

CAT MOIR

## Biocentrism and Marxism: Bloch's Concept of Life and the *Spirit of Utopia*

This article argues that Ernst Bloch's (1885-1977) early philosophical development was profoundly influenced by a biocentric perspective that dominated European culture in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Biocentrism covers a range of artistic and intellectual currents united by a commitment to embodied life, the natural world, and the insights of the flourishing biological sciences. Despite the clear filiations between biocentrism and *völkisch* and fascist ideologies, as this article demonstrates, Bloch combined aspects of biocentrism with a Marxist viewpoint in an attempt to counter his political opponents—even as that meant occasionally moving in the same conceptual territory.

Keywords: Ernst Bloch, biocentrism, Marxism, fascism, biopolitics

If one concept can be said to have dominated German culture in the early decades of the twentieth century, it is “life”. Life was the slogan of the youth movement and of *Jugendstil* in the arts; it was the motivating idea behind the *Lebensreform* movement that sought to transform everything from clothing and food to education and leisure time; it was the organising principle of a *Lebensphilosophie* that emphasised the meaning and value of human existence and rejected the self-sufficiency of sterile, scholastic philosophy and scientific positivism.

Amid this atmosphere of life affirmation, as Herbert Schnädelbach has put it, the “difference between what was dead and what was living came to be *the* criterion of cultural criticism” in early twentieth-century Germany (Schnädelbach 1984, 129; emphasis added). Yet this orientation towards life also had a dark side. The “cult of life” tended towards an extreme naturalisation of the human being, with its proponents justifying social inequality and positing human diversity as being the result of innate, biological differences (Lebovic 2013, 155). At the same time, there was a certain irrationalism built into this “biocentric” worldview, as it has been called, which was exploited politically in the years following the First World War by conservative revolutionaries and fascists, who saw conspiracies inscribed into the mysterious forces they believed to be at work in nature itself (Botar and Wünsche 2016).

As dangerous as the fascists’ political exploitation of the discourse of life may have been, for Ernst Bloch writing in 1935, it was nevertheless part of the explanation for their success. While the National Socialists were attracting supporters by speaking to people’s hearts and minds, the Communists, as Bloch saw it, were losing their audience because they were talking only in numbers and figures. Yet if “the fraudulent flickering and frenzy of fascism appears only to serve big capital, which uses it to disperse or darken the view of less privileged social classes”, Bloch argued that the left could use the same tactics to mobilise people for more progressive ends (Bloch 1985, 16). To have any hope of combatting fascism, Bloch claimed, the left needed to wrest the discourse of life from its political enemies.

In this article, I argue that Bloch’s Marxism was underpinned by a conception of life that shared much in common with the thought of vocal critics of socialism, such as Ernst Haeckel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ernst Jünger, even as it differed in important respects. Tracing how Bloch mobilised the discourse of life in pursuit of a progressive utopian politics in the 1920s thus opens up new perspectives on both the history of Marxism and the broader intellectual context in which it was embedded in early twentieth-century Germany. The article offers a close con-

To have any hope of combatting fascism, Bloch claimed, the left needed to wrest the discourse of life from its political enemies.

textualised analysis of Bloch's essay entitled "The Lower Life" from the 1923 edition of his early work *Spirit of Utopia* (Bloch 2000). It aims to show how Bloch integrated a concept of life deeply indebted to the biocentric orientation of his age into his broader, utopian Marxist framework.

### Origins of Bloch's Biocentrism

Looking back on his Berlin childhood, to around 1900, Walter Benjamin reflected on the experience of his "generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar" and "now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (Benjamin 1999, 732). Benjamin's memoir captures a sense of alienation under conditions of industrialised modernity in which embodied life was experienced as trapped between the age-old cyclical rhythms of nature and the novel promise and threat of technology. If such alienation was a widespread feature of turn-of-the-century German urban life, it was only heightened by the cataclysm of the First World War, which saw the destructive forces of technology unleashed on a massive scale. Despite the enormous loss of life, the war inspired awe in technology's capabilities among some artists and intellectuals (see Herf 1998). Yet it also fuelled the critique of a modern industrial society perceived to be based on a logic of instrumental reason (see Horkheimer 2012). Against this background, a certain "biocentric" perspective, which had been developing in Germany since the mid-nineteenth century, was reinvigorated in the Weimar years.

In their work on biocentrism in cultural history, Oliver Botar and Isabel Wünsche identify biocentrism with a number of discourses in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Europe that shared a commitment to "the primacy of life and life processes [...] as well as an anti-anthropocentric worldview, and an implied or expressed environmentalism" (Botar and Wünsche 2016, 16). The term biocentrism thus covers a number of related intellectual and cultural phenomena—from neo-romanticism and neo-vitalism to *Lebensphilosophie*, philosophical anthropology, various forms of social and cultural evolutionism, and the continuation of a romantic naturalistic tendency within modernism. Despite their many specificities and differences, these intellectual currents were connected by three main things: the rejection of positivism, scientism, and physicalism in the study of life and society; the concomitant conviction

that knowledge should “serve life”, to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase; and a shared emphasis on the organic and corporeal (see Nietzsche 1997). Biocentrism was thus a broad cultural and intellectual phenomenon characterized, in Botar’s words, by a “revival of aspects of Romanticism, among them an intuitive, idealistic, Holistic, even metaphysical attitude towards the idea of ‘nature’, of the experience of unity of all life” (Botar and Wünsche 2016, 16). It was directed, as Schnädelbach argues, against “a civilization which had become intellectualistic and antilife, against a culture which was shackled by convention and hostile to life, and for a new sense of life” that emphasised authenticity, culture, and youth (Schnädelbach 1984, 139).

Yet if biocentrism was in part directed against a reductive natural scientific view of life, it is nevertheless not the case that the term “life” in this context did “not refer to anything primarily biological” (Schnädelbach, 1984, 139). The emergence of biology as an independent scientific discipline and its enormous advances during the nineteenth century had a major impact on the broader cultural understanding of “life” and, as Botar and Wünsche point out, biocentric perspectives were united by the perception of biology as “the paradigmatic science of the age” (Botar and Wünsche 2016, 16). This is particularly evident in the pervasive rise of evolutionary thinking, which gradually supplanted traditional religious explanations of life’s diversity and development. In the German context, the modern life sciences incorporated older, romantic ways of looking at nature. In the early years of the twentieth century, Darwinian ideas of the struggle for life and the survival of the fittest were combined with romantic and vitalist ideas in a biocentric worldview that spanned science, philosophy, and the arts.

Bloch’s philosophy displays many of the hallmarks of biocentrism as defined by Botar and Wünsche. In the early phase of his career, Bloch was deeply influenced by Nietzsche’s philosophy of the will to life, and by the naturalistic aesthetics of the expressionist movement (see Moir 2019). Both his language and his metaphysics, underpinned by the concept of a self-realising and limiting material nature, are pervaded by organicism (see Moir 2020). His political demand for the emancipation of nature has profoundly environmentalist implications, and although Bloch’s thinking could hardly be described as anti-anthropocentric, his utopian Marxist vision of the humanisation of nature is counterbalanced by the impulse to naturalise the human. The fundamental features of the biocentric worldview thus pervade Bloch’s thinking from the outset.

By the time Bloch published the first edition of *Spirit of Utopia* in 1918, the idea that philosophy should privilege not just the concept of

His political demand for the emancipation of nature has profoundly environmentalist implications, and although Bloch’s thinking could hardly be described as anti-anthropocentric, his utopian Marxist vision of the humanisation of nature is counterbalanced by the impulse to naturalise the human.

life, but life itself was firmly established. Writing in 1910, the *Lebensphilosoph* Wilhelm Dilthey had argued that “[l]ife is the foundation that must be philosophy’s starting point. It is that which is known from the inside, the horizon beyond which we cannot go” (Dilthey 1992). That *Spirit of Utopia* shares this *lebensphilosophische* orientation is clear from the book’s opening “Intention”, written already in 1918:

I am. We are. / That is enough. Now we have to begin. Life has been put into our hands. For itself it became empty already long ago. It pitches senselessly back and forth, but we stand firm, and so we want to be its initiative [Faust] and we want to be its ends [Ziel]. (Bloch 2020)

In the context of the end of the First World War, the subject position with which Bloch begins here speaks to those who remain after having survived the conflict. It is into their hands that life has been put after the senseless deaths of so many millions of others. At the same time, however, Bloch inaugurates a compositional technique here that will come to characterise almost all his texts, which begin from the existentialist standpoint of an embodied life—Dilthey’s horizon—understood as both individual and shared.

The orientation on embodied life is emphasised through the reference to “hands” and “fists”, and to “standing firm” amid a living flux that “pitches senselessly back and forth”. Yet the resonances of labour and resistance that these images also conjure up demonstrates that Bloch’s focus on life is intended to serve what Wayne Hudson has called his “activist metaphysics” (Hudson 1982, 86). Like many of his contemporaries in the wake of the First World War, Bloch was clearly calling for the spiritual and cultural renewal, not only of German society, but of all humanity. The oblique reference to Goethe’s *Faust*, who yearned to make the perfect moment last forever, already gives some indication of the cosmic dimensions of the task at hand, as Bloch saw it.<sup>1</sup> Yet his injunction “Now we have to begin” was above all a call to social and political action.

Though Bloch’s earlier writings, particularly his journalism during the First World War, had been marked by a stylistic flair (see Bloch

1 In Scene 7 of *Faust* Part I, Faust, having agreed with Mephistopheles that he will serve the Devil in hell after death in exchange for Mephistopheles granting his every wish on earth, Faust says that if he is pleased enough with anything Mephistopheles gives him in this life that he wishes to stay in that moment forever, he will say “Verweile doch, du bist so schön” (stay awhile, you are so beautiful), and die in that moment.

1985), here for the first time we get a sense of his fully-fledged modernist style. Botar and Wünsche point to biocentrism as “a constituent element of modernism” in literature and the arts, and there is no doubt that the two are combined in *Spirit of Utopia*, which is written in Bloch’s trademark expressionist idiom.

The expressionists’ use of art and literature to convey a sense of cosmic unity was a neo-romantic response to a Kantian epistemology that emphasised the *distinction* between human beings and the rest of nature. Kant’s insight that human beings can never know the world as it is in itself may have given rise to precisely the kind of metaphysical dualism that the German romantics challenged, but they did not abandon the insight (see Kant 1998).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, that is precisely why romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel claimed that conventional philosophy, which treated thought and language as capable of transparently representing the real, could never truly access the “highest” totality of humanity and nature (Schlegel 1958, 124). Philosophy, Schlegel argued, must become ironic in order to convey this sense of wholeness while nevertheless recognising the limited scope of knowledge within it. Nature’s generative—its poetic—power would always exceed our grasp, the romantics believed, but given that we too are part of an auto-poetic life process, the best way for philosophy to convey this unity was for it to become poetic. Bloch’s fusion of biocentrism and expressionist modernism thus, like expressionism itself, owed a significant debt to romanticism in both thematic and stylistic terms.

Against this background, it is clear that concept of life was at the heart of Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* from the very beginning, with its poetic mode of philosophising and its emphasis on embodied life as philosophy’s privileged starting point. Bloch takes up the concept more explicitly, however, in the short essay “The Lower Life” [*Das untere Leben*], which first appeared in the 1923 edition, in the book’s final section entitled “Karl Marx, Death, and the Apocalypse”. It is the only substantial addition to this final section, inserted before “The Socialist Idea” and incorporating a reformulated version of the short opening vignette that preceded the latter in the 1918 edition (see Bloch 1971). The essay thus occupies a significant position between the preceding chapter on “The Shape of the Inconstruable Question”, which ends with a meditation on the relationship between self-knowledge and the knowledge of nature, and Bloch’s reflections on socialism which follow.

---

2 Nietzsche of course pushed it even further with his perspectivalism, which he blends exemplarily with a critical biocentrism in the opening aphorism of “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (Nietzsche 1990).

The subtitle of the book's final section – “the ways in which the inward can become outward and the outward like the inward” – positions the discussion of embodied life between epistemology and social and political action (Bloch 2000, 231). Here, Bloch alludes to the romantic Novalis, for whom the “secret path” to knowledge of the cosmos led “inward” via the “depths of our spirit” (Novalis 1996, 103). If Bloch's conception of life was also one in which “eternity with its worlds / past and future” would be found “in us or nowhere”, once the principle of unity of all things has been discovered within, he believed it must be externalised, made real at the social level (Bloch 2000, 235). Bloch believed that Marx and Marxists neglected the inner, spiritual dimensions of life at their peril (Bloch 2000, 243-245). However, the purpose of looking inward was for him always in order to realise the dream of a thing that Marx claimed the world itself has long possessed (see Marx 1975a).

### The Romantic Conception of Life

Bloch shared with the “romantic conception of life” a holistic vision of nature in which humans and other living beings are part of a single continuum (Richards 2010). If with the emergence of human beings “what lies beneath us opens up for the first time”, Bloch nevertheless simultaneously insists that we “are also inside” that lower life (Bloch 2000, 233). His reflections on the somatism of our embodied existence – “This is how one moves, and we too fall asleep” (Bloch 2000, 233) – briefly call to mind the mechanical materialism of a Carl Vogt or a Ludwig Büchner, for whom all life, including consciousness and thought, could ultimately be explained in mechanical-physiological terms.<sup>3</sup> When Vogt, following the eighteenth-century French materialist Cabanis, wrote that thoughts are to the brain what urine is to the kidneys, he reduced thought to a mere somatic reflex of our material being (Vogt 1847, 206; Cabanis 1844, 137f).

Yet Bloch's conception of life is deeply anti-mechanistic. Instead, it is imbued with the kind of neo-vitalism that was central to the biocentric perspective. In the German-speaking world, Romantic scientists such as Goethe, Kiehmeyer, and Oken treated biological processes as teleologically determined by some sort of immaterial vital force driving the process. Bloch similarly describes evolution as an experimental process driven—or rather pulled—by an invisible natural force seeking to externalise something internal, oriented on an ultimate, but still unk-

3 For more on mechanical materialism, see Gregory 1977.

noun, goal. In this context, species formation takes place “[t]entatively, and led by a strange presentiment, not yet implanted”, by means of a “testing, retaining, rejecting, reusing, erring, reverting, succeeding” (Bloch 2000, 234). The “impulse” to push towards the “brightness”, and out of the darkness that “larves” beneath, implies a Schellingian subject of nature with which our own subjectivity is connected in what Bloch calls the “darkness of the lived moment” (Bloch 2000, 234)<sup>4</sup>.

Though Bloch does not cite Darwin directly here, this utopian theory of evolution clearly implies a critique of Darwin’s theory of evolution by adaptation. Though he concedes that individual creatures might “accommodate to the flora or move exactly to the rhythm that their structure, and the environment to which their structure is attuned, dictates”, Bloch sees more than merely adaptation at work in the “struggle for skeleton and brain” (Bloch 2000, 233-234). “[N]ot even hares”, he writes, “could arise through mere adaptation to the environment, to say nothing of lions, if it were merely impressions of the milieu that assembled, and not potential victors over them” (Bloch 2000, 233). In other words, Bloch saw evolution as much in terms of a triumph of the individual over external circumstances as of adaptation to those circumstances.

Bloch’s remarks here recall those of Nietzsche in his posthumous fragments when he writes that the “influence of ‘external circumstances’ is exaggerated by D[arwin] to a ridiculous extent: the essential thing in the vital process is precisely the tremendous shaping force which creates forms from within and which utilizes, exploits the ‘external circumstances’” (Nietzsche 1988, 7 [25])<sup>5</sup>. Bloch’s early Nietzscheanism shows through strongly in his discussion of life and evolution, with some interesting parallels and divergences. As Gregory Moore has argued, the “focal point of Nietzsche’s evolutionary thought” was “not the group, but rather the solitary organism” (Moore 2006, 519). For Nietzsche, though extraordinary individuals may evolve, they leave no trace on the type because their existence is precarious. As such, Nietzsche sees evolution at the species level as a race to the bottom.

Like many of his contemporaries, Nietzsche had never actually read Darwin, and his “Darwinism” is in fact a “blend of Darwinian rhetoric [...] with attitudes that are in reality a legacy of the pre-Darwinian view of nature” (Moore 2006, 519). The same can be said for Bloch, who never refers directly to Darwin in *Spirit of Utopia*, but, like Nietzsche,

---

4 For more on Schelling’s influence on Bloch’s ontology, see Moir 2018.

5 Hereinafter Journal of Nietzsche Studies citation style: KSA 12: 7[25].

is at some level committed to a pre-Darwinian theory of evolution, inherited from romantic nature philosophy, which understood it as a gradual, developmental unfolding. This idea of a naturally progressive evolution was easily allied with a teleological narrative of evolution that remained compatible with the religious creation story, by implying that human beings are the necessary outcome of the process.

Perhaps because of his stronger emphasis on the individual organism, Nietzsche remained closer to Darwinism in resisting a teleological explanation of human development. Nietzsche's view that humans did not "represent any significant advance over other species or organisms" stands in contrast to that of Bloch, for whom "every organism first became on the way to human form" (Moore 2006, 524; Bloch 2000, 233). To be sure, Bloch's description of humankind as the "characteristically uncompleted being" points to the Nietzschean idea of humans themselves as something that is to be "overcome", whether evolutionarily or through our own self-remaking (Bloch 2000, 234; Nietzsche 1967, 358). Nevertheless, Bloch's residual commitment to teleology in his account of evolution does distinguish him from the later Nietzsche who eventually seems to have disavowed it explicitly.

If Nietzsche eschewed teleology, however, he nevertheless remained committed to a broadly progressive account of evolution. Even the later Nietzsche envisaged the organic sphere in orthogenetic terms as still rising "to yet higher levels" (Nietzsche 1967, 358). Darwin, however, rejected the theory of orthogenesis, according to which evolution is inherently progressive, tending towards more complex forms. Instead, he argued that the outcome of development was not pre-given but was contingent upon the more probable reproduction of those specific individuals better adapted to their environment. Many of Darwin's German advocates, however, adopted his ideas without abandoning earlier, non-adaptive theories of evolution. Chief among them was Ernst Haeckel, who supported the idea of orthogenesis, seeing in evolution the progression towards ever more "perfect" forms (Haeckel 1924, 10; see also Haeckel 1868, 247ff).<sup>6</sup>

Haeckel was a scientist, but he integrated his scientific views into a monistic philosophical vision that saw the entire universe as "a single substance [...], which is both god and nature at once". From this perspective, "body and spirit (or matter and energy)" were "inseparably

6 For more on the significance of Heinrich Georg Bronn's translation of Darwin's term "preferred" as "completion" in the early German editions of the *Origin*, see Gliboff 2008, 138.

connected” (Haeckel 1908, 13). Although Haeckel was Darwin’s leading advocate in Germany, his monism nevertheless clearly went beyond anything Darwin had intended with his theory of evolution, as his commitment to orthogenesis demonstrates. Haeckel saw evidence for orthogenesis not only in the historical evolution of species, but also in embryonic development. According to his recapitulation theory, the ontogeny of an individual embryo—its development from fertilization through gestation to hatching or birth—undergoes various stages that represent moments of the evolutionary history (phylogeny) of the species. Controversial at the time, Haeckel’s recapitulation theory and the idea of orthogenesis that underpinned it were eventually debunked as Darwin’s theory was gradually incorporated from the 1890s onwards into what would become known as the modern synthesis of evolutionary and genetic theory (see Hopwood 2015).

Like Darwin, Haeckel is never mentioned in *Spirit of Utopia*, though Bloch would later comment critically on his work. Nevertheless, given Haeckel’s widespread fame and popularity in early twentieth-century Germany, including among the German Marxists, it seems likely that Bloch would already have been familiar with his work at this time.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the case, Bloch’s utopian theory of evolution as he articulates it in “The Lower Life” is clearly orthogenetic in character. When he writes that there is a “free, open, human-seeking quality in the progression from algae to fern to conifer to deciduous tree, in the migration from water into the air, or certainly in the strange delarvation of worm as reptile as bird as mammal”, Bloch is expressing the idea of teleological progress built into evolution (Bloch 2000, 233-234). Moreover, his remark that “We too were embryonic, became plants and animals”, not “as though we had only evolved out of plants and animals, but had not been there before, within” (Bloch 2000, 233) is strongly resonant of the idea of recapitulation.

Haeckel’s commitment to orthogenesis was connected to the fact that he framed human evolution within his broader monist ontology, which strongly stressed the unity of all life and the continuum between humans and other creatures. Like many of his contemporaries, Haeckel realised it was “entirely possible” to draw conclusions about human society, culture, and politics from a theory that effectively put human beings on a spectrum with all other living creatures. For Haeckel, the political framework that followed from the Darwinian theory of the

---

7 For more on the socialist and social democratic reception of Haeckel, see Weber 1991.

“survival of the fittest” could only be “an aristocratic one, by no means democratic, and least of all socialist” (Haeckel 1878, 73). Moreover, hierarchical ideas fed into right-wing discourse where they underpinned arguments for social Darwinism and racial pseudo-science.<sup>8</sup> If a threshold was to be sought between humans and animals, Haeckel argued it should be located “between the most highly developed cultural peoples and the roughest natural peoples, uniting the latter with animals” (Haeckel 1868, 655). As we can see, it was just a short step from Haeckel’s strong emphasis on the progressive development of human culture to arguing that some human “races” were more advanced than others, and to finding “biological” justifications for the “right of the strong” (Bayertz 1998, 244-246).

Bloch departs from Haeckelian thinking in drawing a much stronger distinction between human beings and other creatures. While non-human creatures remain “within the persistent constraints of the genus”, humans have “exceeded the fixed genus for so long among the animals” (Bloch 2000, 234). The way in which Bloch argues that human beings have broken out of the constraining force of the genus is via the emergence of a technologized labour capable of transforming the environment. It was under the “pain of destruction” of the biological genus that man “became the tool-making...animal”, Bloch argues (Bloch 2000, 234). His remark that the “pulse of life beats” truly only “after the leap toward the only creature that changes has succeeded through work above all” (Bloch 2000, 234) is double-edged: not only does it belie Bloch’s underlying “left Aristotelianism” with the implication that nature itself “works” in some sense; it also suggests that work qua labour is a crucial and distinguishing factor in human evolution.

## The Labour of Evolution

Friedrich Engels expressed this idea quite explicitly in his essay “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man”, first published in 1896 in *Die Neue Zeit* (Engels 1987). There, Engels argues that labour, which “begins with the making of tools”, was a key component of human evolution with our morphology, intellect, and specific form of sociality all stemming from the initial adaptation of bipedalism, which

8 For Haeckel’s influence on National Socialism, see Gasman 2017 (1971). For a contrasting view, see Richards, 2007.

9 For more on Bloch’s conception of the “Aristotelian Left”, see Loren Goldmann’s introduction to Bloch 2018.

Engels argues first freed of our hands for intensified tool use (Engels 1987, 457). Though the allusion to Engels, like those to Nietzsche, Darwin, and Haeckel, remains implicit here, the parallels between Bloch's view of the role of labour and technology in distinguishing the human being and Engels' are striking. While Engels acknowledges the existence of consciousness and planning behaviour in a range of animals, he nevertheless insists that the "further removed men are from animals, [...] the more their effect on nature assumes the character of premeditated, planned action directed towards definite preconceived ends" (Engels 1987, 459). So too for Bloch, human beings can no longer "get by with inborn reflexes", the "earlier signals" of the animals (Bloch 2000, 234). With time, mankind "becomes only more dependent on deliberate planning, in the building of nests and related activities" (Bloch 2000, 234). Like Bloch, Engels recognises that in nature, "nothing takes place in isolation", and that animals, too, work on their environment (Engels 1987, 459). However, while at one level this may be seen as a difference in degree, both Engels and Bloch assume that at a certain point, quantitative difference is dialectically transformed into qualitative difference, or difference in kind. As Bloch puts it, human beings "initiate with their new standpoint and viewpoint by starting to make history" through labour and the use of technology (Bloch 2000, 234).

If Bloch's teleological view of human evolution distinguished him from that of both Darwin and the later Nietzsche, he nevertheless drew the same conclusion as Nietzsche in the face of what the latter called the "horrible consequence" of evolutionary theory: namely, the death of God and the concomitant realisation that life's meaning and value are not pre-given (Nietzsche 1988, 19[132]). While Haeckel and other social Darwinists believed that the laws of nature could fill the vacuum left by the decline of traditional religion in providing values to live by, for Bloch as for Nietzsche, only human beings were capable of giving life meaning and value.

Bloch's remark in "The Lower Life" that human beings did not appear "fortuitously" (Bloch 2000, 233) is thus not only an avowal of an orthogenetic concept of evolution. When at the start of the essay Bloch repeats the idea, introduced in the "Intention", that it is into "our hands [that] life has been given", it is not just to the hands of a generation that survived war that he refers, but to human hands as such. We human beings have a task, according to Bloch, which is first and foremost social and political. Giving life true meaning involves the "dissolution of capitalist society", as Bloch puts it in the following essay on "The Socialist Idea" (Bloch 2000, 240). Yet the task that Bloch sees set for humans

here is more than merely the abolition of class society—as if that were not enough. It is nothing less than what the young Marx described as the naturalisation of man, and the humanisation of nature, in other words, the emancipation of nature itself (Bloch 2000, 240). All of our “lower relatives”, Bloch argues, from the “topsoil” and “plants” to the “worms, the tame as well as the wild creatures” all now “pass us by expectantly” waiting for us to free them too from their “constrained” life, to set free what is still “encircled” in them and has “not yet come out” through the process of evolution alone (Bloch 2000, 234). Of course, this is a task of messianic proportions, of which only the human being as the “latest and yet the firstborn creature”, the alpha and the omega, is capable according to Bloch (Bloch 2000, 234).

Bloch was always more willing than either Nietzsche or Marx to ascribe a positive role to religion in the creation of meaning and value. The later Bloch will make it clear that he saw the very idea of the death of God that was precipitated by the rise of evolutionism as already coded in the Christian idea of Christ’s forsakenness (see Bloch 2009). At this early stage, however, his recourse to religious motifs was part of his strategy to avert the resurgence of the German right. Already in 1923 Bloch argues that Marx had over-emphasised the economically “outward” at the expense of those “inward” factors that move people (Bloch 2000, 242-243). As fascism was growing, Bloch insisted on the need for the left to “make room for life” in order to stem its tide (Bloch 2000, 245).

What this meant in practice was occupying some of the same discursive terrain as one’s opponents, a controversial strategy then as now, but one that Bloch carries out convincingly in *Spirit of Utopia*. Bloch’s recourse to a romantic view of nature and his insistence on the importance of “heritage” intersects thematically with the political aesthetics of the *völkisch* movement, whose romantic anti-capitalism was primarily articulated via an anti-modern avowal of an imagined pastoral past. Bloch explicitly criticises this “romanticism of the latest reaction” as “coarse and backward” [Bloch 2000, 236]), but his writing also performs this idea.<sup>10</sup> “The Lower Life” begins “So am I. So are we still”, subtly varying the opening lines of the “Intention” (Bloch 2000, 233). This repetition that is not quite a repetition signals Bloch’s recognition that what takes place at another moment in time can never be exactly the same as what has gone before. By returning to the theme of “life” with which the book began, Bloch is suggesting that in order to change society in the after-

Bloch’s recourse to a romantic view of nature and his insistence on the importance of “heritage” intersects thematically with the political aesthetics of the *völkisch* movement, whose romantic anti-capitalism was primarily articulated via an anti-modern avowal of an imagined pastoral past.

10 For more on the ideology of the *völkisch* movement, see Puschner, Schmitz and Ulbricht 1999; Mosse 1964; Stern 1961.

math of bloody catastrophe, we must “absolutely go back”—back to nature, to what connects us with the rest of the natural world (Bloch 2000, 233). *Völkisch* thinkers, too, traded in the idea of restoring a former, putatively lost, more “natural” state, usually imagined in terms of the racial or cultural purity of the nation. When Bloch argues that whoever goes back must also necessarily “be there anew”, he acknowledges not only that the literal return is technically impossible, but also that the past as imagined by *völkisch* thinkers never really existed (Bloch 2000, 233).

Bloch’s combination of a romantic naturalist perspective with an affirmative attitude towards technology brings him into closer proximity, perhaps, with what Jeffrey Herf has called “reactionary modernism”, another conservative revolutionary movement alongside the *völkisch* nationalists, with strong ideological and genealogical ties to fascism (Herf 1998). Unlike the *völkisch* movement, reactionary modernists and fascists combined what Thomas Mann called an “affirmative stance toward progress” with “dreams of the past” in a “highly technological romanticism” (as cited in Herf 1998, 14). Thinkers such as Ernst Jünger embraced technology as stemming from the same natural drive that produces organic forms and called for a total fusion of the bio- and techno-spheres. Though not a Nazi, Jünger was a strident nationalist and veteran of the First World War, and like many during the Weimar years was in favour of technologized warfare between industrialised nations, which he saw in Darwinian terms as a cultural outgrowth of natural tendencies towards conflict and competition. Jünger’s biotechnical romanticism was partly based on the fact that, as he saw it, the “martial side of technology’s Janus face” could not be adequately grasped from the perspective of Enlightenment reason (Jünger 1932, 171-2).

When Bloch writes in “The Lower Life” that the “tool-making” behaviour so distinctive of human beings is “absolutely artificial, and yet right on the front”, he is undoubtedly moving in the same discursive territory as Jünger, right down to the martial metaphor (Bloch 2000, 234). Yet whereas Jünger saw the logic of technology as inherently anti-democratic, and the increasing technologisation of the lifeworld preferentially aligned with a hierarchical society and authoritarian form of government, Bloch envisaged the “inevitable emancipation by technology” in terms of the “abolition of poverty and the emancipation, compelled by the revolutionary proletariat, from all questions of economics” (Bloch 2000, 267). For Jünger, labour was “an expression of national life and the worker one of the parts of the nation” (cited in Herf 1998, 90). In this mechanistic vision of the social body, war transforms labour

Yet whereas Jünger saw the logic of technology as inherently anti-democratic, and the increasing technologisation of the lifeworld preferentially aligned with a hierarchical society and authoritarian form of government, Bloch envisaged the “inevitable emancipation by technology” in terms of the “abolition of poverty and the emancipation, compelled by the revolutionary proletariat, from all questions of economics”.

into a moral deed in the service of the nation. The vitalistic perspective Bloch develops in *Spirit of Utopia*, meanwhile, was directed against militarism and nationalism, which Bloch saw as anti-life in their atavistic tendencies. Unlike that of Jünger, Nietzsche, or Haeckel, Bloch's biocentrism was resolutely Marxist in orientation. Nevertheless, as "The Lower Life" makes clear, in order for Marxism to truly realize philosophy, Bloch believed it had to become a philosophy of and for life.

### Conclusion: Marxism and Biopolitics

The biocentric perspective that pervaded European thought and culture in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century was double-edged. The preeminent cultural and intellectual orientation on life fulfilled a subversive function that sought to resist alienation in the modern, administered world. From this perspective, biocentrism meant putting the plenitude and generativity of life itself at the service of artistic creation and social improvement, and, conversely, making knowledge and culture "serve" life, as Nietzsche put it. The remarkable advances of biology promised to put all the power of organic nature at human fingertips. Yet life cannot be understood without death, and biocentrism also influenced fascism and adjacent perspectives that prioritised a crude biological reductionism predicated in the social and political sphere on preserving the right of the strong.

In its ambiguity, biocentrism as a cultural and intellectual phenomenon can be seen to participate in the broader development of a biopolitical regime as described by Michel Foucault, the principle of which is to govern by fostering or disallowing life (Foucault 1990, 138). Giorgio Agamben has argued that fascism was the culmination of this principle, while others such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Roberto Esposito, and more recently Catherine Malabou have sought to harness a biocentric perspective for more egalitarian purposes (Agamben 1998; Hardt and Negri 2005; Esposito 2008 and 2011; Malabou 2016). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the ways in which Bloch's Marxist biopolitics intersects systematically with these approaches. Nevertheless, from a historical perspective his example demonstrates that, contemporaneous with the rise of fascism, there were attempts to put biocentrism in the service of an emancipatory politics.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bayertz, Kurt. 1998. *Darwinismus als Politik: Zur Genese des Sozialdarwinismus in Deutschland 1869-1900*. Stapfia 56, zugleich Kataloge des OÖ. Landesmuseums. *Neue Folge* Nr. 131: 229–288.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1999. *Selected Writings*, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934. Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press.
- Bessel, Richard. 1993. *Germany After the First World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bloch, Ernst. 1985. *Geist der Utopie: Erste Fassung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- . 1985. *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- . 1985. *Kampf nicht Krieg: politische Schriften, 1917-1919*. Ed. Martin Korol. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- . 2000. *Spirit of Utopia*. Translated by Anthony A. Nassar. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- . 2009. *Atheism in Christianity*. Translated by J. T. Swann. London: Verso.
- . 2018. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*. Translated by Loren Goldman and Peter Thompson. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Botar, Oliver A.I. and Isabel Wünsche, eds. 2016. *Biocentrism and Modernism*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cabanis, Pierre Jean Georges. 1844. *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme et lettres sur les causes premières*, 8 ed. Paris: J.-B. Baillière.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. 1992. *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften, (1910)*. In *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 8. Ed. Bernard Groethuysen. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Donahue, Neil, ed. 2005. *A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism*. Rochester: Camden House.
- Engels, Friedrich. 1987. "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man". In *Dialectics of Nature, Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 25, 452–465. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Espósito, Roberto. 2008. *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2011. *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*. Transla-

- ted by Zakiya Hanafi. London: Polity Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The History of Sexuality*, volume 2. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gasman, Daniel. 2017. *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism* (1971). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gliboff, Sander. 2008. *H. G. Bronn, Ernst Haeckel, and the Origins of German Darwinism: A Study in Translation and Transformation*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Gregory, Frederick. 1977. *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth-Century Germany*. Dordrecht/Boston: D. Reidel.
- Haeckel, Ernst. 1924. "Über die Entwicklungstheorie Darwins" (1863). In *Gemeinverständliche Werke*, Bd. V. Ed. H. Schmidt. Berlin: S K. Henschel: 3–32.
- . 1868. *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte. Gemeinverständliche wissenschaftliche Vorträge über die Entwicklungslehre im Allgemeinen und diejenigen von DARWIN, GOETHE und LAMARCK im Besonderen, über die Anwendung derselben auf den Ursprung des Menschen und andere damit zusammenhängende Grundfragen der Naturwissenschaft*. Berlin: G. Reimer.
- . 1878. *Freie Wissenschaft und freie Lehre: eine Entgegnung auf Rudolf Virchows Münchener Rede über "Die Freiheit der Wissenschaft im modernen Staat"*. E. Schweizerbart'sche Verlagshandlung.
- . 1908. *Die Welträthsel: Gemeinverständliche Studien über monistische Philosophie*. Leipzig: A. Kröner.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2005. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin.
- Harrington, Anne. 1996. *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Herf, Jeffrey. 1998. *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hopwood, Nick. 2015. *Haeckel's Embryos: Images, Evolution, and Fraud*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Horkheimer, Max. 2012. *The Critique of Instrumental Reason*. Translated by Matthew O'Connell. London/New York: Verso.
- Hudson, Wayne. 1982. *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*. London/Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.
- Jones, Larry Eugene. 2014. *The German Right in the Weimar Republic*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Jünger, Ernst. 1932. *Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt*. Stuttgart: Klett Cotta.

- Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lebovic, Nitzan. 2013. *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2016. "One Life Only: Biological Resistance, Political Resistance," *Critical Inquiry* 42(3): 429–438.
- Marx, Karl. 1975a. "Letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843." In *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 3: Karl Marx, March 1843–August 1844. London: Lawrence & Wishart: 141–145.
- . 1975b. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* In *Marx-Engels Collected Works* Volume 3: Karl Marx, March 1843–August 1844. London: Lawrence & Wishart: 229–348.
- Moir, Cat, 2018. "In Defence of Speculative Materialism," *Historical Materialism* 1: 1–33.
- . 2019. "The Birth of Materialism out of the Spirit of Expressionism," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 3 (289): 303–332.
- . 2020. *Ernst Bloch's Speculative Materialism: Ontology, Epistemology, Politics*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Moore, Gregory. 2006. "Nietzsche and Evolutionary Theory." In *A Companion to Nietzsche*, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson, 517–531. Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.
- Mosse, George L. 1964. *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins Of The Third Reich*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1988. *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*. In *Kritische Studienausgabe* Vol. 12, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 1967–88. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter:.
- . 1967. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1990. *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*. Translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale. New Jersey: Humanities Press International.
- . 1997. "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life". In *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazeale, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, 57-144. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Novalis. 1996. *Die Christenheit oder Europa und andere philosophische Schriften*. Cologne: Könenmann.
- Puschner, Uwe, Walter Schmitz and Justus H. Ulbricht (Eds.). 1999. *Handbuch zur "Völkischen Bewegung" 1871–1918*. Munich: Saur.
- Richards, Robert J. 2007. "Ernst Haeckel's Alleged Anti-Semitism and Contributions to Nazi Biology", *Biological Theory* 2(1): 97–103.

- . 2010. *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*. Chicago/London: Chicago University Press.
- Schlegel, Friedrich. 1958. *Kritische-Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, Vol. 11. Edited by Ernst Behler. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Schnädelbach, Herbert. 1984. *Philosophy in Germany, 1831-1933*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stern, Fritz. 1961. *The Politics Of Cultural Despair, A Study In The Rise Of The Germanic Ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Taylor, Seth. 1990. *Left-Wing Nietzscheans: The Politics of German Expressionism, 1910-1920*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.
- Vogt, Carl. 1847. *Physiologische Briefe für Gebildete aller Stände*. Stuttgart/Tübingen: Cotta.
- Weber, Thomas. 1991. "Zur Rezeption der Lehre Ernst Haeckels durch die deutsche Sozialdemokratie", *Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitung* 32: 23–44.
- Weir, Todd H., ed. 2012. *Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion, and the History of a Worldview*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

CAT MOIR – is Senior Lecturer in Germanic Studies at the University of Sydney. She is an intellectual historian specialising in nineteenth and twentieth-century European thought, with a special interest in critical theory and its antecedents in idealism, romanticism, materialism and psychoanalysis. Her first book, *Ernst Bloch's Speculative Materialism: Ontology, Epistemology, Politics* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), offers a new interpretation of Bloch's utopian materialism that challenges characterisations of him as an irrationalist and totalitarian thinker, and appraises the relevance of his thought for our time.

**Address:**

Room 518, Brennan McCallum (A18)  
School of Languages and Cultures  
The University of Sydney  
457Q+F5 Camperdown  
New South Wales, Australia  
**email:** cat.moir@sydney.edu.au

**Citation:** Moir, Cat. 2020. "Biocentrism and Marxism: Ernst Bloch's Concept of Life and the Spirit of Utopia". *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1(35): 15–34.

**DOI:**10.14746/prt2020.1.2

**Autor:** Cat Moir

**Tytuł:** Biocentryzm i marksizm: Blochowska koncepcja życia i *Duch Utopii*

**Abstrakt:** Tekst dowodzi, że wczesny rozwój filozoficzny Ernsta Blocha (1885-1997) był znacząco zainspirowany biocentryczną perspektywą, która zdominowała kulturę europejską na przełomie wieków. Pojęcie biocentryzmu obejmuje szeroki zakres zarówno artystycznych, jak i intelektualnych nurtów, które jednoczy zainteresowanie wcielonym życiem, światem naturalnym, a także myślą rozkwitających nauk biologicznych. Pomimo jasnego pokrewieństwa pomiędzy biocentryzmem i volkistycznymi, a także faszystowskimi ideologiami – jak pokazują – myśl Blocha łączy w sobie pewne aspekty biocentryzmu z marksistowską perspektywą, próbując zmierzyć się ze swoimi politycznymi oponentami, nawet jeśli czasami oznacza to poruszanie się po tym samym terytorium pojęciowym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ernst Bloch, biocentryzm, marksizm, faszyzm, biopolityka