

## Western Marxism and Death

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Abstract: This paper is the first step in developing a systematic Marxist reflection on the theme of death. The effort faces some stiff opposition: some of the leading Western Marxist figures alive today aver that they are interested in life, not death. Badiou has made it clear on more than one occasion that there is no point in talking about death, for he is interested only in life. Negri is concerned with what may give life, in creative being, and not death. Even Jameson is remarkably reticent to discuss the topic. By contrast, we need to remind ourselves of Adorno's comment that any Marxist approach fails if it does not deal adequately with death. In order to find some substantial reflections on death in the Marxist tradition, it is necessary to go back to Horkheimer, Adorno and Bloch.

The paper deals, first, with the differences and overlaps between Horkheimer and Adorno. Despite the significant overlap between them, especially in terms of the deleterious effects of capitalism, reified social relations and the pervasiveness of instrumental reason, they emphasise different aspects of the anticipation of death. For Adorno, the reification of death has at least two dialectically opposed outcomes: death has become a mechanical process of being snuffed out; the dialectical outcome – on the other side of reification – of this technical banality of death is the cleavage between death and life, a casualty of the fragmentation of the unity of life. Horkheimer agrees concerning the repression of death, but the effect of that repression is an unfathomable terror that is conveniently blocked in whatever way possible. He also argues that the anticipation of death is very different for the millionaire or the pauper.

From there I move on to explore Bloch's various and uneven efforts at making death a central feature of Marxist philosophy. While I find his championing of the kernel or soul in *Traces* problematic, I am more enamoured with his argument against dogmatism on the matter of death (neither dogmatic religious belief nor dogmatic materialist denial of the possibility of something after death), with his distinction between physical death and the ontological status of death, and with the metaphors of gate and door, journey and unknown destination. Perhaps the most pointed treatment of all appears in a discussion between Bloch and Adorno called 'Something's Missing'. While Bloch reiterates his better earlier arguments, Adorno suggests that the resistance to the possibility of overcoming death is the resistance to utopia/socialism itself, for it is an attachment to the status quo; indeed, utopia cannot be imagined without the elimination of death.

Death depicts the hardest counter-utopia.<sup>1</sup>

The elimination of death is indeed the crucial point.<sup>2</sup>

Marxists are not adept at talking about death, although they are by no means alone. But death is arguably one of the most under-studied elements of Marxist thought and practice, with some of the leading Western Marxist figures alive today averring that they are interested in life, not death.<sup>3</sup> Badiou has made it clear on more than one occasion that there is no point in talking about death for he is interested only in life.<sup>4</sup> Negri in all his enthusiasm and energy is concerned with what may give life, in creative Being, and not death.<sup>5</sup> Even Jameson is remarkably reticent to discuss the topic. Suspicious, perhaps, of the justification of death through the problematic valorisation of (self-)sacrifice for the sake of a better society, assuming that death is the ultimate end beyond which it is meaningless to speculate, preferring to focus on what is known and possible, they opt for life and simply avoid its grim opponent. This is a mistake, it seems to me, but in order to find those willing to face death squarely and fearlessly and offer some substantial treatments, we need to go back some way in the tradition – to Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Ernst Bloch. For, as Adorno comments, any Marxist approach fails if it does not deal adequately with death.<sup>6</sup>

Their observations may conveniently – and obviously – be divided in terms of what happens before and after death. As we might expect, the former category is full to overflowing, while the latter has a sparser collection of comments. In the following, I begin with Horkheimer

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, ed. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 1988 [1975]), p. 9; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch," in *Gespräche Mit Ernst Bloch*, ed. Reiner Taub and Harald Wieser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 66

<sup>2</sup> Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," p. 8; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch," p. 65

<sup>3</sup> I should specify, especially for Chinese and other Asian readers with their own distinct Marxist traditions, that my focus in this paper is Western Marxism.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 35-9; ———, *L'éthique: Essai Sur La Conscience Du Mal* (Paris: Nous, 2003 [1993]), pp. 61-6; ———, *Logics of Worlds, Being and Event*, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum Press, 2009), pp. 507-14; ———, *Logiques Des Mondes: L'être Et L'événement*, 2 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), pp. 529-37.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Negri and Cesare Casarino, *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 152-3, 155-6; Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)Contemporary Variations*, trans. Timothy S. Murphy, et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 105-11.

<sup>6</sup> Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," p. 8; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch," p. 65.

and Adorno, before passing onto Bloch and then a stunning discussion between Adorno and Bloch.

## **Baleful, reified death**

Although one may detect a significant overlap between Horkheimer and Adorno, especially in terms of the deleterious effects of capitalism, reified social relations and the pervasiveness of instrumental reason, they emphasise different aspects of the anticipation of death. For Adorno, the reification of death has at least two dialectically opposed outcomes. On the one hand, death has become a mechanical process of being snuffed out. Once the dignity of the individual is gone, each of us becomes replaceable, a stand-in ready to take our place. The degradation of human life leads to the degradation of death. Even the old, who die at the end of a full life, are no longer regarded as being full of sage advice, but become pathologised (gerontology!) and enter a second dependency. And so, in the very repression of a healthy approach to death, society itself has taken on the aura of death. The most telling example for Adorno is genocide, especially the mass murder of approximately six million Jews (as well as gypsies and homosexuals) at the hands of the Nazis. In his work, Auschwitz becomes the keyword for genocide as such, leading him to make the oft-cited point that philosophy would never be the same after Auschwitz and that education must ensure that it never happens again. Indeed, the new categorical imperative is that human beings need to mobilise all their thoughts and acts to prevent anything similar from taking place in the future.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the dialectical outcome – on the far side of reification – of this technical banality of death is the cleavage between death and life, a casualty of the fragmentation of the unity of life. Death has become external and strange, outside the totality of life. It has become an incomprehensible interruption, an accident that comes in from outside. As a result, since death is now alien, it is a terrifying breach and one faces it with unaccountable panic.<sup>8</sup>

Although Horkheimer agrees to some extent, he differs in emphasis. Both he and Adorno are concerned with the repression of death, arguing that it equates to a forgetting of

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<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973 [1966]), pp. 361-8; ———, "Negative Dialektik," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003 [1966]), pp. 354-61; ———, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, Pickford, Henry W. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998 [1963/1969]), pp. 89-103, 191-204; ———, "Eingriffe: Kritische Modelle 1," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003 [1963]), pp. 573-94; ———, "Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003 [1969]), pp. 674-90; ———, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978 [1951]), pp. 58-60, 165-6, 231-3; ———, "Minima Moralia," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003 [1951]), pp. 65-7, 188-9, 264-6.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 368-73; ———, "Negative Dialektik," pp. 361-6; Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1998]), pp. 106-7; ———, *Metaphysik: Begriffe Und Probleme*, Nachgelassenen Schriften (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006 [1998]), pp. 166-7.

history,<sup>9</sup> with dire consequences for the nature of society: “True humanity would repeat the rite according to which the life that seeks to forget death stands all the more certainly under its scourge”.<sup>10</sup> Yet, for Horkheimer the effect of that repression is an unfathomable terror that is conveniently blocked in whatever way possible. The frenzy of consumption and the absolute attachment to the trash of industrial production are all part of the effort to deny the reality of death.<sup>11</sup> But Horkheimer also points out that death varies among different classes – the millionaire and the proletarian approach death in very diverse ways. The former, not having to worry about the wellbeing of dependents, is focused very much on his or her own condition and fate, while the latter knows that death will lead to hardship for those who depend on them.<sup>12</sup>

This emphasis on differing approaches to death actually stands in tension with the tendency by both Horkheimer and Adorno to make universal comments on death. At times, they stress that death itself varies not only in within a particular age, but also over time and social context. Here the assumed narrative from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies plays a role, for the reification of death, with all its contradictions, is not as it has always been – death changes, but not always for the better. Yet, at other moments they begin to absolutise the experience of death. Adorno is particularly guilty here, arguing that death causes a rupture with which no-one is equipped to deal. It juts into life, generates futile efforts at metaphysics and threatens to be meaningless in any formulation since it is absolutely inaccessible. Here he is suspicious, precisely because of his attraction to them, of older images of a meaningful and fulfilled death. For example, the biblical patriarch, sated with life and experience, who dies in peace, may express not so much the ideal of being reconciled to death as the longing for the relief from an intolerable burden.<sup>13</sup> This sense of absolute annulment is reinforced for Adorno in the death of an old, frail person: ‘there is also something immeasurably sad in the fact that, with the decline of very old people, the hope of *non confundar*, of something which will be preserved from death, is also eroded, because, especially if one loves them, one becomes so aware of the decrepitude of that

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<sup>9</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 178-9; ———, *Dialektik Der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, vol. 3, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003 [1947]), pp. 245-7.

<sup>10</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury, 1978), p. 211; ———, "Notizen, 1949-1969," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1991), p. 374.

<sup>11</sup> Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, pp. 210-11, 236; ———, "Notizen, 1949-1969.", pp. 373-4, 418-19;

<sup>12</sup> Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, pp. 38-9; Max Horkheimer, "Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1987 [1934]), pp. 345-6.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, pp. 106, 130-4; ———, *Metaphysik: Begriffe Und Probleme*, pp. 166, 202-10.

part of them which one would like to regard as the immortal that one can hardly imagine what is to be left over from such a poor, infirm creature who is no longer identical with itself'.<sup>14</sup>

What are we to make of the differing emphases and indeed tensions in the thought of Adorno and Horkheimer? Here Bloch offers a useful way through in what is perhaps one of the most honest and refreshing reflections on death from a Marxist. He differentiates between the physical act of dying, which is really a part of life, and the state of death: 'the act of extinction is very different from the resultant state'.<sup>15</sup> The fear of dying is a far cry from the horror of death: while the former may generate an occasional apprehension, death as an ontological status produces annihilating dread. The real issue is this second category, the horror of the complete pulverisation of any identity at death. Here Bloch finds plenty of room for his over-riding concern with utopia, for in that context, death is 'a highly inadequate end, generally breaking, only very rarely rounding off, the human life'.<sup>16</sup> It puts a damper on any effort to change the world, let alone the sense that any life is incomplete, that there was so much that could have been achieved.

That utopian element brings me to two final and pressing questions: what would an unalienated and dereified approach to death look like? And what can one say concerning what happens after death? To the first question Adorno and Horkheimer offer a few hints. Death would lose its bitterness and terror, becoming an inseparable element of life, a relativising of the life that removes the desperate clinging to life, indeed an enhancement of life if not of death itself. The unity of a person's history, both Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, includes both death and life, even if that unity remains to be achieved rather than being lost in the past.<sup>17</sup>

In response to the second question, each has their own answer. Horkheimer professes an agnostic position: 'I don't know what comes *after* death, but what happens before it takes place in capitalist class society'.<sup>18</sup> Yet his tombstone has an edited text from Psalm 91: 9: '*Denn du ewiger bist meine Zuversicht* (Because you, eternal one, are my confidence)'.<sup>19</sup> Even here Horkheimer equivocates, for the biblical text has been altered, removing *der Herr*, the Lord, and replacing it

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<sup>14</sup> Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems.*, p. 135; ———, *Metaphysik: Begriffe Und Probleme.*, p. 210.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J. T. Swann (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 255; ———, *Atheismus Im Christentum: Zur Religion Des Exodus Und Des Reichs*, vol. 14, Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), p. 335.

<sup>16</sup> Bloch 1972, p. 249; Bloch 1968, p. 329; see also the discussion in Bloch 2000, pp. 255–66; Ernst Bloch, *Geist Der Utopie, Zweite Fassung*, vol. 3, Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985), pp. 318–31.

<sup>17</sup> For Horkheimer, such a healthy approach to death would render euthanasia perfectly normal for the incurably ill and the doomed. Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969.*, pp. 230-1; ———, "Notizen, 1949-1969.", p. 410.

<sup>18</sup> Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969.*, p. 39; ———, "Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland.", p. 346.

<sup>19</sup> '*Denn der Herr ist deine Zuversicht*' from verse 9 ('Because the Lord is your confidence')

with *du ewiger*, you, eternal one.<sup>20</sup> For his part, Adorno makes a valiant effort to deal constructively with death in an essay on Gustav Mahler, an essay that coincided with the death of his aunt, Agathe Calvelli-Adorno, who had lived with the family from the time Adorno was a child and to whom he had become much attached. But all he can do here is invoke the memory of the defenceless dead and suggest that love leads us to treat the dead as if they were children: ‘uncomprehending love can only comprehend death as if the last farewell were that of children who will come home again’ he writes. ‘We can hope for the dead only as if for children’.<sup>21</sup> Of course, this is still the perspective of the living in relation to others who have died. What of ourselves? What happens then? Adorno, usually reticent to speak of what is beyond the experience of any human being, is pushed only when he engages in an extended discussion concerning utopia with Bloch.

## Of dubious souls and promising journeys

However, let me lead into that discussion by returning to Bloch, for he is willing to go much further than either Horkheimer or Adorno. As I noted earlier, for Bloch even the sense of being unfulfilled, that there was something more to life than what we have experienced, becomes the signal of utopian longing for a fulfilled life. More importantly, he seeks a way to overcome the horror of the state of death. Now we face a snag, for Bloch’s treatment of death is uneven and not always persuasive. To his great credit, he was one of the rare Marxists who faced the question honestly, without shying away from it as an impossible and irresolvable issue that we may put off until after the revolution. But he tries different approaches, some more satisfying than others. Thus, the earlier extended engagement in *Spirit of Utopia* has not worn well, while the arguments in later texts stand up far better.

As far as the provocative section of *Spirit of Utopia*<sup>22</sup> is concerned, metaphors abound, all of them seeking to evoke the utopian charge of the hope and/or belief that something persists of our selves. Thus, death becomes a process of testing our strength and durability, of purification and hardening. Or it expresses a deep utopian desire to transcend our limits, our wicked hearts and the limited talents with which we are born. But the question already presses: what is

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<sup>20</sup> See the fuller discussion in Roland Boer, *Criticism of Theology: On Marxism and Theology Iii* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), as well as Horkheimer extended reflection on Psalm 91 in Max Horkheimer, "Psalm 91," in *Marx, Critical Theory, and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice* (Leiden: Brill, 2006 [1968]); ———, "Psalm 91," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1985 [1968]).

<sup>21</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia on Mahler," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002 [1984]), pp. 612-13; ———, "Komponisten Und Kompositionen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003 [1984]), p. 236.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 248-68.

strengthened and what transcends? A third metaphor comes closer to Bloch's central argument: the body is a house, a trap, a coat, a restriction for our true selves: 'Here we have not only escaped such that the slamming door no longer snags our coat, which anyway belongs to us no differently than a husk or a vein of ore might'.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Bloch's central theme is the soul, for which the most persistent metaphors of seed and kernel, of husk and shell and house are most appropriate. This line of argument is a gamble: its gain is that it allows Bloch to touch on biblical themes (the soul is remarkably absent), on Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist doctrines, all in order to point to the utopian dimensions of the idea of the soul. Above all, the doctrine of the transmigration of souls – their need for return to other lives for the sake of maturity (rather than a singular and unknowable break from the body at death) and the pervasiveness of the idea in different religious tradition – enables Bloch to make a dialectical link between individual and collective, between singular limits and disappointments and the promise of the solidarity of history. The soul is the mediator, if you will, between individual and collective, especially through the notion of the dispersal of souls into history. Yet the gamble is too risky, it seems to me, for it pushes Bloch into dubious suggestions for the phenomenological evidence of the soul, into the use of the illogical arguments from G.K. Chesterton on miracles (which have more evidence than their irrational denial), into a deeply non-biblical argument (transmigration is distinctly Greek), into a fundamental and deeply gnostic dualism of body and soul, of enduring core and disposable husk, all of which is far from the interests of historical materialism. The paradox is not – as Bloch argues – that the doctrine of the soul enables us to stitch the individual into history, but that the New Testament idea of the resurrection of the body is far more materialist than any wayward and dualistic argument for the immortality of the soul.

By contrast, the treatments in *Atheism in Christianity* and even in the early *Traces* are much better.<sup>24</sup> Here we find the suggestion – unburdened by assertions concerning the existence or durability of the soul – that death should be viewed as a departure, a passage through a gate or door that marks the beginning of a journey, the destination of which is unknown and which can only be spoken of in mythical language. Thus, in *Traces* he recounts the rending story of a wall,<sup>25</sup> through which a young woman's recently deceased lover passes along with all the others from the march of history – 'men, and women, young and old, farmers, merchants, knights, clerics,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 264

<sup>24</sup> Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom.*, pp. 255-63; ———, *Atheismus Im Christentum: Zur Religion Des Exodus Und Des Reichs.*, pp. 335-44. Ernst Bloch, *Traces*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006 [1930]), pp. 116-19, 171-3; ———, *Spuren*, vol. 1, Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985 [1930/1969]), 152-6, 218-20.

<sup>25</sup> Bloch, *Traces*, 116-19, ———, *Spuren*, 152-6.

and kings'.<sup>26</sup> Unable to draw his attention through her screams and the pass through the formidable wall to join him, she takes a poison, inspired by the text from the Song of Songs 8:6, 'Love is stronger than death'. Now a door opens in the wall where the procession of the dead had passed though and she follows them.

Far more than a simple agnostic position, in which one avers that since no one has experienced the other side of death and come back to inform us, it would be rash to make any statements, Bloch seeks to offer a utopian look to the *Novum*. Death should not be the occasion for a regretful and longing retrospective of one's life, but rather an anticipation. What is on the other side, the destination of the journey? It is not a pre-fabricated place, postulated by the 'positive dogmatism' of Christian theology with its heaven and hell or by the 'dogmatic negativity' of materialism, which asserts with equal confidence that death is an absolute end, with nothing to expect beyond the body's dissolution. Instead, the journey's destination remains an open question: 'the *status viae* lies far beyond death, which hardly represents an inflexibly formative *status terminus*?'.<sup>27</sup> The ones who dogmatically assert that they know have another, sinister agenda in the here and now.

Bloch wishes to do far more as he sets out on the journey, especially in terms of the 'life force' (*Lebensmuts*) and of hunger, the former an irrepressible push out of dullness, oppression and any effort to close it down, the latter a desire for that which is better, a craving for his great category of the Not-Yet. But what is this life-force but the innate desire within each human being for a better world? Part of a wider agenda, life-force is that within human life that has a potential beyond itself, a capability for a fuller realization that is only partially fulfilled in an individual life. And what are its sources and signs? The ability to stand up straight, a moral independence, finality, understood as 'the courage to break free from this devil's guesthouse, this world',<sup>28</sup> and hope, especially the hope that does not disappear, that holds on in the worst of circumstances. For Bloch, human beings can only come close to the realisation of their potential to which the life force points in a utopian, that is, a properly socialist environment, where the as yet unimagined social and economic conditions will enable a transformation of human beings themselves and thereby a transformation of death. In his perpetual tendency to dip into his theological storehouse, Bloch offers a materialist translation of resurrection and especially eternal life, which is not the dogmatic answer to death but the 'deep presence of something that has not yet appeared'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bloch, *Traces*, 117. ———, *Spuren*, 153.

<sup>27</sup> Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 265; ———, *Geist Der Utopie, Zweite Fassung*, p. 330.

<sup>28</sup> Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, p. 252; ———, *Atheismus Im Christentum: Zur Religion Des Exodus Und Des Reichs*, p. 332.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

More than one commentator has begun to squirm when Bloch broaches death in his different ways, feeling that his critics in East Germany were right in charging him with a little too much mysticism for comfort. Is not all this talk of journeys, life-forces and the transformation of death in socialism a load of prophetic mumbo-jumbo? Is it not a metaphoric overload that requires some of the sobriety of a Horkheimer or an Adorno to bring us back to earth? However, if we pick up the extraordinary and perceptive dialogue between Bloch and Adorno called 'Something's Missing' then we will be for a surprise, for here even Adorno is pushed, by Bloch, to state clearly what he sees are the crucial issues with death. Soon enough they come to the agreement that utopia can hardly be discussed without considering the question of death, for 'death depicts the hardest counter-utopia'.<sup>30</sup> But it is worth considering carefully Adorno's comments in the discussion, for they pick up exactly at the point where most of us would object to Bloch's arguments.<sup>31</sup>

## **Eliminating death?**

Ever the dialectician, Adorno is interested in the resistance to utopia that shows up in the question of death, for this is the crux of utopia and anti-utopia. Suggest, he proposes, the elimination of death to someone who may be sympathetic to the idea of utopia. At least you will not get the knee-jerk response that you must be crazy. But the knee will certainly come up at another point: to eliminate death, says the interlocutor, would be dreadful. It would be absolutely terrible, boring and enervating, to face endless life. For Adorno, this is the moment of the most absolute resistance to utopia, since the strongest tie to the status quo is not social but an identification with and attachment to death. Given Adorno's commitment to the determinate negation and the need to maintain, even negatively, the hope of utopia, this resistance must be negated. How? Death must be eliminated if utopia is to have any meaning. The possibility of utopia is therefore predicated on a double position: for not only must death itself be eliminated, but so must the resistance to that elimination: 'Utopian consciousness means a consciousness for

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<sup>30</sup> Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing.", p. 9; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch.", p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> The following analysis follows closely the argument in Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing.", pp. 8-10; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch.", pp. 65-9. For a comparable position, see Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 125-46.

which the *possibility* that people no longer have to die does not have anything horrible about it, but is, on the contrary, *that* which one actually wants'.<sup>32</sup>

We have reached the point that the anti-utopian attachment to death must be negated and that the way to do so is insist on the elimination of death. But what does Adorno mean? He accepts Bloch's distinction between dying and death. The former concerns the scientific, physical process of dying. In this he is not interested; or rather, he argues that utopia would not involve new scientific discoveries that enable one to pass over the threshold from organic to inorganic life. He is, however, very interested in death as an ontological state. Is this light, we can understand the following extraordinary observation:

I believe that without the notion of an *unfettered life*, freed from death, the idea of utopia, the idea of *the* utopia, *cannot* even be thought at all. ... There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the *elimination of death*; this is inherent in the very thought. What I mean is the *heaviness of death and everything that is connected to it*. Wherever this is not included, where the threshold of death is not at the same time considered, there can actually be no utopia.<sup>33</sup>

Note the emphases: the elimination of death involves eliminating the heaviness of death and all attached to it. In other words, the sheer terror and horror of death, the pure annihilation that such a state is supposed to entail, must pass for any utopia to have meaning. Awaiting the threshold should hold no dread for us; indeed we may be able to look forward to it.

Not the Adorno to whom we are accustomed. To my knowledge, this is one of Adorno's most forthright statements concerning both utopia and death. He has been led to this point not merely by the arguments of Bloch, but also by the logic of his own position. Determinate negation is the key, for the attachment to death as it now exists is also an attachment to the status quo. That anti-utopian resistance must be met by the determinate negation, for 'death is nothing other than the power of that which merely *is*'.<sup>34</sup> Even here he remains true to his position that one must heed the ban on images, or what may be called the political iconoclasm of the critique of idolatry, for in arguing for the negation of the attachment to death, he remains

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<sup>32</sup> Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing.", p. 8; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch.", p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing.", p. 10; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch.", p. 68; except for 'the' and 'cannot', emphasis is mine.

<sup>34</sup> Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing.", p. 10; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch.", pp. 68-9.

within a negative argument. Yet the dialectic can surprise even Adorno at times, for he finds himself making an uncharacteristically positive statement. 'Excuse me', he says a little later, 'if I have taken the unexpected role of the attorney for the positive'.<sup>35</sup>

Inevitably, the question arises as to what my own position is in response to these explorations by Horkheimer, Adorno and Bloch. Much of that should have become clear to the astute reader in the points I have emphasised, critiqued and approved. That the resistance to the elimination of death, or indeed to considering the question of death at all, is an attachment to the status quo is a telling point, one that contemporary philosophers on the left – Badiou, Negri, Jameson and others – would do well to heed. Further, the distinction between dying and death, between a physical end and an ontological state, is one that needs to be upheld. We will continue to die as we do now, but the horror of death as an ontological state may itself pass, so that one may look forward to the threshold of dying. Or rather, the reifying effect of death under capitalism – in which death becomes both a sanitation problem and an incomprehensible interruption – will be overcome when the physical cessation of life signs no longer holds any terror, but is part of life itself. Bloch, of course, favours a string of utopian metaphors and stories (some of which I find less useful than others), knowing full well that it is impossible to speak of what is beyond our experience except in the language of myth.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the moment of passing over becomes an open question, one of hope rather than despair, a passage through the door, the beginning rather than the end of a journey. Adorno is more reticent to evoke myth and metaphor, preferring to rest with the position that utopia simply cannot be contemplated without the elimination of death. Even at this basic level, before Bloch's evocative metaphors come into play, it seems to me that this is the ultimate transgression.

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<sup>35</sup> Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing", p. 13; ———, "Etwas Fehlt ... Über Die Widersprüche Der Utopischen Sehnsuch.", p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> Those who do experience what is on the other side of death become in the stories mute, unable to pass on the information no matter how insistently they might be pressed. See Bloch, *Traces*, , 171, ———, *Spuren*, 218.

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