

# Ernst Bloch’s Ungleichzeitigkeit then and now – About a political term and its reflection in literary texts of the past and present

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## Abstract

The term Ungleichzeitigkeit, taken from the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, shows itself as an analytic tool that helps understanding the emergence of nationalism both in the past and present. The objective of the presentation is not only to compare ungleichzeitige developments then and now but also to show in which ways this political term is reflected within contemporary literary texts as well as in novels from the past.

## Content

„They seized their prey among people who got lost“ – with these words the German philosopher Ernst Bloch described in his book *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1935) the strategy of the Nazis to gain power during the 1920s and 30s. According to Bloch the nationalist propaganda was first and foremost successful due to capitalizing on – what Bloch called – Ungleichzeitigkeit. With this term he encompassed the situation of all milieus and classes which did not stand at the forefront of modernity (especially the petty bourgeois and the peasantry). In contrast to social democratic and communist parties the Nazis were willing and also able to grasp (and henceforward to manipulate) the phantasies and desires of these groups of people.

Mutatis mutandis the concept of Ungleichzeitigkeit uncovers a similar situation for the present (always having in mind that today there is no political group like the Nazis). Citizens, particularly those living in small towns and villages, were politically ignored

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for a long time, leaving them exposed to the propaganda of right wing parties and movements. The words used to gain back trust among these people often ring hollow. However, in contrast to the past – and this will be one central hypothesis of my presentation – there seems to be more awareness today among artists, especially writers, that *Ungleichzeitigkeiten* within a society are likely to cause soft spots which make attacks on the democracy easier. Authors like Klaus Mann or Hans Fallada captured the *Ungleichzeitigkeiten* of the 1920s and 30s in their novels when the consequences (or even the aftermath) of the National Socialist empowerment were already visible. They considered the downfall of democracy when it was already deceased. Today, writers like Juli Zeh or Saša Stanišić seem to be more conscious towards reality. In their novels they consider the living conditions, problems and dreams of people living in rural areas, thus making it harder for the rest of the population as well as for politics to ignore potential threats that go along with developments that are characterized by *Ungleichzeitigkeit*.

As the paragraph above already indicates, the notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* from the philosophy of Ernst Bloch will be methodologically crucial for my presentation. I did not translate the term *Ungleichzeitigkeit* because in my judgement transmissions like non-simultaneity or non-parallelism focus too much on the negation. Bloch did not want to describe people living in *Ungleichzeitigkeit* only as reactionary or backward; he also wanted to stress that there is nevertheless an anticapitalistic impulse that connects for example the peasant with the proletarian (and that of course disappears when nationalist movements get hold of these people). In short, the *Gleichzeitigkeit* within the *Ungleichzeitigkeit* is also very important to Bloch. (The same phenomenon is for example true for the term deconstruction.) Following Marxist thinking Bloch used the concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* to capture differing developments of social classes. The peasant for instance, bound to his own clod of earth, with the means of production in his own hands has not much in common with his fellow citizens living in the cities. These groups share the present but nevertheless live in totally different times. However, they are both pressured by the same economic development which can lead to the above mentioned anticapitalistic impulse. Because this impulse is not very clear and precise, particularly for those affected by *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, these people need to be addressed in a specific way by left wing politicians and thinkers. According to Bloch this was not done during the time of the Weimar Republic.

When it comes to this failure and to the Nazis who used it for their own purposes Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto* in part almost seems like a reflection of Bloch's theoretical concept. Especially analysing the character of Hans Miklas – a young actor coming from rural Bavaria to Hamburg who struggles to make a living and eventually turns towards the Nazis – will be fruitful in this context. As already mentioned neither is there such a party as the Nazis in the present nor did we witness an antidemocratic takeover in politics. But nonetheless *Ungleichzeitigkeiten* are still in place and play a major role in the emergence of today's nationalist movements. Against this backdrop novels like Juli Zeh's *Unter Leuten* or Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* seemingly appear like a reminder

that there are people who should not be forgotten. Analysing these novels with Bloch's concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* and at the same time comparing them with literary texts from the past potentially reveal that they can be a powerful means in undoing (or at least in pushing back) antidemocratic movements of the present.