

Statement of Intended Research: History, the Subject and Human Rights in the Thought of Hannah Arendt and Ernst Bloch

I would like to undertake a historically oriented comparison between the political philosophies of Hannah Arendt and Ernst Bloch. The reasons why I consider such a comparison to be fruitful are threefold. *Firstly*, because I believe that a historical contextualisation of their work would shed light on the political climate of the Weimar Republic and of the intellectual debates in Germany and the United States around the Second World War. *Secondly*, because I think that a thorough understanding of both thinkers is only possible by considering their particular historical situation. This means to take into account *inter alia* their Jewish origin, their academic experiences in the politically turbulent 1920s, the Russian Revolution, the rise of Nazism, their emigration to the United States and the Holocaust. *Thirdly* and most importantly, because I believe that both thinkers share unexpected and inspiring philosophical points of commonality which have thus far not been properly recognised. It is my aim to carve out these conceptual overlaps by means of a historical contextualisation of their work and a close reading of their intellectual influences. Although I seek to reveal their commonalities and differences in a historical analysis, my project exceeds at this point a purely contextualising approach, in the sense that their respective political critique also deeply concerns today's political and historical thought.

So, why Arendt and Bloch? Although she never considered herself a philosopher, Arendt's political theory is deeply embedded in philosophy. Bloch's philosophy on the other hand is throughout deeply political. I thus think that reading Arendt's political theory philosophically and Bloch's philosophical work as quintessentially political would reveal subterranean connections between Arendtian political thought and critical Marxist theory. In short, I believe that both their philosophies aim at a fundamental openness in and towards the world, in a threefold sense. Politically as the possibility of a human community in which individuals are responsible for their own faith and can live in freedom and dignity. In regard of temporality as an understanding of the past as unresolved and alterable, the future as radically undetermined and open for change. And ontologically as a conceptualization of the world as undetermined and incomplete and thus open for new beginnings and utopian manmade transformations. Starting from this foundation, I would like to explore the relation of Arendt's and Bloch's thought more deeply on three interlinked topics: History, Subjectivity and Human Rights. To grasp the intellectual debates in which both thinkers were involved, I believe that for each aspect it will be necessary to juxtapose their respective critical reception of other thinkers. These are in particular: Walter Benjamin, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx. But also, Husserl, Kierkegaard and the German and French Existentialists.

I will try here to give a brief overview of the three topics, outlining the questions I regard as most promising for this research project.

First, the understanding of history. Arendt conceptualizes history as the unfolding of radically contingent constellations, elements and events and argues for the political judgement of the historic object. For this, she puts forward the idea of reconciliation and non-reconciliation as a means to either reject certain past events or to come to terms with the past for the sake of a common future. Bloch, breaking in a similar manner with Historicism's chronological understanding of time, claims that in the past lies a certain unresolved heritage, an unfulfilled future that must yet be wrested from the past and be realized in the present. Both perspectives owe a great deal to Walter Benjamin's work (in particular "On the Concept of History") as well as to a critique of Hegel's philosophy of history. Thus, the first task of my research would be to sound out the relationship of Arendt and Bloch with Benjamin, personally (as both thinkers were close friends with him) as well as philosophically, and to compare their respective critiques of Hegel. I believe that this comparison would open up an unconventionally political perspective on the philosophy of history and might reveal an interesting nexus between Arendt and Critical Theory.

Second, the conceptualization of subjectivity. Both Bloch and Arendt develop their understanding of the individual in a close and critical examination of more or less the same thinkers. On the one hand, Hegel and Marx, on the other hand Kierkegaard, Heidegger and the French Existentialists. Both thinkers emphasize the "subjective factor" (Bloch), the individual's possibility to shape history. To me, the philosophical key questions of this part are: to what extent is Arendt's phenomenological conception of plurality as an ontological presupposition of human life compatible with Bloch's unorthodox interpretation of Marx's humanum as something yet to be realized? Is there a common ground between Arendt's concept of the becoming of the subject through speech and interaction and Bloch's understanding of the subject-object-relationship as both reciprocal and teleologically aiming at reconciliation? How does Bloch's idea of the anticipating consciousness and the not-yet relate to Arendt's concept of natality and the capacity of a new beginning?

Third, in regard of human rights, I believe that from merging Arendt's critique of statelessness with Bloch's analysis of natural law could emerge an unconventional and critical philosophy of law. Both their conceptions of law need to be understood in the light of their own experience as refugees and against the backdrop of the complicity of large parts of the German jurisprudence in the National Socialist Regime.

To summarize briefly. I believe that a historically contextualising comparison of Arendt's and Bloch's thought and their respective influences could open up a variety of interesting perspectives on the understanding of history, the subject and human rights. Furthermore, I think

that bringing together these two unorthodox thinkers whose thought can hardly be classified under any “ism”, might ignite a stimulating conversation between Arendt’s unique political theory and Critical Theory. In the following bibliography I list sources I consider useful to my research.

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