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Ernst Bloch and the subject of orientalism

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a reading of German philosopher Ernst Bloch's 1952 essay *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* in relation to the question of orientalism. Bloch's study of first-century Islamic philosopher, scientist and doctor Ibn Sina (Avicenna) relies on orientalist sources and authors also discussed in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Yet, it challenges many stereotypes and 'structures of attitude and reference' that are recurrent in European representations of the Middle East. Bloch presents Avicenna as a secular thinker and situates him in a complex economic and social conjuncture, refusing to see his work as manifestation of a non-Western pre-modern 'essence'. This perspective avoids both primitivism and essentialism; rather, it aims to recuperate the vast influence of Islamic thought on European philosophy, especially the European Enlightenment. Avicenna's heterodox naturalism and rebellious interpretation of Aristotle is hence reframed as the source of a materialist line of descent to which Bloch himself belongs. Bloch hence sketches a concept of philosophical heritage grounded into the legacy of Avicenna's teaching, thereby anticipating Edward Said's critique of the metaphysics of exteriority proper to Orientalist discourse and its colonial underpinning.

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How should Bloch's 1952 *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* be read after Edward Said's *Orientalism,* a study originally published in 1978? Such question presupposes some kind of anachronism, but it is also unavoidable for the twenty-first century reader. As an essay written in the 1950s by a German philosopher belonging to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, Bloch's essay on Avicenna certainly entails a European representation of the Arab World, and Islam in particular, which could potentially fall into the field covered in Said's influential work. Bloch's book, furthermore, relies on sources that fully belong to the orientalist camp. In particular, Bloch makes reference to works like Ignác Goldziher's *Vorlesungen über den*

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Islam as well as orientalist critics like Joseph Ernest Renan and Max Horten, who translated Avicenna's writings.[1]

Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left was originally published as an essay for the journal *Sinn und Form*, republished the same year as a monograph, and then as an appendix to his 1972 collection *Das Materialismusproblem.*[2] This text belongs to what Wayne Hudson has described as the 'fourth phase' of Bloch's career: 'the phase in which he was a semi-institutionalised Marxist philosopher in a "socialist" country'.[3] The text was published after Bloch took up his first academic appointment in Leipzig, then part of the DDR, in 1949, after exile in North America in the preceding decades. Borrowing the title of Jack Zipes's recent monograph on the author, Ernst Bloch could be portrayed as a 'pugnacious philosopher of hope' and utopia: his philosophy can be described as an unfaltering attempt to recover elements of unrealised futures, hopes and possibilities in the history of the oppressed.[4] Potrayed as 'German philosopher of the October Revolution',[5] Bloch was influenced by Expressionism, Romanticism, classic German philosophy and Marx, whose oeuvre he reinterpreted from a humanist and non-deterministic perspective; indeed, he developed an open-ended dialectical materialism casting hope, anticipation, human dignity and daydreams as political forces for social change. In the 1930s, he wrote a compelling critique of Nazism in his influential book *Heritage of Our Times,* while he later elaborated his philosophical vision in his three-volume work *The Principle of Hope,* described by Michael Löwy as 'one of major works of emancipatory thought in the twentieth century'.[6] While an independent thinker that cannot be easily assimilated to any school of thought, Bloch can be situated in the intellectual, political and historical milieu of important European philosophers including Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. During his time in East Germany in the 1950s, Bloch got into trouble for developing a humanist alternative to the Stalinist orthodoxy and came to be seen as heretical Marxist; he was forced to retire and eventually left East Germany. Bloch's engagement with Avicenna, as Cat Moir notes, was part of his attempt to rethink materialism by looking at a wide range of sources, including 'idealist' philosophers such as Plato, Kant and Hegel, in order to challenge mechanistic and determinist concepts of materialism.[7]

Bloch's study on Avicenna was written before Said's *Orientalism*, which ignited decades of debate on the representation of non-European peoples in European cultural forms. Yet, Bloch's study of Avicenna seems to anticipate some key issues that characterise critical theory after *Orientalism*. For example, as Joseph Massad states, 'Edward Said's *Orientalism* excavated a Western epistemological mode of production that projected an Oriental other from its own interiority, externalising and banishing this other outside the European self as it sought to define itself'.[8] One of the key

issues at the heart of Said's *Orientalism* concerns the exteriority of the subject from the object of representation: a Western subject posing *him*self as external to and distant from the non-Western 'object'. From this point of view, orientalist knowledge serves the purpose of establishing the cultural superstructure of imperialism, and traps living histories into the reified second nature of both colonising and colonised identities. As Said eloquently puts it in his later work *On Late Style,* 'imperialism is the export of identity'.[9] Aamir Mufti further explains this mechanism by noting that Said mainly developed a critique of orientalism's '"naturalised supernaturalism," of its remapping of humanity in terms of supposedly secular cultural logics whose Manichean modalities … can only be understood as a "reconstructed religious impulse"'.[10] The ideological dimension of the metaphysics of exteriority identified by Said's research does not only regard the assumptions informing Bloch's sources. More generally, the tradition of orientalism predisposes the very context and composition of the essay at large, and the position of its author. Lauren Goldman and Peter Thompson, translators of Bloch in English, acknowledge the question in their introductory note, where they consider 'the subject matter, the era, and the subject position of its author', remarking that unsurprisingly, 'Bloch occasionally employs Orientalist language that is no longer accepted in academic writing. While nothing here is patently offensive … Bloch's deep appreciation for the philosophical contributions of Avicenna and his intellectual descendants should be clear'.[11] Reading *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* through the lens of the critique of orientalist knowledge should take Goldman and Thompson's thoughtful remarks as a helpful point of departure.

The essay on Avicenna does not contain any blatantly 'offensive' language that could upset the twenty-first century reader. Yet, it must be situated according to the subject matter, the era and the subject position of the author. In his introduction to the short book, Loren Goldman remarks that 'by situating the world's emancipatory possibilities in the Islamic interpretation of Aristotle, this small book provides a provocative reconstruction of the sources of modern philosophy that both confounds standard binaries of East/West and Premodernity/Modernity'.[12] Even more radically, Bloch seems to anticipate a contemporary sensibility by sketching a critical appraisal of his orientalist sources. Thus, for example, in endnote Bloch vituperates 'Catholic theologian M. Horten, someone without much of an elective affinity for enlightened matter', as a tendentious interpreter who, 'when translating and glossing Avicenna and Averroës, wrote them off as mere "enlighteners." Their naturalism was to be seen as nothing more than a "primitive misunderstanding of Scholasticism"'.[13] Such criticism is worth considering for many reasons.

Bloch acknowledges a common ground of intellectual exchanges, influences, translations and inheritances that cut across any simplified imagined

geography pitting the 'West' against a supposedly inferior 'East'. Bloch is fully aware of the many cosmopolitan interlockings and borrowings in which modern European philosophy is entangled. Furthermore, Bloch is highly critical, not only of the orientalist translator Horten, colourfully portrayed here as an obscurantist ('someone without much of an elective affinity for enlightened matter'), but also of a tradition of European misunderstandings of Islamic culture. Thus, writes Bloch, 'in Horten we are surprised to find, for example, that Averroës is turned from an antiorthodox thinker into an "apologist for the Qur'an"'.[14] Contrarily, it is important to acknowledge that 'Averroës and Avicenna still stand firm against the world of the mufti and his orthodoxy, and to wish to retrospectively assimilate them is not scholarly work but confabulation'.[15] Bloch's sharp criticism denounces the orientalist conflation of Islamic thinking with a supposedly irrational and regressive submission to religious orthodoxy. Bloch's Avicenna is fully recognised as a secular, heretical and surprisingly modern thinker, whose writings were censored by the religious establishment of his times as well as by religious authorities in Christian Europe.

This could resonate with Bloch's own approach to religion, as he outlined it in an important study titled *Atheism in Christianity,* a book in which he proposed to 'read the Bible with the eyes of the Communist Manifesto'.[16] Bloch's religious atheism offers a reconsideration of myth and religion from a Marxist perspective: rather than dismissing faith as inherently complicit with power and, in Marx's famous dictum, 'opium of the people', Bloch aimed to recuperate rebellious elements of religion set against theocracy and orthodoxy. He recovered the secular and 'plebeian' element of protest against the ruling class in popular forms of faith and belief.[17] The significance of Bloch's religious atheism, moreover, cannot be restricted to the European context as it had a major impact on currents of liberation theology in the Global South, from South Africa to Latin America, for instance on Gustavo Gutierrez's theology of liberation.[18]

Bloch's analysis of Avicenna, for these reasons, seems to outline what Michael Löwy would describe as an 'elective affinity': 'a very special kind of dialectical relationship that develops between two social or cultural configurations, one that cannot be reduced to direct causality or to "influences" in the traditional sense'.[19] Bloch's elective affinity with Avicenna is a convergence of intellectual affiliations that transcend the orientalist divide. Notwithstanding a dated language and occasional references to 'Eastern reason', Bloch does not fall into the orientalist trap of dividing the world into two uneven sides and does not take orientalist knowledge at face value. Bloch's situates the philosophy of Avicenna in a material world of exchange, commerce and circulation that does not assimilate Islamic culture to a supposedly unchangeable and metaphysical essence. From this point of view, Bloch's profound historical awareness is

substantially different from the structures of feeling proper to orientalist thought as described by Edward Said, in a passage of *Orientalism* in which he notes how orientalists such as Renan and Goldziher saw Islam 'as a "cultural synthesis" … that could be studied apart from the economics, sociology, and politics of the Islamic peoples'.[20] 'For Orientalism', continues Said, 'in order best to be understood Islam had to be reduced to "tent and tribe." The impact of colonialism, of worldly circumstances, of historical development: all these were … never taken seriously enough to complicate the essential Islam'.[21] There are no traces of this essentialist and ahistorical version of Islam or the Arab World in Bloch's essay. Bloch eschews those 'categories, codes, and conventions' that, according to Derek Gregory, performatively constitute 'the Orient' as both a repertoire and an archive.[22] Bloch introduces Avicenna as complex historical figure to be understood in relation to the advancements of the economy and society of his times.

Bloch's critical stance towards orientalist knowledge is based on a very specific concept of history, which informs his philosophy as a whole. This is the idea of a non-synchronous work of cultural transmission, whereby the work of the writer is meant to complete unfinished and unrealised possibilities of social emancipation left incomplete by past generations.[23] Bloch revives Avicenna's philosophy by drawing a line of intellectual descent of which Bloch himself is the ultimate heir and successor. A reading of Avicenna beyond the dichotomy of 'Europe and its others' leads the German philosopher to reimagine the role of the contemporary intellectual – and the specific intellectual and artistic labour she or he performs.[24] Intellectual labour is envisaged as the ability to interweave torn halves of a common cultural heritage and, most importantly, to overcome the exteriority of the object of representation from the one doing the representing. Accordingly, what will be described as the materialism of immanence and possibility that animates Bloch's philosophy could be aligned with Said's critique of orientalist representational strategies. Reading Bloch through the lens of the critique of orientalism, in the end, can lead to overcome, not only recurring neo-orientalist prejudice, but also a regressive ideology of reverse orientalism reinstating the imaginary geography of orientalism in inverted form. Bloch's materialism avoids ossifying the living historicity of peoples in Europe and Asia into the ahistorical expression of a reified cultural essence or identity. Bloch's essay was written before Said's *Orientalism* was ever conceived or written, but it suggests a way out of the cultural and political impasse which still traps postcolonial cultural theory more than forty years after *Orientalism*.

1. Beyond orientalism: situating Avicenna

Born in the town of Afshana in the Samanid Empire (now Uzbekistan) ca. 970, Avicenna (a corruption of his patronymic ibn Sīnā) was a self-taught

Muslim philosopher influenced by Aristotle.[25] Peter Adamson notes that Avicenna 'should be recognised as the single most influential thinker of the medieval period': indeed, he exerted a major influence on Muslim philosophy and theology, but also played a major part in Jewish, Christian and Renaissance philosophical traditions.[26] Avicenna was a true polymath well-versed in disciplines such as medicine, physics and logic as well as philosophy and theology. As regards the philosophical significance of this important author, Lenn Goodman remarks that 'Avicenna's achievement is not in attempting to adjudicate between determinism and indeterminism but in harmonising a Neoplatonic/Aristotelian determination of nature with the reality of choice, change, and contingency'.[27] This aspect strongly resonates with Bloch's attempt to envision an open-ended dialectical materialism eschewing at the same time determinism and voluntarism.

Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left starts with preliminary thoughts on the material context out of which Avicenna's philosophy emerged. The way in which Bloch presents this context is driven by a very self-critical reconsideration of *European* history, which is appraised in a comparative and less insular viewpoint. In a section titled 'Merchant Cities and Hellenistic Foundations', Bloch notes that 'Ibn Sina [Avicenna] was a doctor, not a monk. He was as little a monk as the other significant Islamic thinkers who lived in the world and thought scientifically'.[28] Similarly, rather than primitive and barbaric, and 'despite its feudal forms and its spiritual wars', Islamic society

> was, in its own way, a type of early bourgeois society with a clan structure, yet one in which mercantile capital dominated and determined social life. Mecca, the birthplace of Islam, was an ancient great emporium, one of the entrepots for trade between Arabia, Persia, India, and the Mediterranean lands.[29]

Avicenna is immediately presented as a rational, scientific thinker, one of the major figures of an Islamic 'enlightenment' that predated the European one. Most importantly, against the grain of the orientalist reduction of Islam to 'tent and tribe' (to use Renan's formulation addressed by Said), Bloch emphasises that 'the Arab world had its Venices and Milans five hundred years before Europe'.[30] Bloch does not present Avicenna as a primitive figure completely imbued by a non-European 'mentality', or as if his thought would originate from a supposed non-Western 'essence' of a less developed civilisation. Bloch is highly critical of developmental views of history that cast heterogeneous social formations as earlier stages of a unilinear trajectory of which Europe would embody an accomplished and mature version. Bloch sketches a critique of the latent primitivism of his orientalist sources along with an anti-teleological and materialist understanding of Avicenna: economic conditions determine the Persian author's oeuvre much more significantly than a supposedly unchanging cultural reification turned into second nature. Avicenna is shown as the product of a

complex historical milieu defined by circulation, commerce, exchange of goods and ideas, and the progress of science. Avicenna was, indeed, according to Dimitri Gutas, the initiator of a 'Golden Age' of Arabic philosophy that was to last more than three centuries.[31]

Bloch's parallelisms do not renounce his European subject-position and reference points: stating that the Arab World had its 'Venices and Milans' five hundred years before Europe still implies a European reference point to make sense of this non-synchronous temporality wherein Avicenna's world anticipates subsequent historical periods. Bloch originally developed his concept of 'non-simultaneity' in a chapter of *Heritage of Our Times* to make sense of the rise of Nazism out of elements of European society inhabiting different temporal registers.[32] Non-simultaneity or non-synchronism (as the German word *ungleichzeitigkeit* has been variously translated) implies both the persistence of objective historical elements other than the present, and the mobilisation of these untimely remnants as a very ambivalent political force of change. Non-synchronism entails a vision of history as an open dialectics in which strata belonging to different epochs constantly intertwine to form new configurations. Bloch's concept of non-synchronism challenges any unidirectional idea of history as a set of stages moving from less to more developed, hence questioning the Eurocentrism often implied in teleological visions of history. Thus, the context of Avicenna's thought is described as much more advanced technologically, scientifically and economically than contemporary Europe, while the way in which this advancement is portrayed still relies on European coordinates. However, these European coordinates are constantly called into question in Bloch's introduction to Avicenna. The Arab World is a universe driven by 'global merchants, a blossoming manufacturing sector, and a rich system of trade … its light was more alive than that of the later European cloister schools and the universities they spawned'.[33] In contrast to this early Arab Enlightenment, Europe is portrayed as a 'semiwilderness of fortifications, insignificant towns, and monasteries'.[34] The cultural centrality of the Arab World also entails a very specific quality, again positively contrasted with the insignificance and backwardness of Europe at the time.

Indeed, Bloch notes that 'alongside trade and commerce, the book was part of everyday life. Uninterrupted by any great migration of peoples, the traditions of late antiquity were still richly present'.[35] Avicenna's world is simultaneously more advanced than Europe and still immersed in the living pulse of vanishing traditions of the past, thanks to the exceptional archival cultures of the times. Avicenna's world stretches both far away in the past and towards a not yet existing future, as it anticipates the European Enlightenment upon which Avicenna's philosophy was to exert great influence. Bloch outlines a non-synchronous view of Avicenna's context whereby high technological advancement, pre-modern enlightenment and

scientific discoveries combine with feudal social structures and the survival of the past. The 'traditions of late antiquity' are very much present, whilst merchant capital is much more developed than contemporary European economy. Avicenna's world is an assemblage of what Massimiliano Tomba would call 'a plurality of temporal strata' in which different ages mingle, in order to give rise to a unique conjuncture.[36] The heritage of Antiquity combines with non-European social forms and scientific discoveries, and Avicenna's philosophy itself is the product of such combinations.

On a first reading, Bloch's representation of first-century Middle East might appear to be animated by what may be described as a sort of 'reverse orientalism', whereby Europe is shown as barbaric, primitive and backward, if compared to the advancement of the Arab World of the time. In an important intervention on the matter, Gilbert Achcar describes the features of such sort of 'orientalism in reverse' – a term used in an influential essay by Sadik Jalal al-'Azm – which started to gain popularity after the publication of *Orientalism* and the 1979 Revolution in Iran.[37] As Achcar notes, the 'orientalism in reverse' disseminated in those years was based on six postulates, including the assumption that

> the Islamic Orient and the West are antithetic … [that] the degree of emancipation of the Orient should not and cannot be measured by Western standards and values … that no analogy with Western phenomena is relevant … [that] the primary factor setting Muslim masses in motion, is cultural – that is, religious,

and that any kind of politics guided by non-Western movements or peoples is intrinsically progressive and liberatory.[38] All these postulates reinstated a sort of cultural essentialism and a rigid binary division between East and West.

Reverse orientalism starts from a necessary critique of European culture's entanglement into the material realities of imperial domination, but it results in acritical celebration of non-European cultures, existing hegemonies and ideologies of authenticity and nativism, reaffirming the unbridgeable gap between Orient and Occident. Implicitly, the possibility of such drift was already present in Said's own discourse, as Aijaz Ahmad observes in his major critique of *Orientalism*: Said speaks 'of *a* Europe, or the West, as a self-identical, fixed being which has always had an essence and a project, an imagination and a will; and of the "Orient" as its object'.[39] More broadly, Ahmad's critique reveals the risk, somehow already present in *Orientalism,* of falling into the ideological trap of considering orientalist representations the cause, rather than the *effect* of imperialism.

This deceptive confusion of cause and effect is a reversal that complicates the transmission of Said's legacy, as Vivek Chibber notes in his thoughtful reassessment of the matter: 'Orientalism *could not* have generated modern

colonialism, or even contributed to it in any significant way. Its roots therefore have to be sought in political economy, not in European culture'.[40] *Orientalism* paved the way for a much-needed analysis of how imperialism impinges on cultural production. Nevertheless, in the subsequent rise of what Gyan Prakash famously characterised as 'post-orientalist' scholarship, Neil Lazarus notes, 'the West' became a monolithic 'mappable zone and social agent' that resulted in mystifying existing power relations as well as obfuscating the material dimension of colonial modernity and its roots in capitalist economy.[41] Post-orientalist scholarship, qualified by Prakash as a post-foundational approach to history, has tended to shift from critique of essentialism to celebration of cultural instances of heterogeneity, hybridity and the politics of difference. Such approach is based on the assumption that orientalist discourses and representations produce the historical realities of a capitalist and colonial modernity. Debates on the legacy and significance of Edward Said's work, however, have shown the need to reinstate the epistemological realism and materialism inherent to the critique of orientalism.[42] From this point of view, a materialist critique of orientalism does not neglect the wider and systemic historical conditions and tendencies in which cultural forms are entangled.[43]

None of these orientalist, post-orientalist or reverse-orientalist assumptions and postulates, however, animates Bloch's 1952 essay: Bloch draws constant affinities, parallelisms and commonalities that underline the reciprocal influences and connections between Europe and the Arab World, which are shown as changing, historical and complex social formations. Bloch's essay does not celebrate any religious orthodoxy – both in its Islamic and Christian variations – but rather formulates a retrieval of heretic and secular traditions across historical and geopolitical boundaries. Avicenna is rescued from orientalist interpreters and shown as a rational and scientific thinker whose impact on European thought continues to be substantial. This gesture, however, does not lead Bloch to reinstate Europe's superiority at a later stage: Bloch does not conclude by celebrating European cultural progress in subsequent centuries. On the contrary, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* formulates a complete reconsideration of the philosophical tradition to which Bloch himself belongs. In a striking passage towards the end of the essay, Bloch even denounces, in passing, the evils of colonialism and suggests that only the revival of a materialist philosophy could act as a liberating force *in Europe as well as in Asia*.

He writes that in the centuries following Avicenna's death, philosophy

> became as dangerous in the Orient as the natural sciences did in Italy after Galileo's trial … It was a double emancipation of Near Eastern peoples – from a half-colonial condition and perhaps from their own intellectual torpor; it is once again possible to hear there the sound of what was tarnished along with Avicenna.[44]

Avicenna's legacy is shown as a force able to cross generational, as well as geographical distances: his influence is not limited to the society he belonged to, but rather continues to operate as an inspiration and a source of resistance athwart continents and eras. In a striking passage of the second volume of *The Principle of Hope,* Bloch mentions, in passing, the influence of Arab philosophers on European heresies such as the Cathars: very much against the grain of orientalism or even current forms of what Elleke Boehmer identifies as 'neo-orientalist' narratives, the influence of Arabic philosophy is described by Bloch as enabling 'the seeds of religious tolerance' in Europe.[45] In sum, Bloch's portrayal of the elective affinities of Arabic philosophy and European heretical movements immediately reveals another important aspect of Bloch's concept of history. Bloch's Avicenna is a non-synchronous figure that transcends civilisational partitions, in sheer contrast to orientalist representations that often separate, not only geographically and spatially, but also historically and temporally European from non-European cultures.

Avicenna's anticipation of future philosophies disjoints any linearity and teleology that would locate the Arab World as a more primitive version of Europe. Bloch's research instead indicates how each historical era is animated by multiple tendencies and survivals, elements from the past but also from the future, and indeed Avicenna's thought anticipates the European Enlightenment. In such asynchronous temporality, Avicenna's inheritance belongs to the European tradition together with the Islamic one, it embodies the past together with the seeds of possible futures. As a living matter, Avicenna's philosophy is hence the product of an intellectual and economic context that challenges both orientalism and its reincarnations in forms of reverse or neo-orientalism that still divide the West from the East. A materialist perspective inspired by Avicenna leads Bloch to ground philosophical lineages into the material circumstances out of which ideas spring and which ideas express and represent. This materialism, more than any reverse orientalism or cultural essentialism, is the precondition that enables Bloch to reimagine European philosophy's debt to Islamic thought.

2. The telos of matter: situating European philosophy

Bloch's materialist way of understanding Avicenna's heritage does not stop at challenging what Said would describe as orientalist 'structures of attitude and reference' in its representation of the Arab World.[46] Bloch refuses to reduce the complexities of the economic and social conjuncture inhabited by Avicenna to the reifications of cultural identity. Bloch demonstrates how Avicenna's influence played a major part in subsequent European philosophy, especially the philosophy of the Enlightenment. As Bloch observes,

> a widely printed book by Ibn Tufayl: *Alive, Son of Awake*, one of the first philosophical novels … went into the European canon … [and] served as a model not only for *Robinson Crusoe* but for all subsequent Robinsonesque tales. Yet the novel itself harks back conceptually to Avicenna, and the wakeful title comes quite literally from him.[47]

This novel

> appeared in 1671 under the title *Philosophus Autodidactus* and was translated into German in 1783 by *Eichhorn as Der Naturmensch* … The novel did not, however, merely call Robinson onto the stage but also reinforced the basic tenet of the Enlightenment, that faith is not necessary if one has reason.[48]

Avicenna's influence, then, extends to the roots of the European Enlightenment, and operates as an often-unacknowledged source in many classic tropes of eighteenth-century European literature.

As Bloch continues, 'the influence of Eastern naturalism could also be felt in Europe; on Abelard, on Roger Bacon, and ultimately on the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'.[49] In addition to being source and reference point for the European Enlightenment, Bloch reframes Avicenna as the initiator of a long tradition of thinking that feeds into the most radical and anti-hegemonic strands of European philosophy, the tradition of materialism. As he notes in his essay, what is 'distinctive' about Avicenna's thought, 'what secures the coherence of his legacy and much more, is the line he emphasised leading from Aristotle … to Giordano Bruno and his successors'.[50] In order to describe this line of intellectual and political affiliations Bloch proposes, 'corresponding to the well-known fork in thought after Hegel's death, the description *Aristotelian Left.* There is a similarity between the naturalistic ways in which the Aristotelian *nous* and the Hegelian Spirit were brought down to earth'.[51] The most enduring legacy of Avicenna, for Bloch, is hence the reversal of the transcendental presupposition of idealist philosophies aligned with the interest of dominant religious and aristocratic power.

Against transcendence, Avicenna originated a tradition of non-mechanistic and immanent materialism, understood as the overcoming of the privileging of spirit, nous, or form, over body and matter. As Loren Goldman notes, in contrast 'to the Absolute Idealism of extra-material form argued by Aquinas and the Aristotelian Right, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left emphasise active form within matter'.[52] The Aristotelian tradition lay the foundation for the overcoming of this hierarchy, but in Aristotle's teaching, matter still remained somehow passive and inert: 'Aristotle had defined matter as "dynamei-on," merely what-may-become-possible, as indeterminate in itself, and which, like wax, passively takes on and can be moulded by any form'.[53] Aristotle had conceived of matter as a field of possibility, a wax that can be moulded by the agency of form in multiple ways and

according to multiple ends. But it was Avicenna that radically rethought the dichotomy between an active 'form', leaving its imprint on substance, and a passive matter, simply to be modelled and shaped according to the telos of form. Avicenna, instead, gave rise to a materialist viewpoint emphasising the active, collaborative agency of matter; he stressed the immanence of form and matter against the transcendental; this insight led to questioning the radical distinction between spirit and body. Bloch writes that the tradition initiated by Avicenna was advanced by authors like Jewish Andalusian philosopher Avicebron 'in the concept of *materia universalis*, and by Averroës, in whose writings matter becomes something eternally in flux and alive in the form of "natura naturans," in no need of a God-*nous* from above or beyond'.[54] Such primacy of matter is also echoed in Spinoza's philosophy of immanence, and Spinoza's famous dictum '*deus sive natura*', which identified the divine with the worldly. This philosophical lineage outlines the main feature of the Aristotelian Left, 'namely the *sublation of divine potency itself in the active potentiality of matter* … By contrast, the Aristotelian Right, leading to Thomas, elevated the concept of *nous* even further than Aristotle already had. This Right relegated matter to mere potentiality'.[55] The Aristotelian right, hence, is exposed as an institution of European thinking that serves the interests of the Church and the dominant classes. In contrast to this right-wing Aristotelianism, Avicenna folded the agency of form – or nous – into the concrete being of matter: rather than being animated by a divine potency, Left Aristotelianism sees matter as alive, vibrant and as a sort of non-human agency which fulfils its possibilities through human consciousness and labour.

Avicenna's revival of matter gave rise to a materialist interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of *dynamei-on*, whereby the real and active potentiality of matter is one with the intentional agency of spirit or form. While Aristotle 'never overcame the equation of matter with passivity', Avicenna gives matter 'the distinguishing characteristics of ferment and pregnancy, of self-creation, of the sheer incompleteness of this possibility'.[56] Matter does not receive its telos or finality from the external action of form: the telos of matter is an immanent entelechy. As Frederic Schwartz notes,

> Bloch found the notion of the "entelechy" to be quite helpful … As an immanent telos of matter, the concept figures centrally in Bloch's process philosophy, in his categories of "tendency," "latency," and ultimately "utopia" that he developed in his book *Das Materialismusproblem* … though he relates the "entelechy," logically enough, to Aristotle's speculative materialism.[57]

Bloch's philosophy is pervaded by concepts, references and lines of thought deriving from the tradition of Aristotelian Left identified in his book on Avicenna. To use the language of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia,* Bloch's philosophy is traversed by the 'power of transmigrational dispersion' of Avicenna's

thought.[58] As Caroline Edwards suggests in her compelling reading of Bloch's complex references to transmigration in *Spirit of Utopia*, this notion 'enables Bloch to overcome the dichotomy between the subject and historical time. The lifespan of an individual is stretched into meaningful association not just with their immediate relations, but, crucially, with broader swathes of human struggle'.[59] Transmigration allows a vision of history that cannot be limited to the individual and rather mediates between individual and collective consciousness, forming connections across historical eras and inter-generational solidarities.

Avicenna's teachings radically subvert the order of things that dominated European philosophy in its idealistic forms. The incompleteness of matter does not result in a passive idea of 'natura naturata' or a static and ossified materialism posing the existing world as an incumbent and unchangeable force. As Wayne Hudson notes, in 'Bloch's system matter is not confined to what is at hand: it is the womb of possibilities, uncompleted entelechy, activist forward matter that dialectically develops new contents as the process unfolds'.[60] Thus, writes Bloch, 'the orientation of the Aristotelian Left emerges via the reconstruction of the matter-form relationship as one that clearly grasps matter as an active force – not just as something mechanically inert'.[61] This is the foundation of Bloch's speculative materialism: 'Bloch repurposed Aristotle's theory of actuality', writes Cat Moir in a recent essay on the topic, 'to produce an emergentist concept of matter as containing the possibility of "everything later external within it" – including consciousness'.[62] However, this should not be confused with some kind of subjectivism or voluntarism. 'Although Bloch explicitly referred to a "self of the material"', Moir continues, 'he did not believe that matter is "alive" … There is a 'subjective factor' in Bloch's concept of matter, but it is an impersonal "agent," which tends dynamically and energetically towards the actualisation of possibilities latent in its capacity'.[63] Bloch's concept of subjectivity derives from the convergence between a conscious agent and the entelechy of matter. This view is greatly indebted to the materialism of the Aristotelian Left. As he writes in a passage on his concept of 'militant optimism' in the first volume of *Principle of Hope,* the subjective factor reclaiming the role of making history, 'that of realisation and of changing the world … as Marx stresses in the first thesis on Feuerbach', is 'the *active side* (generation, productivity, spontaneity of consciousness)', developed from an idealism brought down to earth rather than 'mechanical materialism'.[64] A materialist notion of subjectivity goes beyond the dualism of consciousness and body, paving the way for a dialectical perspective whereby humans make history out of their material circumstances, as Marx famously wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Accordingly, Bloch's materialist idea of agency rests on the process of completing something incomplete. As Caroline Edwards writes, Bloch's

lasting achievement 'was to rescue the centrality of utopia within literary and cultural life as a crucial catalyst for political agency; shaping interventions into a social reality that he saw as fundamentally unfinished'.[65] In Peter Thompson's words, this kind of agency can indicate 'the space into which anticipatory consciousness, liberated from both *re-ligio* and reductionist materialism, can be projected … This process also liberates Aristotelian *potentia* from its own theological limitations'.[66] Avicenna is hence situated by Bloch as the precursor of a materialist tendency in both Arabic and European philosophies: the Aristotelian Left tradition stresses the primacy of matter over spirit, while it is at the same time incompatible with a mechanistic materialism depicting matter as inert, passive and unchangeable. Matter is a field of concrete and real possibilities that find their telos and purpose in their own realisation.

Rethinking materialism after Avicenna, for this reason, means seeing matter as a womb of possibilities that realise themselves through the agency of human beings. Conversely, human beings are the real actors and subjects of history, though actors that drive to completion the telos of matter itself. Human agency hence cannot be restricted to thought, spirit or form, but it is a material and concrete force built upon the external circumstances that human beings make and remake through their labour. Avicenna's materialism, from this standpoint, anticipates Marx's historical materialism. And indeed, in the first volume of *The Principle of Hope,* Bloch notes how

> without this legacy of Aristotle and Bruno, Marx would not have been able to set much of the Hegelian world-idea on its feet in such a natural way. Nor would the dialectic of process have been rescuable from the so- called world-spirit in materialistic terms and become ascertainable in matter as a law of motion.[67]

Marx's dialectical materialism, for this reason, rests on a concept of matter very different from the mechanical and inert concept of pre-dialectical materialism. This is a legacy that reveals a suppressed elective affinity between Arabic and European philosophies of matter, complicating any provincialised history of European thought detached from the intellectual lineage of Avicenna.

3. The subject of representation: situating Bloch

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is prefaced with an epigraph from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:* 'they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented', which played a very influential role in subsequent postcolonial criticism after Said, and was also analysed by Gayatri Spivak in her influential meditations of the subaltern.[68] As used by Said, this quote refers to the non-European peoples who, according to the discourse of

orientalism, are incapable of forming their own narratives and images and are hence in need of being represented by the European colonising voice. In the conclusion of this essay, I aim to suggest that Bloch's book on Avicenna contains an important intervention concerning the issue of representing and being represented. Avicenna, the non-European philosopher, is 'represented' by Bloch in his book, but in a way that is not reducible to the metaphysics of exteriority that underlies orientalist representation. Bloch, indeed, reimagines the role of the critic and, more generally, the one who represents, in a way that prevents the act of representing from acting as a way of silencing the voice being portrayed and narrated.

One of the most striking features of Bloch's reinterpretation of Avicenna's philosophy concerns his final meditations on the question of the subject. Bloch's essay appears, in the end, to be an intense reflection on the question of agency, and the related issue about the production of forms or representations. Bloch writes that Avicenna 'kept matter and active form separate, but he did so in a way that made matter ever more important. The active form, especially in its highest, divine manifestation, hence becomes … the mere exhalation that releases material forms'.[69] These considerations on form and matter are not merely philosophical. As already mentioned, Avicenna's legacy posed a threat to religious establishments for its reframing of the divine as a material and worldly agency against transcendental metaphysics. Profoundly secular and rebellious, this kind of materialism also accentuated the unity of humankind and hence did not serve the hierarchical separation of humans into citizens and slaves.

Thus, while

> Aristotle saw all non-Greeks as natural slaves … active reason in Avicenna and Averroës … appears to be entirely different. In their work, active reason is defined first and foremost as the site of the *unity of human intellect*. From being the mere expression of the nonhabitual, the nonindividual, active reason becomes a human universal.[70]

The immanent, monistic and universalist implications of Avicenna's tradition end up abolishing divisions among human beings or any static dualism of self and other, subject and object. The Aristotelian Left challenged orthodoxy and oppression by showing instead the unity of human reason in its bodily existence. It is for this reason that Avicenna's legacy was silenced and repressed, not only by Islamic orthodoxy, but also by the Christian Church. This materialist, heterodox and rebellious heritage runs as a secret undercurrent across Islamic and Christian histories. Accordingly, Bloch explains that the transcendental, reactionary reinterpretation of Aristotle

> left no place – literally *au fond* – for a Left-Aristotelian concept of matter with its own *logos spermatikos*. Consequently, any emancipatory natura naturans from below (self-creating matter) could only ever appear to the Aristotelianism of the church … as the work of sulfurous Lucifer.[71]

Avicenna embodies a repressed materialist heritage deriving from the golden age of Arabic philosophy and transmitted, through the centuries, across diverse philosophical traditions. This heritage, however, has not yet exhausted its possibilities of liberation, social change and struggle against the status quo.

While intensely political, as Karam AbuSehly notes, Avicenna also played a major influence on Bloch's Marxist aesthetics.[72] From this point of view, there is another aspect of Avicenna's speculative materialism, which can illustrate an interesting feature of Bloch's own essay on Avicenna. The way in which Bloch rereads Avicenna may suggest deeper and wider implications for the twenty-first century reader. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* contains productive insights on the social role of art, the figure of the artist and, in general, the work of representation conceived as neither a transparent mirror of nature nor as a performative construction of reality by an abstract mind. Rather, the act of making artistic forms entails the actualisation of a predisposition inherent in matter itself. This ontology of real possibility eschews both simple naturalism and constructivism, but points to a different way of situating artistic representation. Bloch concludes:

> The resistant matter is the material of 'what-is-considered-possible,' taken as a disruption or constraint; the conjectured plastic nature, however, thinking its own image, this is the material of 'what-may-become-possible,' which the artist further actualizes. And indeed – pointing directly to the Aristotelian Left – not as passive but as active matter, that is, as natura naturans, which further actualizes its own potency-potentiality in the artist. Present existence is accordingly not slavishly depicted, nor is it violated by imprinted form; instead, that which is predisposed within its matter – perhaps not yet matured to full clarity – is artistically driven to completion.[73]

The idea suggested by Bloch in this passage is radical: the artist is neither the one who depicts reality as it is nor the one who makes worlds out of nowhere. The artist operates the completion and actualisation of utopian possibilities that already exist in matter. In Avicenna's reversal, the artist becomes somehow a recipient and transmitter of matter's predisposition. It is the immanence of active matter that expresses itself through artistic labour. This realisation leads Bloch to conceptualise a role for the 'modern artist' that draws on the results and implications of the Aristotelian Left to which Bloch himself ultimately belongs. 'The modern artist', writes Bloch, 'now steps into the scene as both the liberating and perfecting force, such that he clearly and distinctly brings out, exposes, the shape of matter predisposed within matter'.[74] From this point of view, form – spirituality, nous, mind – 'becomes thereby identical to the immanent-entelechial type of things, of characters, of situations'.[75]

Bloch identifies here a role for the artist that also suggests a possible role for the *critic and interpreter*. In the same way as the artist operates as a

liberating force that brings out and realises the unrealised and incomplete telos of matter, thus the interpreter and critic – hence the subject-position of Bloch himself, along with his readers – must assume the role of the activator of what-may-become-possible of the material and tradition the critic is handing down. The interpreter acknowledges being interior to the matter of representation, instead of giving meaning to an inert object incapable, on its own, of finding its purpose and finality or, on the other hand, mechanically repeating what already exists in reified and ossified form. The artist completes, activates and actualises potentialities that are already present and active, though latent and unconscious, in matter itself.

The main argument proposed in this essay is that Bloch refigures, indirectly, the position of himself as interpreter of Avicenna in this particular way, going beyond both idealism and mechanistic materialism. The European interpreter of Arabic philosophy, hence, is reimagined as someone able to transmit real possibilities, in contrast to the orientalists who claimed to make an inert and enigmatic subject speak. Both orientalism and the nativism of reverse orientalism assume, in other words, the exteriority of subject and object. Differently, Bloch's materialism of immanence and possibility casts a new light on the fundamental *interiority* of Arabic and European philosophies, acknowledging his own debt to Avicenna and his heritage. This *immanent materialism of real possibility* sharply contrasts with the presupposition of exteriority well delineated by Said as a key feature of orientalist discourse. Indeed, Said describes how 'Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West'.[76] The orientalist, writes Said,

> is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says. What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact.[77]

The principal product of this exterior relation between subject and object, Said concludes, is the representation of non-European cultures in a self-serving and domesticated fashion.

Bloch's rethinking of the role of the artist is based on the premise of a sort of intimacy, immanence and interiority of form and matter. Most importantly, Bloch's materialism goes beyond any static dichotomy of East and West, Arabic and European heritages and, more broadly, object and subject. Bloch hints at a dialectical way of understanding the question of the subject, by showing the intimacy of form and matter, and rethinking form as the self-completion of matter. As he wrote in the concluding section of his commentary on Hegel, *Subjekt-Objekt,* a section titled 'Dialectics and Hope', the fundamental meaning of the dialectic

> is the relationship of subject and object, nothing else; it is subjectivity working its way forward, again and again overtaking the objectivation and objectivity it has attained, and seeking to explode them. In the final analysis, the needy subject, by finding itself and its work inadequately objectified, is always the *motor* of historically appearing contradictions.[78]

Subjectivity emerges as a force inherent to matter, struggling against the inadequate objectifications it constantly produces. This view does not end up in a static and simplified distinction between an active subject – the one producing the representation – and a passive object. Subject and object are constantly remade in a dialectical process that reinforces the collaboration and interlocking of the two sides at play. In this context, the subject is

> the intensive motor which is set into motion as a consequence of the inadequacy of the achieved form of existence, and which, by contradicting the contradiction within the *thing itself,* activates in a revolutionary way the contradiction stemming from the inadequacy of these forms.[79]

There is no exteriority between subject and object; similarly, Bloch's representation of Arabic philosophy is based on this dialectical immanence that casts the representer and the represented as two parts of a unique process.

Bloch's materialism of immanence and possibility situates the human agent as the activator and redeemer of potentialities that are already present and alive in matter itself. Against a rigid dualism pitting subject against object, Bloch shows how matter is the bearer of utopian possibilities that only human subjects are capable of realising. Matter hence is not inert, but rather an open field of concrete possibilities that the conscious subject can realise. The wider meaning of this perspective in *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left,* however, concerns the very position and subjectivity of the European interpreter of Arabic or 'Oriental' philosophies. Against the dualism of Europe and its Others, Bloch envisages the as yet unrealised possibility of a *concept of philosophical heritage* that goes beyond the imaginary geography of orientalism. Beyond East and West, Bloch ultimately recognises European philosophy's debt to Islamic heritage by situating himself as the crossroads of diverse influences and a secret tradition of speculative materialism of which Bloch's thought itself is a powerfully emancipatory variation.

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