

PROGRESS AND MEMORY

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The academic treatise on ‘Differentiation in the Concept of Progress’ (GA 13, 118 ff) is significant because on the one hand it puts forward a theory of history that focuses on what has been left out, forgotten or mislaid in the process or history and on the other it contains a discussion which is crucial for the construction of the theory of memory. A reflection on memory cannot do without a clarification of its interpretation of time.

The theory of progress presupposes Bloch’s theory of the non-simultaneity of historical development, and is developed in *Heritage of Our Times*. Bloch’s intention in this text is to inherit the cultural forms of the late bourgeoisie and make them effective against fascist appropriation. This is done by means of a process of ‘montage’ which combines as in a collage the cultural phenomena of the proto-history of fascism, ‘the strange mixture of dawn and dusk of the nineteen-twenties’ (GA 4, 17), and asks about its influence. The theory of non-simultaneity seeks — like the later *Theses on the Concept of Progress* — to understand the dialectic of continuity and break in the historical process, and thus to conceive in categories the influence of the past on the present. On this basis the theory is able to give a philosophical answer to the central question of all memory, that in the present there is impulsion and cause to actualize the historical past. The theory of non-simultaneity leads to a consciousness that the break with the past inherent in historical progress is not complete, that rudimentary older forms of existence cross over this break in discontinuous continuity and suddenly become contradictions in a present that is strange to them. From the perspective of non-simultaneity, historical memory means tracing these texts, these fragments of the past which are immediately present in the present, and bringing them consciously into the present, assuming their utopian potential as an inheritance. The legacy becomes a memory of all that is unrealized, both in the present and in the past.

The historical tradition cannot, to put it in the Nietzschean manner, set aside the past as a mere relic, the book of history cannot be closed. The past as an objective influence on the present must be detected in its concrete mediation in the current historical situation, the ‘now in motion’ must be ‘expanded’ (GA 4, 122). Bloch tries to achieve this expansion of the concept of the present in its current historical forms. The present then appears as a more complex space of reaction of simultaneous and non-simultaneous social oppositions. It is therefore worth keeping at home ‘the utopian and subversive elements, the submerged matter of what has not yet occurred’ (ibid.). Even a more formal concept of linear progress which feels itself capable of having transcended the past becomes blind to its influence and restricts the present to its simultaneous phenomenal forms — in other words, to what truly occurred in the enduring social formation. Bloch linked the requirement to remember what the historical tradition has forgotten and misplaced to the critique of the thinking of abstract understanding and the destruction of tradition in capitalist modernity, ‘because the entirety of earlier development is not yet sublated in capitalism and its dialectic’ (GA 4, 124). The ‘sterile’ now (GA 4, 106) of capitalist reality should be criticized insofar as it demands the realization of an interrupted evolution through the

elaboration of the moments of the past that have not yet been destroyed by capitalist modernity; that is, through memory.

By 'dialectic' Bloch meant a pluritemporal and plurispatial dialectic which is concerned not only with the linear movement of history but also and above all with mediating the heterogeneous historical processes of the present that take place in it. It is more a question of the historical forms that coexist than of those that are in opposition — in other words, of breaking with the idea that that which is historically more recent is *ab ovo* and *a priori* better. Bloch developed this idea in the treatise on progress. Given that in this dialectic there is a denial of the concept of linear chronometric time and of the associated conception of history as a chain of events, and time appears in its contents, the space of the present is filled with the heterogeneous contents of different times. The work of dialectics is to produce the philosophical mediation of these time-spaces that coexist kaleidoscopically in present time; in other words, to make the present core conscious of the past contents. So it is not, as Bloch makes clear in referring to the concept of memory (GA 4, 125), a question of the closed global context of history but of drawing up into the consciousness of the present time the 'incomplete realm of the past' GA 4, 126) where its specific virulence is revealed in the present. The dialectical method is thus philosophical 'montage' as the produced, interrupted and open global context of past and present.

Fundamentally, Bloch is interested not in criticizing the idea of progress but in saving it through reflection on its aporias. This is done in memory, recovering 'the losses in progress' (GA 13, 118) 'but it was always quite clear that even an assumed progress was not necessarily so forever. There is something that can be mislaid...' (ibid.). Bloch would make room for what had been lost, historically, in development, he would bring it to memory in the progress of the historical process. The concept of progress, into which are here incorporated corrections of differentiation, goes back to the universal historical idea of the Enlightenment, thanks to which the continuous perfecting of humanity was to come about. In France it is linked to the name of Condorcet, and in Germany to that of Herder.

It is the concept of linear time which constitutes the thinking of the automatism of progress. The empty temporal series reduces history to a succession of events; the historical past as the result of the restriction to mere contiguity is treated, in short, as 'what has been', as what is already past. In this formal 'already past' historical contents are necessarily perceived as closed, there is no longer any impulsion on the present in them.

Thus, the 'fetishistic' idea of progress to the continuity of time (GA 13, 120) is the nexus between the understanding of empty chronometric time and the concept of linear progress at which Bloch directs his critique of progress. Only in a past that does not conform to a temporal-formal conclusiveness, but instead contains in itself as yet unrealized potentials, can a 'subsequent history' unfold — in other words, rise up non-simultaneously in the now. If cultural tradition were temporally linked to the social nexuses of its constitution, there would be no history of the reception of cultural figures, the actuality this past consciousness would be forgotten and would be lost in the process, erased from the consciousness of the present. Culture is absolutely non-simultaneous, it contains forms which are not past and have not yet occurred, and

the conditions of possibility of its knowledge are produced by the historical process itself. Thus is born a dialectic of past and present which must necessarily set aside the formal understanding of time that separates the time from its contents, in which precisely it manifests itself and allows itself to be appreciated.

In order to understand historically this nascent ‘polyphony’, the interrupted development that can once again become present, Bloch breaks down the linear concept of historical time into a braiding of temporal moments full of social content, a *multiversum* of historical forms in the present.

It is a question, for Bloch, of a kind of ‘extra of space in the historical timeline’ in contrast to the hierarchizing of historical periods (*GA* 13, 128) — in other words, of a non-simultaneity as the coexistence and integration of different historical times in the space of the present. It is a question, then, of methodically filling up time and temporal links with an amplitude of space in the represented course of history (*ibid.*). In order to leave a space in the present for forms already past, Bloch complements the concept of with a heterogeneous temporal structure, filled with social history. Yesterday lives on today.

The formulation of an elastic structure — in other words, with historical and social content — embodies a critique of the unilaterality of modernity’s concept of time. The rational calculation of time, measurable time oriented linearly towards an end, subjugates social relationships and identifies the continuum of time with progress. This is the development of the rational calculation of time that is carried out in modernity. Against the concept of clock time, metrically uniform, and also against the reduction of time to subjective temporal experience, Bloch formulates a theory of historical time, linking time once again to its social contents: ‘the time is only through what happens, and not only where something happens’ (*GA* 13, 129). In *Experimentum Mundi*, Bloch established in categories that the contents that constitute time have, thanks to their development, a specific time of their own: ‘every living creature has its own time in accordance with its life, which remains below uniform clock time, or overtakes it...’ (*GA* 15, 104). The subjecting of this particular individual time to a standardized calculation of time means interrupting the specificity of its developments. Rather, we must allow these developments their qualitative temporal span. In short, time is never an abstract schema of change, but its specific elastic set of trajectories, which modifies itself on the basis of these changes.

The determination of time in the Transcendental Aesthetic of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* shows specifically where Bloch’s distinction is situated, insofar as Kant determines time as a pure form of *a priori* intuition — in other words, as a formal condition of the possibility of the phenomenon: the phenomenon is not thinkable without time, nor is time thinkable without its content. It is a pure source of knowledge, *a priori*, prior to the objects of knowledge. And pure time is one-dimensional: Kant represents ‘the course of time by a line progressing to infinity, the content of which constitutes a series that is of only one dimension.’ While these findings cannot be refuted formally, the question remains open whether time can, in general, detached from reality, and manifest in it, enter into consciousness. Pure time is amorphous and outside of experience. Time will be experienced without its objectifications — in other words, in concrete systems of reference, where its formal infinity enters a given material finitude. In the Kantian concept of time, the specificity

of historical time cannot be appreciated, it systematically evades analysis, and in the linear concept of progress shows how the classical physical concept of one-dimensional linear time is mistakenly applied to history. Hegel, on the other hand, declared the objectivity of time as constitutive of the concept of historical time. Here time is 'intuited becoming' — in other words, the actual development of contradictions and not merely a condition of possibility of the objects of knowledge. Hegel salutes the Kantian determinations of time as pure form of sensibility, but notes their inadequacy: 'everything, it is said, *comes to be* and *passes away* in time. If abstraction is made from everything, namely from what fills time, and also from what fills space, then what we have left over is empty time and empty space; in other words, these abstractions of externality are posited and represented as if they were for themselves. But it is not in time that everything comes to be and passes away, rather time itself is the becoming [...].' According to Hegel, time can only be grasped in the change that takes place in it. Insofar as Hegel argues that time as such cannot be separated other than formally from the objective development of the things of it — establishing, in other words, the unity of time and its changing contents — his philosophy formulated for the first time the specification of a material-qualitative concept of historical time beyond the time of physicalism. Bloch takes this model and effects a differentiation. Non-simultaneity is then the physical presence of historical forms — those whose formal time has passed — in the present. Bloch can do this because he incorporates a differentiation into the Hegelian theory, which holds fast to the continuity of time, by means of a concept of discontinuous time: if time is linked to historical objects, insofar as developments are halted or interrupted, or not resumed, it is discontinuous. Precisely because the objects in development have a peculiar time, and cannot be subjected to any unitary temporal measurement, continuity is strange in this thought. This has implications for progress. For Hegel, the thinker of the continuum of history, the past is always closed and swallowed up by Chronos, and development determined and ready, so that in its reality it is known only as that which has been recorded in memory, while for Bloch progress is a dialectic of continuity and rupture: development is incomplete, it can be surpassed by memory in consciousness and therefore a moment of possibility can be perceived in it. The elasticity of time in history stems from the heterogeneity of historical materials. In order for to render accessible to experience the bundle of differing temporal thicknesses and intensities and movements of development that take place in the present, and their heterogeneous evolutionary tendencies, Bloch introduces a Riemannian time, by analogy to Riemannian space (GA 13, 136.) Bloch applies the mathematician Bernhard Riemann's concept of non-Euclidean space, in which 'the metric field is not rigidly given in a definitive form, but is causally dependent on the material and changes with it' (GA 13, 133), to the conception of time. Just as in a Riemannian space the metric field depends on the system of material reference, so Bloch makes the material group of the temporal metric depend on the 'different distributions of historical material' (ibid.) it is to represent.

Bloch's concept of progress as an open unit of heterogeneous developments gives way, in present consciousness, to potentialities not realized in the past. Only where the past still has a present potential can memory take place as historical knowledge. The concept of linear progress mortifies the past, and memory is then nothing more than historical memory, with an antiquary's purely archival relation to history as a sum of facts or, at best, of cultural assets. Bloch's concept of progress involves the grasping of non-simultaneous development with a view to the centralization and

accentuation of historical becoming. Insofar as the past returns to be conceived in and to determine the present and as such is not that which the past has left behind but that which may become the object of progress by way of memory, Bloch makes references to meaning in the sequence of historical processes, interrupting the chronometry and raising the historical context to consciousness. The historically distanced coincides, by virtue of the correspondence of contents, with the present; developments which are interrupted and therefore still have utopian content are inherent to the process and can give it real progress as forgotten tendencies anchored in the past. Memory amounts in this context to making the losses of progress recognizable, to bringing to development that which has been forgotten in history. In the restitution and new determination of historical contents implicit in this 'intention of progress' lies the relevance of the theory of progress for the concept of memory in the philosophy of Ernst Bloch.

Bloch's critique of the empty and homogeneous concept of time is akin to Walter Benjamin's critique of the theory of progress. I would like to turn now to this critical affinity, without losing sight of the difference in fundamental theoretical intentions between the two thinkers. For Bloch it was a question of rescuing and reviving the concept of progress by problematizing it. For Benjamin, on the other hand, it was a question of exercising a fundamental critique of progress in history. Bloch emphasizes, especially in *Heritage of Our Times*, his methodological affinity to Benjamin, specifically in attending — as Surrealist thinking does — to 'contents often discarded or missing' (GA 4, 369). This methodology, which is constitutive of Benjamin's thought, Bloch uses instead to gain access and points of application to philosophical problems.

This procedure is rare in Benjamin. For Benjamin, the *Spes* of Andrea Pisano on the door of the Baptistery in Florence is the allegory of true hope: Pisano represents the winged *Spes* seated on a bench, stretching his hands toward a fruit that is unattainable. 'Sitting, she helplessly extends her arms toward a fruit that remains beyond her reach. And yet she is winged. Nothing is more true.' If we look carefully at the *Spes* we will see that the fruit really is unreachable, particularly if she tries deliberately and perseveringly to reach the object of her hope; the unattainability of the fruit is thus the result of the *Spes*'s fear of grasping the content of her hope. Bloch also commented on Pisano's *Spes*: 'Sitting waiting, although she has wings, and yet despite them she stretches out, like Tantalus, her arms towards the unattainable fruit. Hope, too, much more dispossessed than memory, can seem an evil.' For Benjamin, the futile gesture of the *Spes* is the true, for Bloch it is simply a symbol of false hope, a figure in which hope behaves 'deceptively.' The difference between Bloch and Benjamin is found even in the intentionality of hope as *docta Spes*, which stems from its being founded in Bloch's theory of possibility and is therefore the expression of a thinking of development. For Benjamin, the truth of the *Spes* is found in the non-intentionality of the gesture. Again, this difference between intentional development and unintentional truth should be understood on the basis of the aforementioned affinity between the two thinkers, particularly in the context of memory and memories; Bloch himself noted his difference from Benjamin here too: 'Surrealist philosophizing (Benjamin's, JZ) is exemplary as a retouching and assembly of fragments [...] As assembly [...] it is constitutive of it that the fragment, and not the intention, die and be used for reality, one-way streets also have a direction [...]' (GA 4, 371).

Benjamin, like Bloch, linked the critique of progress to the critique of the chronometric understanding of time in history: 'The representation of a progress of humankind in history cannot be separated from the representation of a progress that takes place in a homogeneous, empty time. The critique of the idea of this process should constitute the basis of the idea of progress as such.' For Benjamin, too, there was a need 'to make the continuum of history explode'. This critique of progress is twofold: first, the critique of a progress that only takes into account the accumulated sum of technical progress; this 'recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society', aspires only to the exploitation of nature and leads to what Benjamin calls the 'continuum of catastrophe in the course of history'. But secondly, and justly keeping in mind that technical progress as permanent catastrophe, Benjamin's critique of progress has a methodological aspect for the work of the historical materialist (and at this point is in contact with Bloch's approach): putting an end to the continuum of history reveals the vision of the actuality of the contents of history. The past enters the future, history is 'of the present': the materialist cannot renounce the concept of a present that is not transition but where time stops and falls quiet. Because this concept defines precisely the present, in which he writes, he for it, history. 'Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.' As against homogeneous, empty time Benjamin conceived a 'kind of concentrated time', which is exchanged perspectively with the present. Benjamin coined for this the rigorously categorical concept of *Jetztzeit*, 'now-time'. With this concept Benjamin, like Bloch, turned against the antiquarian concept of history, which equates historical objects with cultural assets and distances itself from the present. Time is the specific relation produced in the process — in other words, a constellation of a particular present and the particular knowledge that only it can have of the past. Each present is an occasion to take a new and free look at the past, and therefore is not simply transition in the temporal series but a means of historical knowledge. For Benjamin, too, the past is latent in the present: "'The truth will not run away from us": in the historical outlook of historicism these words of Gottfried Keller mark the exact point where historical materialism cuts through historicism. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.'

In Benjamin's approach, history becomes the object of a construction: the historical context will be destroyed in order to liberate the forces of the past in the present (*Passagenwerk: Atomspaltung*). The past loaded with actuality (*Jetztzeit*) is the object of a construction in which there is a correspondence between past and present, in collision with the present core of historical tradition. Unlike an approach such as Bloch's, the thinking of history as construction means constructing the cessation of becoming through the 'tiger's leap into the past'. This method is directed against historicism, the universal historical process which 'musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time'. In contrast, the constructive method is salvation of the historical contents of a historical progress which represents a history of the tradition of the victor of the history: 'A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.' The constructive method is a method of remembering, very close, no doubt, to Bloch's concept of historical memory. Both talk about what is new in the old, and for both the real progress is not in the continuity

of the course of time but in its interruptions. What becomes evident here with equal force is Bloch and Benjamin's common intention of founding a tradition opposed to the dominant tradition in relation to history, and the need to manifest their theoretical differences. In Benjamin's concept of monad, construction is seen as representing a singular configuration of past and present which crystallizes in a historical situation. Bloch, however, as we have seen, conceives of 'remembrance' as renewed understanding of the oppressed developments of the past, sets in motion one again in his memory the object passed over in history, paralysed in the historical fact, integrating them into the current historical development. Thus Bloch formulates the present as a means of mediation between past and future, his memory not only aspires to the present but beyond it, to the tendential future of the past. This always signifies an intentional access to tradition, which Benjamin renounces completely. It also signifies a difference in their respective concepts of history: Bloch sees history as a space of possibilities, in which intention can be conceived in the fullest sense, in which there is room for a possible realization of human purposes; for Benjamin it is a question, as his recourse to the theological concept of Messianism shows, of freeing ourselves from history. This difference in the concept of history is at bottom the difference between dialectical image and dialectical form, between truth without intention and intentional praxis. To rescue it is to arrive at the theoretical form of two models of historical memory, the need for which is recognized both by Benjamin and by Bloch in the course of their critiques of progress.

'The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe.' The fact of our simply continuing in this way is the catastrophe. It is not that which is always imminent, but that which is always given. We read here a radical denial of the representation that establishes progress as such in the historical process — even if only, as in the case of Bloch, as a possibility. 'On the Concept of History' and essential parts of *The Arcades Project* reject progress as an immediate tendency inherent in historical reality. Authentic progress is the path of humanity towards freedom that extends into the history, but 'principally the redemption of humanity from history.' In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin illustrated the negativity of the history in a highly illuminating image, making clear the difference from Bloch's concept of progress: 'Marx said that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps things are very different. It may be that revolutions are the act by which the human race travelling in the train applies the emergency brake.' In Marxist theory revolutions define the quantum leaps in historical development, in which one social formation is replaced by another as a result of its own internal contradictions and make possible qualitatively new historical developments. With the image of the emergency brake, Benjamin goes absolutely against the idea of development, which Bloch merely tried to differentiate. The face of Benjamin's angel of history 'is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The present storm is what we call progress.' The real hope does not, then, as in Bloch, lie in a possible tendency in history, but is directed like a Messianic force against the tendency of historical processes. (Bsp: *Der Historiker denkt nicht an die befreiten Enkel, sondern an die unterdrückten Grosseltern*). This is why the angel faces not the

future but the past: Messianic forms which are hidden in history are recognized in memory. The instant of memory is one of danger in which the image of memory enters into an arbitrary constellation with the present. 'The lightning image of the past in the now of its recognition is an image remembered according to its subsequent determination. It resembles the images of his own past that come to a man at a moment of danger. These images appear, as we know, arbitrarily. History, in a strict sense, is therefore an image of arbitrary memory, an image that at the moment of danger suddenly shows itself to the historical subject.' In this arbitrariness of the dialectical image we can see the differences with Bloch. In the theory of non-simultaneity the forms of the historical past are questioned in their moments of possibility, and therefore intentionally developed. The future moment of the past lies in the new determinations to which the actualizing present leads. Benjamin's concept of memory lacks that intention that here, in the now, suddenly pushes the knowing subject. He does not take up the interests of the historian, but seeks to save fragments forgotten in history at the moment of their knowability. 'The true picture of the past flits by.' For Benjamin it is not a question, as it is for Bloch, of a process of knowledge within historical processes, but of that which evades it — in other words, the singular experience of history, born in the involuntary memory of the 'historic moment'.

It is clear that Bloch and Benjamin refer to an open and unconcluded history, and that both theoretically actualize hopes in the past. Bloch's concept of memory is epistemic, and refers to effective history — that is, to the renewed development of the cultural heritage; in contrast, Benjamin emphasizes a singular experience with history. Benjamin's concept of history as the continuance of catastrophe is in opposition to Bloch's theory of possibility to the extent that history appears in the latter as a movement in which both catastrophe and real progress take place. Because more possibilities can always appear in the process, Bloch's perspective makes it possible to mobilize the forces of the past against catastrophic tendencies, so that authentic progress can take place. Thus two models of historical memory complement one another here. Precisely the occasion of this memory, the modern consciousness of time and progress, which spurs men blindly towards the future, constantly accelerating life and thereby making it necessarily less conscious, makes clear a social function of remembering that Benjamin made known in a striking form: the need to halt, to reflect on the historical process and to devote special attention to all that has been lost in its unidimensionality.