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"Etwas Fehlt": Marxian Utopias in Bloch and Adorno

During a radio debate in 1964, Bloch and Adorno clashed over the status of Utopia in Marx's thinking. In particular, the disagreement concerned the possibilities (or, rather, limitations) of picturing – with Marx and beyond Marx – a condition in which all societal antagonisms have been reconciled. It is telling, then, that their conversation quickly came to turn on a surprising term: the Old Testament interdiction against making images of God. Given both authors' commitment to an ostensibly secular critique of capitalist modernity, the prominence of this figure, which is emblematic of the decades-long exchange between these authors, invites further questions. What, for instance, are the epistemic and aesthetic conditions under which Bloch and Adorno propose to *present* their Marxian Utopias? By considering these questions in light of issues arising from their debate, and applying it to their writings more generally, my paper aims to contribute to the on-going exploration of "Utopia" in German Critical Theory.

Keywords: Adorno, Bloch, Marx, Utopia, Critical Theory

Marxism, as a political project, has long been derided as "utopian" in the sense of its purported impracticality – an alleged incompatibility with the un- (or *anti*) egalitarian "nature" of human beings that has been presupposed in dominant strands of political theory since at least Locke and Hobbes. The evocation of "Marxian" (or Marx*ist*) *Utopias* in the writings of Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno is thus somewhat ironic. It is connected to these thinkers' eccentric efforts to mobilise, in their respective ways, the category of Utopia – that ideal non-place once memorably dreamt up by the venerable Renaissance humanist, Thomas More – for their formulation of a broadly Marxian critique of capitalist modernity; a critique, which – for its part – emerged under the sign of Karl Korsch, the young Georg Lukács, and other so-called "Western" Marxists (Elbe 2013). This tendency, it bears emphasising, was inspired both by the aftershocks of WWI (when the fronts between SPD and KPD hardened in the young Weimar Republic) and by the wish to break with the perceived orthodoxies of Soviet Marxism in the wake of its institutionalisation. To be sure, in its exalted manner of imagining a better world, this new wave of German Marxism arguably had more in common with the romantic anti-capitalism of the very young Lukács, or the expressionistic anarchism of Gustav Landauer, than with the views espoused by more traditional Marxists from the orbit of, e.g., the Second International (Löwy 1981). Nevertheless, although it is well known that, later on at least, Lukács and Bloch sympathised with more orthodox variants of Marxism, their broadly messianic disposition – their emphatic yearning for something *radically* different – remains a feature of their work throughout their lives. To this extent, it is worth reappraising the particular status of these Marxian Utopias as a feature of German Critical Theory's political imaginary.

The present paper, then, attempts to make a case for the currency of "Utopia" in on-going debates concerning the political actuality of Marxism, albeit in a qualified sense. In particular, it focuses on the manner in which this issue is treated in the decades-long conversation between Adorno and Bloch, which culminates in a 1964 broadcast debate, published under the Brechtian heading "Etwas fehlt" – *something's missing*. To this end, the paper will proceed in three steps: (1) An account of Bloch's characterisation of Utopia; (2) An account of Adorno's criticism of Bloch; (3) A reflection on the wider status of such "Marxian" Utopias in contemporary Critical Theory and beyond.

However, before proceeding to a fuller discussion of these points, it is worth noting that the effort to mobilise Utopia in the context of any self-consciously Marxian project is "eccentric" for at least two reasons:

firstly, because, as is well known, Marx himself was highly critical of the concept of Utopia, at least to the extent that he associated it with the work of what he and Engels called the "Utopian Socialists": principally Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen (Engels 1989). It is true, of course, that Marx and Engels share many aspects of these thinkers' diagnoses concerning the ills of industrial modernity, as is clear from works such as *The Holy Family* or *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*; however, they differ significantly in their views concerning the practical means by which societal transformation might occur. "Such fantastic pictures of future society" which are "painted," by the Utopian Socialists, "at a time when the proletariat is still in a very undeveloped state and has but a fantastic conception of its own position, correspond with the first instinctive yearning of that class for a general reconstruction of society" (Marx and Engels 1976, 515). In other words, "utopian socialism […] is praised for its original criticism of capitalism" but is in turn "patronised for its ineffectual solutions at a time when it was too young to know any better, and castigated for being effectively reactionary when its historical relevance had superseded" (Levitas 1990, 61). In particular, Marx and Engels objected to the "fantastic" dimension of the "pictures" in question, to "writing recipes for the cook-shops of the future" (Marx and Engels 1996, 17),[1] emphasising, instead, the need for a thoroughgoing criticism of the present. Their objections were directed not against the underlying impulse informing these thinker's social utopias, but rather (and paradoxically enough, in the present context) against the abstractness of their approach. Accordingly, in the 1960s, Bloch defends a utopian orientation for Marxism by arguing that:

> The mandate, or rather, the operative maxim, which was necessary for Marx so as not to say more about the utopian was merely polemical. It held sway for some period of time, short or long; it was directed against the abstract Utopians, who were his forerunners, and who believed that one only had to appeal to the conscience of the rich and they would begin to saw off the branch on which they were sitting. (Adorno and Bloch 1988, 8)[2]

In other words, "the commandment against a concrete expression of utopia tends to defame the utopian consciousness and to engulf it. What is really important, however, is the will *that* things be different" (Adorno and Bloch 1988, 11):[3] a criticism of the present for the sake

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1   Translation altered.
2   Translation altered.
3   My emphasis.

of a prospective concretisation of something that differs categorically from the status quo, instead of a regulative (and hence "abstract") ideal for reform.

Secondly, the "mobilisation" of Utopia (or, to put it in less martial terms, its *re-purposing*) is "eccentric," in the sense of "not centred." Insofar as its apparent linchpin – Marx*ism* – itself undergoes considerable recalibrations at the hands of Bloch, in particular, and (albeit with a different emphasis) Adorno as well; not least in its rejection of certain Marx*ist* conceptions of teleology. All that is to say: in the present context, both the epithet "Marxian" and the idea of "Utopia" require considerable qualification.

But how, then, are we to make sense of the "Marxian Utopias" that, I argue, lie at the hearts of both Bloch and Adorno's philosophies, albeit in different ways? What methodological devices do these authors draw on? And what do the differences in their approaches – mediated, as they are, by the quasi-theological undertone common to both authors – tell us about the status of specifically Marxian Utopias in their work, and (by extension) today?

1.

In the aforementioned broadcast debate with Adorno, Bloch provides a useful literary-historical point of departure for exploring the questions listed above. He argues as follows:

> At the very beginning Thomas More designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas. This designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time. Indeed, the Utopians, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transposed the wishland more into the future. In other words, there is a transformation of the topos from space into time. With Thomas More, the wishland was still complete, on a distant island; only *I* am not there. On the other hand, when it is transposed into the future, not only am I not there but rather utopia itself is not at one with itself. This island does not exist, but at the same time it is not simply nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is *not yet* in the sense of a possibility – that it could be there if we could only do something about it. (Adorno and Bloch 1988, 2)[4]

The central conceptual difficulty of figuring Utopia as, in a Kantian sense, a *place* in *time*, and, moreover – in a Marxian manner – as the

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4   Translation altered.

prospective, practical overcoming of real societal antagonisms in this locality (or shall we say at this moment that is "not yet"?) immediately becomes apparent: how can something – *etwas* – that, in Bloch's words, "does not exist" be anticipated by extant means, be they discursive or otherwise, without getting embroiled in contradiction? As we will find, for all their commonalities – and, certain spectacular personal animosities aside, there surely are many – Adorno and Bloch differ decisively on *this* point, let us call it, following Benjamin, a question of *Darstellung*:[5] the presentation, indeed the present-*ability* of Utopia (Weber 2010).

Some 35 years before the aforementioned conversation with Adorno, Bloch stages this difficulty in a passage from his celebrated collection of philosophical prose, *Traces*, in which he describes a conversation between a "Communist" and an unspecified "somebody"; "somebody who had time for the proletariat and had done much with them, in other words not a hostile or even unfriendly figure, but rather a mournful one" (Bloch 2006, 17). Speaking to "the Communist," this "somebody" says:

> A bourgeois was hidden in the *citoyen*; God save us from what's hidden in the comrade. He added: That's why you [the Communist, *ST*] are so careful too,

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5   The term *Darstellung* – presentation – is used advisedly here. It is expounded at length in the "Epistemo-Critical Preface" to Benjamin's ill-fated Habilitation on the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1928), a text that both Adorno and Bloch knew well. For its part, the text can be viewed as the summative statement of Benjamin's early philosophical project. Although *Darstellung* defies easy summary (in Benjamin's "Prologue" it is to do with the presentation of what he calls *ideas*), one way of approaching this term in the present context is as follows: Adorno (arguably more than Bloch) inherits from Benjamin a conviction – shared, in a different way, by Heidegger – that traditional modes of philosophising do a kind of violence to what might cautiously be called "phenomena": the lived stuff of experience. To the extent that philosophy does not do justice to "phenomena" qua knowledge, i.e. in the guise of conceptual thought, it is taken to be incapable of entering into a relation with *truth* (which is, after all, its stated aim). This is the case insofar as truth here means something like a non-coercive mode of relating to the world. Knowledge, on this reading, is problematic insofar as it subsumes particulars under universals and thus obfuscates their inimitability. The central problem of philosophy thus becomes how to recast its own established methods of apprehension and (re)presentation in a manner that resists this in-built tendency to coercion, since even the language in which it is articulated is seen as complicit with the problem it is trying to overcome. For Adorno, in particular, there is no positive set of terms *beyond* extant discursive conventions with which this aim could be achieved. Accordingly, the "truth" that philosophy is supposed to articulate cannot be positively figured but only negatively intimated. It is in this regard that the question of *Darstellung* becomes integral to any discussion of how Bloch, Benjamin or Adorno propose to "conceptualise" the question of Utopia (see Benjamin 2019).

and never want to say what this new world will look like. Instead you're precise like Prussians, all order of the day, but if someone wants to know what kind of society is supposed to break through here, you all become Austrian, postpone everything till tomorrow, even the day after. In 1789, when the third estate was revolutionary, one didn't need to be so formal, not such a cautious dreamer. (…) Now, as cautiously as you consider the future, you still dream constantly of the miracle in the working class; here you are utter believers. Here you don't pursue just the sober abolition of want and exploitation but paint the whole person, the new person, into the undecided setting (Bloch 2006, 17).

"Thus", Bloch tells us "spoke this irascible man, and was homeless" (Bloch 2006, 17). The allusion to the *topos*, indeed the *u-topos*, of the "home" is arresting here not least in light of Lukács's conception of modernity as a condition of "transcendental homelessness" (Lukács 1988, 61). What would it mean for the self-estranged "somebody" – a "mournful" figure with no name – to be at home, (*bei sich*), in a *place* in the *future* in the guise of a *new person*? And how can this condition be presented? A cryptic summary of what might be presumed to be Bloch's own position emerges between the lines of the Communist's response to "somebody": a "comrade could never disappoint," in the way that the *citoyen* is said to have done, "[f]or he *represents* nothing at all" (Bloch 2006, 18). The passage continues:

> In the triumph of the bourgeoisie we have what great words, even human values, mean when the base is not in order. Whereas the proletariat is the only class that does not want to be one; it does not and certainly could not claim to be particularly grand as such; every kind of *Proletkult* is false, and a bourgeois infection. It claims only that it will provide the key to the larder of humanity when it is abolished; yet it does not claim to carry, let alone to be, this larder. In its dehumanization it teaches, with radical precision, that there has never yet been human life, but always just economic life, which drives human beings about, making them false, making them slaves, but also exploiters. What comes then? At least no exploiter will jump out; indeed, if something worse happens, the table will at least have been cleared, and we will have at face value what free men and women are about, or not yet. Even without poverty we will be sufficiently unlike ourselves, or falsely conditioned; there will be misfortune, sorrow, fate enough, and no elixir against death. But what's in the comrade: that will truly be in him, and not in the relations that deform us even worse than we are. Thus spoke the Communist, shocking even his friend, and was finally not such a believer – for humanity is something that has yet to be discovered. (Bloch 2006, 18)

A number of central themes arise here: the dialectic of *citoyen* and *bourgeois*, for instance; or the allusion to an "elixir against death," which is taken up some decades later in the aforementioned conversation with Adorno by way of a discussion of Heidegger. More centrally, though, in the guise of the "Communist," Bloch makes a startling observation: that humankind, in its state of alienation – in its state of *homelessness* – is not yet itself. "That there has never yet been human life" presumably means that the conditions for its possible emergence (in the *house* of humanity?) must still be forged. Bloch attributes this constructive role to a reluctant proletariat, the class that "does not want to be one," and which (through revolutionary action?) will not so much usher in a golden age, as it will – instead – "clear the table," in Bloch's words, thus creating a situation in which current injustices will be uncovered and a path to the "discovery of humanity" will be laid. As Bloch will say many years later: "Marxism in its entirety, even when brought in its most illuminating form and anticipated in its entire realization, is only a condition for a life in freedom, life in happiness, life in possible fulfilment, life with content" (Adorno and Bloch 1988, 2).

Returning to the question as to how Bloch responds to the problem of presenting Utopia without betraying its vital impulse, it is worth noting what, as the title of his collection – *Traces* – already suggests, his *modus operandi* seems to entail: tracing the errant, overgrown paths to salvation in history, unearthing the tracks to a home for housing the homeless (or at least a plot to lay this home's foundation). This approach is captured in Bloch's concept of *Vorschein*, a mode of anticipatory consciousness, wherein art – in particular – exceeds, at the level of semblance (*Schein*), a present reality that is deemed lacking, thus gesturing forward (*vorwärts*) into a future that yet to be filled in. As Bloch puts it in *The Principle of Hope*: "Art is a laboratory and also a feast of implemented possibilities, together with the thoroughly experienced alternatives therein, whereby the implementation and the result occur in the manner of founded appearance, namely of worldly perfected pre-appearance [*Vor-Schein*]" (Bloch 1995, 216). To this extent, Gunzelin Schmid--Noerr's characterisation of Bloch's writings as a phenomenology of anticipatory consciousness is surely apt (Schmid-Noerr 2001): a vast array of images drawn from dreams, fairy tales, art, and the detritus of consumer culture, each containing the promise of a radical societal transformation that is holding out for the clearing of the aforementioned "table" in order to release its transformative energies; not the image of redeemed life *per se*, but the trace of its promise.

2.

In a 1965 essay, included in a collection honouring Bloch on the occasion of his 80th birthday, Adorno makes a similar point as the one outlined above with reference to another well-known Blochian image, namely: that of the pitcher (or pot, as the English translation would have it), from the opening passages of *Spirit of Utopia* (Bloch 2000, 3). As he writes:

> What Bloch is after is this: if one really knew what the pot in its thing-like language is saying and concealing at the same time, then one would know what ought to be known and what the discipline of civilizing thought, climaxing in the authority of Kant, has forbidden consciousness to ask. This secret would be the opposite of what has always been and always will be, the opposite of invariance: something that would finally be different. (Adorno 1992, 219)

"The opposite of what has always been and always will be," "something that would finally be different" can, I think, in this instance be taken to mean Utopia – "the larder of humanity" – to which the "proletariat" in *Spuren* is said to hold the "key" without actually embodying it. The situation of a revolutionary *tabula rasa*, on this reading, would presumably entail that the "thing-like language" of the pitcher (or pot) – its "secret," as it were – would become legible (or audible?) at least to the extent that this new manner of relating to the world of things would allow human beings to reconceive of their relations with each other. In this regard, a path toward a re-imagination of social relations, qua subject-object relations (distorted, as they are, under capitalism), will have been forged. This brings into focus a peculiarity of Bloch's thinking, namely: the presumed homology between a kind of epistemic operation, on the one hand (represented here, for better or worse, by Kant), and reified social relations, on the other. The metaphorical thrust appears to be that if only one knew "what the pot … is saying and concealing at the same time," then this would reveal "what would finally be different" – not least, presumably, at the level of the social world. Thus, arguably, social relations are coded here as – for want of a better term – subject--object relations. Utopia would be to know the pot non-violently, and (by extension) to interact with the world at large – including one's fellow humans – in a manner that is figured as utopian. At any rate Adorno has misgivings about Bloch's view: such thinking, "[t]hinking that follows narrative trails," he chides in a long form review of the 1959 re-edition of *Traces*, "is … like the apocryphal model of the adventure story about

the journey to a utopian goal, a model for which Bloch would like to create a radiant image," an "image of the house in which one would be at home, inside, no longer estranged" (Adorno 1992, 202). Like the pathfinder evoked by his favourite storyteller, Karl May, Bloch's "Communist" could thus be seen as treading on a secret trail that is obscured by deformed social relations, which – for their part – must be cleared through active intervention in the historical process.

Adorno's reference to a "house" is telling in this context, not only because of the Lukácsian figure of a "transcendental homelessness," alluded to earlier, or – for that matter – because the customary place of the pitcher may well be seen as being in a "home" of sorts; rather, the "home," here, designates a mode of pre-empting what it might mean to be *at* home in the world, to borrow a Heideggerian idiom. It too functions as a kind of *Vorschein*. This view resonates with some passages from Bloch's 1964 discussion with Adorno, which crystallise their disagreement, thus allowing us to pivot to a discussion of Adorno's own views concerning Utopia: "[i]n the Baroque Age," Bloch says, "most of all in the Viennese Baroque theatre, there were tremendous buildings that could never be inhabited because they were built out of cardboard and illusion, but they nevertheless made an appearance" (Bloch and Adorno 1988, 5). The interplay of "illusion" and "appearance" is telling here. "[Il]lusions," we are told, "have become necessary for life in a world completely devoid of a utopian consciousness and utopian presentiment" (Adorno and Bloch 1988, 5).[6] (As noted above, in Bloch's estimation Marx's condemnation of the "Utopian Socialists" was merely strategic and no longer tenable in his day – even if the proletariat explicitly "represents nothing." It is conceivable, then, that Bloch is suspicious of the kind of "tactical" caution in daring to dream, which he describes as a consequence of the 1789 revolution.) With respect to the category of an "illusion" that nonetheless "appears" (*schöner Schein*, along with its intimate relation to *Vorschein*), Adorno notes that "the narrator's victorious tone", which he ascribes to Bloch's *Traces* overall, "is inseparable from the substance of his", that is Bloch's, "philosophy, the rescuing of illusion" – the anticipation, in semblance, of being at home in the world figured as the "cardboard" buildings of Viennese Baroque theatre (Adorno 1992, 204). Bloch, Adorno argues, "can only grasp utopia as something illusionary" (Adorno 1992, 208).

Turning now to Adorno's position, it is worth acknowledging – for starters – that his backhanded compliment to Bloch could just as easily

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6   Translation altered.

be applied to his own work, for example to the confounding topography of "Finale," the famous closing aphorism from his *Minima Moralia* with its "standpoint of redemption" (Truskolaski 2017). This question of "topography," of a fully furnished *u-topic* "standpoint," is – according to Adorno – the "innermost antinomy" of Bloch's philosophy (Adorno 1992, 213). It marks the beating heart of his objection to Bloch, which – in turn – throws into relief (ostensibly, at least) his own "Marxian Utopia," if one can call it that. "A heretic when it comes to the dialectic, Bloch is not to be bought off with the materialist thesis that a classless society should not be depicted. With unwavering sensuousness," and against his stated intentions, "he delights in the image of that society" (Adorno 1992, 214).

It is between these lines that Adorno gives a good indication of his own position. He discusses Utopia with regards to the prospective overcoming of death, which he describes as "the absolute anti-utopia" (Adorno and Bloch 1998, 7).

> There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the elimination of death […]. Wherever […] the threshold of death is not at the same time considered, there can actually be no utopia. And it seems to me that this has very heavy consequences for the theory of knowledge about utopia – if I may put it crassly: one may not cast a picture of utopia in a positive manner. Every attempt to describe or portray utopia in a simple way, i.e., it will be like this, would be an attempt to avoid the antinomy of death and to speak about the elimination of death as if death did not exist. That is perhaps the most profound reason, the metaphysical reason, why one can actually talk about utopia only in a negative way, as is demonstrated in great philosophical works by Hegel and, even more emphatically, Marx […]. What is meant there is the prohibition of casting a picture of utopia actually for the sake of utopia, and that has a deep connection to the commandment, "Thou shalt not make a graven image!" (Adorno and Bloch 1988, 10)

What transpires in this passage is the manner in which Adorno seeks to mobilise "the prohibition of casting a picture," a theological motif, so as to bolster his view that Utopia can only be sought in the determinate negation of "everything that exists" (Marx 1975,142), to quote Marx's famous 1844 letter to Ruge. Setting aside Adorno's peculiar re--imagination of the driving force behind Hegel's thought (and, moreover, Marx's), there are at least two points worth noting in this regard. The first point is epistemic: for Adorno, Utopia at once *demands* a kind of discursive elaboration and *defies* it; and in the absence of a fully formu-

lated set of terms with which to articulate Utopia – a "Utopia of cogni-
tion" (Adorno 1973, 10)[7] – philosophy (indeed, *all* intellectual ende-
avour) can only hope to intimate "the wholly other" through a criticism
of the status quo (Horkheimer 1970, 81).[8] After all, if one were to
positively "portray utopia," then this would merely amount to an exten-
sion of what already exists. The second (related) point is, in a qualified
sense, materialistic: it is to do with Adorno's reference to "the antinomy
of death." "Knowledge of Utopia," in the emphatic sense intended by
Adorno, would include – in a sublated, determinately negated form –
death itself, not "as a scientific process" whereby "one crosses the thre-
shold between organic and inorganic life," but rather as the experience
of a negativity, which, for its part, throws into relief its opposite. That
is why "the idea of Utopia" both demands the abolition of death and
sustains it (Adorno and Bloch 1988, 9). Death is no *abstractum*. Know-
ledge of it is, as it were, bodily; and the positive side of this bodily
knowledge (which, in keeping with the image ban, Adorno cannot allow
himself to positively outline) is the obverse of the coercive mechanisms
of thought that he is criticising. One might think of it in terms of a mime-
tic faculty (Benjamin 1999, 720-722).

It exceeds the scope of the present paper to sketch in more detail the
outlines of this Adornian theory of knowledge (if, indeed, it is one) – the
part of his work that tacitly outlines a different mode of thinking. What
bears emphasising, though, is the sense in which his decision to invoke
the image ban at all is strange in the context of a conversation about
Marx, not least because of its ostensibly religious rooting. Nevertheless,
it occurs against the backdrop of a much longer tradition of citing this
figure that spans the history of modern German thought – from Kant
to Hegel and Hermann Cohen (Kant 2000, 156; Hegel 1975, 159;
Cohen 1995, 50-58). To be sure, the image ban's connection with
Marxism is no less eccentric than the invocation of Utopia, though
Adorno's entire *corpus* can, in a sense, be read as proposing this connec-
tion: a continuous quest for a truth that recedes whenever one attempts
firmly to grasp it, and which nonetheless demands a kind of *Darstellung*.
Without presuming to decide whether Adorno's objections to Bloch are
viable, or – for that matter – whether such a resolutely negative view of
Utopia is in any sense more practicable than the one outlined by the
"Communist" in Bloch's *Traces*, it does appear that this issue – the
matter of a thinking-in-images – marks a decisive difference in the way

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that these two thinkers conceptualise the *presentation* of the radically Other. (It is telling that Adorno's objections to Bloch closely recall those levelled in the mid-1930s against the other mentors from his youth, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer – insufficiently dialectical, too positive, etc.) Nevertheless, the question remains as to what this apparent disagreement reveals about the currency of Utopia for the formulation of any Marxian position today.

3.

Leaving behind these largely historical considerations, I propose to conclude on the following note: if Adorno and Bloch disagree on the present-ability of Utopia in the 1960s, and if they consider the strategic currency of portrayals of Utopia in a range of historical settings (from the French Revolution to the post-war Federal Republic), then perhaps one question that follows from reading these texts in the present is whether – and in what sense – the issue continues to play out in practice. I take it that any response to this question, however cursory, has to note at least two issues: the first is a modest point concerning the present state of Critical Theory in its codified, institutional form; the second is a largely speculative point concerning "our" political imaginaries, not least of all in places like Britain, where I happen to be writing these lines shortly before the UK's departure from the EU.

As for the former: it is hardly controversial to observe that the emphasis of Critical Theory (in the "official" sense) changed markedly following the deaths of prominent figures from the orbit of the Frankfurt School's so-called "first" generation – Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, etc. What followed, as many commentators have pointed out, was a foregrounding of questions that might be broadly collected under the heading of "normativity": the view that first-generation Critical Theory "cannot really justify what makes the ideals from its own culture chosen to be a reference point normatively defensible or desirable in the first place" (Honneth 2009, 50). These "ideals," which are characterised as unjustifiable, indefensible and undesirable, seem to me to mean precisely the orientation towards Utopia, which, as I have sought to show, is so characteristic of the "old" Frankfurt School. That is to say, more recent forms of Frankfurt School Critical Theory have abandoned the impetus to salvage a concept of Utopia in favour of seeking the well-reasoned grounds for a less exalted kind of politics. To be sure, this article is not the place to settle the matter. Nevertheless, it is perhaps worth noting – if only

anecdotally – that this controversy recently flared up again in the wake of an article by Raymond Geuss, published on the occasion of Jürgen Habermas's 90th birthday.[9] According to Geuss, "as early as the beginning of the 1970s, the unofficial successor of Adorno as head of the school, Jürgen Habermas […] began his project of rehabilitating a neo-Kantian version of liberalism" (as opposed to Marxism), ostensibly "by having recourse to a normatively highly charged concept of 'discourse'" (Geuss 2019). By "discourse," Geuss means "the idea that there are historically invariant structures that are capable of generating normativity endogenously" (Geuss 2019). These "structures" – necessary to "justify" the otherwise ill-founded project of Critical Theory – are, according to Geuss's reading of Habermas, supposed to be synonymous with "communication" (Geuss 2019). In short: the negative thrust of, say, Adorno's or Bloch's approach is ultimately groundless, making it – at best – utopian (in the sense of a wishful longing for something totally different), and – at worst – nihilistic (as in: unwilling to concede the possibility of reaching political consensus through reasoned debate). Habermas's appeal to communication is "liberal," according to Geuss, because it presumes "that free and uncontrolled discussion will always contribute to clarifying and resolving problematic situations, and that," moreover, "it is, at least 'in principle' always possible to attain consensus," which – we might add – advances the freedoms of those concerned (Geuss 2019). As Geuss points out, however,

> No amount of human exertion will suffice to permit us to establish within the domain of the natural phenomenon "communication" a safe-zone that is actually completely protected on all sides from the possible use of force, nor can we even realistically anticipate in some *utopian* sense a form of communication where relations of domination were completely suspended or cancelled out. Even if, as Habermas suggests, there is something in the "inherent logic" of speech that "implies" freedom from domination, any particular theory that tries to claim that it is insulated against history and the real existing forms of communication will eventually turn out to do nothing more than absolutize some contingent features of our present situation (Geuss 2019).

In other words, there is, according to Geuss, something ultimately implausible about supplanting the utopian (read: unjustifiable) orien-

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9   Geuss's article was followed by a series of responses from Seyla Benhabib, Martin Jay, James Gordon Finlayson, and others, to which Geuss – in turn – responded in another polemical piece.

tation of Critical Theory with an appeal to the "endogenous normativity" of *communication*. Indeed, communication, on this view, is itself "utopian," as he puts it. The point, though, is not, strictly speaking, a philosophical one. Rather, Geuss stakes a historical claim, namely: that the era which gave rise to Habermas's model of communicative action, and thus to the move away from first-generation Critical Theory, is itself drawing to a close. Habermas's theory, he suggests, is a direct outbirth of the politics of post-1945 reconstruction. However, he continues, in the face of a changing economic and political landscape (in Germany and beyond), the stakes have shifted: "When I talk with Brexiteers," for instance, "I" – that is, Geuss – "certainly do not assume that what Habermas calls the 'power of the better argument'," concerning – for instance – the threat of rampant public-sector privatisation in the UK after Brexit, "will be irresistible" (Geuss 2019). And, he goes on to say, "I am certainly very far from assuming that an indefinite discussion conducted under ideal circumstances would eventually free them" – i.e. Brexiteers – "from the" perceived "cognitive and moral distortions from which they" are said to "suffer," thus leading, in the end, "to a consensus between them and me. What makes situations like this difficult," Geuss asserts, "is that arguments are relatively ineffectual against" the now dominant "appeals to 'identity'," German, British or otherwise (Geuss 2019). Whatever one makes of Geuss's views on Brexit, his point is – I think – in keeping with a precept of first-generation Critical Theory: liberalism did not deliver on its promise, and now it has little to offer except for appeals to reasoned debate. Against this backdrop, my suggestion is as follows: if we take Geuss's (admittedly polemical) claims seriously, might it not be said that the "strategic" abstention from relying on fully-formed paradigms, such as a theory of communicative action, is prudent at a time when models of this sort have proven themselves to be ineffectual against an identity-driven push to the right? If so, then this view has ramifications beyond the context of Critical Theory.

This leads me to the second point announced above. To be sure, calls for far-reaching social change – Marxian or otherwise – have proliferated in the wake of the economic crises of 2008-9: from "Occupy Wall Street" to "Fridays for Future," and from the "Arab Spring" to Poland's "Black Friday" marches, to name only a few examples. In some instances, it might be argued, these protests proceeded principally from an urgent criticism of the current political moment; at other times, they seem have had a broader thrust. Amongst the latter, some appear in the guise of a *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* or, more modestly, as

the *Clear Bright Future* of post-capitalism; for instance, as ideas of a universal basic income enabled by technological advancements in the fields of robotics and artificial intelligence that are, for their part, placed in public ownership (Bastani 2019; Mason 2016). To be sure, these considerations are nothing if not timely. Nonetheless, they touch on problems concerning their own presentation, indeed, their own present--ability; problems – I would argue – that touch directly on the topic of Adorno's conversation with Bloch. Accordingly, one might ask whether it is not, in fact, advisable, in this context, to return to an older view of Critical Theory: to *temper* our utopian longing, rather than painting fully-fledged pictures of a land of plenty (or to suggest that we can simply talk things out), and to recall, instead, Marx's demand for a materialist critique of the present – neither the self-consciously normative Utopia of communication, nor that of robotic automation. This may not be a prescription valid for all times; but it is at least conceivable that – as in Marx's day – the problem of the political Left *today* is less to do with a failure of the imagination (in its precise derivation from the Latin *imago*), and more with a tendency to over-determine the future in terms that stem firmly from the present. It is in this sense that "the prohibition of casting a picture of utopia" might be seen as actually occurring "for the sake of utopia" (Adorno and Bloch 1988, 10).

This may not be a prescription valid for all times; but it is at least conceivable that – as in Marx's day – the problem of the political Left *today* is less to do with a failure of the imagination (in its precise derivation from the Latin *imago*), and more with a tendency to over-determine the future in terms that stem firmly from the present.

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Autor: Sebastian Truskolaski
Tytuł: „Etwas fehlt": Marksowskie utopie w myśli Blocha i Adorna
Abstrakt: Podczas debaty radiowej w 1964 Bloch i Adorno starli się w kwestii statusu utopii w myśli Marksa. Brak zgody dotyczył zwłaszcza możliwości (czy raczej granic) przedstawienia – z Marksem i przekraczając Marksa – stanu, w którym wszystkie antagonizmy społeczne zostaną pojednane. Znamienne, że ich rozmowa szybko zeszła na zaskakujący temat: starotestamentowy zakaz czynienia wizerunków Boga. Biorąc pod uwagę przywiązanie obu autorów do rzekomo świeckiej krytyki kapitalistycznej nowoczesności, znaczenie tej figury, charakterystyczne dla trwającej dziesięciolecia dyskusji między tymi dwoma autorami, prowokuje do dalszych pytań. Jakie, na przykład, są proponowane przez Blocha i Adorno epistemiczne i estetyczne warunki, mające umożliwić *przedstawienie* ich Marksowskich utopii? Poprzez rozważenie tych kwestii w świetle problemów wypływających ze wskazanej debaty

i zastosowanie ich do innych prac Blocha i Adorna chcę przyczynić się do trwającej eksploracji tematyki „utopii" w niemieckiej teorii krytycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Adorno, Bloch, Marks, Utopia, Teoria Krytyczna