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ERNST BLOCH'S ENLIGHTENED VIEW
OF THE FAIRY TALE AND UTOPIAN LONGING

Not long after Ernst Bloch escaped the dystopian realm of East Germany in 1961, he held a fascinating radio discussion with the astute critical theorist Theodor Adorno about the contradictions of utopian longing. Their conversation was intriguing because, at times, Adorno sounded more like a utopian thinker than Bloch. To be sure, Adorno questioned the concept of utopia in his usual incisive manner, but he seemed to share Bloch's faith in utopia and to be very disillusioned about genuine possibilities for the realization of utopian longings, while Bloch continued to be more hopeful about the future of utopia, despite the fact that his own hope had been disappointed by East Germany and the Soviet bloc.

In his very opening statement Adorno, very much in keeping with his critique of the culture industry, asserted that utopian dreams had been fulfilled in a way that leads to deception and monotony: «the fulfillment of the wishes takes something away from the substance of the wishes, as in the fairy tale where the farmer is granted three wishes, and, I believe, he wishes his wife to have a sausage on her nose and then must use the second wish to have the sausage removed from her nose[1]. In other words, I mean that one can watch television (*fernsehen)* today, look at the things that are far away, but instead of the wish-image providing access to the erotic utopia, one sees in the best of circumstances some kind of more or less pretty pop singer, who continues to deceive the spectator in regard to her prettiness insofar as she sings some kind of nonsense instead of showing it, and this song generally consists in bringing together "roses" with "moonlight" in harmony. Above and beyond this one could perhaps say in general that the fulfillment of utopia consists largely only in a repetition of the continually same "today"»[2].

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1   Actually, Adorno is mistaken about the incidents in this tale. He is referring to Charles Perrault's *The Foolish Wishes* (*Les souhaits ridicules* [1694]), in which a poor woodcutter is given three wishes by Jupiter. He stupidly wastes the first one by wishing for a sausage. After his wife berates him, he wishes for a sausage on her nose. Finally, as his third wish, he asks that the sausage be removed from his wife's nose.

2   E. Bloch / T.W. Adorno, *Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing*, in E. Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Zipes and F. Mecklenburg, MIT Press, Cambridge [MA] 1988, p. 1-2. See E. Bloch / T.W.Adorno, *Etwas fehlt…. Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht. Ein Gespräch mit Theodor W. Adorno*, in *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch*, eds. R. Traub and H. Wieser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1975, p. 58-9. «Ich meine das allerdings so […] daß man sich dann fast immer durch die Erfüllung der Wünsche betrogen sieht, wie in dem Märchen, wo dem Bauern drei Wünsche freigegeben sind und er in dem ersten – ich glaube – seiner Gattin eine Wurst an die Nase wünscht und einen zweiten Wunsch dann dazu benutzen muß, diese Wurst von der

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Bloch was not entirely in agreement with Adorno and maintained that the wish-images of utopia had not been entirely emptied or banalized. «There is still a much older level of utopias that we should not forget», he responded, «that *we least of all* should not forget – the fairy tale. The fairy tale is not only filled with social utopia, in other words, with the utopia of a better life and justice, but it is also filled with technological utopia, most of all in the oriental fairy tales. In the fairy tale 'The Magic Horse,' from the *Arabian Nights*, there is a 'helicopter.' One can read the *Arabian Nights* in many places as a manual for inventions. Bacon addresses this and then sets himself off from the fairy tale by saying that what *he* means, the real magic, relates to the oldest wish-images of the fairy tale as the deeds of Alexander relate to the deeds of King Arthur's Round Table. Thus, the content of the utopian images change according to the social situation»[3].

Indeed, Bloch insisted that the content always changes over time, but the longing for a better life and justice would always remain and indicate what is missing in life. Utopian longing keeps generating wish-images that must be examined and judged critically and individually as to whether they allow for the possibility of realization. The formation of utopias that stem from longing not only offer a critique of reality, but it also opens up possible alternatives. It is because possibility challenges and subverts the status quo of society that it is treated poorly and neglected by ruling elites. Yet, possibility as a philosophical category must be regarded seriously, and both Bloch and Adorno agreed that the utopian wish-image, even when it is false, conveys a critique of what is present and points at the same time to what could and should be.

At the end of their conversation, Bloch discussed the principle of hope and its relationship to perfection. «But what is valid is that each and every criticism of perfection, incompleteness, intolerance, and impatience already without a doubt presupposes the conception of, and the longing for, a possible perfection[4]». This hope for perfection, however, does not provide confidence or security. «Hope is critical and can be disappointed. However, hope still nails a flag on the mast, even in decline, in that the decline is not accepted, even when this decline is still very strong. Hope is not confidence. Hope is surrounded by dangers, and it is the consciousness

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Nase wieder wegzuwünschen. Ich meine also, man kann heute fernsehen, in die Ferne sehen, aber anstatt daß nun das Wunschbild, die erotische Utopie aufgeht, sieht man dann bestenfalls irgendeine mehr oder minder hübsche Schlagersängerin, die einen noch um ihre Hübschheit betrügt, indem sie, anstatt sich zu zeigen, irgendeinen Unsinn singt, der im allgemeinen darin besteht, daß "Rosen" und "Mondnacht" miteinander in Harmonie ständen. Darüber hinaus könnte man vielleicht sagen, verallgemeinernd, dass die Erfüllung der Utopie im allgemeinen nur in einer Wiederholung des immer gleichen "heute" besteht».

3   *Ibidem*, p. 5. E. Bloch / T.W. Adorno, *Etwas fehlt…*, p. 62-3. «Es gibt aber noch eine viel ältere Schicht, die wir nicht weglassen, die *wir* am *wenigsten* weglassen wollen: das Märchen. Das Märchen ist nicht nur mit sozialer Utopie gefüllt, also der des besseren Lebens und der Gerechtigkeit, sondern es ist auch gefüllt mit technischer Utopie, vor allem in den orientalischen Märchen. Im Märchen *Das Zauberpferd* aus *1001 Nacht* gibt es beim Zauberpferd sogar einen Auf- und Abstiegshebel – das ist ein "Hubschrauber". Man kann *1001 Nacht* an vielen Stellen als ein Modellbuch für Erfindungen lesen. Bacon geht auf das ein und grenzt sich nun vom Märchen ab, indem er sagt, da das, was *er* meint, diese reale Magie, sich zu den ältesten Wunschbildern des Märchens verhalte wie die Taten Alexanders zu den Taten der Tafelrunde des Königs. Es ändern sich also die Inhalte des Utopischen je nach der gesellschaftlichen Lage».

4   *Ibidem*, p. 16. E. Bloch / T.W. Adorno, *Etwas fehlt…,* p. 75. «Wohl aber gilt: Jede Kritik an Unvollkommenheit, an Unvollendeten, Unerträglichem, nicht zu Duldenden setzt zweifellos schon die Vorstellung von, die Sehnsucht nach einer möglichen Vollkommenheit voraus».

of danger and at the same time the determined negation of that which continually makes the opposite of the hoped-for object possible»[5].

Even though Adorno appeared to agree with Bloch by the end of the radio conversation, we cannot really consider him a "hopeful" philosopher, and he certainly did not embrace the hope of the student and anti-authoritarian movement at the end of the 1960s, when he unfortunately died from a heart attack. On the other hand, Bloch never abandoned the principle of hope throughout his life and sought traces of it everywhere – in high and low culture, mass movements of protest, in technology, music, art, and daily customs and habits. More than any genre, however, it was in the fairy tale that he most often found wishful-images of hope. He frequently used it to illustrate the utopian longing and creativity of human beings and the possibilities to change the world that it represented. This is undoubtedly why Adorno had brought up the topic of the fairy tale early in their conversation, and it is also why Bloch almost immediately referred to it as representative of utopia. But what was it exactly about the fairy tale that induced Bloch to use it constantly as a utopian example? After all, the fairy tale is often associated with escapist fantasies, irrelevant in philosophy and politics, and a genre of writing and telling primarily intended for children. In fact, the traditional fairy tales of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen are filled with tendencies that can be considered elitist, sexist, and racist. Did Bloch really understand what a fairy tale was? Did he have a misconception of this genre and place too much value on its utopian potential?

Bloch wrote two complete essays dedicated to the fairy tale that are worthwhile examining for an understanding of why the fairy tale was so vital for his philosophy of hope: *The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own in Time* (*Das Märchen geht selber in der Zeit* [1930]) and *Better Castles in the Sky at the Country Fair and Circus, in Fairy Tales and Colportage* (*Bessere Lufstschlösser in Jahrmarkt und Zirkus, in Märchen und Kolportage* [1959], included in *Prinzip Hoffnung*). In each case Bloch was not concerned with the literary or literary - historical meaning of the fairy tale, but its philosophical and social implications and relationship to his principle of hope.

In *The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own in Time*, he immediately points to the unique quality of the fairy tale. Though the wish-fulfillment of the fairy tale may appear to be obsolete and depict feudal kingdoms with kings and queens, it transcends time and place. «Not only does the fairy tale remain as fresh as longing and love, but the demonically evil, which is abundant in the fairy tale, is still seen at work here in the present, and the happiness of 'once upon a time,' which is even more abundant, still affects our visions of the future»[6].

For Bloch, the fairy tale in all its forms, ancient and modern, remains vibrant and touches the dreams and wishes of common people who want to overcome the dreariness of their daily lives. The appeal of the fairy tale, no matter what its form may be, is boundless because its tendency or tendentiousness indicates the possibility for change and the fulfillment of dreams.

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5   *Ibidem*, p. 16-17. E. Bloch / T.W.Adorno, *Etwas fehlt...,* p. 75: «Also, Hoffnung ist kritisch, Hoffnung ist enttäuschbar, Hoffnung nagelt aber doch immerhin eine Flagge an den Mast, auch im Untergang, indem er nicht akzeptiert wird, auch wenn er so mächtig ist, Hoffnung ist nicht Zuversicht, Hoffnung ist umlagert von Gefahren, und sie ist das Bewußtsein der Gefahr und gleichzeitig die bestimmte Negation dessen was das Gegenteil von dem Erhoffbaren dauernd auch möglich macht».

6   *Ibidem*, p. 163. «Nicht nur bleibt das Bedürfnis, das zum Märchen treibt, so frisch wie die Sehnsucht oder die Liebe, sondern hier wirken Dämonisch-Böses, woran das Märchen reich ist, immer noch als gegenwärtig, das Gluck im "Es war einmal". Woran das Märchen reicher ist, immer noch als zukünftig». (E. Bloch, *Das Märchen geht selber in der Zeit*, in E. Bloch, *Die Kunst, Schiller zu sprechen und andere Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., 1969, p. 11).

Bloch discusses works by Jean Cocteau, Ferenc Molnár, and Jules Verne that are not exactly fairy tales but represent the modernization of fairy tales in Bloch's own time, that is, the time of 1930, a year after the Great Depression had erupted. «What is significant about such kinds of 'modern fairy tales' is that it is reason itself that leads to the wish projections of the old fairy tales and serves them. Again what proves itself is a harmony with courage and cunning, as that earliest kind of enlightenment which already characterizes *Hansel and Gretel*: consider yourself as born free and entitled to be totally happy, dare to make use of your power of reasoning, look upon the outcome of things as friendly. These are the genuine maxims of fairy tales, and fortunately for us they appear not only in the past but in the now. Unfortunately we must equally contend with the smoke of witches and the blows of ogres habitually faced by the fairy-tale hero in the now»[7].

About thirty years later, in 1959, Bloch picked up the theme of cunning and courage in his second essay and continued to write about it: «Despite the fantastic side of the fairy tale, it is always cunning in the way it overcomes difficulties. Moreover, courage and cunning in fairy tales succeed in an entirely different way than in life, and not only that: it is, as Lenin says, always the existing revolutionary elements that tie the given strings of the story together here[8]». Bloch uses many of the fairy tales collected and edited by the Brothers Grimm as examples in which we can find heroes such as peasants, tailors, soldiers, simpletons, who become "enlightened" and knowingly overcome oppressive tyrants such as kings, ogres, witches, etc. Fairy-tale heroes perceive how to take advantage of all kinds of magical or wish instruments that benefit their struggles. In this essay, which is much longer than *The Fairy Tales Moves On in Its Own Time*, Bloch refers to a broad array of fairy tales written by Edgar Allen Poe, Wilhelm Hauff, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Gottfried Keller, Selma Lagerlöff, and Rudyard Kipling to demonstrate how they open up wondrous views and send their protagonists on adventures that break down boundaries and reveal how possible the impossible can be. Rarely do the dreams of the adventurers go unfulfilled in these literary fairy tales that stem from a profound oral tradition based on how adults viewed the world.

For Bloch, who always made unusual if not startling associations in his thinking, there is a connection between the wish-images of the fairy tales and the side shows at country fairs and the performances at the circus. The sensational images in the sideshow or the circus tent, like the miraculous events in the fairy tale, cannot be replicated. Yet they leave behind an indelible impression in the imagination of spectators. Though the scenes and tales may seem

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7   *Ibidem*, p. 165-66. «Man bemerkt gerade an solcher Art "moderner Märchen": Es ist die Ratio selber, die zu den Wunschbildern des alten Märchens hinführt und ihnen dient. Wieder bewährt such ein Einklang mit Mut und List, als jener frühesten Art Aufklärung, die bereits Hänsel und Gretel auszeichnet: Halte dich für frei geboren und zu jedem Glück berufen, wage dich deines Verstandes zu bedienen, siehe den Ausgang der Dinge als freundlich ein. Das erst sind echte Märchenmaximen, und sie kommen, zu unserem Glück, nicht nur in der Vergangenheit vor, sowenig, wie in unserem Unglück, der Hexenrauch und die Anschläge der Riesen, mit denen es der Märchenheld zu tun hat» (*Ibidem,* p. 14).

8   *Ibidem*, p. 168-69. «So phantastisch das Märchen ist, so ist es doch, in der Überwindung der Schwerigkeiten, immer klug. Auch reüssieren Mut und List im Märchen ganz anders als im Leben, und nicht nur das: es sind, wie Lenin sagt, allemal die schon vorhandenen revolutionären Elemente, welche hier über die gegebenen Stränge fabeln» (E. Bloch, "Bessere Luftschlösser in Jahrmarkt und Zirkus, in Märchen und Kolportage", in E. Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1959, vol. I, p. 411).

to be nonsense, there is a deep sense to our attraction to an unusual attraction that is too easily dismissed by people who putatively possess culture and consider the circus, sideshows at the country fair, and even fairy tales as vulgar and decadent. Bloch thinks differently: «The age-old pleasure of people, in no way simple and no way decadent, is preserved in the fair, wanders within it and outside. There is a piece of frontier here, set at reduced admission, but with preserved meanings, with strange utopian meanings, conserved in a brutal show, in vulgar crypticness. It is a world that has not been sufficiently investigated for its specific wish areas. In particular, it is that 'oddity,' the kind that was last called such during the Baroque period, that keeps itself above water here, above land»[9].

By bringing together the fairy tale with sideshows of the country fair and the performances in circus rings, Bloch intended to demonstrate how all popular culture has traces and remnants of utopian longing. This is why he concludes this essay by discussing colportage, the cheap adventure novels and stories, that became popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century and prepared the way for all kinds of "low-brow" romances, adventure stories, criminal novels, science fiction, fantasy and so on in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. «The dream of colportage is: never again to be trapped by the routine of daily life. And at the end there is: happiness, love, victory. The splendor toward which the adventure story heads is not won through a rich marriage and the like as in the magazine story but rather through an active journey to the Orient of the dream»[10].

Bloch draws comparisons between Schiller's *The Robbers* and Beethoven's *Fidelio* to demonstrate how they were liberating fairy-tale plays about rescue and liberation that formed a strong current in all kinds of colportage literature up to the present. «Dark dungeons, pistols, signals, rescue – things in the more refined literature of the new kind never appear by themselves. These things produce one of the strongest possible tensions available: that between night and light. Accordingly, a re-evaluation of this genre is especially evident on the strength of its highly legitimate wish-image in its mirror. Here, missing meanings are fresh everywhere, and those that are not missing are waiting, as in the fairy tale […]. The fairy-tale like colportage is a castle in the sky par excellence, but one in good air, and insofar as this can at all be true about plain wish work: the castle in the sky is right. In the final analysis, it derives from the Golden Age and would like to stand in such an age again, in happiness, which pushes forward from night to light»[11].

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9 *Ibidem*, p. 182. «Uralte Volkslust, keineswegs einfache, aber auch keineswegs dekadente, erhält sich im Jahrmarkt, wandert darin aus. Ein Stück Grenzland ist da, zu sehr herabgesetztem Eintrittspreis, aber mit erhaltenen Bedeutungen, mit kuriös-utopischen, konserviert in brutaler Schau, in vulgärer Hintergründigkeit. Es ist eine Welt, die zu wenig auf ihre spezifischen Wunschgegenden untersucht worden ist. Eben "Curiöses", wie dergleichen zuletzt noch im Barock genannt worden ist, hält sich hier über Wasser, über Land» (*ibid*em, p. 425-26).

10 *Ibidem*, p. 183. «Der Traum der Kolportage ist: nie wieder Alltag; und am Ende steht: Glück, Liebe, Sieg. Der Glanz, auf den die Abenteuergeschichte zugeht, wird nicht wie in der Magazingeschichte durch reiche Heirat und dergleichen gewonnen, sondern durch aktive Ausfahrt in den Orient des Traums» (*Ibidem*, p. 426).

11 *Ibidem*, p. 184. «Tiefer Kerker, Pistole, Signal, Rettung: Dinge, die im gehobenen Schrifttum neuerer Art keinesfalls oder nie von Haus aus derart vorkommen, ergeben eine der stärksten überhaupt vorhandenen Spannungen: die von Nacht zum Licht. Wonach eine Umwertung dieser Gattung, kraft des höchst legitimen Wunschbilds in ihrem Spiegel, besonders evident ist. Hier überall sind verschollene Bedeutungen frisch, unverschollene wartend, wie im Märchen […]. Märchen wie Kolportage sind Luftschloß par excellence, doch eines in guter Luft und, soweit das bei bloßem

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For Bloch, the fairy tale was not a genre of escape literature but rather one of enlightenment. It is interesting to note that his own writing was metaphorical, aphoristic, and elliptical often bordering on the mystical, and the process of reading *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* can be metaphysically compared to an abstract adventure and experiment that sheds light on human struggles for revelation. The writing and telling of fairy tales depend very much the same way on symbol, allegory, surrealism, and magic realism to dispel clouds of deception and reveal enlightening ways in which oppressed and disadvantaged protagonists might triumph against cruel foes. To be sure, from a literary or folkloristic viewpoint, Bloch had a somewhat naïve and indiscriminate understanding of the fairy tale and did not distinguish between oral and literary tales or grasp them in their socio-historical contexts. Nor did he do careful readings of tales to study gender and racial stereotypes or how they reinforced feudal notions of power. Not every swineherd who becomes a king will use his newly achieved power to benefit other disadvantaged people. Not every maiden who becomes a queen and begins bearing children will be autonomous and live happily ever after. Not every fairy tale possesses a utopian tendency. Bloch often simplifies how fairy tales are received by the reading and viewing public. For instance, many fairy tales divert audiences and "blind" them so that they do not become enlightened. One could argue that the manner in which Disney appropriated and adapted fairy tales for the cinema and also for book publishing, tales that stem from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, did not shed light on liberating possibilities for common people but perverted their utopian longings and channeled them so they have become better consumers. Louis Marin has written a scintillating and scathing study of how Disney manipulated fairy-tale elements and motifs to create a utopic degeneration[12] that exploits genuine utopian longings. There is no light in the Disneylands spread across the globe, only darkness and banality. Bloch, in contrast to Adorno, placed much too much faith in the fairy tale as a beacon of light that contained anticipatory illumination (*Vor-Schein*) of utopia, just as he placed much too much faith in much of commodified art to offer a glow of possible change.

Nevertheless, Bloch did have a profound insight about the genre of the fairy tale, which is one of the most unique forms of art that pervades almost all art forms today – including tv sitcoms, advertisements, toys, garments, fantasy literature, films, paintings, sculptures, poetry, Internet sites, and so on. Whether a fairy tale is progressive – illuminates contradictions in a fictitious realm and tendentiously sides with the oppressed – or regressive – reinforces conservative notions of the status quo by furthering elitist ideas of hegemony even if disadvantaged people rise to the top – the genre continually brings out what is missing in most people's lives. The constant repetition of the fairy-tale maxims is not always and necessarily what Adorno asserted it to be, a banalization of utopia or homogenization of daily life, but rather represents a persistent refusal to accept life as it is and a demand that utopian longings be fulfilled. There is indeed something still missing, deeply missing even when people buy into deception. The emptiness of life is projected through the flaccid happy fulfillments of the fairy tale in all art forms, high and low, and these banal happy fulfillments show paradoxically that people deeply feel how much is still missing and that the temporary "plug of happiness" will not stop the longing.

Wunschwerk überhaupt zutreffen kann: das Luftschloß ist richtig. Es stammt zu guter Letzt aus dem goldenen Zeitalter und möchte wieder in einem stehen, im Glück, das von Nacht zu Licht dringt» (*Ibidem*, p. 428.).

12 L. Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. R.A. Vollrath, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands (NJ) 1984. See especially, "Utopic Degeneration: Disneyland", p. 239-258.

Both Bloch and Adorno agreed that something was missing in contemporary society – had always been missing – that engendered utopian longing. Adorno tried to elaborate a theory of negative dialectics in his *Aesthetic Theory* toward the end of his life, and it is clearly why he proposed to Bloch that «at any rate utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what should be»[13]. Though Bloch felt that the world had become completely devoid of a utopian conscience and utopian presentiment, he believed that «utopia cannot be removed from the world in spite of everything, and even the technological, which must definitely emerge and will be in the great realm of the utopian, will form only small sectors». In other words, utopia was not only in the determined negation but in the anticipatory illumination. Glimmers of hope for this utopia were projected and are projected through the fairy tale, but the conditions for its realization must be adequate. As Bloch wryly stated toward the end of his conversation with Adorno, «People must first fill their stomachs, and then they can dance. That is a *conditio sine qua non* for being able to talk earnestly about the other without it being used for deception. Only when all the guests have sat down at the table can the Messiah, can Christ come. Thus, Marxism in its entirety, even when conveyed in its most illuminating form and anticipated in its entire realization, is only a *condition* for life in freedom, life in happiness, life in possible fulfillment, life with content»[14].

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13   *Ibidem*, p. 12. E. Bloch / T.W. Adorno, *Etwas fehlt…*, p. 70. «Ja, die Utopie steckt jedenfalls wesentlich in der bestimmten Negation dessen, was bloß ist, und das dadurch, daß es sich als ein Falsches konkretisiert, immer zugleich hinweist auf das, was sein soll».

14   *Ibidem*, p. 15. Bloch / T.W. Adorno, *Etwas fehlt…*, p. 74. «Es müssen die Menschen erst satt werden, und dann kann getanzt werden. Das ist eine Conditio sine qua non, daß überhaupt über das andere ernsthaft, ohne daß es zum Betrug gebraucht wird, geredet werden kann. Erst wenn sich alle Gäste an den Tisch gesetzt haben, kann der Messias, kann der Christos kommen. Also, der gesamte Marxismus, auch in seine leuchtendste Form gebracht und in seiner ganzen Verwirklichung antizipiert, ist nur eine *Bedingung* für ein Leben in Freiheit, ein Leben in Glück, ein Leben in möglicher Erfüllung, eine Leben mit Inhalten».