Notes


2 Une sélection arbitraire de textes provenant des tomes 5, 6 et 7 sont disponibles en français dans Jürgen Habermas, Écrits politiques, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1990.


4 « wir müssen uns für kritische Erfahrungen offenhalten ».

5 Expression que Habermas emprunte à Fritz Ringers (The Decline of the German Mandarins 1890-1933, Cambridge/Mass., 1969).


7 Une version française de cet article est publiée dans Symposium, Vol III, no1 (Printemps 1999), p.53-69.


9 Sa conférence s’intitulait “Die postnationale Konstellation und die Zukunft der Philosophie” (Cf. Information Philosophie, 4, Oktober 1998).

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Assembling (Post)modernism: The Utopian Philosophy of Ernst Bloch
JOHN MILLER JONES

Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) is a major twentieth-century European social thinker in the same league as Adorno, Benjamin or Gadamer, and arguably the greatest theoretician of Utopianism of any time. Yet, at least in recent years, he has not attracted anywhere near the same level of scholarly attention that has been accorded similar figures. Partly, this is because Bloch was an unrepentant, sometimes strident Marxist, and today of course Marx’s ideas are decidedly out of favour. Bloch often robustly defended Stalin and the Soviet Union (and not always out of duress), long after his erstwhile
colleagues in the Frankfurt School had decided that 'really existing socialism' was an historical dead-end, an apotheosis of the repressive and authoritarian tendencies of twentieth-century modernity and therefore not substantially different than Nazi Germany. Furthermore, he chose to settle in Leipzig in East Germany after the Second World War, rather than stay in America (as did Marcuse), or return to the Federal Republic (the destination of Adorno and Horkheimer). (It is worth pointing out, however, that Bloch was never a Communist Party member, and that his tenure in the GDR became increasingly intolerable the longer he stayed there. Indeed, during a trip to West Germany in 1961, he and his wife decided not to return to Leipzig and accepted the offer of a university position at Tübingen, where he spent the rest of his days.) Outside of Germany, this situation of relative neglect has been compounded by the undeniable difficulty of Bloch's writings, the sheer diversity of his influences, the highly syncretic, even 'heretical' version of Marxism he promulgated, and also by the fact that the translation of his works into English has been a rather haphazard affair. (For instance, his magnum opus, the three-volume The Principle of Hope to which Bloch devoted some twenty years of his life, has only been available in English translation since 1986.) These factors, combined with the strongly messianic and apocalyptic tendencies of Bloch's writings, have conspired to make his ideas appear (at least on the surface) embarrassingly outmoded to many in these postmodern times.

Perhaps this explains why that when published in 1995, the rather slim volume under review here was only the third full-length study in English to deal exclusively with Bloch. (It has since been followed by Vincent Geoghegan's excellent, if more introductory study Ernst Bloch in 1996.) The author, John Miller Jones, is an American scholar of German philosophy and social thought who currently holds a post at the Universität Hannover in Germany. As stated in the acknowledgements, Assembling (Post)modernism grew out of his Phd research, in the course of which Jones was fortunate enough to have been able to gain access to documents and materials relating to Bloch's life and work that were unobtainable before the demise of the GDR in 1989 and its absorption into a unified German state. Accordingly, he provides us with some rich biographical information, particularly relating to his attitude towards the Communist regime in the East, which bears directly on the evolution of Bloch's oeuvre. Yet this study is neither a straightforward intellectual biography, nor a comprehensive exposition of Bloch's ideas. (The nod for the latter goes to Wayne Hudson's The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch, long out of print.) Assembling (Post)modernism is instead a refreshingly idiosyncratic text that engages certain Blochian themes with the current debate over modernism versus postmodernism. Some of these characteristic leitmotifs include: architecture, especially the recurring trope of the Tower of Babel, and related metaphors of space and construction; the
German concept of *Heimat* — roughly ‘homeland’, although it has no precise English equivalent; and the transgressive fecundity of the imagination, as registered in a plethora of dreams, fairy-tales, and narratives, which for Bloch concerns the peculiarly human capacity to transcend the immediately given in order to conceptualize a future that is not yet realized.

Jones’ central argument can be summarized roughly as follows: modernist theories, especially that of Marx, envisaged the future, non-alienated society as something to be actively fabricated through human agency in concordance with a rational plan. Marxist theory was held to be ‘scientific’ in the sense that it grasped the essential qualities of human nature and the vicissitudes of history, and had therefore successfully located the immanent tendencies within society that heralded a transition to socialism. Although Marx explicitly railed against the ‘Utopian socialists’, it is often argued that his conception of communism (which was, after all, the ‘riddle of history solved’) implied a belief in a universalistic form of human emancipation, and was hence prototypically Utopian in the ‘social engineering’ sense of the term. Postmodern approaches, by contrast, have tended to regard this sort of Utopianism as incipiently totalitarian, because it imposes an abstract plan for human perfection on a complex, heterodox reality, and thereby destroys the qualitative and the particular. Accordingly, postmodernists such as Lyotard have eschewed the sort of monolithic universalism which they feel Marxism has actively promoted. They voice their preference for a multiplicity of agonistic and largely incommensurate language-games and perspectives that do not ride roughshod over gender, class, ethnic or sexual differences, and through which sociocultural diversity can be preserved. Postmodern theorists reject images of ‘building’ (as in the ‘construction’ of socialism), and instead prefer metaphors of ‘play’ and similar aesthetic or poetic notions. Although Bloch is typically lumped in with the Marxist modernists, Jones’ assertion is that Bloch develops a much more subtle position that supersedes the sterile modernist/postmodernist dichotomy. Bloch retains the postmodernist emphasis on a plurality of traditions and the celebration of the local and the particular — for instance, his notion of *Heimat* is not any place but a specific location with particular meanings for individuals — yet, at the same time, he maintains a radical hope that humanity can move towards the construction of an emancipated, shared ‘homeland’ within which antagonisms and conflicts between groups and individuals can be resolved, yet where particularity can continue to flourish. To cite Jones, Bloch seems to envisage a form of critique that would avoid both of the extreme positions of crass modernism and vulgar postmodernism — which might then be termed (post)modernism — ... a perspective that recognizes both similarities and differences. Such a viewpoint would not demand the
choice of either unity or diversity but would describe how these two categories intersect. Such a principle could incorporate the contribution of postmodern theorists within a paradigm of knowledge that recognizes at least the possibility of completing the edifice of enlightenment (36).

In undertaking to ratify this thesis, Jones engages Bloch with such thinkers as Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, Heidegger, Kant, and others, in relation to such themes as space, language, aesthetics, and so on. In the main, these engagements are highly successful and illuminating, and to my mind Jones effectively vindicates his argument that Bloch can be read as a (post)modern thinker who offers us a way out of the modernist/postmodernist impasse. His writing is lively and pellucid (no small feat given Bloch's notoriously difficult and allusive prose style), the digressions stimulating, and his main arguments convincingly prosecuted. It is to be hoped that this book will convince many readers to discover Bloch's work and not to relegate it to the dust-heap of history in the rush to embrace postmodernity orthodoxy, during an age in which 'hope' has become almost a forgotten concept.

References


MICHAEL GARDINER, University of Western Ontario

*Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*

MICHAEL KELLY, ed. in chief


This major reference work, published last August, has been in progress for well over two years. The work was initially expected to appear in two volumes, with a total length of approximately 1,800 pages, to be published by Garland Press. These expectations changed as the work progressed. Established scholars from numerous countries contributed a total of some six hundred articles written just for this work. Each article was refereed by members of the editorial board, which consists of forty-one members and reads like a Who's Who of contemporary aesthetics and literary theory, including, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, Stanley Cavell, Arthur C. Danto,