denn schon das Anstoßen an ihr setzt eine über sie hinausgehende Bewegung voraus und enthält sie keimhaft. (*PH I*: 515)

Every barrier, when it is felt as such, is at the same time crossed. For just coming up against it presupposes a movement which goes beyond it and contains this in embryo. (*PH I*: 444)

Bloch is not primarily concerned with questions of gender and gender relations, yet he nevertheless acknowledges that the overcoming of barriers described here can also be observed in this area, as for example when he speaks of “the prospect of venturing beyond an undetermined sexual barrier” (*PH II*: 598) (“die Überschreitung einer nicht ausgemachten Geschlechtsschranke”, *PH II*: 698).

While the subject of history in Bloch's work may be gendered male — and there is ample evidence that this is the case¹⁶ — this maleness, like all gender categories, depends on difference, on its position relative to the term it excludes and against which it is defined. Where can this difference, this excluded term, be located

in Bloch's philosophy, and what is its function? How does Bloch deal with the two mythic poles of feminine and masculine, and the multitude of gendered and engendering subjectivities from which these are abstracted?

Bloch's thoughts on gender tend towards the utopia of authentically realized sexual difference, towards the emancipation of what he calls the "contents of gender" ("die Inhalte des Geschlechts"), or more specifically with respect to femininity "the utopian possibilities" of "female content" (*PH I*: 596) ("[die] utopische[n] Möglichkeiten [...] des weiblichen Inhalts", *PH I*: 695). The sense that the prevailing social order somehow distorts or fails to recognize the "truth" of gender implies a correlated utopian vision of people being able, and free, to live their genders and sexualities more authentically. Yet the utopia of "true" gender is not inherently emancipatory, as it can lead to prescriptive models of "natural" or "essential" gender difference. This accounts for the theoretical shift that has occurred in recent decades, away from an emphasis on authenticity to an interest in performativity, the implications of which I revisit below. While the authenticity or "truth of gender" trope may have been more or less superseded by the performativity trope in current theoretical discourse, it is most relevant to *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. Where Bloch writes of the feminine – "das Weibhafte" – and of the complementary binary of male and female idealized in the figure of the "Hohes Paar" (*PH I*: 381f.) or "High Pair" (*PH I*: 327f.), his debt to traditional stereotype, and also to archetype, is clear:

Es [das Weibhafte] ist Sanftes und Wildes, Zerstörendes und Erbarmendes, ist die Blume, die Hexe, die hochmütige Bronze und die tüchtige Seele des Geschäfts. Ist die Mänade und die waltende Demeter, ist die reife Juno, die kühle Artemis und die musische Minerva und was noch alles. Ist das musikalische Capriccioso

(Violinsolo in Straußens “Heldenleben”) und das Urbild des Lento, der Ruhe. Ist schließlich, mit einem Bogen, den kein Mann kennt, die Spannung Venus und Maria (*PH II*: 695-96).

It [female nature] is something gentle and wild, destructive and compassionate, it is the flower, the witch, the haughty bronze and the efficient life and soul of business. It is the maenad and the ruling Demeter, it is the mature Juno, the cool Artemis, the artistic Minerva and all sorts of other things. It is the musical capriccioso (the violin solo in Strauss’ ‘Heldenleben’) and the prototype of the lento, of calm. It is finally, with an arc which no man knows, the tension between Venus and Mary (*PH II*: 596).

To a feminist sensibility, this gesture of defining the feminine, even in such a way as to recognize its internal diversity, has a prescriptive aspect that makes it questionable. Nevertheless, this “truth of gender” trope has appealed powerfully to some feminists and other critics of the sexual status quo at various times; the argument that if social norms are preventing me from living my gender “truly” or authentically, then these norms must change to accommodate my “natural” or “innate” capacities and desires, can carry a certain strategic advantage when it is a question of achieving concrete changes, such as the adoption of more progressive legislation. An example of the strategic use of the “truth of gender” trope is offered by Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s utopia *Herland* (1915), which deploys the essentialist rhetoric of maternalist feminism. While Gilman’s text relies on a problematically idealized “true” femininity which is thoroughly aligned with fully realized motherhood, the utopia it constructs nevertheless serves to expose what the author regards as the “false” or degraded

femininity of Victorian patriarchy. As the male narrator surveys the radically different practices of the matriarchal society portrayed in the novel, his eyes are opened to the distinction between “true” and “false” gender:

These women, whose essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture, were strikingly deficient in what we call “femininity.” This led me very promptly to the conviction that those “feminine charms” we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity — developed to please us because they had to please us, and in no way essential to the real fulfilment of their great process.¹⁷

Here, the premise of a “true” femininity, realized in the utopian society, facilitates the critique of the gender norms actually in place in Gilman’s time.

The idea that certain gender categories can be strategically invoked for the purposes of critique and transformation returns in recent thinking on gender. The invocation or mobilization of what Gayatri Spivak has called “the necessary error of identity” proceeds in the knowledge that any signifier of identity can be destabilized or contested.¹⁸ Put more simply, anything claims we make about our genders can be called into question, but that does not mean there is nothing to be gained by making such claims. Nancy Chodorow’s study of gender roles in *The Reproduction of Mothering* shows this dynamic at work. Chodorow posits that relationality is a feature of feminine identity — a risky hypothesis, as it can be used to shore up the patriarchal practice of defining women in terms of their relationships with men. However, this claim about femininity, while it may be contested, rejected, distorted or even abused, does have heuristic value for an inquiry into gender relations and social structures.

The strength of Chodorow's by now classic analysis is that it does not hypostatize relationality as some inherent quality, or strength, of an ahistoric, universalizable "femininity," but rather relates it to a specific, socially constituted and historically located organization of the labor of reproduction and parenting.

The concern with difference in gender theory, then, has yielded fresh perspectives and challenged a facile universalist equality discourse that would negate the irreducibly different experiences of differently positioned subjects; but the move to place difference at the centre of concern carries its own risks, and the perception and interpretation of gender difference have their own troubled history. The feminine types evoked by Bloch's "tension between Venus and Mary", problematic even in the context of his broadly sympathetic argument, take on quite another cast when viewed from the perspective of a *fin de siècle* misogynist such as Otto Weininger, whose widely-read polemic *Geschlecht und Charakter* of 1903 located the 'essence of woman' precisely in the 'always and absolutely sexual' types of mother and whore.¹⁹ Moving forward to late twentieth-century *Differenzfeminismus*, we find quite a different deployment of essentialism, for example in the writing of Verena Stefan;²⁰ here we could not be further, in gender-political terms, from Weininger, but the risk of overemphasising bodily and sexual experience as constitutive of femininity arguably remains.²¹ The utopian "truth of gender" trope thus combines strategic advantage with risk; yet, if we look at the history of utopian thought in the modern era, we can conclude that this ambivalence is a common feature of all utopian projections. That ideals formulated in the service of a critique of an oppressive reality (let us not forget that even Weininger struck an anticipatory note with his theory of universal bisexuality) themselves have the potential to become static, hegemonic or oppressive is perhaps the key insight of dystopian thinking.²²

The converse of the “truth of gender” trope — the idea that there is no “true” or “authentic” gender, but rather that gender is constructed by social practices and cultural discourses — also contains a utopian core: if gender identities and gender relations are socially constructed, surely we can remake them to our liking? Taking the constructivist position to its logical extreme, I may reject the prescribed gender-role and gender-identification of my social context and fashion an alternative, or several alternatives, from the array of cultural practices available to me, changing and subverting these as I appropriate them. One thinks of Monique Wittig’s radicalization of de Beauvoir’s “one is not born a woman”; if woman is something one becomes rather than is, one can become something else instead. For Wittig, because “woman” only exists as a term that “stabilizes and consolidates a binary and oppositional relation to a man,”²³ a lesbian is not a woman. Such radical constructivism is balanced in poststructuralist gender theory by an emphasis on the conditions that define, determine and delimit the “I” itself. Lacan’s re-inflection of the term “subject”, away from notions of autonomy and self-identity, and towards the notion of *subjection* — the condition of being subjected to language, discourse and other systems and regimes — highlights the fact that the conditions under which the subject might fashion her own “identity” are not themselves of the subject’s choosing. Foucault similarly emphasizes processes of *subjectivation* through which the subject is positioned within a social apparatus.²⁴ The notion of the subjectless subject of poststructuralism, produced and traversed by discourse, may itself be a simplistic caricature, but at least it provides a provocative counterpart to the myth of the self-engendering subject, freely constructing her gender identity within a marketplace of options. Butler formulates the poststructuralist challenge to gender theory and practice as follows:

If there is no subject who decides on its gender, and if, on the contrary, gender is part of what decides the subject, how might one formulate a project that preserves gender practices as sites of critical agency?²⁵

The opposition of constructivism versus essentialism — itself a variation on the theme of nature/nurture — has lately given way to a more nuanced inquiry into the production of identity through the sedimentation of social and cultural practices, and into operations of difference, dissidence and desire.²⁶ Of lasting significance for the ways in which these questions are approached has been an increased emphasis on performativity, along with a heightened awareness of the constraints to which the “performance” of gender is subject:

The “performativity” of gender is far from the exercise of an unconstrained voluntarism. [...] rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity.²⁷

This dialectical model, which identifies the limitations placed *on* possibility while conversely acknowledging how these limitations are only thinkable in their tension *with* possibility, shows clear affinities to the dialogue between history and hope that is the larger theme of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*.

Gender and the “Humanization of Nature”

The constructivist position alluded to here may seem far from Bloch’s commitment to the unfolding of a “utopian content of gender”, yet there are some aspects of his thought to which this central theme of recent gender theory is highly relevant. What I would like to suggest is that Bloch’s conceptualization of the relationship between

humanity and nature is sufficiently complex to accommodate aspects of gender constructivism. The concept of nature is highly problematic for gender theorists. This is an understandable consequence of its frequent mobilization in anti-progressive discourse, but it continues to haunt gender theory nonetheless, not least at the edges of the debate about what constitutes sex and what gender.²⁸

Bloch's Marxist account of the human/nature relationship as a dialectical process which involves the "humanization of nature" ("Humanisierung der Natur") and the concomitant "naturalization of (the hu)man" ("Naturalisierung des Menschen") offers a way out of the problem that the concept of nature poses to gender theory. Bloch writes:

Das Mittel der ersten Menschwerdung war die Arbeit, der Boden der zweiten ist die klassenlose Gesellschaft, ihr Rahmen ist eine Kultur, deren Horizont von lauter Inhalten fundierter Hoffnung, als dem wichtigsten, dem positiven In-Möglichkeit-Sein, umzogen ist (*PH I*: 242).

The means by which man first became human was work, the basis of the second stage [of becoming human] is the classless society, its framework is a culture whose horizon is surrounded purely by the contents of founded hope, the most important, the positive being-in-possibility. (*PH I*: 210)

Bloch's view of the complex process whereby human labor both *initiates* and, as currently organized, *hinders* the unfolding of human potential is admittedly gender-blind; but his blind spot should not prevent us from seeing both the relevance of his account to questions of gender, and, conversely, the need for gender theory to

complete his account. The division of labor entails the construction of differences of gender, class and race, thus marking an incomplete ‘Menschwerdung’, a falling short of the task of becoming fully human. But this first ‘Menschwerdung’ paves the way to a second ‘Menschwerdung’ (Bloch, unlike his translators, does not speak in terms of ‘phases’, rather expressing these as two distinct processes). The second ‘Menschwerdung’, which completes the work of the first, is heralded in cultural expressions of hope and anticipation. The articulation of possibilities for change and self-fashioning, and the rejection and re-fashioning of the “badly existing” (*PH I*: 147) (“das schlecht Vorhandene”, *PH I*:167) are, for Bloch, among the most important tasks of culture.

Negotiations in the field of gender and gender relations can be understood on this model as a kind of “humanization of nature”: in gender, biological/anatomical difference is restated as a cultural/social question. While this restatement has traditionally taken the form of a hierarchical social code, involving prescription, normativity and constraint, it does not only, not necessarily take this form; it can also open the possibilities for resistance, improvisation and subversion discussed above. In other words, the very insight that gender is more or other than biology offers a way out of the trap of biology as destiny that so preoccupied earlier feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir.²⁹ The ‘nature’ of sexual dimorphism is ‘humanized’ in the practice of gender, but in the first instance this achieves only a partial, incomplete ‘Menschwerdung’ that remains subject to the social divisions of patriarchy, just as the ‘humanization’ achieved through labor remains partial and incomplete as long as it is subject to the social divisions of class. The second ‘Menschwerdung’ would reconcile ‘Mensch’ (both woman and man) with ‘Welt’ and *vice versa* (“jene Freiheit [...], worin sich weder der Mensch zur Welt noch aber auch die Welt zum Menschen verhalten als zu einem Fremden”, *PH I*: 241). Bloch’s “humanization of nature”

confronts the question of how labor might serve freedom through the establishment of radical democracy and the achievement of full humanity; therefore, it cannot be thought apart from the question of gender, as the divisions which it presupposes and seeks to overcome include the gendered division of labor, the estrangement of women from nature and themselves in patriarchy, and their exploitation by men. Bloch, caught in his gender-blind spot, may be quick to dismiss feminist activism as the privilege-grabbing antics of a bourgeois sisterhood whose case dissolves once the revolution has happened (see *PH* II: 687-698; translation II: 589-598). But the history of feminism might more appropriately be read as compelling evidence of the tenacious hope that the ‘badly existing’ is not the only possible world.

It is this very hope that relates feminist and gender theory to the central category of Bloch’s thought. *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* demonstrates that expressions of hope, while they are unthinkable apart from the prevailing social reality and bound by the constraints of this reality, testify to a continued resistance to, and transgression of, these constraints. Blochian hope encompasses subjective and objective, or “warm” and “cold” strands. These correspond to the imaginative anticipation and desire of the subject (“warm”), and the concrete response to the objective reality of socio-economic structures (“cold”). As with all conceptual pairs in Bloch’s thinking, the relationship between the “warm” and “cold” strands is dialectical:³⁰ “Both factors, the subjective and the objective, must rather be understood in their constant dialectical interaction, one which cannot be divided or isolated”. (*PH* I: 148) (“Beide Faktoren, der subjektive wie der objektive, müssen [...] in ihrer beständigen dialektischen Wechselwirkung begriffen werden, in einer unteilbaren, unisolierbaren”, *PH* 1: 168.) The mutually transformative interaction between the “warm” and “cold” strands of hope constitutes historical progression, the two strands together driving history forwards. We can conceptualize this process as follows: The subjective desire for change comes up

against the wall of social reality. This reality is what engenders desire to begin with: “From early on we are searching. All we do is cry out. Do not have what we want” (*PH* 1, 21) (“Von früh auf sucht man. Ist ganz und gar begehrllich, schreit. Hat nicht, was man will”, *PH* 1, 21) we read at the opening of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, in the section headed “We start out empty” (“Wir fangen leer an.”) Through the encounter between the desiring subject and external conditions, reality itself is altered, the subject’s desire acts upon it. An example is the relationship, discussed above, between vision, critique and transformation, as concretely manifested in specific gains such as women’s enfranchisement. Bloch’s insistence on the importance of hope in history allows us to write subjective desire, both individual and collective, back into our understanding of how such transformations are achieved. The “cold stream” of practical circumstances and material factors cannot be separated out from the “warm stream” of anticipatory consciousness, daydreams and desires.

Desire in History

The hope of Bloch’s philosophy, then, is a socially oriented form of desire. Bloch’s insistence on historicizing desire and the human drives and passions is fundamental to his critique of psychoanalysis. The fact that the opening sections of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* are devoted to a critical summary of Freud’s and Jung’s theories suggests how significant Bloch considered the then emerging discipline to be, and also how much he saw his own work on hope as a response, and corrective, to the psychoanalytic account of desire. While he is critical of Freud, he is nothing short of damning of Jung. (This is a primarily political aversion; in fact, archetypes play quite a significant role in Bloch’s thought, as his discussion of the “Hohes Paar” trope and the “utopian content of femininity”, quoted above, reveals. This is not to suggest that his reference to archetypes makes him a Jungian, but it does relativize somewhat the

stark opposition between the two thinkers suggested by the hostility towards Jung expressed in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*). Bloch's quarrel with psychoanalysis is that Freud and his colleagues seem to accept all too readily the reality in which they find themselves. Their focus, he argues, is on what is and has been, rather than what is not or not yet: "The unconscious of psychoanalysis is [...] never a Not-Yet-Conscious" (*PH* 1, 56) ("Das Unbewußte in der Psychoanalyse ist [...] *niemals ein Noch-Nicht-Bewußtes*", *PH* 1, 61). In Bloch's opinion, Freud, Adler and especially Jung have a tendency to hypostatize the unconscious and the drives, isolating them from social and economic conditions: "an idolized libido arises [...] [which] is never discussed as a variable of socio-economic conditions" (*PH* 1, 64) ("ein Götze Libido [...] [der] als Variable ökonomisch-gesellschaftlicher Bedingungen überhaupt nicht diskutiert [wird]," *PH* 1, 71). Bloch also finds the psychoanalytic model of the unconscious to be thoroughly de-historicized, and maintains that its proponents exhibit a willful blindness to history.³¹

The psychoanalytic significance allocated to (night-)dreams also leads, in Bloch's view, to the underestimation of the importance of daydreams, which play a hugely important role in his own anatomy of hope. In Bloch's view, the daydream, unlike the night-dream, has a collective dimension, an expansive quality, and a commitment to "Weltverbesserung" (world-improvement); furthermore, it is fundamentally communicative and communicable. This makes it congenial to his utopian philosophy in a way the night-dream cannot be.

Vorab das revolutionäre Interesse, mit der Kenntnis, wie schlecht die Welt ist, mit der Erkenntnis, wie gut sie als eine andere sein könnte, braucht den Wachraum der Weltverbesserung. (*PH* I: 107)

Above all revolutionary interest, with knowledge of how bad the world is, with acknowledgement of how good it could be if it were otherwise, needs the waking dream of world-improvement. (*PH I*: 92)

For Bloch, the daydream provides evidence of the integral relationship, discussed above, between critical analysis of existing conditions and visionary formulation of alternative possibilities. Yet however compelling Bloch's objections to psychoanalysis may be, one comes away from his discussion of Freud and Jung with the uneasy sense that he — Bloch — has excessive faith in desire. He is insistent that desire is a positive force, in and of itself, and that any problems generated for and by desire are a result of prevailing socio-economic conditions and will vanish when these are overcome. The psychoanalytic project to understand the workings of desire is, for Bloch, a questionable digression from the more urgent task of enabling the fulfilment of desire through the creation of appropriate social conditions.

Desire, hope, anticipation, orientation towards the future: the central Blochian concepts all involve a potentially precarious relationship to the now. Where the future is given the heavy burden of having to redeem an unsatisfactory present, this redemption risks being perpetually deferred, and the present lived in the shadow of a promised future. Bloch acknowledges this risk, for example in his discussion of the melancholy of fulfilment, or of the Trojan Helen. These figures of disappointment, in which the realization of desire falls short of its promise, underline the necessity of constant dialectical mediation between present and future, *Weg* and *Ziel*. The future-oriented attitude of militant optimism can avoid the risk of disappointment if sufficient attention is paid to the *latency* of the now, to that which it holds within itself to unfold. The analysis of possibility thus not only contributes to the envisioning of the future, it also heightens awareness of the anticipatory or latent aspects of the

present moment. It is to be noted that Bloch's discussion of latency and disappointment draws on a long tradition of feminizing utopia: in his figuring of fulfillment as sexual consummation, of disappointment as sexual disaffection, and of hope as sexual desire, the desiring subject is male, the desired object female (*PH* I: 204-12, and III: 1172; translation *PH* I: 178-94, and III: 997).³² Yet while gender theory can sharpen our awareness of Bloch's reliance on this kind of discourse, the traffic goes in both directions: key concerns of gender theory can be also illuminated by Blochian concepts. Perhaps the most important shared ground here is the commitment to radical democracy, to which we now turn.

The Utopia of Radical Democracy

A critical insight into the world we have (“das schlecht Vorhandene”), a collective desire for a different and better one (“Reich der Freiheit”), given endlessly varied expression in anticipatory cultural practices: this formula of Blochian utopianism begs some fundamental questions, not least: who is covered by “we”? How might the “Heimat” of “Freiheit” be attained? How might it even be recognized? These questions must also be asked of the utopian visions that – often tacitly – underpin theories of gender. Recent theoretical work on gender frequently takes these questions as its point of departure, reflecting on the difficulties of articulating a valid collective position and on the impossibility of formulating a definitive “task” or “goal.”³³ Nevertheless, gender theorists do at times come close to formulating such a task, at least in broad outline. For example, Butler names “defiance” and “legitimacy” as two central concerns of gender theory, as follows:

defiance of the established meanings and values attached to sexual practices and gender identities, along with a quest to legitimise that

which has been deemed illegitimate or beyond the pale. [...] The task is to refigure this necessary “outside” as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome.³⁴

In order to overcome the violence of exclusion, categories and practices “which had seemed fixed” need to be opened up.³⁵ The re-evaluation of seemingly fixed practices and norms, their “re-description” as Richard Rorty would term it,³⁶ is a crucial step towards the achievement of a more radically democratic sex/gender system. In the passage just quoted, where Butler does set forth a task of sorts for gender theory, her formulation makes striking use of the horizon metaphor so familiar to readers of Bloch. The utopian attitude is described in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* as a pioneering position at the boundaries of an advancing world (“an den Grenzen einer vorrückenden Welt”), one which continually exceeds each available horizon (“über den jeweils vorhandenen Horizont hinaus”, *PH I*: 142; translation *PH I*: 126). This horizon is both internal and external to the subject of history: man (*der Mensch*), Bloch writes, is “not an established being, but one which, together with his environment, constitutes a task” (*PH I*: 119) (“ein nicht festgestelltes Wesen, eines, das zusammen mit seiner Umwelt eine Aufgabe ist“, *PH I*: 135); elsewhere, Bloch writes “der Mensch ist nicht dicht,” (*PH I*: 225) evoking – in the porous, unfinished quality of ‘nicht dicht’ far more so than in the translators’ “man is not solid” (*PH I*: 195) – an open-ended process that sits well with the accounts of subject formation and self-construction offered by gender theorists. Gender, according to Butler, is “an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation.”³⁷ In a similar vein, Brigitte Weisshaupt has argued that the category of femininity, while a bearer of anthropological tradition, can also be inherently open (“‘Weiblichkeit’ ist tradierte

Anthropologie und zugleich offener anthropologischer Entwurf.”)³⁸ This insistence on openness in contemporary theories of gender identity bears comparison with Bloch’s account of human history, in which the limit of the given and the horizon of the possible are constantly in the process of being overcome.

Despite their clear differences in scope and emphasis, where Bloch’s philosophy and contemporary gender theory appear to coincide is in their shared commitment to a radical or real democracy, a democratic future which constitutes the horizon of their thought. Butler situates her own thinking within a “radical democratic theory,” and writes of the “democratic notion of futurity” that informs the work of gender critique.³⁹ By exposing the aporia of gender ‘identity’, and rethinking gender in terms of its instability, Butler aims towards “a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference” — the difference internal both to the subject, and to the sex/gender system.⁴⁰ Other feminist thinkers also invoke democracy in like manner: for instance, the reflections on a feminist theory of authority offered by Rebecca Hanrahan and Louise Antony are grounded in a commitment to “the development and maintenance of truly democratic institutions.”⁴¹ The use and understanding of the term “democratic” in such contexts provides a further key to the utopian dimension of recent gender theory. This is not to suggest that democracy be equated wholesale with utopia — an equation that, leaving aside its problematic political implications, would weaken the semantic specificity of both terms. Rather, the point is to identify the role played by democracy in Bloch’s utopian philosophy, and to acknowledge its similarity to the function of the democratic horizon of gender theory. It is worth quoting once more the familiar finale of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* in order to take a closer look at Bloch’s invocation of democracy there:

Die Wurzel der Geschichte aber ist der arbeitende, schaffende, die Gegebenheiten umbildende und überholende Mensch. Hat er sich erfaßt und das Seine ohne Entäußerung und Entfremdung *in realer Demokratie* begründet, so entsteht in der Welt etwas, das allen in die Kindheit scheint und worin noch niemand war: Heimat. (*PH* III: 1628, emphasis added)

But the root of history is the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, *in real democracy*, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland. (*PH* III: 1376)

The humanly habitable world towards which Bloch's thought never tires of pointing is a real democracy, beyond alienation. While many of Bloch's assumptions concerning the concrete appearance of this world, as derived from the 'real existing socialism' of the Soviet Union, have not stood the test of history, nevertheless his overall project of identifying those tendencies in human history and culture which anticipate real democracy, those areas in which this democracy shows itself in latent, unrealized yet realizable form, remains compelling. *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* underscores the importance of retaining a radical conception of democracy as the horizon of social critique. And, as we have seen, where social critique focuses on sex/gender systems, the democratic horizon is indispensable.

In their analysis of the interaction between the social and the subjective, gender theorists seek to locate sites of resistance to normativity. The utopian

dimension of gender theory is dynamic rather than static: the aim is not to cancel history and instate a new perpetual order, but rather to identify both emancipatory and oppressive tendencies within the history of gender relations, and to offer critical perspectives on oppression and constraint with a view to expanding the scope and effectiveness of emancipation. From this viewpoint, history is not only a narrative of suffering and struggle, it is also a resource; through active engagement with the past, including the past of gender and the genders of the past, its seeming fixity is ruptured, its utopian potential activated, its relation to the now rendered urgent.⁴² Which returns us to where we began: the task of the present, as articulated by Bloch, is to identify and activate the unredeemed content of the past in such a way as to shape a more habitable future. This creative, praxis-oriented conception of the relationship between hope and history is everywhere at work in gender theory. The critical analysis of what gender is and has been contributes to a fuller vision of possibility, a permanent expansion of the horizons within which sexed subjects can live (and live against) their genders.

Notes

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe Abtl. 7 Bd. I: Nachgelassene Fragmente Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977), 55.

² Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 695; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, vol. 2 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 596. Henceforth in the main text as *PH* volume number, page number.

³ Significant early voices in the dialogue between feminism and Marxism are, of course, Friedrich Engels, August Bebel and, later, Simone de Beauvoir. More recent feminist perspectives to engage with Marxism would include Gayle Rubin, “The traffic in women. Notes on the ‘political economy’ of sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210; see also Donna Landry and Gerald M. MacLean, *Materialist Feminisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), and the work of Silvia Federici.

⁴ Caitríona Ní Dhúill, “‘One loves the girl for what she is, the boy for what he promises to be.’ Gender discourse in Ernst Bloch’s *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*,” in *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on the Terrain of Utopian Thought and Practice*, ed. Michael Griffin and Tom Moylan (Oxford: Lang, 2007), 272-92.

⁵ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 21, 108, 191.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

⁸ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society*, 1.2 (1987): 140. See also Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.

⁹ The expression “hermeneutic of suspicion” derives primarily from Paul Ricoeur’s reading of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. See Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970). See also Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) 11-15, for a discussion of this concept in the context of gender theory and queer theory.

¹⁰ On the utopian content of early feminism, see Harriet Anderson, *Utopian Feminism. Women's Movements in fin-de-siècle Vienna* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992); Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century. Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003).

¹¹ For a vision of consciously cultivated sexual difference – predicated on a ‘culture in the feminine’ – see Luce Irigaray, *I Love To You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. by Alison Martin (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

¹² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹³ See *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003); also *Women, Migration and Citizenship: Making Local, National and Transnational Connections*, ed. by Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

¹⁴ On the wide semantic range of the term utopian, see Caitríona Ní Dhúill, *Sex in Imagined Spaces. Gender and Utopia from More to Bloch* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), chapter one.

¹⁵ See Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions. Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁶ See, for instance, Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, I:132. For a more detailed discussion of the ways in which Bloch's subject of history is gendered, see Ní Dhúill, “‘One loves’.”

¹⁷ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915) (New York: Signet Classics, 1992), 60.

¹⁸ Gayatri Spivak, quoted in Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 229.

¹⁹ Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter. Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung* (1903) (Munich: Mathes & Seitz, 1980).

²⁰ Verena Stefan, *Häutungen* (Munich: Frauenoffensive, 1976).

²¹ For a critical discussion of Stefan's essentialist feminism, see Bammer, *Partial Visions*, 67-79.

²² See Horst Glaser, *Utopische Inseln: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte und Theorie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1996); Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); Jost Hermand, *Orte. Irgendwo: Formen utopischen Denkens* (Königstein, Ts: Athenäum, 1981); Ní Dhúill, *Sex in Imagined Spaces*, chapter two.

²³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 112.

²⁴ See Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 189.

²⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, x.

²⁶ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991); Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*.

²⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 94-5.

²⁸ West and Zimmermann, "Doing Gender". See also Sherry Ortner's classic essay "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (1972) and her own later response to criticism of her earlier thesis, "So, Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston Mass.: Beacon, 1996), 21-42 and 173-180 respectively.

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Everyman, 1993).

³⁰ For a personal account of Bloch as a dialectical thinker, see Jean Améry, “Nachruf auf Ernst Bloch,” in Améry, *Der integrale Humanismus. Zwischen Philosophie und Literatur. Aufsätze und Kritiken eines Lesers 1966-1978* (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta 1985), 64-68.

³¹ “The bourgeois individual, seen by Freud in a bourgeois way, wears down his Dionysian horns on ‘reality’, as Freud calls his bourgeois environment (the commodity world and its ideology).” *PH* 1, 52 (“[D]er von Freud bürgerlich gesehen bürgerlich individuelle Mensch läuft sich an der ‘Realität’, wie Freud seine bürgerliche Umwelt nennt (der Warenwelt und ihrer Ideologie), die dionysischen Hörner ab,” *PH* 1, 57).

³² See Ní Dhúill, “‘One loves’.”

³³ A major focus of the debate among feminisms, particularly in the light of postcolonial theory, has been precisely this question of how to articulate a valid collective position in a way that does justice to the differences between subject positions. See Kum-Kum Bhavnani, ed., *Feminism and ‘Race’* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

³⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 52-3.

³⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 29, 89.

³⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989).

³⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 231.

³⁸ Brigitte Weissaupt, “Begriff und Metapher des Weiblichen, ” in *Wissen Macht Geschlecht. Philosophie und die Zukunft der “condition féminine,”* ed. Birgit Christensen et al. (Zurich: Chronos, 2002), 137.

³⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 191.

⁴⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 219.

⁴¹ Rebecca Hanrahan and Louise Antony, “Because I Said So: Toward a Feminist Theory of Authority,” *Hypatia*, 20.4 (2005): 63.

⁴² “Auch das historische Eingedenken sprengt die scheinbar festgewordene Vergangenheit, belebt ihr unabgegoltenes utopisches Potential und bezieht es in das Jetzt ein. Dadurch erscheint die Geschichte nicht ‘als ein festgefügtes Epos des Fortschritts’.” Anna Wolkowicz, “Bloch als (postmoderner?) Hermeneutiker der Utopie: zu einem Motiv in der Rezeption seines Denkens in den letzten zwanzig Jahren,” *Zeitgenössische Utopieentwürfe in Literatur und Gesellschaft. Zur Kontroverse seit den achtziger Jahren*, ed. Rolf Jucker (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 184. The inaccurately quoted phrase is from Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Munich: Wolff 1921), 19; the passage in fact reads “[...] begriffene Geschichte, gestellt unter die fortwirkenden revolutionären Begriffe, zur Legende getrieben und durcherleuchtet, [...] ist keineswegs [...] ein festes Epos des Fortschritts und der heilsökonomischen Vorsehung, sondern harte, gefährdetste Fahrt, ein Leiden, Wandern, Irren, Suchen nach der verborgenen Heimat,” emphasis added.