Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), Marxist philosopher of utopia, was a persistent advocate of the need for revolutionary optimism in the face of political disappointment. His ‘principle of hope’ may be especially pertinent today then, at a time when Labour politicians and left postmodernists alike are unashamedly content to parrot Thatcher’s claim that there is no alternative to the present, ‘globalised’ system. For, despite the apparently idealist overtones of Bloch’s celebration of hope, he was concerned to locate it, quite concretely, in the ‘objectively real possibility’ of a socialist future latent and tendent in capitalism’s class struggle. His stress on ‘founded optimism’ thus resonates with the paradoxical hopefulness that István Mészáros derives from the public prostration of a reformist tradition now disciplined by ‘the rigours of the market’, since this ideological abasement offers proof that ‘the precarious condition of democratic politics today ... can only be redressed by a radical extra-parliamentary mass movement’.

Bloch’s early intellectual formation was Hegelian. Indeed, he had a reputation for mystical tendencies when he joined, first, George Simmel’s colloquium in Berlin, and then Max Weber’s circle at Heidelberg, as a young intellectual in the years before the First World War. It was in the latter context that he formed his mutually influential relationship with Lukács, whom he later claimed to have Hegelianised. Lukács’s impact on Bloch’s thought is registered in his first important work, Geist der Utopie (1918, revised 1923), a sprawling utopian meditation on music, art and philosophy written in an Expressionist literary style. Among those who recognised its originality, despite the book’s detractors, were Adorno and Marcuse, with whom, besides Benjamin and Brecht, Bloch later became friends.

Geist der Utopie signals the first systematic conception of Bloch’s central, highly idiosyncratic philosophical category, the Noch-Nicht, or Not-Yet, which, when integrated with the historical materialism that he embraced as a non-party Communist in the early 1920s, came to define his mature Marxist utopianism. As explained in his magnum opus, The Principle of Hope, the Not-Yet signifies the dynamic incompleteness of the world, the main manifestation of which is the Not-Yet-Conscious, the ‘anticipatory consciousness’ that inheres in human beings and their cultural efforts as they struggle to connect their sense of as-yet immaterial future possibilities – social freedom chief amongst them – to the convulsive trajectory of history. These ideas sat uncomfortably, to say the least, with Bloch’s long-standing loyalty to Stalinism, which he maintained until 1956. By the 20th Congress of the CPSU, certainly, his utopian promo-
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...tion of 'the upright gait' of socialist humanism, which was increasingly attractive to young radicals, had rendered his presence in the East uneasy. He migrated to the West with relief as the Wall went up, settling into an academic post in Tübingen until his death in 1977. In this context, Bloch produced a series of fresh philosophical works and championed a range of political causes (including anti-Vietnam War and anti-nuclear weapon campaigns), finally attaining considerable popularity amongst Western Marxists.

Three recent books on Bloch raise interesting questions about his potential role in current intellectual debates. They all insist on his contemporary relevance, but at the same time assume that he is worth rereading in spite of, rather than because of his Marxism. Ernst Bloch and the selection of critical essays that comprise Not Yet together fulfill the criteria for resurrecting Bloch set out by Douglas Kellner in his contribution to the second of these two volumes. Kellner asserts that, 'if Bloch is to have any real impact on political and cultural analysis in the English-speaking world, efforts must be made to explain and interpret what he is up to, and convincing arguments must be provided to persuade people that reading Bloch is worth the time and effort'. Approximately speaking, Vincent Geoghegan's work does the former, and the Verso collection does the latter. Neither does so unproblematically, though, since, as we shall see, in bringing him up to date, both books simultaneously go too far and not far enough, de-Marxifying him in order to modernise him, but refusing systematically to pit his thought against postmodernism. John Miller Jones's disappointing contribution to Bloch studies, Assembling (Post)modernism, fails to fulfil either of Kellner's criteria effectively, and, despite its title, fails also to make his thought serviceable in today's theoretical debates.

In what follows, I want to review these works' appraisal of the philosophy of hope with particular attention, first, to the ways in which they negotiate Bloch's Marxism, and its association with his Stalinism; and, second, interconnected with this, to their largely insufficient attempts to position him in a critical relationship with postmodernism. I want to conclude by suggesting a reading of Bloch which shows how his analysis of our cultural tradition's scattered, surreptitious attempts to imagine emancipation can 'revitalize Marxism against a theory or practice which positively refrains from positing alternatives or dealing with the future, as well as against a mechanical, non-dialectical, economistic sort of dogmatic Marxism'.

Geoghegan's introductory monograph on Bloch, with its thorough exposition of his key concepts in the light of their various intellectual contexts, provides an admirably lucid account of its often tortuously difficult subject matter. As I have indicated, it creates the space in which the inevitably more sophisticated reconsideration of Marxist utopianism undertaken in Not Yet can occur. The strength of this selection of essays lies in the range of its responses to a variety of different aspects of Bloch's work. If the fact that many of these pieces have already appeared alongside one another elsewhere makes their overall association here seem a little stale, then this does not detract from the freshness with which some of the contributors intervene in the attempt to make Bloch readable and relevant today. David Kauffmann's muscular essay on 'Bloch,