LOREN GOLDMAN

Left Hegelian Variations: on the Matter of Revolution in Marx. Bloch and Althusser

Although Ernst Bloch is often understood as an abstract, aesthetic philosopher of hope, his doctrine of concrete utopia is underpinned by an idiosyncratic, vital materialist ontology. Against many of Bloch's critics, this article explains and defends his materialism as compatible with Marx's project. It first situates the early Marx's materialism in the generally Left Hegelian and more specifically Feuerbachian context of articulating a concrete account of human agency and social emancipation within a naturalistic framework. Two subsequent sections offer Bloch's "Left Aristotelian" approach to matter and the later Louis Althusser's "aleatory" materialism, respectively, as radical and tactically different variations on this theme.

Keywords: Ernst Bloch, Marx, Althusser, Feuerbach, Materialism, Left Hegelianism, Aleatory Materialism

Introduction[1]

Ernst Bloch's utopian orientation makes it easy to overlook the materialist ontology underwriting his philosophy. Indeed, Bloch's embrace of aesthetics and religion often led to accusations of idealist mystification, despite him taking Marx as his muse.[2] Bloch did not engage in detailed analyses of historical materialism, the typical site of materialist reflections in Marx's wake; instead, he offered a neo-Aristotelian vital materialism as the ontological basis for concrete utopia. While partly rooted in the subjective desire for a better world, utopia is also an objective affair for Bloch, tethered to the emergent possibilities of a world in the process of development: in his terms, the Not-Yet-Conscious of utopian aspiration has to be explained and managed in light of the Not-Yet-Existent inchoate in material reality (Bloch 1977, 13:212-242). Moreover, because utopia marks the transfiguration of history into a space of hitherto unknown genuine fulfilment, Bloch holds that matter must be able to generate novel forms out of itself. Although this ontological materialism might seem orthogonal to Marx's concerns about historical and social dynamics, Bloch considers it both consonant with Marx's insight into the world as a space of human production and necessary for Marx's aim of a world without alienation and exploitation.

Bloch's concept of matter thus serves to answer the question of how to make sense of novelty within a materialist framework. Its affinities to Marx's project run deeper still, moreover, insofar as both developed in response to the Left Hegelian problematic of explaining concrete human freedom in a world of mechanistic natural laws. For this reason, Bloch's account also echoes Marx's early "pre-Marxist" dissertation, *The*

2   Within Marxism, "utopian" can be a dirty word, applied to aspirations untethered to "scientific" social theory; see Engels 1977 and Marx and Engels 2000, 245-272. For criticisms of Bloch as mystified, from Max Scheler, Max Weber, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, resp., see Wiggershaus 1994, 65, 69; Bouretz 2010, 427; and Adorno and Horkheimer 1994, 415, 539.

Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature, a work that similarly turns to ancient philosophy in order to articulate modern emancipatory prospects.[3] To be sure, Bloch's vital concept of matter is idiosyncratic, and it is important to recognize that he means it not as the be all and end all of Marxist materialism; rather, it is meant as a contribution to what he called Marxism's "warm stream" of prophetic vision, in contrast to its "cold stream" of sober analysis.[4] Bloch's materialism aims not only to generally create space for human agency in a naturalist worldview, but to do so specifically as a complement to deterministic models of Marxism. Insofar as Bloch intends his philosophy of matter to enable the creation of new possible futures, it should be read as a conceptual cousin to the later Louis Althusser's "aleatory materialism," which likewise reconstructs ontology for the purpose of spurring revolutionary action.

The first section of this article presents the early Marx's ontological materialism along with the Left Hegelian background with which Marx was engaging. The second section introduces Bloch's "Left Aristotelian" understanding of matter, drawing primarily on *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* and *Das Materialismusproblem*. The third section turns to Althusser's aleatory materialism as presented in *Machiavelli and Us* and the essays in *Philosophy of the Encounter*. As we shall see, Bloch and Althusser offer related yet surprisingly and even radically different —variations on the Left Hegelian theme of modern concrete freedom.

Theme: Marx and Left Hegelian Ontology

Marxist materialism is mainly associated with historical materialism, the view that takes production to be the essential basis of human existence and sees class struggle within various economic modes of production as the motor of progress (See, e.g., Marx 2000, 424ff.; Shaw 1991). This analytical frame is often tethered to a greater set of ethical claims concerning the poverty of life in the capitalist mode of production and a teleological philosophy of history pointing towards the eventual realization of an equitable, classless society that facilitates human flourishing. Bloch, however, had relatively little interest in the complexities

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3   Not because of a direct influence, however, for Bloch's "Epicurus and Karl Marx," a pithy discussion of Marx's *Dissertation*, appeared in 1967, three decades after he had composed most of his writings on speculative materialism; see Bloch 2018, 153-158.

4   Bloch 1977, 15:141; see Mazzini 2012.

of Marx's historical materialism; indeed, one can search his work in vain for extended treatments of wage labor, property rights, and forces or relations of production, for example. While Bloch took Marx's ethical vision to heart and used his analytical frame to distinguish concrete from abstract hopes, his textual debts to the latter emphasize the centrality of human activity in producing the social world and hence potentially transforming it into utopia.

The essays comprising *On Karl Marx* (Bloch 2018), a 1968 collection his previously published writings,[5] reveal the tenor of Bloch's borrowings. Amid some 150 pages of commentary on Marx's student days, the "Theses on Feuerbach," the "Dialectics of Idealism," and Epicurus, to name but a few of the topics he addresses, Bloch confines his discussions of historical materialism proper to several pages in two of the volume's nine chapters;[6] instead, he mainly focuses on Marx's naturalization of *Geist* in the shape of humans working together to freely direct their own development. For Bloch, a thinker who posited flashes of light as the glimpses of our possibilities in the darkened moment, Marx was (as an 1843 engraving famously portrays him) akin to Prometheus gifting humanity fire, offering the power to illuminate our world. The "Theses on Feuerbach" drew Bloch's attention in particular and provide the subject of his most extensive reflections on any aspect of Marx's philosophy. As Bloch puts it, by anchoring human consciousness in matter, the "Theses" reveal that "[w]orking man, this subject-object relation living in all 'circumstances,' belongs in Marx decisively with the material base; even the subject in the world is world" (Bloch 1977, 5:303; Bloch 1986, 262).[7] For Bloch, the lesson of the "Theses" is the ultimate lesson of Marxism *tout court*: "The truly total explanation of the world from within itself, which is called dialectical-historical materialism, also posits the transformation of the world from within itself" (Bloch 1977, 5:310; Bloch 1986, 267). For understanding Bloch's ontology, the title of *The Principle of Hope*'s concluding chapter is indicative: "Karl Marx and Humanity; Stuff [*Stoff*] of Hope." The insight of Marx's materialist vision

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5   This collection is not, as it incorrectly indicates, taken from The Principle of Hope, but from various works, primarily Bloch 1977, vol. 10.

6   The occasions of these chapters, moreover, seem to have demanded acknowledgement of both Marx's economism and his humanism; Chapter 6, "The University, Marxism, and Philosophy," is Bloch's inaugural 1949 lecture at the University of Leipzig (DDR), and Chapter 9, "Upright Carriage, Concrete Utopia," is a 1968 speech in Trier (BRD) commemorating Marx's 150th birthday.

7   In citing The Principle of Hope, I give paginations of both the original German text (Bloch 1977, Vol. 5) and the corresponding English translation (Bloch 1986); most translations have been emended.

lies in its description of human production as the motor of History, revealing humanity to be the matter (*Stoff*) out of which the future dawns.

Seen in this light, Bloch's materialism speaks to the Left Hegelian tradition in which Marx himself operated, a tradition that sought to explain the genesis of transcendent ideals within an immanentist and thoroughly materialist framework. The chief thinker in this regard is Ludwig Feuerbach, who argued that the Idealist philosophy of Hegel and his followers had misidentified the nature of God. According to Feuerbach, Hegel had claimed that all appearances in the world were in fact manifestations of *Geist*, or Spirit, unfolding across history, whose final form (or "Idea") would be achieved when its vessels realized themselves as freedom incarnate, as self-aware vehicles of autonomous spirit.[8] Along with other Young Hegelians like Bruno Bauer and Arnold Ruge,[9] Feuerbach sought to demystify Hegel's notion of *Geist*/God. As such, he deflated God to a projection of human activity: "What man calls Absolute Being, his God, is his own being" (Feuerbach 2012a, 102). For Feuerbach, the "God" or "Absolute" that is the ultimate subject in Hegel's philosophy is in fact the predicate of the true subject, humanity: humans reify their own highest qualities and aspirations and subject themselves to this displaced essence as a power over against and above them. Feuerbach then set as his task the demystification of this process, for "[m]an has objectified himself, but he has not yet recognized the object as his own essential being" (Feuerbach 2012a, 110).

Feuerbach's critical purpose was not to destroy religion, but to unmask it as a human creation that hypostatizes the best "I-Thou" relationship, thereby anchoring the idealism of theology in the materialism of sensuous life, of practical human relations. Demystifying religion in this way means grasping that its true end of realizing humanity's ideal qualities can only be genuinely realized in concrete life. Feuerbach therefore called for a new theoretical orientation that transcends both theology and philosophy, writing that "[p]*hilosophy must again unite itself with natural science, and natural science with philosophy*" (Feuerbach 2012b, 172). In a passage replete with Hegelian language, Feuerbach claims that his new philosophy

> is *the idea realized – the truth* of Christianity. But precisely because it contains within itself the *essence* of Christianity, it abandons the *name* of Christianity.

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8   This is a wildly compressed statement of Hegel's philosophy of history; see, e.g., Hegel 1975, 46.

9   For an excellent overview, see Breckman 2019.

> Christianity has expressed the truth only *in contradiction to the truth*. The pure
> and unadulterated truth without contradiction is a *new truth*—a *new, autonomous
> deed* of mankind. (Feuerbach 2012b, 173)

Christianity, and by extension religion in general and *Geist* itself, is
exposed as the idealized hypostatization of humanity's capacity for con-
certed action.

Feuerbach's impact on his younger contemporaries was profound.
Nearly fifty years later, Engels recalled that, "[e]nthusiasm was general;
we all became Feuerbachians" (Engels 1974, 18). For Engels, Feuerbach
sounded the death-knell of Idealism, showing that Hegel's system was
an inverted form of materialism in which nature became "merely the
'alienation' of the absolute idea" (Engels 1974, 24; 17-18). The ontology
of matter consequently became a topic of serious philosophical concern,
for Feuerbach had demonstrated that it "is not a product of mind, but
mind itself is merely the highest product of matter" (Engels 1974, 25),
a claim Engels himself appropriated in his *Dialectics of Nature* (Engels
1990, 327). Furthermore, Feuerbach's bringing of Hegel down to earth
was not a return to the mechanistic concept of matter; rather, he enabled
the embrace of matter as something in motion, with a past, present and
future, as something "developing in a historical process" (Engels 1974,
26-27).[10]

Feuerbach's later work went deeper into this alliance of philosophy
with natural science, as he sought to explicate the emancipatory impli-
cations of this focus on sensuousness. Indeed, the *Essence of Christianity*
and *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* are both animated by a kind
of religiosity, crystallized in Feuerbach's metaphysical conception of the
"species-essence" of humanity's infinite potential for goodness that he
saw as mystified by Christianity (Feuerbach 2012a, 97). Although the
idea of a human essence was put to great use by Feuerbach and others
(including Marx in the *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts*), it also rece-
ived vociferous criticism – the radically individualist Max Stirner, for
example, saw in it the specter of Idealism, the vestiges of the bad-faith

10   Engels also offers that three scientific developments after Feuerbach neces-
sitated and accelerated a new conception of matter: the discovery of the cell, which
meant that "organisms can change their species and thus go through a more than
individual development"; a concomitant transformation in the notion of energy
according to which it became considered "manifestations of universal motion"
such that "the whole motion of nature is reduced to th[e] incessant process of
transformation from one form into another"; and, finally, the Darwinian idea that
"the stock of organic products of nature surrounding us today, including mankind,
is the result of a long process of evolution…" (Engels 1974, 46; 65ff.).

projection Feuerbach himself criticized in Hegel (Stirner 1995, 33-35). Perhaps as a result, Feuerbach subsequently stressed the concrete basis of human ideals in their biological and practical activities. As he explained in his 1848-49 *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, "that upon which mankind knows itself to be dependent is… *Nature, an object of the senses*" (cited in Schmidt 1973, 155).[11] This stress on his thought as a contribution to the philosophy of nature, an "anthropological materialism" that ostensibly overcame the dualism of body and soul, puts paid to the accusation of Feuerbach being a traditionally religious thinker, despite himself. Indeed, Feuerbach therefore claimed to his own satisfaction that,

> I negate God, which means to me: I negate the negation of humans; I replace the illusory, fantastic, heavenly position of the human – which in actual life necessarily amounts to the negation of the human – with the sensory, real, and consequently necessarily political and social position of the human. The question of the existence or non-existence of God is thus for me only the question of the existence or non-existence of the human. (cited in Schmidt 1973, 7-8)

The upshot of Feuerbach's thought was to turn the philosophical sights of those initially attracted by Hegelianism away from heaven and towards the earthly creatures who imagined it.

Marx's famed inversion of Hegel, the discovery of "the rational kernel within the mystical shell" of the latter's system (Marx 1990, 103), has its origin in Feuerbach's critique of Hegel's religion. Feuerbach's emphasis on Idealism's basis in concrete, practical activity, not to mention his later insistence that materialism and anthropology are one and the same, reduces all of existence to a natural foundation. Moreover, taken to its logical conclusion, Feuerbach's work pushes towards a central debate of late 19th century letters that elicited contributions from Engels and Lenin (See Engels 1969; Engels 1990; Lenin 1972) as well as non-Marxist philosophers like Hermann Lotze and Ludwig Büchner, namely the so-called "materialism debate" concerning the capacity of matter to self-generate, a controversy that revisited the determinism/freedom and theism/pantheism controversies of the 18th century in the language of modern science (See Beiser 2014, ch. 2).

Like Engels, the young Marx was enthusiastic about Feuerbach's transformation of Hegel. He was, moreover, primed for its reception. In 1841, the year Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* appeared, Marx

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11   See Nikolay Chernyshevsky's discussion of Feuerbach, cited in Schmidt 1973, 159-160.

completed a doctoral dissertation under Bruno Bauer's supervision on the philosophy of nature in Democritus and Epicurus in which these ancient thinkers act as proxies for competing camps of Hegel's followers.[12] In *The Difference between the Democritean and the Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, Marx distinguishes the two schools in terms of the role necessity and accident-cum-spontaneity plays in each (Marx 2006, 103ff.). Both Democritus and Epicurus, he explains, were thoroughgoing materialists insofar as they held that matter alone comprises the universe. Citing Seneca and Diogenes Laertius, Marx writes that while both philosophers claimed that all matter was falling in a void, Democritus's perspective was determinist whilst Epicurus allowed for unexpected developments. To use the language of the Epicurean Lucretius, a falling atom may experience a spontaneous "swerve" [Lat: *clinamen*] from its straight path (Lucretius 2007, II: l. 243). In Marx's words, as "the atom frees itself from its relative existence, the straight line, by abstracting from it, by swerving away from it; so the entire Epicurean philosophy swerves away from the restrictive mode of being wherever the concept of abstract individuality, self-sufficiency and negation of all relation to other things must be represented in its existence" (Marx 2006, 115). While this apparently simple difference between explaining the movement of individual phenomena might seem to be of little consequence, Marx holds that it entails an enormous difference in the possibility of freedom, and consequently the possibility of bringing new things into being. Marx signals this grander interpretation in the passage above when he describes the physical, spontaneous swerve metaphorically as an "abstraction" away from the straight path, paralleling Feuerbach's language of the human species-essence as the capacity to reflect and abstract from the givenness of a particular situation: humans, unlike other animals, can separate themselves from the present and imagine a different world. In this light, Seneca finds an ethical lesson in Epicurus, whom he cites as saying, "[i]t is wrong to live under constraint, but no man is constrained to live under constraint" (Marx 2006, 103; see Seneca 1917, 71). For Marx, the swerve of atoms, this abstraction from their straight path, is "the first form of self-consciousness" (Marx 2006, 117). Furthermore, Marx makes the ostensible (although by no means *willed*) freedom of the swerve an index for the human capacity to build autonomous social relations, for its ultimate consequence is the ability

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12   For details of the historical context, see McLellan 1972, 74-93, and Breckman 1999, 259-271.

to make friendships and covenants (Marx 2006, 118).[13] For Marx, then, Epicurus reflects the first glimmers of absolute consciousness (Marx 2006, 145), the first hint, that is, of the eventual realization of *Geist* as the Idea of freedom.

Marx's early foray into the philosophy of matter in his dissertation highlights two points that occupy later discussions of important matters, both concerning alternatives to determinism within a materialist frame-work. The first is how chance can exist in a world of material determinism; the second is how new things can come into being, or – to use a Kantian distinction – how the spontaneous causality of freedom comports with the mechanistic logic of nature. Marx holds that the swerving atoms of Epicurus make sense of both possibilities. It is worth recognizing that Marx is focused on physical aberrations in atomic trajectories, and that the accumulation of tiny swerves ultimately leads to freedom as an emergent property. Taken together, this possibility of aleatory activity within matter (between atoms) and the emergent possibility of freedom secure the material bases for believing that the higher-level social activity can be directed after a fashion. Both become significant topics in the materialisms of Bloch and Althusser.

First Variation: Bloch's Dialectical Matter

Bloch calls his ontological approach "speculative materialism," a moniker drawn from Hegel, whose speculative method, Bloch explains, works "through concrete concepts in opposition to mere abstract concepts of reflection" (Bloch 1977, 7:471).[14] By describing his approach as speculative, Bloch resists "limiting materialism to the realm of mechanical necessity," thereby leaving "an unfinished opening of the content of materialism to the realm of freedom" (Bloch 1977, 7:456). As the thinker *par excellence* of utopia, the problem Bloch faces parallels the problem facing Marx in the dissertation, namely how, on purely naturalistic grounds, we may envision the possibility of freedom *cum* radical difference.

Utopia is a concept that by definition (*u-topos*; "no-place") transcends the world. While Bloch's notion of utopia is transcendent, it is not metaphysically so. Rather than transcending material reality, full-stop,

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13   Marx follows Diogenes Laertius; see Diogenes Laertius 1925, X:150.

14   On speculative materialism, see also Holz 2012, Moir 2013, and Moir 2019.

Bloch suggests a "transcending without any heavenly transcendence" (Bloch 1977, 5:1522; Bloch 1986, 1288), acknowledging that the realization of utopia would be radically different from the present world, but must still be *of* this world. To capture this qualitative difference, he distinguishes two types of novelty. On the one hand, there is *Neue*, good old-fashioned newness in a temporal or quantitative sense, the most recent or next iteration of an existing thing – a "new" car or a "new" recording of Puccini's *Tosca*, say, or Poulenc's *Flute Sonata*. On the other hand, Bloch introduces the category of *Novum* to denote the sort of qualitative novelty a genuine rupture with present social relations utopia would entail (Bloch 1977, 13:228; see Siebers 2012). This *Novum* marks a rupture with current evaluative categories; as Paul Ricoeur noted, hope's logic is absurd (Ricoeur 1970, 58). Absurdity and impossibility are not the same, however, and Bloch stresses the ultimately realistic nature of his enterprise. As he writes in *The Principle of Hope*, "[t]*here is no realism worthy of the name if it abstracts from this strongest element in reality, as an unfinished reality*" (Bloch 1977, 5:728; Bloch 1986, 624,). As a utopian cipher, *Novum* becomes *Ultimum*, the highest end of history, the ideal of human self-realization, "a total leap out of everything that previously existed" (Bloch 1977, 5:233; Bloch 1986, 203).

To this end, Bloch borrows terms from Hegel to distinguish between "abstract" and "concrete" utopia (Bloch 1977, 8:29). Abstract utopias are "not mediated with the existing social tendency and possibility," a category into which fall most of history's utopian projects, as well as the utopian socialisms attacked by Marx and Engels (Bloch 1977, 13:95).[15] Bloch's preferred notion of concrete utopia draws on an awareness of reality's underlying tendencies, a technical term in his work defined as "the energy of matter in action," with which he aims to convey Aristotle's notion of entelechy (Bloch 1977, 7:469; See Aristotle 1984, 1048a30-2; Moir 2019, 128-129.). Abstract utopias *cannot* exist, for there is no connection to real possibilities in the world. Concrete utopias, by contrast, do *not yet* exist but eventually *may*. Abstract and concrete utopias thus typify different sorts of possibility (Bloch 1977/1986, ch. 18). The former may possess formal logical possibility and may accord with the present boundaries of what is understood to be possible, while the latter possess "Real possibility," which involves both a recognition of the power of human agency as well as matter's latent tendencies. Put otherwise, the Real possibility of concrete utopia involves the creation of new possibilities that are drawn out of the world by dint of human action.

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15   On utopian socialism, see n. 2 above.

The philosophy of matter enters the frame as the ontological basis for the Real possibility, and Bloch extends the stakes of the debate between mechanicism and spontaneity from freedom in general to the prospect of a radically different future. Like Marx, Bloch finds determinist naturalism oppressive. As he puts it, "[m]echanical materialism can have no utopia. Everything is present in it, mechanically present" (Bloch 1988, 12). Concretely utopian thought presumes that the world may be radically different than it now is, and such naturalism requires that we not take recourse to "abstract," magical thinking. For Bloch, a utopianism that remains naturalistic requires a non-mechanistic concept of matter that permits us to imagine the *Novum* as not-yet rather than impossible, whatever the present state of knowledge might suggest to the contrary. Therefore, only a notion of matter as dynamic allows "new shoots and new spaces for development" (Bloch 1977, 5:226; Bloch 1986, 197).

Neo-Aristotelian Materialism

Bloch calls his dynamic conception of matter "neo-Aristotelian."[16] For Aristotle, all things are compounds of matter and form; the former provides the material (say, wood or metal), and the latter providing the essence (say, chairness or bedness) (Aristotle 1984, 1032b1-2). A closely linked distinction concerns potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia* or *entelecheia*); matter exists in a state of potentiality – it has the capacity to become many things – which attains actuality when combined with form.[17] Bloch finds in Aristotle's *dynamis* structured and unstructured types of potentiality, differentiated by their capacity to receive form. The first, structured type of potentiality, *kata* to *dynaton*, Bloch renders as "*Nach-Möglichkeit-Sein*," translated as either "Being-According-to-Possibility" or "What-Is-Considered-Possible"; the second, unstructured type, *dynamei-on*, Bloch renders as "*In-Möglichkeit-Sein*," translated as either "Being-In-Possibility" or "What-May-Become-Possible." "What-is--Considered-Possible" (*kata* to *dynaton*) denotes that which is possible given what we know now, while "What-May-Become-Possible" (*dynamei-on*) is that which may prove possible regardless of the currently accepted notion of possibility. For Bloch, the latter type of potentiality provides the fruitful material basis of form, a dynamic ontological sub-

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16   This section parallels Goldman 2019.
17   For Aristotle's obscurity on these issues, see Chen 1956.

strate that inscribes reality in the process of becoming. In line with his idiosyncratic emphasis on matter's unstructured potential, Bloch offers an idiosyncratic interpretation of actuality, the *energeia* or *entelechy* that impels the realization of form. Aristotle's entelechies develop teleologically, according to innate predispositions: given certain environing conditions, for example, an acorn develops into a tree. Bloch, however, draws on a different sense of entelechy, one only briefly mentioned by Aristotle: "open" or "incomplete" entelechy (see Aristotle 1984, 1048b29; Bloch 1985, 409). For Aristotle, unfinished entelechy describes progress in motion – the entelechy, for example, of a plane heading to Warsaw. Bloch interprets unfinished entelechy as related not merely to motion but to ends. Matter is in the process of development, and what develops it (and which it also develops) is for Bloch not a determinate final end, but the self-awareness that human action is the motor of history. Aristotle, in short, gives Bloch a language for naturalizing Hegel's *Geist*.

Bloch's materialism is neo-Aristotelian insofar as he models it on a particular interpretation of the form-matter relationship developed by a line of thinkers that Bloch labels the "Aristotelian Left," with conscious reference to the Right-Left split among Hegel's successors. As Bloch sees things, the dominant interpretation of Aristotelean ontology is marked by Aquinas, for whom form actively impresses itself from without upon a passive, receptive matter. By giving form pride of place, such "right-
-wing" Aristotelianism legitimates Church authority, for its holders could claim exclusive knowledge about the proper form human matter must take to enter the Kingdom of Heaven; the hierarchical power of clerics derives, that is, from their claim to have unique insight into how to free us from bondage our to sin and decay (*Romans* 8:21). Against this Aristotelian Right, the Left interpretation elevates matter to the role of active collaborator with form, in which matter itself actively receives essence and is not merely passively impressed by it.

The medieval philosophers Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroës (Ibn Rushd), made three important exegetical turns that laid the Aristotelian Left's foundation. Avicenna's first major innovation, Bloch explains, was to argue that because the body does not outlive death, the soul cannot be seen as sentient (Bloch 2019, 16ff.). This removed the "metaphysical whip" of the notion of hell, alleviating fear of eternal punishment, the clerics' greatest weapon for keeping people in thrall. A second departure is captured in Averroës's doctrine of the unity of human intellect. Neither Avicenna nor Averroës limits reason to a cognitive elite, situating it instead in all humans as possible participants in active intellect; this move democratizes access to truth, against the privileged epistemologi-

cal claims of the Aristotelian Right. The third and most significant interpretive turn concerns the explication of form-matter. In contrast to the Absolute Idealism of extra-material form argued by Aquinas and the Aristotelian Right, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left emphasize active form *within* matter. The constitutive collaboration of form-matter is not subsumed by matter, but rather, as Bloch explains, Averroës sees matter as predisposed *for* certain forms *if* circumstances for the latter's actualization exist. As Bloch glosses him, this reading of the *Metaphysics* "contains nothing less than the recognition of a specific mediation of progress, one that is necessary at every point and is determined by the maturity of conditions" (Bloch 2019, 55). Small though it may seem, Bloch views this move, by which one *could* argue that matter's variable capacity for receptivity shows it possesses a certain inherent "active" logic of form, as a crucial way station on the path to his own neo-Aristotelian vitalist, self-generating notion of matter. In Bloch's account, this perspective was taken by the medieval Jewish Andalusian poet-philosopher Avicebron (Ibn Gabirol) in his Neo-Platonic concept of "universal matter," which combined spiritual and material existence as the substance of a Plotinian "One," a view sketched further in Giordano Bruno's world-image of a self-fructifying tree of life (Bloch 2019, 57-67). Shortly thereafter, Spinoza's "God, or Nature" gives matter its due, and Marx encapsulates the entire Aristotelian Left's implicit (and concrete) hope of unifying nature and humanity in a "dialectically conceived materialism" (Bloch 2019, 66). In Bloch's account, then, the long sweep of Left Aristotelian thought culminates in Marxism.

Bloch's endorsement of this vital materialism led to the charge that his search for a naturalistic alternative to an inert, traditional Aristotelian account of matter surrenders human agency altogether. In this vein, Alfred Schmidt attacked what he perceived to be Bloch's subordination of humanity to a mystical *natura naturans* (Schmidt 2014), and Jürgen Habermas described him as a "Marxist Schelling," the Romantic monist philosopher of nature (Habermas 1983). Against such critics, however, it is possible to nonetheless understand humans as the effective agents of Bloch's supposed natural subject. In line with his use of Aristotle's notion of open entelechy, Bloch likens his philosophy to an "open system," unfinished for the fact that the world is abundant with new possibilities that active experimentation may yet disclose. When he speaks of Marx as the discoverer of the "matter [*Stoff*] of hope," his scientific language belies his metaphorical intent, for the *Stoff* that educes *Novum* out of matter is action – the human mind is, after all, but a form of material existence. Schmidt and Habermas are correct that the active

When he speaks of Marx as the discoverer of the "matter [*Stoff*] of hope," his scientific language belies his metaphorical intent, for the *Stoff* that educes *Novum* out of matter is action – the human mind is, after all, but a form of material existence.

agent in dialectical matter is akin to a *natura naturans*, but it must also be appreciated that on Bloch's reading, Marx, following Feuerbach, had definitively described humankind as nature's self-conscious aspect. In contrast to mechanical repetition, ever the same as before, Bloch describes the activity of this dialectical matter as a specific kind of repetition: "namely of the still unrealized total[izing] goal-content itself, which is suggested and tended, tested, and processed out in the progressive newnesses of history" (Bloch 1977, 5:232-233; Bloch 1986, 202). Creative human aspiration, the action of hope, is the natural subject animating neo-Aristotelian matter.

This stress on human agency as the active form educed in matter explains Bloch's interest in *poeisis*, both at the conclusion of *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* and in his work in general. Art, human creative ideation and production, enables us to glimpse potential futures, a process Bloch calls "liberating," or "birthing" form from the womb of matter (Bloch 2019, 42-45; see Goldman 2019, xxii). Bloch asks artistic activity to trace the utopian future within matter, to capture and draw out the positive potential of the dawning of a new era, in an evidently collaborative manner that entertains the promise of an eventual rupture towards novel evaluative categories altogether. Art thus offers a model of the future not merely as a dream image, but a "pre-appearance, circulating in turbulent existence itself, of what is real" (Bloch 1977, 5:247; Bloch 1986, 214-215; see Jung 2012). and one that is realized not by the sovereign imposition of humanity upon matter, but by dint of an "alliance technique" co-productive with nature (Bloch 1977, 5:807; Bloch 1986, 695-696).[18] The humanly vital materialism Bloch sketches in his neo-Aristotelian matter enables us to imagine and impel, through our capacities for creation, Real utopian possibility.

Second Variation: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism

Bloch makes sense of the early Marx's naturalism by linking action to matter's emergent Real possibilities, with the confluence of human agency and the world's inchoate tendency effectuating concrete utopia. Agency in Bloch, then, a thinker usually associated with subjective and aestheticized vision, is closely attuned to matter's ostensibly innate and objective (if still open) potential. By contrast, Louis Althusser – a figure associated with structuralism and the supposed anti-humanism of Marx's

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18   Bloch also uses the phrase "natural alliance"; see Zimmermann 2012.

economic works – appeals in his own late materialist writings to the humanist Epicureanism of Marx's dissertation. When considering Althusser's ontology, it is important to tread carefully, for his reflections on "aleatory materialism" have no systematic exposition, and the lectures and sketches that comprise his posthumous *Philosophy of the Encounter* and *Machiavelli and Us* would presumably have been (re)organized and revised before being published (Goshgarian 2006). Moreover, some of these writings date from the period during which Althusser suffered a psychotic break, killed his wife, and was institutionalized; readers must reckon to some degree with those terrible facts.[19] These considerations are raised for neither morbid nor moralistic reasons, for they pose genuine hermeneutical challenges: against this background, it is fair to ask how seriously to take Althusser's musings on determinism and swerves, especially since the crucial language of chance and aleatoriness was added in Althusser's hand to the typed manuscript of *Machiavelli and Us* at an unknown date.[20] In any event, these caveats stated, two texts in particular warrant attention, *Machiavelli and Us* and "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter."

Although Althusser never mentions Bloch, he similarly claims to identify a hidden or subaltern tradition of materialism suppressed in traditional accounts of modern philosophy's development. Unlike Bloch, however, for whom this tradition travels through various attempts to understand Aristotle's form/matter relationship, Althusser traces its lineage to the cast of characters used by Marx in his dissertation, particularly Lucretius and Epicurus. While Althusser remains surprisingly silent on Marx's text, his own Lucretian naturalism is framed as a response to what he sees as a Democritean mechanistic materialism rampant in contemporary Marxism. Hence Althusser characterizes his ontology as

> the 'materialism' (we shall have to have some word to distinguish it as a tendency) of the rain, the swerve, the encounter, the take [prise]… a materialism of the encounter, and therefore of the aleatory and of contingency. This materialism is opposed, as a wholly different mode of thought, to the various materialisms on record, including that widely ascribed to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which, like every other materialism in the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is to say, a transformed, disguised form of idealism. (Althusser 2006, 167-168)

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19   See Althusser's harrowing (and likely false) narration of the deed in the opening pages of Althusser 1995.

20   See the editorial notes to Althusser 1999, 104-111.

In further contrast to Bloch, who traces a more or less continuous line of thinkers, Althusser presents an impressionistic assemblage: Lucretius, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes, the Rousseau of the second *Discourse*, Marx, and Heidegger. These differences aside, both Bloch and Althusser stress the threats to power posed by their respective hidden traditions. Bloch's Aristotelian Left challenges the supremacy of external form and hence the idealism that justified the Church's worldly power; in like fashion, Althusser's underground current challenges the "idealism of freedom," the belief that the human subject can autonomously impose itself on the world rather than be forced to reckon with its ambivalent status as the result of various intersecting socio-economic forces.

Like Marx in his dissertation, Althusser bases his materialism on Lucretius's swerve, the import of which is that "*the accomplishment of the fact* is just a pure effect of contingency, since it depends on the aleatory encounter of the atoms" (Althusser 2006, 169-170). As with Epicurus and Lucretius, so it is with Heidegger, Althusser reminds us, whose fundamental human category of *Dasein* begins literally, figuratively, and conceptually in the basic contingent thrownness of being-there (Althusser 2006, 189). More than anyone else, however, Althusser takes Machiavelli as the archetypal thinker of aleatory materialism. In Machiavelli's work, Althusser finds unusual insight into the nature of contingency, insofar as it sketches the various and *variable* factors that must align for a specific goal, in Machiavelli's case the unification of Italy. Machiavelli, on Althusser's reading, saw that "it was necessary *to create the conditions for a swerve*," and his dual reflections on Fortuna and *virtù* lead to the conclusion that "[t]he encounter may not take place *or* may take place. The meeting can be missed" (Althusser 2006, 171-172). Althusser therefore argues that the philosophy of the encounter is just as much a doctrine of the void as it is of matter, for the possibility of infinite deferral must be granted in order for the encounter to have meaning *as an encounter* rather than a fate altogether (Althusser 2006, 174). When Althusser invokes Marx here, he confesses that he calls the latter's philosophy "materialism" only in order to insist upon its "radical opposition to any idealism of consciousness or reason, whatever its destination" (Althusser 2006, 189). Althusser hereby stresses that the structuralist accounts of Marxism offered in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* are intended not to lead to deterministic economism, but rather to contextualize voluntaristic action within the dynamics of social power defined by Marx in his own later writings (see, e.g., Althusser 2005, 229). The "scientific" Marxism for which Althusser is known is not therefore intended to replace humanistic accounts as much as situate their possibilities amidst the objective processes of socio-economic (re)production.

It is furthermore significant that Althusser describes how encounters "materialize" events with examples from natural science – of liquids congealing upon reaching a certain state, no less – expressing thereby how various determinate, law-like paths intersect to bring emergent novel formations into being. With collisions, things "take hold,"

> that is to say, 'take *form*', *at last give birth to Forms, and new Forms* – just as water 'takes hold' when ice is there waiting for it, or milk does when it curdles, or mayonnaise when it emulsifies. Hence the primacy of 'nothing' over all 'form', and of *aleatory materialism over all formalism*. In other words, not just anything can produce just anything, but only elements destined [*voués*] to encounter each other and, by virtue of their affinity, to 'take hold' one upon the other. (Althusser 2006, 191-192)

Althusser sees Machiavelli as an exemplary aleatory materialist insofar as the Florentine's writings illuminate the *overdetermined* face of reality, the practically infinite combination of liquid elements of social structure that must congeal in encounters in order for new things to begin. No laws cover all situations; instead, we must think of the plentitude of possibilities informing "an aleatory, singular case" (Althusser 1999, 17-18), the creation of a unified Italy, something unique and unprecedented and hence genuinely new. To theorize Italy before it exists is to reach for a beginning – *the* beginning, "rooted in the essence of a thing, since it is the beginning of *this* thing" (Althusser 1999, 6). The dialectical or aleatory thesis Machiavelli represents is reflected in the fact that he is constantly thinking in terms of potential options, "for *alternative conditions for the attainment of his political objective*" (Althusser 1999, 63; see 35). It is in this way that Althusser reads Machiavelli's rejection of traditional morality in politics: given the conditions, in some cases, murder is acceptable; in others, it is counterproductive.[21]

For Althusser, the logic of *The Prince* is the logic of contingent possibility. Machiavelli seeks "a favorable '*encounter*' between two terms: on the one hand, the objective conditions of the conjuncture X of an unspecified region – *fortuna* – and on the other, the subjective conditions of an equally indeterminate individual Y – *virtù*… As we can see, everything revolves around the *encounter and non-encounter*" (Althusser 1999, 74). As Althusser explains in more detail:

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21   Thus, for example, during the consolidation of the Roman Republic it was appropriate that the anti-revolutionary sons of Brutus be killed, whilst Remirro d'Orca's murders in the service of Cesare Borgia's princely rule in Renaissance Emilia Romagna ultimately undermined the latter's cause; see Machiavelli 1996, 45, and Machiavelli 1998, 29-30, respectively.

> *Fortuna* must arrange the 'matter' that is to receive a form. At the same time, an individual must emerge who is endowed with *virtù* – capable, should he have to resort to them, of emancipating himself from dependency on another's forces so as to fashion his own by *virtù*; and finally capable of laying 'very strong foundations for his future power', by rooting himself in the people through *virtù*… In other words, the *abstract* form of the theory is the index and effect of a *concrete* political stance. (Althusser 1999, 76)

The Prince is not the only place one sees this sensibility, as a similar convergence of encounters has to be effected if the republican polity described in *The Discourses* is to last, a lastingness that is predicated, as Machiavelli put it, on bringing states back to their beginnings (Machiavelli 1998, 212). Althusser also draws on Machiavelli's plan for a citizen militia rather than the use of mercenaries, mentioned in *The Prince* and fleshed out in *The Art of War*. This army is the embodiment of the aleatory case, an invention of encounters that brings its purpose into being by its very constitution, and not merely as a paper constitution, but in a concrete assemblage of individuals: "with its popular recruitment, amalgamation of town and country, and supremacy of infantry over cavalry – forms and already unites the people whom the state is assigned the goal of uniting and expanding, simply by virtue of being constituted" (Althusser 1999, 89). And, bringing this whole discussion back to Althusser's framework of Marx's scientific structuralism, we gain insight into the contingency he perceives at the foundation of any political, individual or ideological formation: "the possibilities and limits of the nation's realization depend upon a whole series of factors – not only economic, but also pre-existing geographical, historical, linguistic and cultural factors – which *in some sense* prestructure the aleatory space in which the nation will be able to take shape" (Althusser 1999, 11; see 26). The key, of course, is in the meaning of the "in some sense" emphasized in this passage, for that is where one presumably encounters the real action, so to speak. Althusser does not, however, take us that far, leaving posterity instead suggestive hints of a materialism that ironically enough may reflect the need for the sort of humanism Althusser ostensibly denies. If the lesson of Machiavelli is, on the one hand, that propitious conjunctions occur contingently to enable unique events, the Florentine suggests just as strenuously that Fortuna values boldness, and that human agency may still channel the materialist current(s) of history, both underground and above.

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Conclusion

The problem of matter and action facing both Bloch and Althusser recapitulates the Left Hegelian problematic facing the young Marx: how to account for the possibility of freedom within a naturalist ontology, without recourse to a noumenal perspective or a transhistorical *Geist*. Marx turned to the philosophy of matter in Democritus and Epictetus in order to ground spontaneity in a deterministic world; his intellectual descendants Bloch and Althusser turned to ancient and pre-modern thinkers of the same in order to secure the consequentiality of free acts against rigidly scientific or structural Marxism. The latter thinkers' respective forays into ontology are meant, moreover, as complements to historical materialism. Put in Bloch's terms, both he and Althusser contribute here not to the cold stream of dispassionate social analysis but to the warm stream of utopian prophecy, sketching materialism for revolutionary action rather than for understanding the historical laws of social dynamics. The Not-Yet demands an ontology that allows genuine novelty to arise in this world.

Bloch and Althusser differ considerably, as we have seen, in the substance of their materialisms. Bloch emphasizes emergence, the drawing out of novel forms from inactivated dispositions in matter, and builds his neo-Aristotelian account on a line of teleological philosophers of nature. Althusser's aleatory materialism, by contrast, stresses the contingency of historical possibilities, in which chance encounters mark formal inflection points in matter's trajectory, a point he makes with reference to diverse phenomenologists of action. Attention to their respective ontologies reveals, furthermore, both thinkers to be markedly different than they are usually painted by Bloch is not a subjectivist aesthete fixated on the abstract horizon of the beyond, but a Left Aristotelian materialist whose concrete utopianism takes its cues from the world's emerging Real possibilities. Likewise, Althusser is not a static structuralist fixated on an immutable social framework, but an artist of contingency and encounters, of bold acts that may radically alter the trajectories of the world's ongoing processes. Each take, moreover, imagines a different tactical relationship to the present: Bloch tethers action to the development of nature's open tendencies, while Althusser envisions an energetic disruption of the processual status quo. They share, nonetheless, the common purpose of securing space for agency against determinist accounts of history, and present their ontologies for the sake of effectuating political action. Indeed, against those who malign utopian impulses as mystified, neither Bloch's nor Althusser's warm stress on

agency entails blindness to reality. Bloch sees novel forms arising from matter thanks to the informed (and in-forming) action of those who have reflected on its inchoate energies; in like fashion, Althusser highlights the (cultivated) qualities of judgment and prudence in Machiavelli that lend *virtù* traction and contingency its revolutionary potential.

Concerned as they are with deep ontology rather than the laws of historical development, the Left Aristotelian and aleatory materialisms offered by Bloch and Althusser admittedly underline, on the one hand, the decidedly unorthodox and idiosyncratic qualities of their respective Marxisms. On the other hand, by using the philosophy of matter to emphasize the possibility of utopian action and genuine novelty, Bloch and Althusser not only pick up an overlooked thread in the earliest Marx, but also stay true to Marxism's revolutionary praxis of fabricating a better future (see McManus 2003): "Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it."

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LOREN GOLDMAN – is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in *Political Theory, Analyse & Kritik, Theory & Event, Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, Journal of the Philosophy of History, William James Studies, The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought, The Cambridge Habermas Lexicon*, and numerous edited volumes. With Peter Thompson, he translated Ernst Bloch's *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* (Columbia University Press, 2019), for which he also wrote the introduction and annotations. He is currently completing a book on political hope.

Address:
Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania,
Ronald Perelman Center for Political Science and Economics
133 S. 36th St.
Philadelphia, PA 19104
USA
email: golo@sas.upenn.edu

Autor: Loren Goldman
Tytuł: Wariacje młodoheglowskie. O rewolucyjnej materii w myśli Marksa, Blocha i Althussera
Abstrakt: Chociaż Ernsta Blocha uważa się często za filozofa abstrakcyjnej i estetycznie pojmowanej nadziei, jego koncepcja konkretnej utopii opiera się na oryginalnej, żywiołowej i materialistycznej ontologii. Wbrew licznym krytykom, artykuł ten wyjaśnia i broni materializm Blocha jako ostatecznie zgodny z projektem Marksowskim. W pierwszej części artykułu materializm Marksa zostaje osadzony w kontekście Lewicy Heglowskiej, a w szczególności Feuerbachowskiego konkretnego ujęcia ludzkiej sprawczości i społecznej emancypacji w naturalistycznych ramach. Dwie kolejne części przedstawiają "Lewicowo-Arystotelejską" koncepcję materii oraz "materializm spotkania" Louisa Althussera jako radykalne, choć taktycznie odmienne wariacje na ten temat.
Słowa kluczowe: Ernst Bloch, Marks, Althusser, Feuerbach, materializm, lewica Heglowska, materializm spotkania