

## The Materialism Problem

Between 1936 and 1938, Bloch was living in exile in Prague. During that time, he worked on two manuscripts concurrently, neither of which was ever published in its intended format. Nevertheless, there is plentiful textual evidence for both projects in his correspondence. As Bloch wrote to the *Deutsche Akademie* in New York in early 1938, the first planned book, *Aufklärung und rotes Gesicht* [*Enlightenment and the Red Face*], was to be an ‘investigation of the problems and problematic of the irrational’ – in other words, a systematic continuation of the line of enquiry he had been pursuing in *Heritage of Our Times*, published in 1935.<sup>1</sup> The second was *Theorie-Praxis des Materialismus*, a ‘philosophical foundation of dialectical materialism’, which would include sections on logic, epistemology, the history of materialism, and a system of categories.<sup>2</sup> Bloch mentions this text in a letter he wrote to Joachim and Sylvia Schumacher in May 1936. There, he wondered whether, with this new work, he would ‘declare war’ on his erstwhile friend Lukács, with whom he had been publicly quarrelling for some time.<sup>3</sup> In September that year, he wrote to Max Horkheimer that the third section had emerged out of an introduction he intended to write to a proposed anthology of writings on ‘non-mechanical materialism’: excerpts from the works of Robinet, Bruno, Avicbron, Averroes.<sup>4</sup> A year later, Bloch declared the book ‘complete’ at 900 pages in a letter to Theodor and Gretel Adorno.<sup>5</sup> In November 1944, however, and by now in the USA, he told Adolph Lowe he was revising the manuscript, which had something ‘very refreshing’ about it, after several years working on the ‘wish-image subjectivisms’ of *The Principle of Hope*.<sup>6</sup>

In his entry on Bloch’s speculative materialism in the *Bloch-Wörterbuch*, Holz argues that the interval between the publication of *The Principle of Hope* and *Das Materialismusproblem* has led to frequent ‘misunderstandings’ of Bloch’s work, in particular the perception of him as an idealist thinker.<sup>7</sup> In

1 Cunico 2000, p. 454.

2 Ibid.

3 Bloch 1985r, p. 497.

4 Bloch 1985r, p. 676.

5 Bloch 1985r, p. 438.

6 Bloch 1985r, p. 746.

7 Holz 1975, p. 486.

particular, Holz sees it as having 'hidden' the fact that the 'half revolutionary, half eschatological system of the subjective factor' on display in *The Principle of Hope* was underpinned by a 'fully devised conception of materialism'.<sup>8</sup> As if to highlight this very fact, *Das Materialismusproblem* opens with a quotation from Chapter 18 of *The Principle of Hope*, which forms a bridge between Bloch's phenomenology of hope and his ontology of the not-yet:

the transition from the realm of necessity into that of freedom only finds land in unenclosed process-matter. Precisely those extremes that have previously been held as far apart as possible: future and nature, anticipation and matter – collide in the due rigor of historical-dialectical materialism. *Without matter no basis of (real) anticipation, without (real) anticipation no horizon of matter is ascertainable.*<sup>9</sup>

Yet Bloch far from abandons his emphasis on the question of consciousness in *Das Materialismusproblem*. Indeed, the eponymous 'problem' at the heart of Bloch's investigation is not, as Holz has claimed, that it 'must work out a system of categories that does not allow matter itself to become enraptured into transcendence'.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, the question of the *concept* of matter is central to *Das Materialismusproblem*. However, concepts and categories themselves already imply the existence of consciousness, and indeed, as Bloch tells us, it is primarily the 'aporia' of the being-consciousness relation that poses the most challenging and fertile problem for materialist thought.<sup>11</sup>

Bloch sees this problem closely related to what he calls the 'antinomy' of the quantity-quality relation, arguably even as a species of it – after all, consciousness is a qualitative experience that somehow emerges amid a quantity of non-conscious material phenomena.<sup>12</sup> Yet since it is only because *there is* consciousness that these considerations arise at all, this 'aporia' occupies a privileged position. Thus it turns out that Bloch's 'materialism problem' is what the philosopher David Chalmers would later, and in quite a different philosophical register from Bloch's, call the 'hard problem of consciousness': it is the question

8 Holz 1975, p. 486.

9 Cf. Bloch 1986, p. x; p. 237. Note that here, as elsewhere, I have adapted the translation of Plaice, Plaice, and Knight in the English version of *The Principle of Hope*. There, 'zusammenschlagen' is rendered as 'chime together'; I have changed it to 'collide'. I have also chosen 'rigour' instead of 'groundedness' for 'Gründlichkeit'.

10 Holz 1975, p. 495.

11 Bloch 1985g, pp. 459–66.

12 Ibid.