

Pregnant Materialist Natural Law:  
Bloch and Spartacus' Priestess of Dionysus

**ABSTRACT:**

In this article, I explore two neglected works by the twentieth-century Jewish German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* and *Natural Law and Human Dignity*. Drawing on previous analyses of leftist Aristotelians and natural law, I blend Bloch's two texts' concepts of pregnant matter and maternal law into "pregnant materialist natural law." More precisely, *Aristotelian Left* articulates a concept of matter as a dynamic, impersonal agential force, ever pregnant with possible forms delivered by artist-midwives, building Bloch's messianic utopia. And *Natural Law* resurrects the Stoics' concept of natural law as drawing on a prehistoric matriarchal utopia, later channeled by earth goddess cults misconstrued by the nineteenth-century German anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen as political matriarchy. I then conclude by linking this pregnant materialist natural law to Dionysus as son of the Great Mother Goddess. Though stigmatized throughout homophobic Western history for his queerness and maternal dependence, Dionysus is also the patron god of Bloch's hero, the slave revolutionary Spartacus, paramour of a priestess of Dionysus who prophesied his divine mission of liberation.

Keywords: Ernst Bloch; materialism; natural law theory; Spartacus; Dionysus

Despite a surge of interest in Ernst Bloch in the last decade, there are only a handful of citations of him in the Philosopher's Index. The oldest is a five-page review of Bloch's work, from 1970, which concludes that "although Bloch has managed to articulate a well-developed anthropology, he has not been able to include the world of nature successfully in his system."<sup>1</sup> The remainder of this investigation will attempt to show that this conclusion is unwarranted. Second, Anne-Sabine Ernst and Gerwin Klinger, writing ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, give an overview of Bloch's contemporaries' views of him. In the U.S., Ernst and Klinger write, Bloch was widely regarded as "an apocalyptic rider of Stalin, deriving from Marxism 'only the messianic motif,' the Marxian prophecy," a misperception that several recent scholars have refuted.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, according to orthodox Soviets of his time, "Bloch played his own

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Schreiter, "Ernst Bloch: The Man and his Work," *Philosophy Today* 14(4): 1970, 231-235, 235.

<sup>2</sup> Anne-Sabine Ernst and Gerwin Klinger, "Socialist Socrates: Ernst Bloch in the GDR," *Radical Philosophy* 84: 1997, 6-21, 6 (here quoting Joachim Feste, *Vom Ende des utopischen Zeitalters*, Berlin 1991, 73, 60).

tune, so as to make the iron laws of official Marxism-Leninism dance,” a view that still predominates today (10). On this basis, finally, Michael Löwy affirms Bloch’s magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*, as “undoubtedly one of the major works of emancipatory thought in the twentieth century.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Löwy adds, unlike “so many others of his generation – starting with his friend György Lukacs – Bloch remained faithful to the intuitions of his youth and never denied the revolutionary romanticism of his early writings” (351).

The present investigation engages with the above scholarship only obliquely, however, primarily because it focuses on two neglected texts in Bloch’s oeuvre (rather than the two most exhaustively analyzed of his collections, *The Principle of Hope* and *The Spirit of Utopia*). One advantage of my approach is that offers a kind of archeology of the neglected and marginalized proto-feminist sources of Bloch’s hope and utopia, especially from what is sometimes called second-wave or cultural feminism. Thanks to vital critiques of this tradition of feminist thought, however, it is important that I put some explicit distance between Bloch’s view and mine (to which point I will return in greater detail below). First, the form/matter dichotomy is problematic in itself, in part because it continues to be mapped onto other, isomorphic binary hierarchies (including intellect/nature, and male/female), as I have explored previously regarding the place of women of color in Hegel’s philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Second, the identification of matter-as-pregnant with

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Löwy, “Romanticism, Marxism, and Religion in ‘the Principle of Hope’ of Ernst Bloch,” trans. Rodrigo Gonsalves, *Crisis & Critique* 2(1), ed. Frank Ruda and Agon Hamza: 2015, 351-355. For a similarly affirming interpretation, see Salomon J. Terreblance, “Ernst Bloch’s *Laboratorium possibilis Salutis*: On the Humane Ideal in History,” *Philosophy Today* 60(2): 2016, 277-294.

<sup>4</sup> See Joshua M. Hall, “St. Vitus’ Women of Color: Dancing with Hegel,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 9(1): 2017, 43-61.

the concept of “woman” is further problematic, in part because many women are not willing or able to become pregnant or mothers, notably including many transwomen.<sup>5</sup>

With these important provisos in mind, I return to Bloch’s abovementioned proto-feminist inspirations, namely (1) the infinite fecundity of matter (as mother of all things), and (2) the maternal myths that inspired the Stoics’ natural law theory and its revivals, as well as transformations in Enlightenment natural law and nineteenth-century Romantic anthropology. In both sources, Bloch finds what he calls *Vorscheine* (“pre-illuminations”) of his messianic communist utopia. Here, I will follow these pre-illuminations further into both the past (to historically marginalized revolutions) and the future (to not-yet achieved leftist revolutions). More precisely, the rebellion of Spartacus in Rome was fomented by a feminist and genderfluid Dionysus, by way of a priestess of his who bears no trace of stereotypical femininity or motherliness.<sup>6</sup> In these two figures, therefore (Dionysus and the priestess), the revolutionary potential of Bloch’s view is liberated from his own lingering sexism and misogyny, thereby redeeming his philosophy as a tool for revolution today.

The only major counterexample to the neglect of these issues in Bloch scholarship, and the immediate feminist precursor of the present investigation, is Cat Moir’s 2019 monograph, which reinterprets Bloch’s *The Materialism Problem* and *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For two of many helpful discussions of these issues, see Val Plumwood “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy and the Critique of Rationalism,” *Hypatia* 6(1): 1991, 3-27; and Karen J. Warren “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism,” *Environmental Ethics* 12(2): 1990, 125-146. For the suggestion to foreground both these points (namely the form/matter dichotomy and matter as feminine pregnancy) at the beginning of this article, I am indebted to an early reviewer of the article.

<sup>6</sup> This translation of *Vorscheine* is from Peter Thompson, and it strikes me as stronger and more elegant than the alternatives (such as “pre-appearances” and “anticipatory illuminations”) (84). See Peter Thompson, “Religion, Utopia, and the Metaphysics of Contingency,” in *The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia*, ed. Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 82-105.

<sup>7</sup> Cat Moir, *Ernst Bloch’s Speculative Materialism: Ontology, Epistemology, Politics* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019).

Moir finds considerable evidence of an explicit connection between matter and motherliness in Bloch. I will consider three examples of this evidence. First, as early as age thirteen, Bloch pronounced himself an atheist during his own bar mitzvah, and composed an essay claiming that “Matter is the mother of everything existing” (49). Second, much later in his life, in *The Materialism Problem* Bloch “claims that the German word ‘Materie’ is related to Latin ‘mater,’ meaning mother.”<sup>8</sup> Third, also from *The Materialism Problem*, Ivan Boldyrev’s 2014 monograph quotes it as follows: “Matter is a seething bosom of substance, that in the beginning somehow begets, that is – develops, illuminates and forms itself”; moreover, “What seethes, ferments is a subject of the matter, and a flower or a fruit emerging out of it on the dark and difficult way of the process is a substance of this subject.”<sup>9</sup> This “bosom” could be interpreted as that of mother nature, and “the great goddess, Mother Earth,” whom Arthur Evans claims is the original mother of Dionysus, as “an import from the religion of Asia Minor (Western Turkey).”<sup>10</sup> If so, then in Bloch’s terms here, the Mother Goddess is the subject, and the Son God Dionysus is the substance. This would also align with the obvious importance of Dionysus and the Dionysian in Bloch’s corpus.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Zudeick, *Der Hintern des Teufels. Ernst Bloch – Lebens und Werk* (Zurich: Estler Verlag), 17, quoted in Moir 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ivan Boldyrev, *Ernst Bloch and His Contemporaries: Locating Utopian Messianism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13, quoting Ernst Bloch, *Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 7. Das Materialismusproblem, seine Geschichte und Substanz* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 375.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Evans, *The God of Ecstasy: Sex Roles and the Madness of Dionysus* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), 63.

<sup>11</sup> For two supporting observations from the secondary literature, Boldyev notes the importance of the dancing god to Bloch, writing that “precisely this myth, this natural yearning, the dark Dionysian force and the Will are constitutive for his project of utopian philosophy” (28); and Peter Thompson claims that Bloch’s philosophy “looked for the Dionysian radicalism of change rather than the Apollonian reflection upon it” (91).

In this Dionysian spirit, the present investigation attempts to sketch the darkness of unrealized pregnant matter and maternal law, which both frames and is eclipsed by the glare of the patriarchal forms and laws of our history and present. I use the phrase “pregnant matter” here rather than “motherly matter” in recognition of the fact that many transgender people who are not women are nevertheless capable of bearing children. This usage also has the advantage of undercutting the potential gender essentialism of a conception of maternal matter. My first section, drawing on my previous exploration of materialism in the tenth-century philosopher Abu Nasr Alfarabi, explores Bloch’s conception of pregnant matter in *Aristotelian Left*. My second section, drawing on my previous reinterpretation of natural law theory, turns to the Stoics’ maternal conception of natural law, as refined in Enlightenment natural law theorist, and then resurrected in nineteenth-century German anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen’s ultimately misogynist and regressive account of matriarchy.<sup>12</sup> And my concluding section, drawing on my previous analyses of Dionysus as a queer feminist revolutionary, finds pre-illuminations of this pregnant materialist natural law in Bloch’s hero Spartacus, whose (fellow) Thracian paramour was a priestess of Dionysus, prophesying in his name a divine mission of liberation.<sup>13</sup>

## I. Pregnant Matter

To summarize the title of Bloch’s book, “Aristotelian Left” is his phrase for an alternative, marginalized tradition of Aristotle scholarship in the Judeo-Arabic world, which (in

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<sup>12</sup> For more on these previous analyses, see Joshua M. Hall, “Alfarabi’s Imaginative Critique: Overflowing Materialism in *Virtuous Community*,” *The South African Journal of Philosophy* 34(2): 2015, 175-192; and “On Law as Poetry: Shelley and Tocqueville,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 40(3): 2021, 304-318.

<sup>13</sup> See Joshua M. Hall, “Dionysus Lyseus Reborn: The Revolutionary Philosophy Chorus,” in *Philosophy Today* 66(1): 2022, 57-74. For any readers unfamiliar with the term, “Thrace” refers to a region at the intersection of modern-day Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece, which at the time was home to a tribal people viewed by the Romans as warlike barbarians.

contrast to the dominant, idealist, and Latin Christian tradition) interprets Aristotle as a materialist who (a) assigns agency to matter, (b) denies the personal immortality of the soul, and (c) affirms the existence of a world-soul. The upshot of *Aristotelian Left*'s titular tradition, Bloch writes, is “*the sublation of divine potency itself in the active potentiality of matter*” (16). The historical peak of that tradition, for Bloch, is the sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno, who conceived “matter as a *fructifying and fecund universal life*, infinite like God had been, yet without a beyond” (15). Bruno, as Bloch relates, “called matter the first principle of being...the mother of all forms; the latter are its children, and there is no real difference in substance between matter-form” (32).

Tracing this idea in Bruno back to the origins of the *Aristotelian Left*'s tradition, Bloch begins his story with an ambiguity he finds (and/or creates) in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, namely between “the enduring potential of ‘dynamei-on,’ ‘what-may-become-possible’,” and “‘kata to dynaton,’ corresponding to ‘what-is-considered-possible’” (20). For simplicity's sake, I will call the former “manifest potential,” and the latter “latent potential.” Manifest potential represents what is obviously possible for matter in a particular historical locus, which might be described (using Bloch's own maternal rhetoric) as the unborn-form with which nature is already visibly pregnant. As for latent potential, which is centrally important to Bloch's messianic utopianism, it can be compared to the future generations of form-children to which nature may yet someday give birth. But that birth can happen only if, as I will elaborate below, an artist-doula such as Bloch, or the priestess of Dionysus, is willing and able to help nature deliver that new form.

Returning to Aristotelian matter as an example of such pregnant being, Bloch is clear that this idea of pregnancy is not fully formed in Aristotle himself. “It is evident,” Bloch writes, “that Aristotle's concept of matter is imbued with the character of *objective possibility* but not, or at

least not yet, with the distinguishing characteristics of ferment and pregnancy, of self-creation, of the sheer incompleteness of this possibility” (21). The key phrase here is “at least not yet,” which suggests that Bloch is applying his own reinterpretation of Aristotelian matter to itself. Put differently, it is not that Aristotelian matter could not give birth to Bloch’s pregnant matter, it is simply that when Aristotle first expressed the idea of matter, its Blochian potential was still only latent (and not-yet manifest). In other words, Aristotle’s matter was like a person before becoming pregnant, while Bloch’s matter is the same person who is now actively pregnant.

Continuing with this metaphor (which is only barely a metaphor), the idea of pregnant matter evolved through successive generations of Aristotelian scholars of Bloch’s “left” tradition of interpretation, including Ibn Rush (Averroes), Solomon Ibn Gabirol (Avicbron), and the book’s titular Ibn Sina (Avicenna). According to the latter’s *Metaphysics*, Bloch writes, “the type of possibility that precedes reality presupposes a subject that contains within it the possibility of its own emergence” (21). “This subject,” Bloch continues, “is matter,” which he parses as “the substrate of its predispositions”; whereas form, for Avicenna, is “the ‘immanent fire’ or the ‘fiery truth’ of matter” (22). Put differently, there is something like a subject/cause within matter itself that produces the effect we know as form. In short, form is the design residue of matter’s (quasi-) subjectivity. Finally, Bloch notes that, “What remains of morality” for Avicenna (and Averroes) is only “the natural ethical law, with justice as its central virtue” (35).

That is, pregnant materialism leads to a reduction of morality to the singular principle of justice as found in natural law, which reduction promotes freedom by removing restrictions. By contrast, the more elaborate, traditional forms of morality, in Avicenna’s view, are products of patriarchal oppression. For example, such a natural law theorist would not consider sex outside marriage or the use of hallucinogenic drugs to be immoral, or even in the proper category of

morality. Instead, only a more extreme example such as murder is properly immoral, which is why it has always been illegal across cultures, and thus against natural law. Whereas anything that varies among cultures, including customs regarding race and gender relations, cannot justly be prohibited on moral grounds. Finally on this point, by thus linking pregnant matter to the natural law, whose history includes the Stoics' maternal version thereof, *Aristotelian Left* anticipates my hybrid concept of pregnant materialist natural law.

Elaborating further on the left Aristotelians' concept of pregnant matter, Bloch writes that it "is full of active form, through which the possible [sic] actively produces and organizes itself in accord with the new realities pressing forth within it" (39). Here, one can detect a kind of relational tension, initially manifested in the contrast between the womb as that which is full, and the unborn as that which "presses forth." Developing this relationality further, Avicenna's specific formulation of pregnant matter, according to Bloch, "reveals the form of matter to be inherently both potential and potent, both potent and potential" (39). This language of "potency," I suggest, implies a third figure in this pregnant person/fetus relationship, namely the potent male who initially fertilizes the pregnant person (which male is, in Avicenna's description, absorbed by the pregnant being).<sup>14</sup> Given this remarkable absorption of masculine potency by the pregnant being—or, more accurately, a restitution, restoration, or reparation—it is unsurprising that orthodox religious patriarchies have been threatened by this pregnant materialism, whose matter "bears its idiosyncratic forms within itself" (39). These "idiosyncratic forms," Bloch continues, are like children whom matter "brings to realization through its movement," which "implies a fire, a horizon full of the sheer desire to become" within matter itself (39).

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<sup>14</sup> One might also name a fourth member in this relation, namely the aforementioned artist-doula who for Bloch is necessary for birth.



This fiery rhetoric, which recalls Avicenna's notion of form as the "fiery truth" or "imminent fire" of matter, also suggests the figure of Dionysus. As I have explored elsewhere, as the god of wine, which in ancient Greece was always carbonated (due to their bottling methods), Dionysus can be meaningfully described as an effervescent fire of the water that is reborn in the second life of the grapes (after having been "born" from the earth, crushed, and fermented).<sup>15</sup> Thus, form is not (contra patriarchal ideologies) inherently male, paternal, external, authoritative, and top-down. Nor does form impose itself on a submissive, enslaved, domesticated, presumptively female matter. On the contrary, form is simply the result of matter's own bottom-up, active movement, and a direct result (not the cause) of a feminine desire to be. Put poetically, the fire of the wine comes from the water of the grapes, as Dionysus is the son god of the mother earth goddess.

At this juncture, having telescoped left Aristotelianism's trajectory, Bloch takes a few utopian dancing steps beyond even Bruno, that tradition's peak figure, "who allows that the matter of his universe has already accomplished what it can" (40). For Bloch's matter, by contrast, "it is precisely its latency, filled with the fermenting future, that constitutes the *fertility* of matter, its capacity to manifest in ever-new forms of existence" (41). In short, Bloch argues, "only a materialism, oriented toward the horizon of the future, provides the remedy."<sup>16</sup> "Matter, therefore," Bloch concludes, "also has its utopia; in objective-real possibility, it stops being abstract" (42). Instead, pregnant materialism's utopia is a concrete, historical one.

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<sup>15</sup> See Joshua M. Hall, "Newton Contra Alt-Right Nietzsche: Dionysus as Androgynous Black Panther," *The Pluralist* 15(2): 110-128.

<sup>16</sup> 42. This futurity, as Goldman notes in his introduction, recalls the work of Hannah Arendt on natality, the centrality of mothering to the world precisely insofar as promise of the genuinely new resides most securely there. For more, see Joshua M. Hall, "Twixt Mages and Monsters: Arendt on the Dark Art of Forgiveness," *The Philosophy of Forgiveness, Vol. 2: Dimensions of Forgiveness*, ed. Court Lewis (Wilmington, DE: Vernon, 2016), 215-240.

As to the creation of this utopia, as noted repeatedly above, Bloch assigns a privileged role to artists as midwives (or doulas) to pregnant nature. Going back to left Aristotelianism's founding distinction between manifest and latent potential, Bloch reframes it as a contrast between (a) "resistant matter" (which functions for the artist as "a disruption or constraint") and (b) "a conjectured plastic nature" (which "the artist further actualizes") (43). In sum, "The modern artist now steps into the scene as both liberating and perfecting force" (44). Clarifying this power, Bloch cites the sixteenth-century Italian philosopher Julius Caesar Scaliger, for whom the poet is "one who does not imitate nature 'like an actor,' but who instead re-creates it and brings it to its end, 'like another God,' that is, like a Prometheus" (44). Or, in Bloch's (relatively) more prosaic paraphrase, "artistic beauty involves creatively giving shape to the indicated perfection of the norms and dimensions of matter-nature" (44).

If "matter-nature" here already sounds like "mother nature" (which holds for the German language as much as for English), Bloch's next sentence makes this connection explicit. Art, he writes, "is capable of releasing the form within pregnant matter" (45). If nature, in other words, is a pregnant person, then the artist is not the father/fertilizer (and need not be male, even though artists have historically been imagined as male). Rather, as a doula, the artist for Bloch is an historically feminine figure, or at least occupies a traditionally feminine position. Going back at least to Socrates (who in Plato famously dubs himself a midwife of philosophical ideas), for Bloch this midwifery continues today, because "the womb of matter is not yet exhausted by what has hitherto come into being" (45). This is the historical, materialist foundation of Bloch's militant optimism and utopian hope—perhaps in part because this pregnant matter has already, on his analysis, birthed the Stoics' maternal natural law, to which my second section turns. And in my final section, considering this maternal natural law as an example of pregnant materialism,

the question arises as to the identity of the artist-doula—for which I will suggest the figure of the revolutionary, as for example the priestess of Dionysus, deliverer of Spartacus’ rebellion.

## II. Maternal Natural Law

*Natural Law*’s “Author’s Preface,” like Dennis Schmidt’s translator’s introduction, emphasizes the centrality to natural law theory of what Bloch terms “the upright carriage” (*aufrechter Gang*) (ix). This, according to Bloch, is what natural law fights for, and is synonymous with the book’s titular “human dignity” (ix). Put differently, the foundation and goal of natural law is for everyone to equally walk with their heads held high. This also resonates with the present investigation’s foregrounding of Dionysus as god of dance, given the centrality to dance of orthopedics, posture, and walking, as encompassed in the everyday expression, “how one carries oneself.”<sup>17</sup> Dance also holds a privileged place throughout Bloch’s corpus, but fleshing that out is beyond the scope of the present investigation.

Elaborating on this dance-like upright carriage, Bloch writes that “The establishment of honesty and uprightness against a well-padded, rechristened, and retrogressive subordination is a postulate of natural law that is found nowhere else” (xxviii). Put in my first section’s terms, maternal natural law is centrally concerned with what happens when pregnant nature’s children grow up, particularly regarding the question as to whether they will become capable of reproducing nature’s pregnancy. More specifically, maternal natural law concerns “an active justice of below,” which Bloch parses as “the justice that can only be obtained by struggle, as

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Joshua M. Hall, “Core Aspects of Dance: Aristotle on Posture,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 53(1): 2019, 1-16; and “Posture in Plato’s *Laws*: An Introduction to Figuration on Civic Education,” *Journal of Social Science Education* 15(4): 2016, 59-67.

opposed to “something that descends from above and prescribes to each his share, distributing or retaliating” (xxx).

Precisely at this maximal point, however (and here I return to the Author’s Preface), Bloch vacillates. And he does so in a way that perhaps betrays some lingering patriarchal anxiety about the enormous power and self-sufficiency recognized here in the maternal. To wit, Bloch counters that natural law’s “essential point, however, was the manly attempt at emancipation into the free space it sought to construct,” which point he finds “most concisely expressed” in the German playwright, poet, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (xxx). In this way, as so often in our patriarchal history, the maternal is unseated by an intervention from virility, utilizing the latter’s consummate virtue of freedom. More precisely, in Schiller’s plays one can detect an obsession with precisely the following question: How can one protect one’s masculine self against the omnipotent mother?<sup>18</sup>

Further intensifying this appearance of sexist anxiety is the fact that Bloch’s preface ends with another reference to “the upright carriage,” suggesting (especially in this Schillerian context) the figure of a man who proudly and freely stands apart from (especially) his mother, not bowing in deference to the natural interdependency between her and all her children (xxx). From this position, I suggest that the next step toward realizing Bloch’s utopia might be to embrace this interdependence, outgrowing this sexist anxiety regarding men’s connectedness to their mothers, and encouraging men to embrace the feminine and maternal both within and without themselves. One excellent model for this, as I have explored elsewhere, is the Dionysus

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<sup>18</sup> This is most obvious, perhaps in *The Bride of Messina* and *Don Carlos*, but can easily be seen as well in *The Robbers*, and even *Mary Stuart* (where both queens struggle against traditionally feminine and maternal forces, within and without, to maintain their reigns and the flourishing of their realms).

of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, whose central action is vengeance against his hometown of Thebes for slandering his mother (Hall, "Dionysus Lyseus Reborn," 65).

Moving, hopefully, in this progressive direction, Bloch later strikes a more queer-affirming tone, in the first chapter of *Natural Law*. There, Bloch offers a list of things that might seem neutral, biological, and natural, but which are in fact political, sociological, and cultural, as evidenced in part by the fact that the things in question appealed even to the Nazis. Bloch remarks ironically that "the scales of the heart seem to be especially natural when they condemn the unnatural love among men (though curiously enough not among women)" (4). But the key word here, on my reading, is "seem," which might suggest the kind of rhetorical strategy one might also encounter in a sentence such as the following: "It seems natural to love your adopted children less" (which implies the following parenthetical ending: "but in fact parents discover that they love them equally"). Admittedly, the word "unnatural" in the quote from Bloch here has a pejorative ring, but that suggestion of homophobia is countered by his next sentence. "The woodpile with the witch upon it fit in quite well," he adds, "with a sense of justice popular at the time but not at all with that [sense of justice] of those few who wanted to extinguish the flames" (4). The latter group notably includes Bloch's personal hero, Thomasius, to whom *Human Dignity's* Appendix is dedicated, and who famously and courageously opposed that sexist practice. The implication of this analogy from Bloch seems to be that gay men are just as innocent as the women persecuted in the witch trials, because neither group is unnatural, and both are merely victims of vicious politics.

In sum, Bloch recognizes that the establishment of ideal justice, as inspired by maternal natural law, requires the self-overcoming of much that manifests among the masses as "justice" against the allegedly "unnatural"—especially in the arena of sex and gender. In support of this

queer positivity, and with a connection to Dionysus as dance god, Ruth Levitas relates a homosocial (and potentially homoerotic) anecdote from Bloch's biography, namely his having "allegedly danced a minuet with Igor Stravinsky at the Kroll's opening performance of *Oedipus Rex*" (229).<sup>19</sup> Along with this queer positivity in *Natural Law*, there are also several examples in Bloch's corpus of his condemnations of gendered injustice against women (184, 267, 278).<sup>20</sup> Thus, despite the sexism of the essentialist identification of women/matter/fecundity, in Bloch's argumentative context, that figure is attempting to resist the historically much more destructive misogyny of the mainstream natural law tradition. In short, Bloch is interested less in a reification of maternal law, and more in an egalitarian critique of the paternal law. Nevertheless, in part because Bloch is unable to completely extricate himself from this sexism, I attempt below to queer his vision with a genderfluid Dionysus and his nonmaternal priestess.

After discussing natural law's prefiguration in the Sophists and Epicureans, Bloch returns to the heroes of his narrative, the Stoics. Though they shared their predecessors' emphasis on happiness, in their redefinition of that concept, Stoic "happiness was not a sensible, palpable happiness, but something stronger—the pride of being human" (12). Since, moreover, this happiness "was essentially formal," Bloch continues, "it seemed able to blossom in any class," whether rich or poor, and thereby natural law "became universal, international, even cosmic law" (13). Continuing in this vein, "for Stoicism," Bloch adds, "*physis* also names that which is holy,

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<sup>19</sup> Ruth Levitas, "Singing Summons the Existence of the Fountain: Bloch, Music, and Utopia," in *The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia*, ed. Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 219-245.

<sup>20</sup> In support of this point, Cairíona Ní Dhúill also finds significant resonances between Bloch and contemporary feminism, concluding that, "Despite their clear differences in scope and emphasis, where Bloch's philosophy and contemporary gender theory appear to coincide is their shared commitment to a radical or real democracy, a democratic future which constitutes the horizon of their thought" (159). Cairíona Ní Dhúill, "Engendering the Future: Bloch's Utopian Philosophy in Dialogue with Gender Theory," in *The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia*, ed. Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 144-163.

and even divine” (13). Finally on this point, and crucially for the present investigation, “one finds at the base of this natural law the appeal to a golden age”—of maternal law (13). Bloch elaborates as follows:

The contents of this unwritten law, as it resurfaced in Stoic natural law, were the innate *equality* of all people (the abolition of a difference in worth between slaves and masters, barbarians and Greeks), and the *unity* of all people as members of an international community, that is, the rational empire of love. Stoicism is enormously democratic here: Its natural law is uniquely philanthropic, its state is a brotherhood (13).

Put differently, in Stoic natural law, nature is the universal pregnant person, and every human being is one of their children, none of whom possesses less inherent worth than any other, and all of whom are united in bonds of holy siblinghood. In Bloch’s own maternal paraphrase, “an enormous mother nature appears for the sake of just laws and the laws of justice” (14). To repeat, what Bloch seems to value most in this Stoic view is not the maternal per se, nor its attribution to ciswomen, but the intended progressive and egalitarian consequences for all oppressed groups, including women, racial minorities, and the poor.

To these Stoic foundations, Bloch continues, the Enlightenment added a vision of natural law as the divine command of a Supreme Being. Thereby, as Bloch proceeds to explain, another dimension of the maternal comes into play for natural law. “That which hands down rules,” he writes, “easily moves into the role of a mother or father” (57). Since nature was conceived as laying down the natural law like a parent, the cosmos was increasingly reimagined as an enlarged nuclear household. “Nature had become,” in Bloch’s words, “such a family, such a tribe” (57). More specifically, “Mother Nature” in this way “became the object of a cult,” through which the natural law of the Stoics for the first time “extended to art and religion as well” (57). This

extension, finally, gave rise to “an aesthetic religion of nature,” anticipated in “Arab Scholasticism (where almost all the theologians were also doctors)” (57, 58). In addition to supporting my linkage of *Aristotelian Left* and *Natural Law*, this superposition of Stoic maternal natural law, starting with religion and moving to politics, could also be seen as an example of Blochian pre-illumination. That is, flashes of the maternal natural law lit up the matter that became retroactively pregnant with the divine power of creation, having waited ever since Aristotle for the midwifery of philosophical artists such as Bloch to deliver it. What matters here for the present investigation, to repeat, is not nature’s alleged motherhood, but rather an equal and opposite parental force that balances the unjust powers of the paternal law on behalf of the oppressed, including women. It is for this reason that Dionysus, too, can serve as a figure of pregnant materialist natural law, with his priestess as the artist-doula who revolutionary delivers revolutionary new forms.

Undoubtedly Bloch’s most extensive discussion of maternal law takes place in his two chapters on Bachofen. That anthropologist’s “major work, *Maternal Law* (1861),” Bloch writes, “is the oldest child of German Romanticism,” which “Bachofen dedicated to the memory of his mother” (98). Overall, Bloch summarizes, “the work of Bachofen includes an entire feminine and nocturnal nature that is a metamorphosis, an obscuring of Rousseau’s revolutionary Arcadia by the restorative Romantic” (98). By contrast, Bloch’s assessment of Bachofen dispels all such romanticism, as exemplified in the following passage: “If it is so certain that numerous peoples have gone through matriarchal forms of family law, it is just as certain that this matrilineal affiliation does not coincide with a political *matriarchy*” (99). For evidence of the latter assertion, Bloch observes that “neither ethnology nor prehistorical studies confirmed the existence of a gynocracy” (100). The reasons for this, Bloch explains, are that (a) “in the



agricultural period, which is still characterized by maternal law and represents the only period in which a gynocracy could have developed, there was already a division of labor between the sexes”; and (b) “the beginnings of a class society and the general relations of domination were already present” (100).

This point is crucial in evaluating Bloch’s narrative and that of the present investigation, because failing to acknowledge it risks the resurrection of a romantic nostalgia that can obstruct the movement toward a finally utopian future. Put briefly, maternal ideality lies ahead of us rather than behind, so there should be no looking or going back. The nesting of thinkers here (Bachofen within Bloch within the present author) could easily be misinterpreted as an endorsement of the sexist dimensions of this view, so I will attempt one further clarification. Where (a) Bachofen posits a literal matriarchal society prior to patriarchy, and (b) Bloch sees the foreshadowing of a more gender-balanced future, (c) I see a backwards and stumbling attempt from which gender-neutral egalitarian ideas can nevertheless be extracted and applied today for gendered justice for all (regardless of their gender).

What did in fact exist in this past, however, according to Bloch, was the abovementioned matriarchal religion, more specifically in “*the form of a religious cult, a cult of the earth that is bound to agriculture*” (101). In this cult, in Bloch’s paraphrase of Bachofen, “All birth returns to the mother, the woman is the earth, the earth is the field, the field is the grave” (101). In short, “*The gynocracy is historically demonstrable and valid for religion, but not for politics*” (101). Thus, in Bloch’s view, Bachofen was right about maternal authority but wrong about its sphere. “In the religion of the earth and the moon,” Bloch continues regarding this maternal cult, “passion outweighs action, the left over the right, below over above, night over day, hell over heaven, the subterranean over the Olympian—in short, it is a world to which only a romantic

could find access” (101). Thus, the world of the maternal religious cult is not the kind of world to which a messianic utopian wants to return. Again, therefore, Bloch explicitly rejects a simplistically reversed dichotomy, in which male is evil and female good, which in my view opens his work up to further deconstruction and reconstruction, as I attempt below.

The contemporary political applicability of Bachofen’s maternal religion is enormous, for Bloch, as illustrated in his prior claim that “freedom of religion created the opening that led to the Bill of Rights.”<sup>21</sup> From this I infer that religious freedom for Bloch can empower political freedom, specifically qua natural law (of which the Bill of Rights is an example for him). As this example suggests, by Bloch’s lights, Bachofen has nevertheless made a formidable achievement in terms of the historical development of Stoic maternal law, namely that in his work, natural law “for the first time penetrates, as the hetaerist-Demetrian law, to the depths of the imagination” (102). Both “Demetrian” and “hetaerist” need unpacking here. “Hetaerism” is an alleged prehistoric state in which marriage is forbidden and women are the common property of all men in the community. Bachofen refers to this practice as the “law of Aphrodite,” positing it as the first stage in an historical transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. Aphrodite, Bloch quotes from Bachofen, “hates all special property; thus the same law for all is traced back to the sea, to the riverbanks, to the air, and the *communis omnium possessio* is traced back to the *jus naturale*” (*Maternal Law*, par. 66, qtd. in Bloch 102). As for “Demetrian,” it concerns the second stage in Bachofen’s history. “With the beginning of the second phase,” Bloch summarizes, “Aphrodite is conquered by Demeter,” who establishes for the first time the concept of property, and of family, united in one divine law (103).

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<sup>21</sup> 64. For more, see Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J. T. Swann (London: Verso, 2009), 7, 57, 187.

This second, Demetrian phase, according to Bloch, “is so much like another, philosophical natural law that Bachofen—and this is extremely interesting and important—almost speaks the language of the Stoics in this passage” (103). Quoting Bachofen again, Bloch adds that “The mother becomes the expression of the supreme *justitia*, which divides everything among her children with an impartiality full of love” (par. 63, qtd. in Bloch 103). In short, “*philosophical natural law, from the Sophists till Rousseau, maintains some connections with the maternal law (of the bond to Demeter) which Bachofen discovered*” (109). To repeat, to some degree for Bloch, and to a greater degree in the present investigation, what matters here is not the gender of nature, but rather the egalitarian, democratic and loving sharing of property by all.

Lingering with this mythical matriarchy, Bloch’s second chapter on Bachofen opens with an epigraph from Schiller’s poem “Eleusinian Festival,” which celebrates “the Queen” Demeter, “The beneficent Mother of the world” (110). Bloch calls Bachofen here “the most devoted of all mythologists,” who “discovered maternal law by means of his attachment to his mother and to the image of Demeter” (112). “But in this way,” Bloch continues—implying something pejorative about the maternal origin of what follows—“Bachofen produces something quite astonishing” (112). Note that this is the second time that Bloch has emphasized Bachofen’s devotion to his mother (having already emphasized that he dedicated *Maternal Law* “to the memory of his mother”). Continuing with this passage, what is astonishing to Bloch is that Bachofen goes

directly to the heart of *the problem of recovering maternal law in natural law* (up to and including the forms of *bon sens*, or Bona Dea, which are so difficult to conceptualize, like those that in *jus strictum* represent equity or even the act of grace) (113).

Bona Dea, Bloch explains, is “a goddess related to mother earth,” or perhaps “identical to her” (113). Here, Bloch seems to suggest that (a) the maternal law is to natural law what the creative interpretation of judges in search of equity (such as Britain’s chancery court) is to statutory law, and (b) maternal law is to the secular law what the Christian concept of grace is to Judaic law. Overall, then, Bloch is claiming in this passage that maternal natural law deserves a divine mother even though Bachofen’s discovery of it is tainted by the fact that he derived it from his attachment to his human mother. It is in moments like these that I find a possible anxiety and associated stigma regarding emotional interdependence between adult sons and mothers, perhaps related to the infamous Freudian association of the latter with male homosexuality. In other words, having diagnosed a pathological dimension to Bachofen’s gender-inflected thought, Bloch then overcompensates in the other direction (from idealizing the maternal, to anxiously denigrating it). Fortunately, it is also here that the figure of Dionysus offers some therapeutic hope as I flesh out below.

Despite the absence of pure matriarchy in the political realm of the past, Bloch concedes that specific matriarchal laws have been enacted within an overall patriarchal legal context. In his words, “that human government which Bachofen called matriarchalism” has historically contributed “warmth” to the entire natural law tradition (113). For example, in the ancient world, “The fugitive was saved once he had penetrated the sacred region,” including the temple of the goddess Hera (113). Additionally, “in the most ancient Roman times the emancipation of slaves took place at the altar of Feronia, who was a goddess related to” the abovementioned earth goddess Bona Dea (113). “The divinities of chthonian myths,” Bloch summarizes, “thus form the basis for the warmest *jus naturale*, for the objects of *jus strictum*, and they form the basis for security and freedom,” which also includes Dionysus (113). In other words, the warmth

associated with the maternal, despite the sexism of said association, nevertheless produced enormously beneficial consequences for people oppressed in their embodiment, including the enslaved, many of whom were women.

Elaborating on natural law's relationship to women, Bloch writes that "as *natural law* matures it feels itself drawn all the more to *the invisible undercurrents of nature conceived as a woman*" (114-115). Thus "in Crete," for example, the Epicureans "were driven out by accusing them (borrowing a motif from Tacitus) of being 'representatives of a feminine and shameful philosophy'" (115). Here Bloch deserves credit for manifesting an awareness of the potential homophobia and sexism in patriarchal critiques of an alleged femininity in specific philosophies. Again, therefore, it is not the purportedly female or maternal nature of the Stoic view that is important for Bloch, but rather the historical fact that (what he regards as) a true and just philosophy of law was slandered as pejoratively feminine.

Turning from the Epicureans to the Stoics, though the latter were accepted and even celebrated in Rome (such that "Stoicism was to exert an astonishing influence on Roman law"), Bloch observes that the Stoics "accept all of the popular gods," and thus also "the feminine-subterranean gods," including Dionysus by name (18, 115). More precisely, on the one hand, "there is no greater contrast than the exaltation of the Dionysian feast" and "the ataraxia of the sage" (116). On the other hand, Stoic ataraxia betrays "the strong effect of the archetype of the great mother, for the ataraxia of the person was regularly associated with her" (116). In fact, "The power of the dignity of the person is here finally built into the power of a generic concept of the *protector*, of a concept of Bona Dea with light enlarged to a universal dimension: It was called *humanitas*" (116). In sum, "All of this was assimilated *in a completely Demetrian way* according to the rule of life that is decisive for the Stoics: to live in harmony with nature" (116).

Even more surprisingly, “The Demetrian element even impregnated the Zeus of the Stoics,” who was even “a god of birth, with Dionysus born of his thigh and Athena born of his head” (116). Crucially, this “chthonic Zeus,” as Bloch terms this Stoic god, “permitted the addition of traits of maternal government to his other heavenly traits” (116). Thus, again, the gender of the divine entity (in this case Zeus) is less important to Bloch than the egalitarian results of the genderbending reimagining thereof.

Turning to an example of a revolutionary Stoic, Bloch notes that “tribune of the people” Tiberius Gracchus “was assisted by a belief in Ceres, the protectress of the plebians, in whose name bread was distributed to the poor and a battle was waged against the patricians” (118). Moreover, “At Ceres’ side one even sees a goddess appear, Bona Mens, the patroness of reason,” who “guards *aequitas*, the old virtue of the matriarchs, and consequently Stoic natural law,” thereby “mitigating the harshness of the measured justice of the legislator” (118). Concluding this remarkable second chapter on Bachofen, Bloch writes that “*the traits of the ancient maternal law have remained recognizable in the many formations of philosophical natural law insofar as nature conserves, or presents anew, the face of a magna mater*” (119). Moreover, “when this relationship has become manifest, it also reveals a kind of unique government—‘one in harmony with nature’” (119). In other words, through an admittedly sexist conception of nature as a mother, the Stoics were nevertheless able to counteract some of the worst abuses of the law conceived as a father.

And yet, as Bloch notes earlier in this second chapter, Bachofen’s sympathies do not generally lie with this matriarchal vision. On the contrary, in Bachofen’s conclusions, “paternal law becomes ultimately the correct law,” according to Bloch, “against every objection founded upon the seductions of the unruly hetaerae and especially the sanctified solicitude of the image of

Demeter” (105). Bachofen does not object, therefore, to the history of natural law, wherein the “*jus naturale* is integrated into the *jus civile*, which absorbs it” (106). In this way, in Bachofen, “the law of the Grecian day, of the Roman state, is lifted above the instinctive community of the night” (106). In short, Bachofen’s maternal vision fails to be feminist, in a way that Bloch recognizes and critiques. But this is not-yet all.

As Bloch then adds, “there remains a void, an absence, and into this flows a last force of the old nature: Dionysus,” who “becomes the god of women” (106). “Under his emblem,” Bloch writes of Dionysus, “the Maenads gather and a new hetaerist culture blossoms” (107).

Disappointingly, Bloch also echoes Bachofen’s regressive rhetoric here, describing the god of dance further as “a sensuous and soft god who relaxes members, dismembers the polis, a god of intoxication and antiform,” who as such “makes men effeminate” (106). Nothing could be further from the truth, however, at least when one moves from mythological prehistory to history proper, from the imagined forests of time immemorial to the cruel corruption of the Roman empire. For this, I now turn in my final section to military and naval historian Barry Strauss, Professor of History and Classics and Bryce and Edith M. Bowmar Professor in Humanistic Studies at Cornell University (as well as the Series Editor of Princeton’s *Turning Points in U.S. History*), whose 2009 monograph on Spartacus surprisingly centers Dionysus.<sup>22</sup>

### III. Liberation Priestess of Dionysus

To recap, in my first section I have shown how Bloch affirms a marginalized philosophical tradition that views matter as inherently active, with a kind of quasi-subjectivity and the capacity to create new forms in cosmic and historical time; and in my second section I

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<sup>22</sup> For more, see <https://history.cornell.edu/barry-stuart-strauss>.

have offered, as an example of this materialist process, the Stoics' conception of a maternal law that gets taken up by marginalized voices in the natural law tradition. Despite the promising potential of this birth, however, the problem remains that the figurations of nature and natural law as maternal risks a reification of women as allegedly inherently material, natural, and fecund beings. In this way, these views' politically progressive potential can be undermined, at the risk of retrenching a gender-essentialist conservative traditionalism.

Ironically, though, the thinker in whom this problem manifests most starkly, namely Bachofen, also suggests, through Bloch's vision of him, a potential solution, namely the figure of Dionysus as a genderfluid figure of fecundity. And since what prevents both thinkers from deploying this solution seems to be an affirmation of Dionysus despite (or because of) his queerness, I will now take that step here. More precisely, I propose interpreting (1) the genderfluid dancing god as an alternative symbol of pregnant materialist natural law, and (2) his priestess, partner to Spartacus and catalyst of his rebellion, as an example of the artist/doula who in Bloch's conception delivers pregnant matter's revolutionary new forms.

Against the misogynist and homophobic propaganda that Bachofen and Bloch repeat regarding the wine god Dionysus, Strauss notes that "few of [Spartacus'] insurgents went into battle without first drinking wine," which "was standard procedure for both Celts and Thracians, and, for that matter, for most soldiers in the ancient world."<sup>23</sup> For another example of the militant power of the dance god Dionysus, Strauss notes that the Thracians' usual practice "before battle" was "singing and dancing in sight of the enemy" (179). Note, therefore, both that the contemporary association of wine/dancing with enjoyment/relaxation is not an ahistorical truth, but rather a reductive depoliticizing of these phenomena relative to their Greco-Roman origins.

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<sup>23</sup> Barry Strauss, *The Spartacus War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 59.



To Bloch and Bachofen's credit, though, their analyses of Dionysus do at least hint at the dancing god's heroism. For starters, Bloch notes that Bachofen also "attaches" Dionysus "to political Aphroditism as well, namely, to the *jus naturale* of democracy" (107). For Bloch this is a good thing, and he describes these Aphroditic conditions as "vindicated" by gynocracy, specifically "in the name of the refined god of the night, Dionysus" (107). Bachofen, however, "sees the approaching of these conditions," namely "'the absence of all property, the absence of all special laws of every sort,'" and Bloch concludes that "in this eyes of this reactionary, patrician, and churchly man they are 'low and a vile return to primitive barbarism'" (par. 151, qtd. in 107). Bachofen's own phrase for Dionysus, from the title of his separate book on the dancing god, is decidedly ambivalent, namely "*The Enigmatic God of the Developing World*" (108). The arguably colonialist tone of the latter phrase recalls another important and little-recognized historical fact about Dionysus, namely that he was the patron god of one of the most famous heroes of oppressed ethno-racial minorities in history, the Thracian-born, ancient Roman slave-turned-revolutionary, Spartacus.

A personal hero of Bloch, as well as Marx and Engels (and the Marxian tradition generally), Spartacus was also, according to Strauss, romantically involved with a Thracian "priestess of Dionysus," and she prophesied his incipient mission of divinely-chosen liberation. In Strauss' words, Spartacus's wife or mistress (the historical record is unclear on which was the case) "preached a rousing message," drawing "on the liberation theology that had fired Rome's earlier slave revolts" (6). Dionysus, "she said, had bestowed great power on a man," her partner Spartacus, a conclusion she based on an interpretation of an alleged event in Spartacus' life. "While the Thracian [Spartacus] was sleeping, a snake wrapped itself around his face," as the legend has it, and the priestess of Dionysus "interpreted the event as a miracle" (29, 31, 32).

According to her narrative, “Just as the snake had wrapped itself around Spartacus’s face, so would he be surrounded by ‘a great and fearful power’” (32). That power, on the priestess’ interpretation, was the enslaving Roman empire. And Spartacus indeed soon made Rome tremble, as they raised an army of tens of thousands to defeat him.

This revolutionary political role of Spartacus’ Thracian priestess, Strauss notes, was part of a much more extensive historical tradition among the conquered ethnic peoples of Rome’s empire. “Thrace had a long tradition of prophetesses and oracles,” he observes, “and Thracians set great store by women’s religious authority” (32). In other words, there was a kind of Bachofen-esque maternal law at work among the ethnic tribes. Channeling this womanly power into revolution, Strauss continues, “Seers played a proven role as troublemakers among slaves” (32). For example, “They had incited one revolt in Sicily in 135 B.C. and led another in 104 B.C.” (32). In these attempts at revolution, moreover, Dionysus’ role was pivotal. Strauss elaborates as follows:

Dionysus had a long political pedigree, going back to Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great. More recently, Dionysus had been the symbol of Greek kings (especially Cleopatra’s dynasty, the Ptolemies of Egypt), Thracian tribes, the poor and enslaved masses of southern Italy, and various rebels against Rome, from the leaders of the Sicilian slave revolts to mutinous southern Italian elites to Mithridates (33).

A figure who has been shamefully suppressed in Western history, Olympias was the widow of Alexander the Great’s father, King Philip II of Macedon, and after both of their deaths Olympias successfully ruled as regent of the empire. She was also a devout member of Dionysus’ cult, a maenad and (according to Plutarch) a snake handler, and Olympias was such a popular ruler that

her people refused a direct order from the Macedonian assembly to put her to death.<sup>24</sup> As for Cleopatra, the most famous female monarch in the ancient world, her husband Marc Anthony was worshipped as Dionysus reborn.

Strauss then provides several more examples of Dionysus at the head of revolutions, including in “15 B.C., a Thracian revolt against Rome” (34). Rome so feared these uprisings, Strauss writes, that “In an atmosphere of fear and panic, the Senate launched a witch hunt up and down the peninsula and drove Romans out of the cult” (34). In fact, “After 186 [B.C.], only women, foreigners, and slaves were permitted to worship the god” (34). Undeterred by this religious persecution, however, Dionysus “appeared again in the rebellion of Rome’s Italian allies known as the Social War (91-88 B.C.): rebel coins showed Bacchus [Rome’s Dionysus] as a symbol of liberation” (35). Against this background, Strauss concludes, “By her prophecy,” the Thracian priestess of Dionysus “gave her man a holy duty”—namely, that as “a servant of Dionysus, Spartacus would be a liberator” (37). In an example of fulfilling this divine mission of liberation, when Spartacus’ army had settled in the city of Thurii (which “had for centuries been a center of Orphic religion, a cult with Dionysiac overtones that offered a natural opening to the Thracian woman and her prophecies”), one “source of arms-grade metal was the runaway slaves’ own chains, which were melted down and reforged into weapons” (86). It would be difficult to imagine a more potent or inspiring symbol and weapon of liberation than this: breaking the chains of Rousseau’s born-free humanity, and using their matter to strike the blows of freedom.

Finally from Strauss, there is a direct connection between his Dionysian narrative and my prior analysis of Dionysus in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, involving the Roman general Crassus, who ultimately ended Spartacus’ heroic dream. “The story goes,” Strauss relates, “that Crassus’

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Olympias>.

decapitated head,” after he was killed in a separate military campaign in Asia, “reached the court of the Parthian king at the city of Seleucia, near modern Baghdad,” where “Crassus’ head supposedly showed up as a prop in a performance of Euripides’ tragedy *The Bacchae*” (210). Thus, posthumously, and in legend, Spartacus, Dionysius, and the Thracian priestess have the final triumph, and one can now see them as Blochian pre-illuminations, along with the fertile powers of the medieval Judeo-Arabic healers’ pregnant matter, and the Stoics’ maternal natural law, ready to empower further liberations of the oppressed today and in the future.

By way of a conclusion to the present investigation, and an invitation for further research and practice, my own concrete proposals in this direction include a social justice-seeking philosophy of justice, dance-based methods of both interpretation and psychological therapy and research, the deployment of Afro-Caribbean social dance as a decolonizing and reconstructive practice, a conception of justice as itself a kind of dance, and an associated conception of ideal legal justice comparable to what Bloch terms “the *eunomia* of the upright carriage in community” (280).<sup>25</sup> In the utopian spirit of most ardent hope, I implore the reader to join us in this struggle—daring to stand upright and dance—from the pregnancy of our matter, through the maternal inspiration of a renewed natural law, and into a messianic tomorrow.

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Joshua M. Hall, “Core Aspects of Dance: Schiller and Dewey on Grace,” *Dance Chronicle* 40(1): 2017, 74-98; “Dancing-with: A Theoretical Method for Poetic Social Justice,” *Dance and Philosophy*, ed. Rebecca Farinas, Craig Hanks, Julie C. Van Camp, and Aili Bresnahan (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 415-425; “Dancing-with Cognitive Science: Three Therapeutic Provocations,” *Middle Voices* 2(2): 2022, 1-16; “Afro-Latin Dance as Reconstructive Gestural Discourse: The Figuration Philosophy of Dance on Salsa,” *Research in Dance Education* 22(1): 73-87; and “On Justice as Dance,” *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 55(4): 2021, 62-78.

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