

A Dash of Pessimism? Ernst Bloch, Radical Disappointment and the Militant

Excavation of Hope

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Abstract

Ernst Bloch is a philosopher of hope, of this there can be no doubt. It is the fidelity to the proposition that a better world is possible that undergirds Bloch's work. Yet, the hopeful tenor of Bloch's philosophy, as I argue here, is accompanied by a second, more subterranean strand: a concern with the phenomenon of disappointment. Bloch has an interest in what happens after hope fails; those moments when the desire for utopia confronts the impossibility of its realisation. By considering Bloch's philosophical history of the defeat of the chiliastic movements of the medieval moment alongside his ontology of not-yet-being, the claim is made that disappointment has a constitutive role in the philosophy of hope, such that the dream of a new world is mediated through the history of its failures. Hope and disappointment are entangled, the power of the former indexed to the act of confronting the latter.

Keywords

Ernst Bloch, hope, disappointment, chiasm, ontology, teleology

Bloch and the midnight of the century

The figure of Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) presents us with a paradox. Bloch's life was profoundly marked by the catastrophes of the twentieth century, such that he was barely able to keep one step ahead of the tide of destruction unleashed at the midnight of the century. The Nazis, upon coming to power in 1933, had radical Jewish intellectuals such as Bloch firmly in their sights. Bloch was forced to flee the country, finding sanctuary in various European countries (including Switzerland, France, and Czechoslovakia) in the 1930s. Living in Prague in 1937, the impending German invasion of Czechoslovakia compelled Bloch to escape Europe altogether, the United States providing the locale for a long, lonely period of exile. After the war, Bloch, convinced that a '*glittering world* of communism' was rising in the Soviet Union and its satellites (to the point where he mounted a defence of the Moscow Trials in the 1930s), settled in East Germany.¹ Once again, however, Bloch failed to find a home, his increasingly critical stance towards the East German authorities rendering his position untenable. The erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 decided the issue: Bloch headed West, where he died in 1977. Yet, during these years of persecution, repression and exile, Bloch did something apparently incongruous: he developed a powerful and influential philosophy of hope. In the face of catastrophe – the death camps, the nuclear bomb, and the degeneration of socialism – Bloch focused on the question of utopia, working to demonstrate that a world of complete human fulfilment – free of violence, oppression, and exploitation – was a worthy, and indeed necessary, object of desire.

There is a sense that Bloch's work is engaged in a pugnacious polemic against the moment in which it was written; the relentless, even aggressive, emphasis on hope cutting against the dismal trajectory of Europe in the twentieth century.² Unlike his fellow emigres Adorno and Arendt, Bloch did not address the catastrophes of the twentieth century straightforwardly. Instead, it is as if Bloch is trying to pull the world away from disaster and towards utopia by

the sheer power of hope alone. However, the optimistic tenor of Bloch's work troubles. The absence of the bad feelings of disappointment, disillusionment and despair – the responses that are conventionally associated with the events of the twentieth century – prompts a sense that Blochian hope is hollow. A hope formed through averting the gaze from catastrophe rather than a thorough confrontation with it is unsatisfactory. Terry Eagleton makes this point particularly strongly in his caustic critique of Bloch's perennial hopefulness: '*The Principle of Hope* gives one little sense of immersing itself in the malignant impulses with which hope has to contend. [...] Any humanism that turns its eyes from such unsavory realities is bound to buy its hope on the cheap.'³ Robyn Marasco, in a commanding study of the place of despair in the tradition of critical theory, reinforces this point: 'Bloch would have directed this study toward the principle of hope, when it is my aim to throw light on the negative.'⁴

The problem here is not only that Bloch does not thematise hope's underside, but also that the basic tenets of his philosophy appear to *preclude* the failure of hope. Take, for example, the following statement from *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* [*The Principle of Hope*]: 'Expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become: this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole.'⁵ Bloch's ontologisation of hope, that it is grounded in the very matter of the world as such, would seem to make despair, pessimism and disappointment impossible phenomena; if the world is always directed towards the not-yet become, then hope is a viable disposition even in the grimmest moments of history. Hope appears to be undergirded by some force that reaches beyond concrete human action in particular historical contexts, such that there is a basic tendency in the world that secures the possibility of a new and better future. Beat Dietschy, comparing Bloch's conception of hope with Walter Benjamin's, emphasises that the catastrophes of the twentieth century did not appear to shake Bloch's commitment to the inherent hopefulness of the world: 'The sail of this philosophy of hope ultimately seems to

have become driven by the storm of progress.’⁶ For Bloch, the Angel of History does not look back to the disasters of the past piling up at its feet; instead, its head is turned towards the liberated future that stands on the horizon.⁷

Such attempts to ground hope, in which the desire for a better world is justified by reference ‘to something like a *providential order*’, are highly suspect.⁸ In the face of the disastrous experience of the twentieth century, affirming a basic determination for hope in the world is both unconvincing and obscene. If nothing else, the midnight of the century was, as the originator of the phrase Victor Serge emphasised in 1939, a moment to despair: ‘There is nothing left but our defeat, firmly accepted since it must be.’⁹ Furthermore, as Eagleton indicates above, a hope grounded in a basic tendency in the world itself is *not really hope*. That is to say, hope is a kind of wager, something that is staked on the *possibility* but not *inevitability* of the object of hope being realised. As such, we generally only hope when there is an element of uncertainty or doubt about whether our desires will be fulfilled. If what is needed is a hope that knows that ‘it is hope rather than historical fact, [...] hope without illusions’, then Blochian hope seems deficient.¹⁰ So, both historically and conceptually, it would appear that Bloch’s notion of hope is inadequate, failing to do justice to the defeats of the twentieth century and distorting hope into a kind of shallow optimism.

There is no doubt that a major tendency within Bloch’s work is towards an ontologically-grounded hope in which a better future is perpetually possible within the present. However, this idea, while never entirely dispelled, has been significantly complicated by scholarship on Bloch in the last few decades. There are two key bodies of literature that are of particular importance here. The first concerns Bloch’s notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, often translated as non-synchronicity or non-contemporaneity. As analysed by Beat Dietschy, Ansom Rabinbach, Oscar Negt, and Elke Uhl, the analysis of fascism developed by Bloch in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* [*Heritage of Our Times*] involves a complex account of temporality.¹¹ The hopeful tendencies

of the world do not progress in a linear and necessary fashion but, instead, becomes stalled and spectral, defeated dreams of past phases of class struggle coming back to haunt the present. Bloch's multi-layered temporal understanding, desires that have their origin in different historical moments coming together in the present, suggests a faltering historical movement in which hope confronts blockages and abysses. The emphasis on complexity in Bloch's temporality has found an echo in the literature on his speculative materialism. Wayne Hudson, Hans Heinz Holz, Michael Eckert and Cat Moir, despite their differences, emphasise the dynamism of Bloch's materialism.¹² On these accounts, Blochian ontology is defined by unfinishedness, such that the triumph of hope is figured as a distant and uncertain proposition, a fragile tendency that is registered in the fabric of the world but does not dominate or determine it. These two literatures, which offer a far more complex account of Bloch's philosophy than the cartoonish version painted by Eagleton, are key to the account I develop here, with the aforementioned scholars drawn on throughout the article.

However, there is a theme that has slipped outside these accounts: hope's opposite, whether that be disappointment, despair or pessimism. Bloch's account of these concepts has received very limited discussion, the few counterexamples being a short article by Gerhard Richter on Bloch's essay "Kann Hoffnung enttäuscht werden?" ["Can Hope Be Disappointed?"] and a section in Michael Pauen's book on pessimism in German philosophy.¹³ Despite this, there are a number of moments in Bloch's corpus where the failure of hope comes to the fore. We can return here to the entanglement of theory and biography, studying two texts in which the negative context of Bloch's life bubbles up through into the positive content of his philosophy. The first is a short article, simply but propitiously titled "Pessimismus" ["Pessimism"], written in March 1938 to mark both 'five years of successful horror' since the Nazi victory in 1933 and the 150th anniversary of the birth of Schopenhauer, that great philosopher of doom.¹⁴ The chance coming together of these two events piques Bloch to consider what an authentically

Marxist form of pessimism would look like. Rosa Luxemburg's great slogan "socialism or barbarism" is key here: "[...] capitalism can turn into socialism as well as into barbarism; and that the proletariat, the class of the promising future, can also be dragged into barbarism; that the entire dialectic of history may end up in vain."¹⁵ Now, Bloch is clear that this disposition should not dispel all optimism; the resistance to fascism requires some sense of the possibility of victory. Nevertheless, "socialism or barbarism" does suggest some finality: hope can die, the defeat might be terminal. Bloch's inaugural address at the University of Tübingen in 1961, entitled "'Kann Hoffnung enttäuscht werden?'," reinforces this sense of pessimism. Although the political context is not explicitly mentioned by Bloch, it is difficult to read the statement that hope is 'unconditionally disappointable' outside of Bloch's movement from East to West after the erection of the Berlin Wall.¹⁶ The great hope that Bloch had once held for the Soviet system was now extinguished; it was not the concrete manifestation of utopia that he had once held it to be. The failure of the Soviet project affirms the 'enduring indeterminacy' of hope; it is never guaranteed and always vulnerable to failure, hope 'holds *eo ipso* the condition of defeat precariously within itself.'¹⁷

What should we make of the 'dash of pessimism' that Bloch adds to his philosophical apparatus, this 'optimism with *Trauerflor*' – a black ribbon that signals mourning – that flashes forth at these times of crisis?¹⁸ One option would be to downplay this tendency, suggesting that the occasional pieces discussed above do not significantly alter the dominant tenor of Bloch's philosophy, which remains that of hopefulness. However, in this article, I explore an alternative possibility: disappointment is a constitutive dimension of Bloch's philosophy of hope. Two comments on this statement are appropriate. First, I should clarify why the term disappointment, as opposed to related but distinct terms such as despair or pessimism, is used.¹⁹ Disappointment is bound to hope in temporal terms; it refers not to the absence of hope as such but to what comes after hope has failed, one cannot be disappointed without a prior hope. The

same is not true of despair or pessimism, which do not imply the same temporal relationship; one can be in despair or possess a pessimistic disposition having never had a prior hope. I focus on disappointment in Bloch because his work offers particular insight into the question of what happens after hope dies. Second, to say that disappointment is constitutive to Bloch's philosophy implies that hope can fail for Bloch but also, and more profoundly, that disappointment is part of what it means to hope. If hope is predicated on possibility rather than inevitability, then this implies that all hope is subject to the potential for disappointment: the latter is the flipside of the former, the two are inextricably bound. As I elaborate here, Bloch's philosophy of hope cannot be fully understood without an account of disappointment. Hope contains a moment of disappointment, such that to claim that, ontologically speaking, the world is hope is also to claim that the world is disappointment.

To demonstrate this, I begin in the first section by considering a concrete case of disappointment in Bloch's work: the failure of the chiliastic movements of the late medieval period. The hope for a heavenly paradise on earth was disappointed. The rise of rationalism meant that grounding social hope in the movements of God in the world ceased to convince. However, Bloch's suggestion that the hopes of these old movements were revived in the 1920s and 1930s, by both Marxism on the left and Nazism on the right, prompts a concern: Is the failure of hope merely provisional, such that old hopes can always be revived? Can disappointment ever be terminal for Bloch? To address these questions, the second section turns to Bloch's ontology. By focussing on the notion of unfinished entelechy, I suggest that the incompleteness of the world – the fact that its destination has not yet been set, its essence remains to be defined – means that all hope is perpetually disappointable. Insofar that we do not know what the ultimate end of the world is, we cannot categorically say whether our hopes coincide with the as yet undefined hope of the world. Finally, by way of conclusion, the social and political value of disappointment is considered by means of a comparison between Bloch's

dialectic of hope and disappointment and Freud's famous essay "Trauer und Melancholie" ["Mourning and Melancholia"]. Blochian disappointment is a compound of mourning and melancholia. Like mourning, it allows for a failed hope to be left behind and for new hopes to be formed but, like melancholia, it marks the hoping subject indelibly, such that the old hope retains an untimely hold on the hopes to come.

The failure of chiliasm: epistemology, disappointment and the hopeful sciences

Bloch had an intense interest in the messianic; his philosophy is punctuated by an eschatological sense of the possibility for a new beginning for humanity. The messianic tone of Bloch's philosophy translated into a historical interest in the chiliastic peasant movements of the Middle Ages. This is most obvious in *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* [*Thomas Münzer as Theologian of the Revolution*], a 1921 text celebrating one of the outstanding intellectual and political leaders of the German peasant uprising of 1525. In one sense, Bloch's interest in the chiliastic movements of the past is obvious. Figures such as Münzer, with his combination of a desire for an apocalyptic break with the dominant tendencies of the world of the present and a militant commitment to the revolutionary activity of the popular classes, exemplifies the spirit that Bloch attempted to embody: the utopian segues seamlessly into practical politics and back again. Yet, even in Bloch's work on Münzer, completed before the defeats of the 1930s, there is a hint that Bloch's interest in chiliasm is related to the question of disappointment. For example, in the early pages, we read that history is not an 'epic of progress' but rather 'a hard, most dangerous journey' that is 'full of tragic disruption' and 'discontinuously loaded with the conscience of light.'²⁰ The chiliastic movements of the Middle Ages were precisely one of these moments of light, a time when a hope for a new world was infused into the politics of a mass movement, but it quickly fizzled out, leaving nothing behind but the memory of failure.

The tentative relationship established by Bloch between chiliasm and tragedy, the sense that history is nothing more than a ‘document of shattered hopes’, is particularly prominent in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, which was first published in 1935 and then revised in 1962 to include other related pieces written by Bloch in the 1930s.²¹ *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* is, in part, an attempt to understand the rise of Nazism in Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a process that Bloch thought was intimately connected with the disappointment of chiliastic hopes for a new world in the late medieval moment. At first glance, this is a strange assertion: What do the German Peasant Wars of the sixteenth century have to do with the triumph of racist exterminism in the twentieth century? The key here, for Bloch, is the Nazi slogan of the Third Reich. This slogan was not the product of the fascists – ‘the Nazi did not even invent the song with which he seduces’ – and instead has its origins in the chiliastic movements of the past: ‘The very term Third Reich has a long history, a genuinely revolutionary one. The Nazi was creative, so to speak, only in the embezzlement at all prices with which he employed revolutionary slogans to the opposite effect.’²² The revolutionary history of the term Third Reich was grounded in the chiliastic movements of the Middle Ages, where the notion of a third age – the Age of the Spirit that follows the Age of the Father and the Age of the Son, in the terms of the great medieval millenarian Joachim de Fiore – was synonymous with the realisation of the Kingdom of God, or a moment of complete fulfilment in which all material and spiritual needs are met. The ‘restored paradise’ of the third age was thus evoked by the Nazis, with its latent power mined to provide a utopian shell for destruction, violence and repression.²³

To understand why the Third Reich slogan could be utilised in this way, it is necessary to turn to the question of disappointment. Bloch is clear that the movements of the Middle Ages failed. This much is uncontroversial; it is clear that a utopia of fulfilment, the paradise dreamt of by Münzer and his followers, was not realised at the moment when it was first conceived.

However, chiliasm was also disappointed in a more profound sense. The following statement is of particular importance here:

Chiliasm [...] represented at that time the science of revolution [*die Wissenschaft von der Revolution*] so to speak, namely its objectivity and inevitability; the times were experienced as not just subjectively but also objectively ripe for revolution, the revolution stood 'at the hearing', the heavenly court-clock seemed to be striking its hour.²⁴

Given Bloch's Marxism, to call chiliasm a science is to give it a special status. As Friedrich Engels makes clear, Marxism posits itself as a science of revolution insofar that it identifies the tendencies within capitalism that make socialism possible.²⁵ Bloch's comment implies that chiliasm played a functionally equivalent theoretical role in medieval peasant movements as Marxism plays in modern labour movements. This theology offered reassurance that the conditions existed for the fulfilment of the dreams of the movement: heaven was not only otherworldly but could be realised on earth. Chiliasm functioned as an epistemological bridge between the subjective desires of the peasant revolutionaries and the objective processes of the world.

It is, however, precisely this bridging function of chiliasm that was undermined in the aftermath of the military and political defeat of the German peasants. The corrosive attacks on the epistemological framework of religion mounted by the intellectuals of the 'rationalistic bourgeoisie' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries severed the bridge that chiliasm had provided between hope and the world.²⁶ The hopeful science of chiliasm, as a means by which to produce knowledge about the world through which hope can be justified, ceased to be viable; the desire for a new world of complete fulfilment was no longer an objective hope and became a mere fantasy. At the moment when it was articulated, the chiliastic image of the future

appeared to be immanently contained within the present. To borrow John Caputo's language, millenarian hope was initially directed towards the future-present, or a 'future I can almost see and taste on the basis of the present'.²⁷ However, after the collapse of chiliasm as a hopeful science, a caesura opens within hope itself: the wishful contents of hope are divorced from its estimative dimension, there is no way of seeing a means of moving from the degraded present to the liberated future. The latter is thus other to the present, such that there is a feeling of being 'blocked on every side'.²⁸

Disappointment occurs for Bloch when there is an unbridgeable gap between the subject and object, meaning that the former is unable to envisage the hopeful possibilities in the latter. As such, the existence of hopeful tendencies in the world does not automatically translate into a form of hopeful knowledge: *ontology* does not equal *epistemology*. When a hopeful science such as chiliasm collapses, the hoper is unable to ground the original hope in the world as it exists. The chiliastic hopes of the medieval period confronted an ice age: it was no longer possible to sustain the hope for a restored paradise that prevailed in the Middle Ages. Yet, a problem can be posed at this point: if the hopes associated with chiliasm were disappointed at the end of the eighteenth century, what was left of these dreams for the Nazis to embezzle? Surely, such millenarian dreams were, by the early twentieth century, of purely antiquarian interest, a curiosity for historians, and had ceased to be an active political force? To address these questions, an account is needed of what happens in the aftermath of disappointment. The following statement from *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* is of particular importance here: 'Even disappointed hope wanders around agonizing, a ghost that has lost its way back to the cemetery and clings to refuted images.'²⁹ To describe disappointed hope as agonising implies that, though it lacks any systematic connection to the world as it exists, it retains an inertial force: the original power of the old hope survives for a time beyond the immediate experience of disappointment. At the same time, as the reference to the ghostly nature of disappointed hope

suggests, such untimely wanderings should not be mistaken for hope in the full sense. Disappointed hope lacks the epistemological moment through which subjective desire is aligned with a tendency within the world itself.

To clarify this, we can compare disappointed hope to the unexploded World War Two bombs that are periodically uncovered in European cities in the twenty-first century. Like an unexploded bomb, disappointed hope continues to be powerful: it has reservoirs of ‘undetonated energy’ that have the potential to transform the world.³⁰ Disappointment leaves a sense of ‘accumulated rage’, or a feeling of unfinished business: all the time that the imagined future fails to arrive, it is ‘not yet wholly discharged’ and retains a spectral hold on the world.³¹ The disappointment of hope ‘must not be allowed to conceal either the power of ancient dreams or the explosive force which – both for evil and for good – is still inherent in them’.³² At the same time, the explosiveness of the undischarged desires of the past is passive: it is unable to make an independent intervention in the world. Without the epistemological mediation between subject and object, action is impossible: ‘[...] the Hussite and Baptist movement would not have got off the ground at all if chiliasm had not kindled it ideologically; if it had not added to the revolution the apparently objective certainty on top of the subjective one.’³³ The desires associated with the chiliastic age thus require a new hopeful science, another means by which the objective can be added to the subjective. Without the intervention of another hopeful science, the hope remains disappointed; it is unable to inspire action in the world, it is simply an inchoate wish that clings on in the cracks and crevices of the present. It is no surprise, then, that Bloch associates the untimely desires of chiliasm with classes in German society, such as the peasantry, who exist at some distance from the dominant logic of capitalism; neither proletarian nor bourgeois, they lack independent political agency. The old chiliastic hopes, as Marx commented of the peasantry in capitalist society, ‘cannot represent themselves, they must be represented’.³⁴ Like the unexploded bomb, disappointed hope requires some intervention

from the outside for its energy to be discharged; it is only when the bomb is disturbed, either purposely or accidentally, that its full power can be appreciated.

The importance of chiliasm to the politics of the 1920s and 1930s can be understood in terms of this strange combination of *power* and *passivity*. Bloch understands the struggle between the Nazis and the Communists in this moment as, at least in part, an attempt to harness the energies of the old hopes of chiliasm. Both political movements worked to provide a new hopeful science to chiliasm, bringing it into the present and embedding it within the dominant logic of capitalist society; they aimed at the ‘correction and concretisation of past hope’.³⁵ There is a natural affinity between Marxism and chiliasm, such that the former takes up the disappointed hopes of the past and provides them with new epistemological foundations: ‘In the revolution lives the age-old dream of the kingdom [*Reich*] of freedom, of happiness, of peace; the science and practice of Marxism have finally put this dream on its feet [...].’³⁶ Chiliastic dreams could be made timely by being brought into contact with the hopeful science of Marxism, which offered an account of how, from the class struggles and economic developments in capitalist society, a restored paradise could be realised. The tragedy of the 1920s and 1930s, however, was the failure of these old hopes to coincide with the new grounds provided by Marxism: untimely hope and the new hopeful science passed each other by. For Bloch, this was due to a failure of German socialists to take a sufficiently active orientation towards the claiming of these untimely hopes. The ‘cold, schoolmasterish, and merely economic’ political orientation of socialist propaganda meant that the dreams of chiliasm were ignored.³⁷ This opened the way for the fascists to mobilise the undischarged content of the dream of a third age of complete liberation. These hopes were, once integrated into the Nazi political programme, made timely by being pressed into service of an increasingly desperate capitalist class and brought into alignment with modern racial ideology.³⁸

We can, of course, question Bloch's account of the rise of Nazism. My point here has not been to claim that it is a convincing or accurate account of the tragedies of the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, the movement that Bloch charts – from the dream for a restored paradise in the Middle Ages, to its failure in the age of the Enlightenment, and finally to the refunctioning of it in the twentieth century – suggests that Bloch allows for a form of disappointment in his account of the world, the key marker of which is the epistemological caesura between subjective desire and objective tendency. It is worth considering what Bloch *does not do* in his account of the disappointment of chiliasm. One strategy, adopted by thinkers from Gabriel Marcel to Johnathan Lear, is to appeal, in the face of disappointment and despair, to what Joseph J. Godfrey calls fundamental hope.³⁹ Such fundamental hope has neither object nor grounds; it is not directed at anything in particular and nor does it have a justificatory basis within the world. Rather, it is a bare form of hope staked on nothing more than the openness of the future; that is to say, something good might come up, even if we cannot yet anticipate what this good is or how it will come about. In other words, what is proposed is a hope immune to disappointment: no event or process can corrode fundamental hope. Bloch, however, does not appeal to fundamental hope; to call something hope requires that it has both an object and grounds. So, the object of hope in the case discussed here is the restored paradise and the ground is the workings of God in the world, with the two bridged by the hopeful science of chiliasm. Without all of these three elements, we cannot talk about hope but only the strange, spectral form of disappointed hope that became the object of political contention in the 1920s and 1930s.

Yet, Bloch's account of the mobilisation of the old hopes of chiliasm might suggest that he wants to retain something of fundamental hope, or a hope immune to disappointment. While hope can lose its grounds, the object of hope survives the experience of disappointment. Without the survival of the desire for a restored paradise amongst certain sections of the

German populace, there would have been nothing for the Nazis to embezzle nor Marxists to integrate into class struggle. There is a sense of commonality of hoping across temporal boundaries, such that old hopes can always be revived and, eventually, fulfilled. Disappointment, it seems, is a provisional and temporary phenomenon. It might appear, for Bloch, that chiliasm partakes in what Godfrey calls ultimate hope, or the ‘deepest hope’ that everything in the world is directed towards.⁴⁰ If chiliastic hope is a form of ultimate hope, then it cannot fail; its undetonated energy will be released in the fullness of time. For example, consider Bloch’s claim that old, disappointed hopes reach out beyond their moment of original articulation: ‘They are thus already contradictions of unfulfilled intentions *ab ovo*, ruptures with the past itself: not there and then, like the ruptures of contemporaneous contradictions, but throughout the whole of history as it were.’⁴¹ The suggestion here is that there is something transhistorical about the hope of chiliasm; it is simply one expression of the ultimate hope that undergirds the movement of the world as a whole. As such, we can pose the following questions: Can this kind of ultimate hope be disappointed? And, if not, does the immunity of hope take the sting out of Bloch’s account of the failure of chiliasm? Do we end up back where we started, with a hope that cannot fail?

Radical disappointment: not-yet-being, unfinished entelechy and the end of hope

To address these questions, we should turn to Bloch’s ontology. As indicated in the introduction, it is the ontological moment of Bloch’s philosophy that prompts the question of the immunity of hope to disappointment, or the sense that no catastrophe or defeat, however extreme or disastrous, can disrupt the hopefulness of the world. To begin to think about this issue, it should first be stressed that, for Bloch, there is no straightforward separation between the ontological foundations of the world and the movement of history. Being and history, nature and hope, are thoroughly entangled, such that there is an “arc” between utopia and matter’;

the desire for a new, fully liberated society is built into the fabric of the world.⁴² The aggressive drive to oneness in Bloch's philosophy, the sense that all realms of human life – from aesthetics to politics – ultimately collapse into the fundamental being of the world is what prompted Jürgen Habermas to dub Bloch the 'Marxist Schelling'; the desire to ground knowledge in matter itself involves a leap behind Kant to a pre-critical form of philosophy.⁴³ The fluidity of ontology and history in Bloch's system has an important consequence for the account of the relationship between hope and disappointment elaborated here, prompting the following question: What if it is not only hope but also disappointment that is registered in the matter of the world? In this section, I aim to demonstrate the thesis that disappointment is not a provisional moment in an overarching hopeful dialectic but instead a constitutive dimension of the world.

To this end, Bloch's claim that the world is an 'open system' should first be considered.⁴⁴ The world is open insofar that its final form has not yet been achieved; it is not exhausted or static, but instead holds within it the possibility for novel developments. The emphasis in Bloch's ontology is on that which is to come: 'The basic theme of philosophy which remains and is, in that it becomes, is the still unbecome, still unachieved homeland, as it develops outwards and upwards in the dialectical-materialistic struggle of the New with the old.'⁴⁵ Ontologically speaking, what is most essential about the world are the possibilities that have not been fulfilled; that which does not exist is more important than that which currently exists. Bloch's critique of the Platonic notion of *anamnesis* clarifies what is at stake here. *Anamnesis*, in Bloch's terms, is a form of re-remembering in which the future is anticipated in an embryonic fashion in the past, such that the 'process [is] already decided' before it has even begun and a 'fixed beginning' corresponds to a 'fixed end'.⁴⁶ The movement of history ceases to be an open one of development and instead is oriented around, and directed towards, the unpolluted moment with which the entire process begins; the 'preordered, finished beginning' gains

ontological supremacy.⁴⁷ In this sense, *anamnesis* is symptomatic of a closed system: the essential contours of the world are established from the very beginning, there is no room for novelty. By contrast, for Bloch, it is not the ‘Primum’ but the ‘Novum’ or ‘Never-Yet-Been-So’ that is dominant; the novel end rather than the recollected beginning orients the movement of history.⁴⁸

It may not be immediately clear what the significance of Bloch’s open system is for our consideration of disappointment. It would seem that Bloch is committed to a traditional version of teleology in which the whole world is bent on the achievement of a particular end. We might read Bloch’s open system as positioning us between potentiality and actuality. We are somewhere between the beginning and the end of history, positioned on an ongoing trajectory towards a determinate goal. Such a reading of Bloch’s ontology would imply that he asserts the possibility of an ultimate hope that cannot be disappointed. Insofar that hope partakes in the essence of the world, the end towards which everything else is tending, it can never be fully disappointed; there is something written into the ontology of the system that cannot fail. The collapse of chiliasm would then be a partial one; something for that time but not for all times insofar that the desire for paradise will eventually return and find new grounds. Yet, there are reasons to be cautious of such a reading. It is clear that teleology, understood in this sense, cuts against the radical openness of the system, contradicting the Blochian claim that ‘the circle of possibilities cannot be closed’.⁴⁹ In suggesting that there is an essence that is steadily being fulfilled in the world, an implicit end towards which things in general are directed, a shadowy form of *anamnesis* would sneak back into Bloch’s philosophy; the process has ended before it has even begun.

I would thus like to explore an alternative reading of Bloch’s ontology in which openness is maintained both at the level of *the process* and at the level of *the goal*: the world is incomplete not only because the end *has not yet been reached* but also because the end *has not yet been*

decided. As Peter Thompson argues, contingency in Bloch's system goes all the way down.⁵⁰ This pervasive contingency is best captured by Bloch's curious claim that the world is 'unfinished entelechy'.⁵¹ The Greek term entelechy, which was coined by Aristotle, refers to 'the internal possession of the end', or the idea that a being must have within itself a *telos* as a condition of possibility for its activity.⁵² For Bloch, what is unfinished in entelechy is the end of the process itself: '[...] the *truth* of teleology never consists of purposes already existing in finished form, but rather of those which are only just forming in active process, always arising anew within it and enriching themselves.'⁵³ The end of the process is constantly in gestation; the world poses a 'self-question about its essence'.⁵⁴ It is not only the case that the end is not *completed* but, more profoundly, the end of history has not even been *constituted*. The goal that stands at the end of the process is what is at stake in the present, such that the 'highest good is itself this goal which is not yet formed'.⁵⁵ The world stands before us not as a triumphalist march towards an already pre-defined goal but instead as something much more anxious: it is charged with the new, but the exact nature of the new – of the entelechy to come – remains clouded, something that can only be glimpsed in fragments.

Interpreting Bloch's ontology in this fashion suggests an alternative way of understanding the relationship between hope and disappointment.⁵⁶ The concept of ultimate hope, the deepest hope of the world, is disturbed and reformed by the notion of unfinished entelechy. Put in Adornian terms, we can say that there is a non-identity between any particular hope and the ultimate hope of the world; a particular hope does not go into ultimate hope without a remainder, there is something that is left eternally unfulfilled. The ontology of not-yet-being suggests that the essence of the world has not been set: there is a blank space where the destination of history should be. The pluralism of Bloch's understanding of the world as it has existed up to the present – that is to say, 'a broad, elastic, completely dynamic multiverse' without a definite essence – means that the ultimate hope of the world is something that is not

yet in existence.⁵⁷ Consequently, the wishful content of movements for hope in the contemporary world are *approximations* of ultimate hope; we cannot definitely say whether the content of a particular hope coincides with the content of the ultimate hope of the world, as the latter is not yet set. A strong conclusion follows from this: all hope in the world up to this point is perpetually disappointed. In the most obvious sense, it is liable to disappointment, such that hope is staked on ‘the indeterminacy of the historical process, of the world-process that, indeed, has not yet been defeated, but likewise has not yet won.’⁵⁸ More radically, hope is perpetually disappointed in terms of its wishful content. The indeterminacy of the world means that we cannot say whether the hope posited will ultimately be fulfilled; instead, it might be lost forever, jettisoned by the historical process and imprisoned in its original moment of articulation. If we do not know whether a particular hope corresponds with ultimate hope, then there is always the risk that it is no more than a provisional moment of desire that lacks a relationship with the ontological tendencies of the world itself.

This claim is best illustrated by returning to the relationship between chiliasm and Marxism discussed above. As we have seen, Bloch demonstrates a continuity between the hope of chiliasm and the hope of the proletariat; the former is revived by the latter. The ‘genuine utopia’ of Marxism ‘extracts lasting velleity and humane imagination from the fairytales of an ideal state, and particularly from the dreams of the Reich’.⁵⁹ Yet, the Marxist excavation of the dreams of the past is not a simple process of transposition. Historical hopes cannot be brought into the present without what Dietschy propitiously calls a ‘transforming appropriation’; that is, an act that simultaneously revives the old dream and alters it from within.⁶⁰ The relationship between hope and disappointment is thus a dialectic; the movement from hope to disappointment and back again metamorphosises the original hope, giving it a new form. As Bloch states: ‘The contents of modern socialism, of that in the process of being implemented, are no longer the theological ones, in class terms not even any longer the theologically

disguised ones of those days. Nevertheless, socialism may pay respect to the dreams of its youth, it sheds their illusion but it fulfils their promises.’⁶¹ This implies that the classless society is not entirely identical with the third age of chiasm, such that Marxism engages in a careful process of excavation, saving valuable fragments of the dreams of chiasm and spurning its fantasies. The caesura opened by the collapse of chiasm as a hopeful science is not entirely closed by its appropriation by modern socialism; there is something that is lost in disappointment that cannot be regained.

Bloch’s story of chiasm, at least in part, follows a tragic emplotment, in which the failure of the dreams of the third age in the Middle Ages has a moment of finality; the shedding of illusions leaves chiasm behind even as it brings its dreams up to the present. The new vehicle for hope, the socialist movement underpinned by Marxism, makes a new approximation on the ultimate hope of the world, putting the ‘proletarian mandate and classless goal’ in the place of the struggle of the peasantry and bringing heaven down to earth.⁶² The act of dialectical substitution, in which the player emerging onto the field of play brings with them something of the player who has just departed, does not, however, produce a complete image of the ultimate hope of the world: it is another approximate anticipation, a brief flash of hope that contains disappointment within it. Bloch’s Marxist pessimism is at least in part *a pessimism about Marxism*, affirming both its absolute necessity and potential fallibility: ‘This is Marxist pessimism, an extraordinarily serious and real pessimism, but for that reason it is one that understands how to act on its own [...]’⁶³ To act on its own means to comprehend the shifting sands of the world itself, where Marxism both intersects with the ultimate hope of the world and also departs from it in ways that cannot yet be entirely determined. Disappointment functions as a critical barrier, demarcating a space that is amenable to hope but also controlling the limits of this hope.

On this basis, we can see why it is appropriate to describe Bloch's notion of disappointment as radical. Blochian disappointment is radical because it goes to the root of things, working its way down through each element of hope to progressively deprive it of absolute confidence; neither the means nor the ends of hope are certain, each containing the possibility of perennial disappointment within them. Disappointment is something that is rooted in the world itself, a propensity that survives as long as hope does: 'The world-process has not yet achieved victory anywhere; but it just as surely has not yet been defeated anywhere. And humans on earth can alter course toward a destination that has not yet been decided – toward redemption or perdition.'⁶⁴ There is no end to disappointment in sight: no hoper has yet succeeded in capturing the ultimate hope of the world in its entirety. The caesura between subject and object is something that can be tentatively bridged – whether through chiasm in the medieval moment or Marxism in modernity – but all hopeful sciences reach certain limits beyond which they cannot go; traction is achieved for a fleeting moment, but eventually the baton of hope is passed on, its old content excavated for undetonated energy while its illusions are discarded, left in a perpetual state of disappointment.

What does disappointment do?

The unfinished nature of hope, as I have demonstrated, forges a place for disappointment in Bloch's philosophy. The Blochian perspective on the world is not only a positive one, in which everything is bent on liberation and fulfilment, but instead involves important negative moments, such that its hopefulness is constantly accompanied by disappointment. A concern might, however, be raised here: What is the value of such disappointment? The power of Bloch's perspective is partly dependent on his commitment to a form of 'militant optimism', or the constantly renewed desire to transform the world in the face of failure, catastrophe and destruction.⁶⁵ One of the reasons we hold onto Bloch is because, in emphasising the openness of the world, he reminds us that things can be otherwise, even in moments when everything

appears closed. Whatever the problems of Bloch's apparent inability to comprehend hope's underside, it does have an important upshot: the future is open, the world can change, we can hope anew. By contrast, it is not immediately apparent what is gained by emphasising the entanglement of hope and disappointment. In fact, the quasi-Schopenhauerian understanding of hope elaborated here, in which it is perpetually disappointed, could be seen to suggest that there is no point in hoping in the first place. What would it mean, then, for pessimism not to be 'paralysing' but rather 'scrutinising and cautious', reinforcing rather than undermining the possibility of realising the hope of the world?⁶⁶

To address this question, and bring the article to a close, I would like to turn to Sigmund Freud's famous essay "Trauer und Melancholie", which was first published in 1917. At first glance, this might seem like a strange approach. Bloch, in contrast to his fellow critical theorists Adorno and Marcuse, regarded psychoanalytic theory with great suspicion, emphasising that the daydreams of utopia are quite different from the nightdreams of the unconscious.⁶⁷ Yet, Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia offers an important clue regarding the value of Blochian disappointment. As is well known, both mourning and melancholia, on Freud's account, involve feelings of depression, dejection and sorrow prompted by the loss of a loved object. In mourning, the ego works through the experience of loss, eventually accepting the absence of the loved object and withdrawing all attachment from it. This process, though 'extraordinarily painful', results in a return to the pre-loss state, with Freud suggesting that 'when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again'.⁶⁸ By contrast, melancholia occurs when the ego is unable to escape from the hold of the lost object. In melancholia, 'the shadow of the object [falls] upon the ego' such that it is unable to accept the loss of the object and remains indefinitely in a state of pain.⁶⁹ Melancholia, as an 'elegiac formation', looks backwards; the lost object becomes part of the self, leaving an indelible mark on the ego.⁷⁰

What is distinctive about the Blochian conception of disappointment is that it represents a compound of mourning and melancholia, fulfilling two apparently opposing functions. On the one hand, like mourning, disappointment allows the hoper to move on after failure. The non-identity of any particular hope with the ultimate hope of the world has a liberating effect. The hoper is not condemned to the dogmatic repetition of past hopes that have clearly failed; we may cling to the refuted images of these hopes, but we are also aware that they may be supplanted – the Kingdom of God can become the classless society, the latter can become something else in the future, and so on. As such, disappointment is a precondition for new hope; it is only once the failure of the old hope is properly confronted that we are free to adopt new objects of desire. On the other hand, like melancholia, disappointment is oriented towards the past. As noted above, disappointment's relationship to hope is temporal in nature: disappointment implies a previous hope that has failed. Disappointment involves some continuing attachment to the hoped-for object; the stronger the original hope, the more profound the disappointment. This is what inspires the form of militant excavation described by Bloch, a 'dialectical-hermeneutic inheritance procedure' in which as much as possible from the old is retained in the new.⁷¹ In recuperating certain elements of the dream that failed into the new hope, 'gold-bearing rubble' can be rescued from the wreckage of history.⁷²

Disappointment is, for Bloch, an inherently dialectical feeling: it pulls in two directions simultaneously, at once prospective and retrospective. It pushes the subject to interrogate their hope, testing its wishful content against the world to determine whether it is viable. If this test fails, the subject is free for new action; an openness to fresh possibilities of hope is cultivated by the experience of disappointment. Yet, the retrospective disposition of disappointment disrupts this movement forward, constantly calling the subject back to the original hope. The latter can be relinquished but only after it has been thoroughly worked through to recuperate the wishful contents of the old utopia for the contemporary moment. Bloch navigates a path

between ‘hope without realism’, the idealist who refuses to relinquish the old hope even as its foundations collapse, and ‘realism without hope’, the cynic who is too quick to declare the ideals of the old dead.⁷³ Disappointment becomes a moment in the movement of the world, a kind of recycling centre for dreams and desires, saving what it can and rejecting the rest. The mediation of hope through disappointment marks the former with a sense of gloominess, but this is not incapacitating; instead, the coming together of mourning and melancholia piques new action. Each new approximation of the ultimate hope of the world carries with it the failures of the past, the moments when desire for a new world were thwarted. These act as a warning for the future, guarding against the attempt to identify one’s subjective desires with the ultimate hope of the world, but also as a means for renewal. The catastrophes of history must be confronted, the lessons of past failures thoroughly learnt, precisely to give hope purchase in the present.

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Notes

¹ Bloch, *Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe*, 60.

² I borrow the term pugnacious from Jack Zipes, who identifies Bloch as ‘the pugnacious philosopher of Marxist humanism and revolutionary utopianism’, emphasising his forceful and uncompromising mode of argumentation (*Ernst Bloch*, 25).

³ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 108.

⁴ Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, 18.

⁵ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 7

⁶ Dietschy, *Gebrochene Gegenwart*, 15. All translations from texts listed in German in the references are my own.

⁷ It should be noted that Dietschy, one of the best interpreters of Bloch’s concept of non-contemporaneity, significantly complicates this assertion as *Gebrochene Gegenwart* progresses, emphasising the multilinear and complex nature of Blochian temporality.

⁸ Smith, “Hope and Critical Theory,” 51 (emphasis in the original).

⁹ Serge, *Midnight in the Century*, 121.

¹⁰ Aronson, “Hope After Hope?” 490

¹¹ Dietschy, *Gebrochene Gegenwart*; Rabinbach, “Unclaimed Heritage”; Negt, “The Non-synchronous Heritage”; Uhl, “Ungleichzeitigkeit als geschichtsphilosophisches Problem.”

¹² Holz, *Logos spermatikos*; Eckert, *Transzendieren und immanente Transzendenz*; Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*; Moir, *Ernst Bloch’s Speculative Materialism*.

¹³ Richter, “Can Hope Be Disappointed?”; Pauen, *Pessimismus*, 168-172.

¹⁴ Bloch, *Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe*, 348.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 349.

¹⁶ Bloch, “Can Hope Be Disappointed?” 341.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 199; Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, 242.

¹⁹ It is worth noting here that disappointment, unlike despair and pessimism, which both have a long philosophical pedigree (from Hegel to Kierkegaard for despair, Schopenhauer to Horkheimer for pessimism), has been relatively little discussed. This may be because disappointment appears shallower than despair or pessimism. For example, I might feel disappointed if I find that I have eaten the last biscuit in the tin, but I am unlikely to feel despair. However, as I demonstrate here, disappointment in Blochian terms can be just as profound as despair or pessimism: the failure of hope can open a caesura between the disappointed subject and the world such that hope *tout court* appears impossible.

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- ²⁰ Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 19.
- ²¹ Vidal, "Hoffnung," 200.
- ²² Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 117.
- ²³ Ibid., 128.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 131.
- ²⁵ Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.
- ²⁶ Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 8.
- ²⁷ Caputo, "The Experience of God," 133.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 134-135.
- ²⁹ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 195.
- ³⁰ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xvi.
- ³¹ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 109, 112.
- ³² Ibid., 131.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 187.
- ³⁵ Schiller, "Jetztzeit und Entwicklung," 178.
- ³⁶ Bloch, *Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe*, 60
- ³⁷ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 118.
- ³⁸ See Rabinbach, "Unclaimed Heritage"; Vogt, "Nicht nur Erinnerung".
- ³⁹ Marcel, *Homo Viator*; Lear, *Radical Hope*; Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*.
- ⁴⁰ Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, 55.
- ⁴¹ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 109.
- ⁴² Holz, "Spekulativer Materialismus," 500.
- ⁴³ Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 61. For an extended defence of Bloch from Habermas's critique, see Moir, "In Defence of Speculative Materialism."
- ⁴⁴ Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, 170. On Bloch's open system, see Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, 79-88.
- ⁴⁵ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 9.
- ⁴⁶ Bloch, *Subjekt-Objekt*, 472.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 480.
- ⁴⁸ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 201.

⁴⁹ Holz, “Spekulativer Materialismus,” 507.

⁵⁰ Thompson, “Ernst Bloch and the Dialectics of Contingency.”

⁵¹ Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*. 174. For good commentaries of Bloch’s ontology that emphasise this notion of unfinished entelechy, see Eckert, *Transzendieren und immanente Transzendenz*, 32-38; Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, 136-138; Moir, *Ernst Bloch’s Speculative Materialism*, 62-67.

⁵² Blair, “The Meaning of “Energeia” and “Entelecheia” in Aristotle,” 116.

⁵³ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1374.

⁵⁴ Bloch, *Experimentum Mundi*, 248.

⁵⁵ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1324.

⁵⁶ This reading of Bloch does not resolve the tension between openness and closure in his ontology. As indicated at the end of the previous section, there are certainly moments when a more traditional understanding of teleology, in which the goal is already established, sneak into his work. For analyses of these tensions, see Dietschy, *Gebrochene Gegenwart*; Holz, “Spekulativer Materialismus”; Moir, *Ernst Bloch’s Speculative Materialism*.

⁵⁷ Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, 146.

⁵⁸ Bloch, “Can Hope Be Disappointed?”, 340.

⁵⁹ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 137.

⁶⁰ Dietschy, *Gebrochene Gegenwart*, 272. Gerard Raulet’s discussion of the process of dialectical secularisation, which refers to the process by which the utopian desires of religion are simultaneously negated and affirmed in Bloch’s philosophy, is also useful here (“Critique of Religion and Religion as Critique”). This dialectical movement is captured by Bloch’s statement that: ‘Atheism-with-concrete-Utopia is at one and the same time the annihilation of religion and the realization of its heretical hope, now set on human feet’ (*Atheism in Christianity*, 225).

⁶¹ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 118.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶³ Bloch, *Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe*, 349.

⁶⁴ Bloch, “Can Hope Be Disappointed?”, 345

⁶⁵ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 199.

⁶⁶ Bloch, *Experimentum Mundi*, 120.

⁶⁷ See Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 77-113.

⁶⁸ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 245.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁷⁰ Clewell, “Mourning Beyond Melancholia,” 64. Freud, in the original essay, deemed melancholia pathological insofar that it prevented the ego from completing the mourning process. However, as a number of later thinkers have emphasised, there is something of value in melancholia; its ‘militant refusal [...] to let go’ means that it functions to keep the memory of past failures alive (Eng and Han, “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia”, 365; see also Butler, “Thresholds of Melancholy”).

⁷¹ Uhl, “Ungleichzeitigkeit als geschichtsphilosophisches Problem,” 32.

⁷² Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, p. 116. The claim that utopia in the contemporary moment is entwined with the experience of catastrophe recalls Joseph Winters’s claim, articulated via a reading of the black literary and aesthetic tradition, that hope is always-already infused with melancholia (*Hope Draped in Black*). Without a constant return to the catastrophes of the African American historical experience, the desire for a better world is empty and inauthentic (see also Thaler, “Bleak Dreams, Not Nightmares”).

⁷³ Aronson, “Hope After Hope?” 489.

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