Ernst Bloch—The German Philosopher of the October Revolution*

by Oskar Negt

History does not repeat itself; yet, wherever something did not become history and did not make history, then history will by all means be repeated. —Bloch, 1936

“Criticism in the Midst of Hand-to-hand Combat”

Part of the essays and articles which appeared in Ernst Bloch's Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe: Politische Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1934-1939 (From Accident to Catastrophe: Political Essays from 1934 to 1939) had already been published by Suhrkamp Verlag in 1970 in a collection of Bloch's political writings under the title Politische Messungen—Pestzeit, Vormärz (Political Assessments—The Plague Period, before the Revolution). A reviewer of this earlier volume, a specialist in philological and historical exactitude particularly concerned about Bloch's integrity and reputation, compared some of the texts published in 1970 with the originals. His investigations revealed that there were changes: incorrect dates, omissions and additions; in other words, revisions had obviously been made but had not been annotated. Some of Bloch's important essays written about the Moscow trials of the 1930s, which at the time of their publication upset many German emigrants (some of whom have still not forgiven him), were not included in this collection because they did not represent the author's present position. Of course, it should also be noted that one of the major essays of Politische Messungen, “Jubiläum der Renegaten” (“A Jubilee for Renegades”), did not strike Bloch's sharpeyed critic as either an explicit position taken on the Moscow trials or as an exploration of the ambivalent role of a philosopher, who in refusing to base his judgments on a moral Weltanschauung attempted instead to comprehend the historical signs of revolutionary movements, including their transformations into terror.

Disillusioned because he felt that Bloch had truncated his own life history, the reviewer concluded his article, published in the Frankfurter Rundschau

* This essay was first printed as the afterword to Ernst Bloch's Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe (Frankfurt am Main, 1972) and appears here in English for the first time with the permission of Suhrkamp Verlag.
(December 12, 1970), with this note of criticism: "Therefore, it is a catastrophe, a great disappointment, and it is not in any way lessened by the fact that Bloch analyzes more informatively in his later essays. It is just not true that a 'mere discarding of something can be beneficial for us.' In fact, it was mere discarding that was characteristic of Stalinist practice and this is one of the elements we have inherited from that time... In the end there remains just one favor to ask: for Ernst Bloch to retract this volume and replace it with an annotated edition of the original texts including the important essays which were not printed here so that we can believe in him again."

Ernst Bloch and his publishers saw no reason for retracting Politische Messungen. And rightly so. These works have proved to be what they always were: authentic documents of a historical, contemporary consciousness which compare favorably to the great products of European political philosophy from Aristotle to Kant, Fichte and Hegel. Bloch intended the collection of political essays, published four years ago, to be understood as the most up-to-date version. As such, they form the political quintessence of a philosophical thinking unsurpassed in productivity and material richness of ideas. Since he himself was no longer physically able to read these works, spread as they were over a fifty year period—in other words no longer able to use his eyes to supplement the texts with footnotes, variants and exact dates—he devoted himself to classifying the associations of his ideas, frequently formulated in haste and under the pressure of events, and to developing unfinished thoughts, rudimentary tendencies; i.e., to bring everything up to date and in accord with his present thinking.

Anyone who, like Bloch, is highly conscious of the historical content of his own statements, of the determining interest of knowledge (Erkenntnisinteresse) for the release and structuring of revolutionary processes, and who sees precisely in this the foundation for the objectivity of knowledge, does not have time to write for historians of philosophy, philologists or even for a general audience. He writes for political contemporaries, for classes, groups, persons. In short, for specific audiences. The process which has been labeled "criticism in the midst of hand-to-hand combat" represents in the strictest sense the critical process of Marx in Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie (Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right) and can be applied literally to Bloch, even with regard to the thrust of its contents: "Let us wage war against German conditions! For sure! They are below the level of history; they are below all criticism, yet they remain a subject of criticism.... In waging war against these conditions, criticism is not a
passion of the mind, it is the mind of passion. It is not a surgical knife, it is a weapon. The subject of its concern is its enemy, which it does not want simply to refute, but to destroy."

The Moscow Trials as Signs of Identification

In reading all of Bloch's arguments relating to the Moscow trials, it soon becomes apparent who the actual audience is—the emigrants. And it is primarily against them that he employs his rich arsenal of scorn and mockery. Time and again he demonstrates their inability to understand one very simple fact: the historical alternatives of that time did not allow neutral positions either in one's thinking or actions. The alternatives were fascism or the Soviet Union, alternatives which were valid even on the level of personification: Hitler or Stalin. "Monopoly capitalism does not engender ambivalence. The choice between it and the socialist cause of the people is an easy one. In today's situation it should be clearly evident that anti-bolshevist statements serve only the devil himself. Contrary to what Klopstock and Schiller were still able to believe, senselessly exaggerated criticism of the homeland of the revolution will not benefit the ideal of revolution. This ideal can be furthered only by the popular front. And a popular front does not require a fervent or absolute commitment to Russia, but rather the modest, and one would think perfectly acceptable realization: there can be no struggle, there can be nothing good without Russia." The correction of 1970 makes the meaning more precise: "no anti-fascist struggle and victory without Russia."1

Clearly the major enemy of Bloch's thinking and action is fascism. In spite of that, there is absolutely no justification for Bloch's apologetic remarks about the Moscow trials, Stalinist terror, the liquidation of the old bolshevist guard—a liquidation which was not only caused by the exigencies of foreign politics and which actually weakened the anti-fascist front and thereby undermined its officially announced purpose. In the majority of cases, his statements have proven false; an overwhelming number of the victims deserve to be rehabilitated historically and morally. As an example, let us consider Bloch's statements concerning the Trotskyists. Regarding his use of language there appears to be little to distinguish these writings from the customary formulations issued by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which since its origins at the end of the 1920s sought to reduce complex political and

1. All further quotations which are not cited are taken either from Politische Messungen or Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe.
historical relations to easily identifiable friend-foe antagonisms and to clear-cut alternatives: "How believable the sabotage here, the pernicious work, even the secession of the Ukraine: the overthrow of the Stalin bureaucracy dignifies all means, drives Trotskyism toward the enemy of its enemy and today justifies for it another Brest-Litovsk. ... The end result of Trotskyist activity would, of course, not be world revolution (which the emigrants of the bourgeois right by no means desire). In spite of all this the result would be the introduction of capitalism in Russia and, in case this result should not be sufficiently horrifying for our right wing emigrants—on the contrary—it can be put in even plainer language: the effect would be German fascism in Moscow."

It seems almost superfluous to note that this sort of simplistic generalization about the political situation cannot be substantiated even by the stenographic reports of the trials themselves. In addition, more recent comprehensive investigations about Stalinization and the role of the right and left wing opposition in the Soviet Union during the 1930s place us in a better position to see the shortcomings of Bloch's argument.

Yet, under the present circumstances it would also be false and useless to judge retrospectively and on moral grounds Bloch's political analysis and behavior vis-à-vis a cause (which Bloch after all joined and to which he committed himself without being under pressure from Communist party discipline) and to judge him for trying to explain and defend this cause against the overwhelming forces of anti-communist resentment. Let us remember that this was being done while others either felt that the trials simply confirmed what they had always known or, as in the case of the Frankfurt School, abstained from making any kind of systematic analysis. Furthermore, a critique of Bloch at this level would be insufficient, for it could only repeat his own fundamental critique of the negative development of Stalinism and his even earlier remarks about the disastrous narrow-mindedness of bureaucratic mentality and the chronic lack of concrete imagination regarding socialist organization.

What is pertinent here are two problems posed by Bloch himself. These are of much more interest in that he, for his part, considers them solved: the identity crises and strong reality needs of the revolutionary intelligentsia. Ironically it was Bukharin who expressed these most clearly. Confronted by the state prosecutor and imminent death, he underwent an experience which could be called a "double psychology," an unhappy consciousness. At this moment his admiration for the development of the Soviet Union under Stalin became mixed with an irrepressible feeling about the counter-revolutionary course the Soviet Union had taken. Bukharin's
experience was only a highly condensed form of the ambivalent consciousness of West European intellectuals who, while clinging to the proletarian contents of the October Revolution, were beginning to have doubts due to the trials.

The question of whether the court really was a revolutionary tribunal or merely enforced revolutionary legality under the mask of criminal law (as argued by Merleau-Ponty) is a secondary issue compared to the fact that the Moscow trials were a kind of acid test of the dependability of socialist intellectuals and of the strength of their dedication to the October Revolution. In any event, the consideration of these points can have particular significance as a clarification for people in the West, who have had difficulty understanding why the accused were so ready to confess and condemn themselves and why, in some cases, they seemed to have viewed the Soviet Court as the real legal embodiment of their own class. When Bloch speaks about the jubilee of the renegades, he does so because he detects parallels between Robespierrean terror and the Moscow trials, and their polarizing effect upon that sector of the intelligentsia which sympathized with the Revolution. "There is a parallel between the shock of then and the shock of today—between the shock regarding the Revolutionary Tribunal and the shock regarding the Moscow trials. . . . The similarity lies in the hurried and almost totally unheralded desertion at the very moment the Revolutionary Tribunal put enthusiasm to the test—to the test of a concept rooted in the concrete." 2

But the formation and preservation of the identity of the revolutionary intellectual who does not let himself succumb to provocations of terror is not merely the result of abstract individual decision. Such a decision needs to be supported by and fulfilled in a reality which causes alternative decisions to become phantasy, and criticism to become blind rationalization. It is with obvious relief that Bloch seizes upon Feuchtwanger's travel journal Moscow

2. Not all the famous German contemporaries of the French Revolution allowed themselves to be deterred by the Jacobin terror from subscribing to the substantial historical meaning of the Revolution. Among those who continued to subscribe to the Revolution were Kant, Fichte and Hegel. Kant makes a clear statement about this in Streit der Fakultäten (The Dispute of the Faculties): "The revolution of an imaginative people which we have seen taking place before our eyes may succeed or it may collapse. It may be so filled with misery and horrible deeds that a right-thinking person, if he could attempt it for the second time with the hope of success, might still decide never to go through with the experiment at such a high cost. Nevertheless this revolution finds a wishful sympathy in the hearts of its spectators (who themselves are not involved in the game) which borders on enthusiasm, and whose open expression is fraught with danger—proof that this sympathy can have nothing less than a basic moral disposition in the human race as its cause."

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1937, which confirms for him the realistic content of Stalinist policies (Realitätshaltigkeit) and permits him to speak out (again aimed at emigrant psychology) against the moral racketeers and waverers who judge much too rashly or are too contemplative. "They detach socialism from Stalin and paste it on the eternal stars of their imagination and subjectivity." Two sentences are quoted from Feuchtwanger which are not only characteristic of Bloch's position regarding the Soviet Union of the 1930s, but of many communist intellectuals. The first: "If Lenin was the Caesar of the Soviet Union, then Stalin became its Augustus, its 'augmenter' in all respects." The second: "It does one good, after all the wavering of the West, to see an achievement about which one can say with all one's heart, yes, yes, yes."

What is the significance of this realistic content (Realitätshaltigkeit) of Stalinist politics? The victory of fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain terminated the revolutionary movements which began to develop at that time, or which at least possessed a broad organizational and political base among the masses. Consequently, the Proletarian Revolution became confined to the country of its origins, the Soviet Union. Yet, it was already in the second half of the 1920s—in the wake of the bolshevization of the Comintern, the final formulation of socialism in one country and the concern of Western Communist parties for protecting the "fatherland of the workers"—that the entire spectrum of autonomous revolutionary movements was reduced in such a way that the direction of social development in the Soviet Union as designated by Stalin could become the actual reality, the indisputable requirement for all political behavior that was considered communist. A socialist camp was formed, and its fortification absorbed all available energies. The politics of a popular front emerged only when it was already too late. And the united front politics was never taken seriously or consistently pushed—at least on the part of the German Communist Party (KPD).

Stalin's strategy, which in 1925 was still the focus of a struggle being waged (by Trotsky, Bukharin and others) with substantial means and with the objective possibility of realizing alternative developments for the Soviet Union, had established itself once and for all by the mid-1930s. This left an individual with one of two choices: either adaptation to a reality which implied that it was the expression of natural social law, or loss of reality. The established apparatus of Stalinist bureaucracy was thus able to judge any behavior which was directed against it to be in the wrong. In such a situation it was only a question of legal semantics, whether one called it plain criminality, collaboration with fascism, political opposition, sabotage,
etc. The effect is always the same: namely, the breaking of laws which have the status of natural social laws and are effective in a social order that portrays itself as "the paradise of communist atheists viewed from the end of an individual lifetime."

Only when we consider these historical interconnections is it possible to understand why Bloch was not puzzled by the Moscow trials, even though he more than anyone viewed the superficial realism, the insipid machinations of Realpolitik and the undernourishment of socialist imagination as essentially destructive to all revolutionary consciousness. It is here, in fact, that the crucial question must be posed: is Bloch's behavior vis-à-vis the Stalinist trials an expression of the inner nature of his thought or is it a product of the need for identity and reality of a revolutionary intellectual who takes seriously the commitment of his moral materialism? Just as we cannot stamp Hegel as the philosopher of the Prussian state because he lets the development of the moral idea end in the Prussian state, we cannot reduce Bloch's thought, the philosopher in combat, to statements he made about the Moscow trials, for these statements clearly contradict his entire philosophy.

Philosophy of the Revolutionary Process

No other contemporary philosopher has a greater claim to the title of "philosopher of the Revolution" than Bloch. From his early book Geist der Utopie (Spirit of Utopia, 1918) through Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution (Thomas Münzer as Theologian of the Revolution), Erbschaft dieser Zeit (Heritage of this Time) and Prinzip Hoffnung (The Principle of Hope) to Naturrecht und menschliche Würde (Natural Right and Human Dignity) and Politische Messungen (1970), we find an important train of thought emerging in even the most obscure questions concerning epistemology, aesthetics and natural philosophy, a train of thought marked by two fundamental characteristics: a deeply rooted moral materialism which encompasses the entire richness of nature and history, and the will to help promote the manifold and unconnected revolutionary powers in nature and society in their process of self-expression and self-conceptualization.

3. The opposite example: Heidegger's spontaneous agreement with National Socialism is not just an expression of the identity crisis of the bourgeois intellectual. Nothing changed much in the nature of the relationship between his fundamental ontology and fascism when he individually withdrew and distanced himself somewhat from the practices of National Socialism.

4. The following analysis is based in part on an article which I wrote in April 1971 for the journal links. It mainly dealt with Politische Messungen.
From the very onset, of course, it is necessary to defend Bloch against the pervasive theological misuse of his thought. The fact that Bloch until today has been read and discussed more intensively by both Catholic and Protestant theologians than by the political Left is due more to the retardation of Marxist theory than the eschatological qualities of his materialism—a materialism which, within the sterile standards of revolutionary categories, is often misleadingly branded “philosophy of hope.” Quite the contrary, Bloch is the philosopher of revolution in a historically very specific sense. When Marx speaks of the philosophy of Kant as the “German theory of the French Revolution” his use of “German” carries with it a critique of the backwardness of the social conditions—the confining perspectives of which even the thought of the great idealistic philosophy from Kant to Hegel was never completely free. If we delete the elements of pathos, it could be said in contrast that Bloch is the German philosopher of the October Revolution—even when, in recent years, his attention has turned more toward problems of the social revolutionary intelligentsia and the liberation movements of the Third World. To endow his philosophy with a “national” attribute does not in any way limit its general relevance. On the contrary it underscores precisely its concrete materialist content. No other thinker of the German language could have elaborated the experiences of German history with similar intensity and perseverance, could have brought to bear on the subject such a high level of theoretical sophistication and historical sensitivity. This is particularly true concerning his analysis of the changing periods of restoration and counter-revolution, where, with utmost clarity and a minimum of illusion, Bloch sought to determine the lines of necessary revolutionary change. The best materialism is one which applies “differentiations in the concept of progress” to the socialist movement. Bloch sees finally the dawning of a new Vormärz—the perspective of new revolutionary changes bound up with and nourished by the awakening intelligentsia of the advanced industrial world.

What then is the measure of all his political assessments? It is that epoch-making event, the occurrence of the October Revolution and its moral, emancipatory content—which today is no longer tied to the materialist base of one single social formation as could still be assumed by those Marxists struggling against fascism during the time of Stalinism. This historical determination of the standard and measure does not contradict Bloch's aims as stated in the introduction to Politische Messungen and, better yet, in Naturrecht und menschliche Würde—the dialectical interlacing of politics and morality to the point where morality has become
the guiding principle of politics. A demand like this does not make Bloch a moral philosopher or his philosophy a moral Weltanschauung. Bloch has stretched Marx and Engels' idea of the socialist heritage to its utmost limits and filled it with substance. In so doing, he has freed this tradition from the deadly rhetoric which has infected it since Kautsky and has become even more pronounced in orthodox Soviet Marxism itself.

All those things which are not absorbed in the ideologies of class: the unfulfilled promise in the concepts of freedom, equality and brotherhood; the abiding and productive memory of a primitive communist democracy which has always been present historically in morality, in heretical movements and in ideas of natural rights—all these things are the burden of the emancipatory expectations placed in the proletarian revolution. The seizure of power by the proletarian class is an unconditional requirement, but it only brings about the end of prehistory when it realizes what in a class society could only assume the utopian form of demands and dream phantasies. In this sense one can say, modifying Lenin's words about revolutionary Realpolitik, that Bloch's harnessing of that which thrusts toward the future does not divert him from the class contents and alternatives of human drives and imagination, nor does his adherence to "the remaining utopian images in the process of realization" take him away from reality. Rather, it is from just this apparent idealism that he draws his connection to his revolutionary sense of reality. This is demonstrated most clearly in the determination of the main front of the anti-fascist struggle, which for Bloch could only be maintained under two conditions: 1) through an uncompromising critique of the "socialist undernourishment of concrete phantasy," of the "narrowing of intellectual perspectives." Here only those ignorant of Bloch's thought could argue that it was not directed at all factions and organizations of the working class movement. 2) By drawing careful distinctions when analyzing the ambivalent nature of fascist irrationalism—a phenomenon which cannot be swept aside by abstract-rationalistic explanations precisely because the material base of this irrationalism constitutes nothing less than the partially self-destructive, reverse fulfillment of real wishes and hopes of the exploited masses.

_Imagination as a Mode of Experience of the Masses_

The above-mentioned conditions represent themes which run through much of the _Politishe Messungen_ and also through _Vom Hasard zur Katastrophe_. As far as the first level of critique is concerned, Bloch was to
experience its political explosiveness personally in 1957, when he was declared an idealist dangerous to the state, in part by the very same people who had honored him on his 70th birthday in 1955. This occurred at a time when concrete imagination and perspectives would really have been necessary. Of course, it is important to add that incidents like the October events in Poland and the Hungarian uprising had taken place within this brief span of two years.

From the very beginning Bloch was free from the kind of unproductive, naive astonishment which so frequently led to political resignation and traumatic fixations. It was this astonishment which characterized so many German intellectuals, among them many theoreticians of the Frankfurt School, and which was a common reaction to the breakdown of bourgeois culture and liberal guarantees of freedom under fascism. When he counts the lack of praxis and feeling as well as the mechanistic consciousness of socialist intellectuals among the “roots of Nazism,” this critique touches a precarious point in the traditional theories of class consciousness. For even where this is the subject of the critical elaboration and discussion of economistic interpretations, as in the case of the young Lukács, a concrete mediation is still missing between class consciousness, i.e., “objective possibility” as the prime category for historically relevant action, and the real existing dreams and needs of the individual worker which, while reified, point nevertheless to an emerging class consciousness.

Bloch’s criticisms are still very relevant today: “It was precisely the mechanistic intellectualism of many German socialists which ultimately drove many people into the arms of the Nazis. Although they did not gain there an understanding of their situation, they did find a language—no matter how shabby and deceitful—that was directed at an emotionalism (Gefühlsstand) characterized by poverty, instability, and susceptibility to rapture. One does not live by bread alone, especially when one has none. This thesis is irrefutable. It is also valid for countries which are better schooled in politics than Germany, i.e., it is necessary everywhere to occupy concretely the dream areas of the imagination instead of neglecting them altogether and thereby abandoning them to those who are bent on deception and the destruction of reason.” As early as 1937, Bloch, with a clear eye to the bureaucrats of the Communist Parties, made his point: “Now there is undoubtedly no more harmful type within the Revolution today than the radical intellectual, the type devoid of imagination and philosophy, who with abstract intellect and the arrogance of narrow-mindedness, wants to master the richness of life (Daseinsfülle).”
the young Lukács defines as a problem of irrationalism in bourgeois philosophy and considers solved with the actual subject of revolutionary action (Tathandlung), the proletariat, is seen by the materialist Bloch in a practical and historical dimension. He understands National Socialism as a kind of opportunistic materialism. Aside from Bloch, only Wilhelm Reich has attempted in a few studies to develop some premises about fascism from a psychoanalytical point of view and as an everyday phenomenon. However, Reich was particularly limited by his empirical method and never did develop his theory. It was Bloch who never let up, who decoded the fascist ideologies as a diffuse collection of both deformed ideas belonging to the formerly revolutionary bourgeoisie (illustrated incomparably where he talks of the misuse of Fichte's Reden an die deutsche Nation) and real fulfillment of needs, even though they proved deceptive in the end for this reason. The atmosphere of tragic downfall is constantly conveyed in these ideologies.

Iring Fetscher is correct when he says: "Bloch has again and again challenged the practice of the political Right to monopolize such terms as home (Heimat), empire (Reich), even 'German essence' (deutsches Wesen). He is almost the only leftist to have attempted this (Die Zeit, February 12, 1971). Bloch has a unique concept of the specific mode of experience of the masses; imagination, the banal, superstitious content of the consciousness of the common people—all this is a constitutive element of the materialist understanding of science, which can no more be separated from the mode of experience of the masses than it can from the "coproductivity of nature," the sublation (Aufhebung) of the exploitative relation of man to the material of nature. Materialism in fact is defined by the concrete sublation (Aufhebung) of everything that is unmediated. Avant-garde formulation of theory, which abandons the experiences of the masses because they cannot be generalized, loses its own claim to truth. This corresponds to the idealistic brutality by which the basis from which man lives is destroyed. "The lack of mediation with its material continues to be common to both bourgeois economy and technique. Crisis as well as accident form for both these abstractions unsurmountable barriers, for both are contemplative, both are idealistic. Both are characterized by the pure indifference of form to content. And this does not occur just in crises but in technological catastrophes as well. Here and everywhere the lack of mediation of the bourgeois homo faber with the material of his works avenges itself, especially at the moment of incomplete productivity, with the tendency and latency in the material of nature itself. And only when the subject of history, the working human being, understands him or herself as the producer of history
can he or she move closer to the seat of production in the world of nature. Natural energy as friend, technology as the release and delivery of the creations slumbering in the womb of nature, all this is part of the most concrete of concrete utopia." (Prinzip Hoffnung, 2, p. 269).

It is just this materialism, aiming as it does at the conscious, collective appropriation of the social, natural and historical wealth of mankind, that prevents the regression of mankind to those earlier stages of development which can still also be found in the present. And it was precisely fascism which Bloch used to show that there is no idea, no need, no hope which materialist theory can afford to ignore. For none of these elements are ever really disregarded: either they will be appropriated by socialism or they will be added to the resources of its enemies—there is no third possibility.

The economistic reduction of socialist strategies in this way not only destroys the surging revolutionary imagination, but relinquishes the masses to the forces of capitalism: "... then the swindlers can carry on their dealings with the irrational without being disturbed... But there is always the force which caused people to dance on the ruins of the Bastille; this always mysterious joy also belongs to reason and it is this joy which makes reason— in the long run—anti-fascist." It is exactly in this context that the most provocative sentence for left rationalists and the most problematic for liberals appears in the Politische Messungen: "There won't be a muffled, or indeed even a real, revolution in this Germany which is not anointed with a drop of the oil of irrationalism." The new Vormärz, which for Bloch announced itself in the world-wide student and youth protest movement, has (at least in the early phase) confirmed on a theoretical and practical level much of what had been formulated and anticipated in his philosophy—even though the direct literary influence of other theoreticians upon the actual struggle of the European protest movements has been temporarily greater. Yet, there is comparatively speaking no philosophy which was more in agreement with the ideas of the protest movement than Bloch's: the interconnections of political morality, protest, enthusiasm and play; the practical recollection of heretical traditions; the "upright stride"; the reactivation of repressed democratic freedoms; finally, the most significant slogan of the May demonstrations in Paris: "Power to the Imagination!"— all these things are, in their materialist content, insights and demands which are developed in Bloch's philosophy in their entire conceptual richness. Rudi Dutschke certainly recognized this best.

The enormous personal integrity of Bloch, in his thinking but above all in his political conduct, paradoxically may be the reason why there has not yet been a thorough elaboration and discussion of his entire work by the Left.
This will eventually prove unavoidable. To some extent the man himself overshadows his philosophy. Whereas others of great political promise have become disenchanted and have withdrawn from current political debates, often too embittered to enter even into discussion, it is different with Bloch. Although he was their age over half a century ago, to this day he has spared himself no pain—appearing publicly at forums, mass meetings, on radio and TV—in order to declare his solidarity with the goals of democratic and social revolutionary politics and participating actively as a Marxist in the process of formulating opinion within the left movement.

Bloch is a great orator. Who can forget his protest speeches against the emergency laws (Notstandsgesetze) in the Federal Republic and against genocide in Vietnam? I know of no other German philosopher who can speak in front of large audiences without boring them and who makes his language clearly understandable on all levels without sacrificing essential meaning. The sentence which he often quotes from Isaac Babel, “Banality is counter-revolution,” is valid in the first instance for language itself, and to this date Bloch has kept a close watch on the inner dialectics of certain tendencies developing in the New Left, particularly the transformation of praxis, which is blind to theory and history, into politically futile revisionism. Not only does he criticize those whose entire revolutionary activity consists in waiting for the “signal of wildcat strikes,” but he also comes down hard on the self-destructive pragmatism of the Marxist-Leninist groups: they want to leave the university “in order to be in the midst of the working proletariat, in other words in the factories, and in order to rekindle the class consciousness which has so inexplicably been extinguished. The point was not to go there just to distribute leaflets, but to be a member of the working class itself... Instead of high sounding phrases they use simple, commonly understood slogans which they coined in trivial haste in order to recuperate from academic formality. With the effort to make speech understandable, and even more with the increased understanding of the short term goals, there develops a general hostility toward theory... At any rate, ab ovo practice which is inimical to theory and necessarily short-sighted contains in itself the danger of missing not only the long-range goal of all or nothing but even the short-range target.”

Both these books containing the political works of Bloch, components of an “active renaissance of Marxism,” are indispensable reading for every democrat and socialist. In presenting a consistent connection between the philosophically elaborated experiences of bourgeois society and the working class movement, they help break down new dogmatisms and, in addition,
demonstrate a means for philosophy to survive without having to surrender political effectiveness. From the beginning a philosopher in combat, Bloch himself has continually held to the simple practical maxim which he had formulated as early as 1905: the upright stride is the last to be learned.

Translated by Jack Zipes