

# The Late Wittgenstein and Marxian Thought

*An analysis and defense of Marxian attractions to and uses of Wittgenstein's later work*

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*Austin's contemptuous treatment of the alternatives to the common usage of words, and his defamation of what we 'think up in our armchairs of an afternoon'; Wittgenstein's assurance that philosophy 'leaves everything as it is' – such statements exhibit, to my mind, academic sado-masochism, self-humiliation, and self-denunciation of the intellectual whose labor does not issue in scientific, technical or like achievements.*

Herbert Marcuse (2007, pp. 177-178)

*Wittgenstein is probably the philosopher who has helped me most at moments of difficulty. He's a kind of saviour for times of great intellectual distress – as when you have to question such evident things as 'obeying a rule'. Or when you have to describe such simple (and, by the same token, practically ineffable) things as putting a practice into practice.*

Pierre Bourdieu (1990a, p. 9)

## Introduction

Wittgenstein's move from the rigid and restrictive model of language in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922) to its dismantling in the *Philosophische untersuchungen* (PU, 1953) was in large part precipitated by lengthy discussions with the Marxian thinker Piero Sraffa, who in turn was profoundly influenced by his close friend and Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci.<sup>1</sup> Amartya Sen and others therefore argue that Wittgenstein's late philosophy owed much to Marxian thought, and it is not difficult to identify substantial commonalities between the two (Sen, 2003, pp. 1240-1242).<sup>2</sup> Yet they also differ in many respects, particularly when it comes

to the import of political and social theory in Marxian thought and its near complete absence in Wittgenstein's work, as well as the obverse lack of attention in Marxian theory to classical philosophical questions and language – around which Wittgenstein's work revolves (Lecercle, 2006, pp. 12-13). These points of contact on the one hand and divergence on the other also come to the fore in the reception history of Wittgenstein's work among Marxian thinkers. Beginning with rejection and harsh criticism as being merely another form of 'bourgeois philosophy' harboring politically and socially conservative ideals (Marcuse, 2007, p. 179), Wittgenstein became appreciated by a new generation of Marxian thinkers who were profoundly attracted to his later philosophy, drawing on various aspects of it in the development of their own thought (Kitching, 2002, p. 17).

All this shows there is an interesting dialectic between Wittgenstein's work and Marxian thought worth exploring in greater detail. For what is the deeper philosophical background that lies behind the shift from rejection to acceptance, and what implications does this have for the varying attitudes Marxian thinkers have taken up in relation to Wittgenstein's work? I aim to provide a novel answer to this question by uncovering the underlying commonalities between Wittgenstein's late thought and that of the new generation of Marxian thinkers who embraced it, focusing on their respective ontological and epistemological commitments, while also putting forth the case that the attractions as opposed to the repulsions are the legitimate response.

In the first section I will analyze the initial critical responses to Wittgenstein by Marxists, arguing that they provide an inadequate appraisal of Wittgenstein's work and that their critique of it is therefore misguided. In the second section I will move to uncovering the motiva-

tions behind the attraction to and positive uses of Wittgenstein's later work by a diverse range of Marxian thinkers, from Left-Heideggerians steeped in the continental tradition of philosophy to those trained in the analytical tradition. This will be done not by examining surface commonalities between various aspects of Marxist theory or Marx's own work and Wittgenstein's thought, as is the case in most current positive assessments of the relationship between the two, but rather by focusing on the deep, underlying structures these favorable sentiments are based on, for only that will provide an adequate account of why an otherwise diverse range of conflicting Marxian thinkers share this common appreciation of Wittgenstein's later thought (Pleasants, 2002, pp. 160-161). I will uncover these underlying commonalities by making use of the concept of language ideology to reveal their nature in Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language, and then showing how they coincide with the underlying commitments of the various Marxian thinkers who developed an appreciation for his later thought (Silverstein, 1979, p. 193). Finally, in the third section it will be shown that it is not by chance that these shared commitments exist given their origins in Wittgenstein's move to his later philosophy in which his contact with Sraffa was instrumental. My aim is not only to adequately explain why otherwise conflicting Marxian thinkers have been attracted to Wittgenstein's later thought and have used it in their own fields of study, but also to show that these positive sentiments are legitimate given their shared underlying commitments. By demonstrating this, I hope to encourage further and more extensive use of Wittgenstein's work by thinkers working in the Marxian tradition.

## §1 Rejection and critique

Marxian responses to Wittgenstein's work have been varied, ranging from positive assessments to the outright rejection of it as representing merely another form of reactionary bourgeois ideology. It should be noted, however, that by and large the Marxist tradition has simply ignored Wittgenstein's work, as well as philosophy of language more generally. My analysis concerns solely those who *have* responded to it in various ways (Vinten, 2013, p. 9). In this section I will explicate and assess what the Marxian critique of Wittgenstein consists of. The rejection and critique

of Wittgenstein was most prominently formulated by Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, who saw in his work an attempt to, in Wittgenstein's (1953/2009) own phrasing, "leave everything as it is" (p. 55) and thereby close off the political space to radical alternatives formulated by critical philosophers such as themselves. In his seminal *One-dimensional man* Marcuse devotes an entire chapter to critiquing Wittgenstein's work, which he sees as representing one-dimensional (i.e. conformist and conservative) thought in the sphere of philosophy in late capitalist society:

Paying respect to the prevailing variety of meanings and usages, to the power and common sense of ordinary speech, while blocking (as extraneous material) analysis of what this speech says about the society that speaks it, linguistic philosophy [referring to J. L. Austin and Wittgenstein's work] suppresses once more what is continually suppressed in this universe of discourse and behavior. The authority of philosophy gives its blessing to the forces which *make* this universe. Linguistic analysis abstracts from what ordinary language reveals in speaking as it does—the mutilation of man and nature. (Marcuse, 2007, p. 179)

Concomitant to this, argues Marcuse, is a lacking critical dimension in Wittgenstein's thought, which particularly in the sphere of political discourse leads him to ignore the conflict-ridden history that lies behind what is now considered the legitimate meaning of words: "Multi-dimensional language is made into one-dimensional language, in which different and conflicting meanings no longer interpenetrate but are kept apart; the explosive historical dimension of meaning is silenced" (p. 202). For example, the term 'freedom' in late capitalist society can only be used legitimately in the political sphere to denote individualistic, liberal notions of freedom such as those inscribed in the rights of property, whereas the whole point of a critical theory is to uncover the purposely suppressed history behind the production of such distorted meanings. By lacking this critical dimension, Wittgenstein's philosophy amounts to a justification of already existing distorted meanings, thereby closing off any possibility of creating novel meanings which stand in opposition to them, which is unacceptable from the standpoint of a Marxian critical theory unsatisfied with the state of the world as it is (pp. 184-186).

Adorno takes issue with Wittgenstein on similar grounds, believing also that his later philosophy was characterized by the fetishizing of ‘ordinary language’, and taking particular offense at his comments in the *Tractatus* that “*die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist*” (The world is all that is the case) (p. 25) and “*wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*” (whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent) (p. 90). For Adorno it is exactly the extralinguistic, unutterable aspect of being in late capitalism that the philosopher must focus on and explicate so as to enable one to break free from the inhuman oppression that overwhelms us, though he remained notoriously pessimistic about the possibility of doing so successfully (2002, p. 369). In his lecture notes to *Negative Dialectics* (2008) he comments that “[p]hilosophy faces the task of breaking out *despite everything*; without a minimum of confidence in doing so, it can’t be done. Philosophy must say what cannot be said. Against Wittgenstein” (p. 66; italics his). The Marxist thinker Perry Anderson has argued similarly that the intention of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, both the early and the later, “was simply to consecrate the banalities of everyday language” (1968, p. 21), making it the primary task of the philosopher to “ensure the identity and stability of the system, by preventing unorthodox moves within it” (p. 22). Any serious Marxist should know what this means as to the status of such a philosophy: “The social meaning of such a doctrine is obvious enough. Gramsci once wrote that common sense is the practical wisdom of the ruling class. The cult of common sense accurately indicates the role of linguistic philosophy in England” (p. 22). Anderson then goes on to criticize Wittgenstein for being an upper class philistine always loyal to religious and political authority, who barely had any knowledge of the history of philosophy and was compelled by a messianic vision induced by his odd religiosity and mysticism to produce the kind of reactionary bourgeois philosophy he did (pp. 22-25).

The problem with these critical accounts is that they are wholly inadequate in their interpretation of Wittgenstein. For one, they rely on statements taken out of their context, from arguments related to an issue in the realm of the philosophy of language to the realm of political and social theory. This is clearly so with respect to the often repeated “leave everything as it is” statement, which Marcuse and Anderson mention as a primary exemplification of Wittgenstein’s conservatism. It is drawn from §124 of the *PU*. In context, the statement reads as follows: “Philosophy must not

interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot justify it either. It leaves everything as it is” (p. 55). Stanley Cavell and D. Z. Phillips have pointed out that “leaves everything as it is” only refers to the activity of the philosopher in relation to the use of language in a strictly philosophical sense, which Wittgenstein understood as being restricted to the philosophy of language, not a practical, social or political one (Uschanov, 2002, pp. 38-39). In other words, there is nothing that precludes the philosopher from attempting to change *society* as a political and social activist or theorist, as in the cases of Marcuse and Anderson themselves, and thereby effecting a change in the use of language. But when they are doing so they are no longer engaged in *philosophical* activity in the sense Wittgenstein was referring to with the “leaves everything as it is” comment, which as Hans-Johann Glock notes was solely meant to make clear that “(...) it is not philosophy’s business to bring about such reform by introducing an ideal language” (1996, p. 296-297). This leaves out of consideration areas of philosophy like political and social philosophy which generally *are* aimed at effecting change in society. That this is indeed the point Wittgenstein was making in §124 rather than attempting to legitimize existing power structures is further exemplified by the comment that philosophy can also not justify the actual use of language. All of this is conveniently left out in Marcuse’s and Anderson’s rendering of the statement.

This type of selective quoting from Wittgenstein is pervasive, not only in Marcuse’s and Anderson’s accounts but also in Ernest Gellner’s, who in many ways influenced their views concerning Wittgenstein. The line of critique that presents Wittgenstein as some kind of arch-conservative philosopher desperate to defend the powers that be can be traced back to Gellner’s scathing critique of the then dominant Wittgensteinian school of ‘ordinary language philosophy’ at Oxford in his *Words and things* (1959/2005), for which Bertrand Russell wrote a laudatory foreword commending the effort to save philosophy from the clutches of the late Wittgenstein who, as Russell notes elsewhere, sought to reduce it to “at best, a slight help to lexicographers, and at worst, an idle tea-table amusement” (2005, p. 217). Yet in the decades since its publication serious problems have been identified with the text by scholars well-versed in Wittgenstein’s thought. The work was not only full of the aforementioned out of context and tendentious

quoting, but also ignored important biographical information with respect to Wittgenstein's changing views, such as how they were influenced by his interactions with Sraffa.<sup>3</sup> It also does not take into account any of Wittgenstein's writings aside from the *Tractatus* and *PU*, and seriously misreads Wittgenstein's concepts of language-games and forms of life as indicating support for radical relativism (Uschanov, 2002, pp. 33-34).

Despite the criticisms of his book, Gellner continued his attacks on Wittgensteinian thought along these lines, arguing in the posthumously published *Language and solitude* (1998) that the *PU* "positively outlaws the very idea of social criticism by making every culture sovereign, self-validating, ultimate" (p. 105). Anderson similarly attempts to make a connection between Wittgenstein and recent postmodernist thinkers on the same basis, referring to Wittgenstein's "incoherent" conception of "incommensurable language-games" (1998, p. 26). It is now commonplace among Wittgenstein scholars to dismiss such a reading of his work, especially in the light of the publication of Wittgenstein's other writings such as *On certainty*. As David G. Stern aptly notes in this respect:

Some readers have taken the practical turn in Wittgenstein's later work to amount to a form of linguistic relativism or idealism that makes the beliefs of a particular group or linguistic community immune to criticism, because they are part of the language-games that the community uses. But the agreement in what we call obeying a rule and going against it Wittgenstein appeals to here is not comparable to agreement over specific doctrines or views. The point of drawing our attention to the role of training and custom and other facts of our natural and social history is not to establish a positive theory of concept formation, but to emphasize what such theories overlook: that language depends on these facts being in place. (Stern, 1995, p. 127)

Marxists who continue to reject and criticize Wittgenstein's thought still do so on the same grounds as Marcuse, Adorno, Anderson and Gellner – often being only superficially acquainted with it via these critiques (Uschanov, 2002, pp. 24-25). The most serious shortcoming of these criticisms is however their overlooking of the significant underlying commonalities between Wittgenstein's later work and the basic assumptions of novel forms of Marxian thought as developed by a new generation of thinkers working in this

tradition. These commonalities explain the attractions of these thinkers to Wittgenstein's later philosophy. It is this underlying core of shared commitments that I will attempt to uncover in the following section.

## §2 Family resemblances

The phase of outright rejection of Wittgenstein's work, as represented by the likes of Marcuse and Anderson, began to fade during the 1970s with the advent of the so-called 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences and the move away from structuralism to post-structuralism. This made Wittgenstein's philosophy palatable to a new generation of Marxian thinkers seeking to break free from the archaic modes of thinking induced by a classical Marxism that frequently resulted in crude reductionism and determinism through its fascination with and hyperfocus on structures and socio-economic conditions as the sole or primary explanans of all aspects of reality (Wolff & Resnick, 2006, pp. 11-12). This included the eschewing of the essentializing and foundationalist tendencies of these archaic forms of thought, criticized by the new generation of Marxian thinkers for "confus[ing] the things of logic for the logic of things" (Bourdieu, 2000a, p. 41).<sup>4</sup> Instead, they focused on a non-foundationalist and non-essentializing conception of linguistic and other practices as being constitutive of reality in their works, and found an ally in the late Wittgenstein for the arguments they wished to advance. Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida and other thinkers belonging to this new generation rooted in the Marxian tradition of critical political and social theory therefore saw his later work in a new light, as offering tools and methods with which to analyze the (for them) newly discovered field of language as a distinct object of study as well as the possibility to apply these tools and methods to the realm of critical political and social analysis (Marchart, 2007, p. 110).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Marxian thinkers nurtured in the analytic tradition were by virtue of their political and philosophical background already predisposed to prefer Wittgenstein's position in the philosophy of language to others, hence the rise of a 'Marxist-Wittgensteinian' school of thought from the 1970s onward that was heavily dominated by analytical Marxists (Kitching, 2002, pp. 2-4).



**The continental and analytical roads to Wittgenstein**

There are two distinct paths varying types of Marxian thinkers have traversed to reach Wittgenstein – the continental and analytical – but they share the same motivation for having made the journey. Those taking the first route, like Foucault and Derrida, influenced by Heideggerian phenomenology interpreted from a critical, left-political perspective,<sup>6</sup> were attracted to the late Wittgenstein for among other reasons his elastic ontological and epistemological commitments. These include the concept of multifarious uses of language in accordance with multifarious language-games and his conception of language as a public rather than a private phenomenon (the exact commonalities that motivated this attraction will be explicated below) (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, pp. 49-50 & p. 57). As for the Marxian thinkers who came to Wittgenstein via the analytical tradition, they were already philosophically predisposed to doing so given the powerful influence he exerted on it. G. A. Cohen, one of the originators of analytical Marxism, exemplifies this attitude aptly in a footnote to his analysis of Marcuse's thought, commenting on his critique of Wittgenstein:

Let me declare an interest which inhibits me from entering an extended commentary on Marcuse's treatment of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy: I teach philosophy in a department which is, broadly speaking, of the 'analytical' persuasion, and I regard the philosophy inspired by the later Wittgenstein as very valuable. It would be unproductive to catalogue all the misperceptions revealed in Marcuse's treatment of the latter. (1969, p. 40)

What remains unexplained in current accounts of Marxian attractions to and uses of Wittgenstein's later work is why these two disparate schools of thought – which moreover differ significantly internally as well – happen to converge on this point. Foucault, Derrida, Cohen and Bourdieu, while all working in the Marxian tradition of critical social and political theory, disagree on many points, some quite fundamental, which is traceable to the analytic-continental divide. Cohen for example has famously referred to non-analytical conceptions of Marxism as constituting "bullshit" (2001, pp. 25-26). Yet both analytical and continental Marxian thinkers have been strongly attracted to Wittgenstein's later work. I believe only a

reference to their shared underlying ontological and epistemological commitments can provide a viable answer as to why this is the case. These shared commitments can best be described as a common opposition to foundational, Cartesian, mentalistic conceptions of reality, including in the sphere of language.

**Language ideologies: Augustinian and naturalistic**

In order to elucidate the exact nature of the underlying commonalities between the mentioned novel forms of Marxian thought and Wittgenstein's late philosophy, which constitutes the basis of the interactions between the two, it is useful to employ the concept of language ideologies as developed by the anthropologist and linguist Michael Silverstein. Silverstein defines language ideologies as "any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (1979, p. 193). It is therefore not the superficial specificities of otherwise varying philosophies of language that is the focus of analysis, but rather the deeper ontological and epistemological commitments they entail; an analysis of language ideologies is therefore a *meta*-analysis of varying philosophies of language aimed at uncovering the deep structural commonalities with respect to their basic underlying philosophical commitments. Given its very broad nature particularly when extended over various philosophies of language in intellectual history (something Silverstein himself does not do, but thinkers such as Hans Aarsleff, Richard Bauman, and Charles L. Briggs do) – which it has to be by necessity in order to capture all the sometimes widely varying conceptions of language involved – the concept of a language ideology can best be seen as what Wittgenstein describes as a family resemblance concept. It meets the two requisite criteria, namely 1) the concept is *open*, meaning that new additions can be made to it, and 2) the concept is *vague* rather than sharply bounded, meaning that various overlapping terms fall under it so that the meaning of the family resemblance term itself can only be explained by providing exemplifications of paradigm cases of its use (Baker & Hacker, 2009, p. 91 & p. 239). In some cases, the terms that fall under the concept may be either sharply definable such as 'integers' or 'real numbers' in the family resemblance term 'number', or more vaguely as in

the case of ‘football’ and ‘tennis’ in the family resemblance term ‘game’ or ‘Augustine’s picture of language’ and ‘Locke’s philosophy of language’ in the case of language ideology (Baker & Hacker, 2004, pp. 146-147 & pp. 156-157). As mentioned, such a use of the concept is not without precedent. Aarsleff, Bauman, Briggs and others have similarly and extensively employed the concept, providing detailed overviews of how various philosophies of language relate to distinct language ideologies (Aarsleff, 2006; Bauman & Briggs, 2003). On the basis of their work it is possible to distinguish between two types of language ideologies in intellectual history, the explication of which will aid in better understanding why the aforementioned Marxian thinkers were attracted to this rather than that tradition in the philosophy of language by clarifying the conflicting underlying commitments involved.

First there is Cartesian mentalistic language ideology that perceives language as being innate, static and universal (hence *foundational*, based on Platonic essences), whether it takes on the form of universal grammar or logical forms. This language ideology with its underlying foundationalist ontological and epistemological commitments can be found in Augustine, Locke, Frege, Russell, the early Wittgenstein and Chomsky, and fits the late Wittgenstein’s description of what he termed the *Augustinian* picture of language, which will be explicated in more detail below (Hacker, 1996, pp. 105-106; Glock, 1996, p. 41). It is important to note again that language ideology is a family resemblance concept and therefore involves vagueness. So otherwise distinct philosophies of language like Russell’s and Locke’s – which are closer to the side of behaviorism – can still be regarded as belonging to the same category as Chomsky’s – which is much closer to the mentalist side – given that they both share the underlying epistemological and ontological commitments to foundationalism in their respective conceptions of language. *This* key area overlap defines the family resemblance concept of the Augustinian language ideology.

Then there is the late Wittgensteinian conception of language, which perceives language as being social, public (hence intersubjective) and non-foundational. This language ideology, with its underlying non-foundational ontological and epistemological commitments, also comes to the fore in the works of Condillac, Hamann and the Bakhtin Circle, and

can most aptly be described as the *naturalistic*<sup>7</sup> conception of language.<sup>8</sup> These language ideologies are diametrically opposed to each other with respect to their underlying commitments, and, as shall be shown in the case of the naturalistic language ideology, these coincide with the commitments of the aforementioned analytical and continental Marxian thinkers.

Why can Wittgenstein’s later work be classified as a naturalistic language ideology and precisely how is it distinct from the Augustinian one? As the prominent interpreter of Wittgenstein’s work Peter Hacker notes, one of the main thrusts of the *PU* is its opposition to foundationalism in the philosophy of language, expressed in a sustained critique of what was defined as the Augustinian language ideology and its underlying foundationalism as propagated by Russell, Frege and himself in the *Tractatus*. In opposition to this Wittgenstein develops a position that is firmly non-foundational. It is worth quoting Hacker’s detailed diagnosis of this at length:

The thought that analysis will reveal the ‘logical structure of the world’ rested on the misconceived idea that the world consists of facts, that facts have a logical structure, and that the substance of the world consists of sempiternal objects with language-independent combinatorial possibilities. Once these metaphysical confusions are swept away, the idea of *the logical forms* of propositions as reflections of reality collapses. What may remain of the notion of logical form is the supposition that the forms of the predicate calculus (with appropriate enrichment) display not the logical structure of the world, but the common depth structure of any possible language. (This conception became the leitmotif of philosophy of language in the 1970s and 1980s, deriving apparent support from the new theoretical linguistics advocated by Chomsky.) But, Wittgenstein argued, the idea that languages have a common essence is misconceived, since the concept of a language is a family resemblance concept. One can imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in a battle, or only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no (PI §19). One can imagine a language in which all ‘sentences’ are one-word sentences, or a language in which all statements have the form and tone of rhetorical questions, or one in which all commands have the form of questions - e.g. ‘Would you like to ...?’ (PI §21). (...) More important, the very idea that human languages have a hidden, function-theoretic depth structure (first uncovered by Frege,

Russell and Whitehead's discovery (or, more precisely, invention) of the predicate calculus) is misconceived. For the structure that is alleged to characterize a language is a *normative* structure, a structure governed by rule. (1996, pp. 105-106)

The *PU* is peppered with anti-essentialist arguments based on an adherence to a non-foundational view of language, as exemplified by the explication of key concepts like language-games and family resemblances. Wittgenstein begins the *PU*, however, by describing the central features of the Augustinian picture of language, which consist of the following elements:

- (a) every individual word has 'a meaning';
- (b) all words are names, i.e. stand for objects;
- (c) the meaning of a word is the object it stands for;
- (d) the connection between words (names) and their meanings (referents) is established by ostensive definition, which establishes a mental association between word and object;
- (e) sentences are combinations of names. (Glock, 1996, p. 41)

The consequences of this conception of language are then laid out:

- (f) the sole function of language is to represent reality: words refer, sentences describe (PI §21-7);
- (g) the child can establish the association between word and object only through thinking, which means that it must already possess a private language, in order to learn the public one. (PI §32)

A key defining feature of the Augustinian language ideology is therefore its commitment to mentalism and the associated belief in the existence and primacy of private language. In ontological and epistemological terms, it denotes essentialism and foundationalism, for the private language is posited as being universal and as describing reality in a direct sense, as a one-to-one correspondence between (simple) names and objects. For Frege, for example, the *Sinn* (sense) or mode of expression of a name may vary, but its *Bedeutung* (reference) to an object cannot. This is why he believes that sentences, which consist of the combined senses of its constituent terms, denote a *Gedanke* (thought) which refers either to the True or the False, determinable by whether the references of the senses adequately refer to

objects.<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein distances himself from Frege and others who put forth such a conception of language, including his younger self, by pointing to the myriad of uses of words in different contexts, which he captures in his concept of language-games: "It is interesting to compare the diversity of the tools of language and of the ways they are used, the diversity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (This includes the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)" (2009, p. 15). The rest of the *PU* consists of a thorough demolition of this Augustinian picture of language, which however does not go in the opposite direction of behaviorism but instead tries to find a middle path between the two extremes. This is the only way Wittgenstein can maintain his commitment to the naturalistic picture of language as being something intrinsically social and historical, which in epistemological and ontological terms translates as being anti-essentializing and non-foundational. Examples of this can be seen in §23: "(...) this diversity [of sentences] is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten" (pp. 14-15). Another example can be found in the statement in §97 against "super-concepts" in ideal language and a necessary refocus to ordinary language: "We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language (...) Whereas, in fact, if the words 'language', 'experience', 'world' have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words 'table', 'lamp', 'door'" (p. 49). This moves into Wittgenstein's condemnation of "crystalline" conceptions of language that postulate a Platonic realm of unreachable perfection and analyze language in relation to it in §107-§108 (p. 51). There is then no doubt that Wittgenstein's later language ideology is indeed a naturalistic one with the concomitant underlying non-foundationalist philosophical commitments.

Having uncovered these commitments, it is now possible to explain why a diverse range of Marxian thinkers have felt an attraction to Wittgenstein's later work. For them, non-foundationalism in political and social theory is a primary concern. All the objects of their analysis, ranging from language and institutions to ideologies, are perceived in a historicizing, diachronic manner; they are intrinsically *social* phenomena and not universal, static, essentialized ones as was all too often the case for

the antiquated Marxist thinkers they criticized (Wolff & Resnick, 2006, pp. 80-81). To exemplify these shared commitments and their origins in more detail with respect to the Left-Heideggerians, it is worth pointing out the similarities between Heidegger's anti-foundationalist philosophy and the commitments underlying Wittgenstein's later work. Hubert Dreyfus has written about this in his analysis of Heidegger's *Being and time*, noting that "Heidegger, like Wittgenstein, holds that the background of *shared* concerns and activities against which the special problem of knowing others arises is constitutive of worldliness and intelligibility" (1995, p. 151). This background is interpreted as being social in nature rather than transcendental or foundational, being composed of our daily practices. Here Heidegger's distinction between knowledge as constituted in the present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) and the ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) modes comes to the fore. The present-at-hand denotes a foundationalist or ontic conception of being, as is employed by the scientist or philosopher in their abstract analyzing of objects from a distance, whereas the ready-to-hand denotes the practical, immediate, intrinsically social and already-involved conception of being (Dreyfus, 1995, p. 40 & p. 131). Heidegger's project consists of detaching the two modes from each other – which philosophers have failed to do in the past – and refocusing our attention to the ready-to-hand mode of how knowledge is constituted, which is of primary importance in understanding what Being or *Dasein* consists of, the source of all knowledge. Heidegger hereby effects a reorientation of our approach to the intersubjective, social, historical nature of being and knowledge, eschewing foundational and essentializing conceptions of ontology and epistemology (Dreyfus, 1995, pp. 83-84 & p. 310). As shown, Wittgenstein's later work similarly displays a social sensibility and an opposition to foundationalism, eschewing ideal language theory with its search for Platonic forms or atomic facts of any kind. "For both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, then," concludes Dreyfus, "the source of the intelligibility of the world is the average public practices through which alone there can be any understanding at all" (p. 155). It is therefore not surprising that Left-Heideggerians like Foucault and Derrida, sharing Heidegger's epistemological and ontological commitments, were attracted to Wittgenstein's later work as it coincides with them in this respect (Marchart, 2007, p. 110).

A further concrete example of such an overlap in the Wittgensteinian and Marxian approaches along these anti-foundationalist lines can be seen in the discussion of human nature, which also demonstrates the broader implications the adherence to a specific type of language ideology has. Chomsky's conception of language, which belongs to the category of the Augustinian language ideology, leads him to affirm an essentializing conception of human nature, and unashamedly so. For him, such a conception of human nature is necessary not only because it is in line with his linguistic project, but also because it is needed to found a progressive politics on, for without a view of human nature being innately creative and freedom-striving, what is to stop a manipulation of it in whatever direction the powers that be choose? (Chomsky, 1969, pp. 31-32). His well-known debate with Foucault – who was arguing for the Left-Heideggerian position – laid bare the diametrically opposed conceptions of social ontology involved (and, of course, their respective language ideologies reflects this) (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006, pp. 4-5). For Foucault, the concept of human nature is, like all others, an ideological one, normatively implicated from its inception, hence representing a battlefield of opposing interpretations, the dominant ones being determined ultimately by prevailing social norms and conventions. However, this does not imply fatalism, for the construction of meaning, which is a normative endeavor, occurs in social practices and hence can be affected by critical practices such as ideology critique (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006, p. 7 & p. 29; Owen, 2002, pp. 217-219). Compare this view with Hacker's, who has written extensively against essentializing conceptions of human nature, specifically also Chomsky's, on the basis of Wittgenstein's later work, arguing for example that "[o]f course, different cultures may employ distinctly different conceptual schemes to talk and think about human beings and their nature" (2007a, p. 16). While it is true that Hacker does not expand this discussion to the realm of political and social theory as Marxian thinkers have done, their basic positions on the question overlap because they share the same underlying anti-foundationalist commitments.<sup>10</sup>

However, it should be clear that an adherence to an Augustinian or naturalistic language ideology does not necessarily imply a specific normative stance in political and social views. Wittgenstein and Derrida need not, and do not, share the same broader normative framework despite the



fact that they adhere to the same underlying ontological and epistemological commitments, and as a self-proclaimed anarcho-syndicalist Chomsky is closer to the Marxian normative position than Hacker is (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006, pp. 38-39). The same is true for many members of the *Wiener Kreis* (Vienna Circle), who were close to Marxian thought in their normative views yet adhered to a foundationalist conception of language and reality as expressed in their logical positivism, though in their case this was not odd because they chronologically preceded the generation of Marxian thinkers who actively eschewed such modes of thinking (even first generation members of the Frankfurt School like Adorno harshly criticized them on these grounds) (LeMahieu, 2013, p. 20). As already said, language ideologies concern only the deeper level underlying the specificities of philosophies of language, i.e., the conceptions of the structure of language and the ontological and epistemological commitments these entail. This does not preclude or impose a certain normative position on the basis of the type of language ideology adhered to. Hence, it cannot be argued that Wittgenstein was himself in fact an avowed Marxian thinker simply by virtue of his adherence to a naturalistic language ideology, just as Heidegger's ontological and epistemological commitments which coincide with the commitments underlying the naturalistic language ideology did not effect a normative commitment to Marxian ideals on his part.<sup>11</sup> This brings to light another shortcoming of current accounts of the relationship between Wittgenstein's and Marxian thought. Any point of contact or commonality discovered – strictly limited to the surface level of specific concepts or views and not the deeper ontological and epistemological commitments underlying them – are perceived as indicating a clear normative affinity between the two, evidence of Wittgenstein's supposed Marxian tendencies despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.<sup>12</sup> Clearly such normative differences are of no relevance to Marxian uses of Wittgenstein's later work, for despite misguided attempts by some to portray them as being normatively aligned, the vast majority of thinkers who have been attracted to it have either rejected or been uninterested in the question of normative alignment. Of course, the same attitude has been taken in relation to Heidegger's work by the Left-Heideggerians (Marchart, 2007, pp. 4-5 & p. 110). This further indicates that the attraction is indeed driven by the deeper ontological and epistemologi-

cal commitments they have in common and not a common adherence to certain normative, political positions. But what are the origins of these shared commitments? The answer to this question yields further evidence to the argument that it is indeed the underlying shared philosophical commitments that motivate Marxian uses of Wittgenstein's later work.

### §3 Origins: Gramsci, Sraffa and Wittgenstein

It is not purely accidental that Marxian and Wittgenstein's later thought overlap in terms of their respective epistemological and ontological commitments. Wittgenstein's move from the Augustinian to the naturalistic language ideology was after all precipitated by discussions with Sraffa, who in turn was influenced by Gramsci. They already possessed the requisite anti-essentializing, historicizing and dialectical commitments in social and political theory given their eclectic philosophical background, which included a highly original and lucid reading of Marxism, and upon closer analysis it becomes clear that these commitments were imparted to Wittgenstein via his discussions with Sraffa (Sen, 2003, p. 1245).<sup>13</sup> A wonderful illustration of this is provided in the famous story about an argument they were having concerning Wittgenstein's Augustinian view of language as laid down in the *Tractatus*, specifically the idea that propositions and that which they describe must have the same logical form or grammar, the so-called "picture theory of meaning" which "sees a sentence as representing a state of affairs by being a kind of a picture of it, mirroring the structure of the state of affairs it portrays" (Sen, 2003, p. 1242). During this discussion, Sraffa made a gesture with his hand, brushing under his chin, which indicates rudeness in Neapolitan culture, and asked Wittgenstein: "What is the logical form of *that*?" (p. 1242). Sen, who knew Sraffa personally, asked him about this story, in response to which Sraffa "insisted that this account, if not entirely apocryphal ('I can't remember such a specific occasion'), was more of a tale with a moral than an actual event ('I argued with Wittgenstein so often and so much that my fingertips did not need to do much talking')" (p. 1242). He goes on to say: "But the story does illustrate graphically the nature of Sraffa's skepticism of the philosophy outlined in the *Tractatus*, and in particular how social conventions could contribute to the meaning of our utterances and gestures" (p. 1242).

However, as Ray Monk rightly notes, this does not mean that his move away from the picture theory of meaning and the Augustinian language ideology more generally was caused directly and solely by his interactions with Sraffa and thus indirectly by Gramsci. In the *Tractatus*, before he had even met Sraffa, Wittgenstein had already made steps toward the naturalistic conception of language by eschewing the connection between language and logic and describing ordinary or colloquial language as being organic.<sup>14</sup> With respect to mathematics, Wittgenstein had sided with L. E. J. Brouwer and Hermann Weyl against Russell and Frank Ramsey, arguing that the latter's attempt to build mathematics on the foundation of logic was misguided whereas he was sympathetic to the former's argument that the two are not intrinsically connected but rather distinct, hinting at a non-foundationalist conception of mathematics. Very interesting is Wittgenstein's use of the term 'bourgeois thinker' to describe Ramsey's attempt to save Russell's work in mathematics by drawing on his theory of propositions as outlined in the *Tractatus* (which he believed to be ill-conceived), and the term 'Bolshevik' to describe Brouwer and Weyl's views (Monk, 1991, pp. 245-246). Wittgenstein's move away from the Augustinian picture of language must therefore be seen as a process of development wherein Sraffa's ability to make Wittgenstein see things from a different perspective, thereby deeply problematizing foundationalist conceptions of language, played the instrumental role he himself acknowledges in the foreword of the *PU* – but the move is not reducible to this alone (pp. 260-261; Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 4).

Sen goes on to add that the novel perspective Sraffa introduced to Wittgenstein was influenced by Gramsci, and revolved around key assumptions of a naturalistic language ideology. In his *Prison notebooks*, which Sraffa was familiar with, Gramsci interestingly discusses language in very much the same terms as the later Wittgenstein would. For Gramsci, philosophy is an activity bound by rules and conventions, and must be perceived in such an "anthropological" way, for, as he argues, "it is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or of professional and systematic philosophers" (Sen, 2003, p. 1245). Instead, "it must first be shown that all men are 'philosophers,' by defining the limits and characteristics of

the 'spontaneous philosophy' which is proper to everybody" (p. 1245). The "spontaneous philosophy" was to be concerned with "language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content" (p. 1245). Here Sen sees a striking resemblance with Wittgenstein's refocusing from ideal language in the *Tractatus* to ordinary language in the *PU*. Elsewhere, Gramsci criticizes Russell's Augustinian view of language, contrasting it with his own non-foundationalist view, which is very reminiscent of Wittgenstein's arguments concerning meaning arising out of convention and custom in the *PU*:

One can also recall the example contained in a little book by Bertrand Russell [*The problems of philosophy*]. Russell says approximately this: "We cannot, without the existence of man on the earth, think of the existence of London or Edinburgh, but we can think of the existence of two points in space, one to the North and one to the South, where London and Edinburgh now are." ... East and West are arbitrary and conventional, that is, historical constructions, since outside of real history every point on the earth is East and West at the same time. (p. 1245)

Wittgenstein said of his conversations with Sraffa that they "made him feel like a tree from which all branches had been cut", to which Monk adds: "The metaphor is carefully chosen: cutting dead branches away allows new, more vigorous ones to grow (whereas Ramsey's objections left the dead wood in place, forcing the tree to distort itself around it)" (1991, p. 261). The following anecdote mentioned by Monk is also important in clarifying the influence of Gramsci and Sraffa on Wittgenstein with respect to the 'anthropological' or naturalistic conception of philosophy and language:

Wittgenstein once remarked to Rush Rhees that the most important thing he gained from talking to Sraffa was an 'anthropological' way of looking at philosophical problems. This remark goes some way to explain why Sraffa is credited as having had such an important influence. One of the most striking ways in which Wittgenstein's later work differs from the *Tractatus* is in its 'anthropological' approach. That is, whereas the *Tractatus* deals with language in isolation from the circumstances in

which it is used, the *Investigations* repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the ‘stream of life’ which gives linguistic utterances their meaning: a ‘language-game’ cannot be described without mentioning their activities and the way of life of the ‘tribe’ that plays it. If this change of perspective derives from Sraffa, then his influence on the later work is indeed of the most fundamental importance. (1991, p. 261)

Given all this, John B. Davies persuasively argues that the central area of influence from Gramsci and Sraffa to Wittgenstein is to be located in the former’s adherence to the Hegelian conception of critique, grounded on an anti-foundationalist social ontology expressed in an adherence to a historicizing, dialectical conception of reality, which in those respects overlap with the underlying ontological and epistemological commitments of the naturalistic language ideology Wittgenstein moved towards in his later work (2002, pp. 131-132). While Sen notes that further research is required to uncover the exact points of contact between Gramsci, Sraffa and Wittgenstein, he argues the same, saying that on the basis of what is already known about these contacts there was certainly an important degree of influence exerted by Sraffa on Wittgenstein (2003, pp. 1242-1243 & p. 1245).<sup>15</sup>

Going back to the rejections and critique of Wittgenstein for a moment, they not only ignore the importance of Wittgenstein’s move toward a naturalistic language ideology, either by not even mentioning it as indicating any significant change in position (Marcuse) or by contentiously reading into it an adherence to radical postmodernist relativism (Anderson), but they also ignore the role played in this move by Sraffa and Gramsci.<sup>16</sup> I believe the reason for this is pretty straightforward. Those Marxists who still reject and criticize Wittgenstein’s late work also reject those Marxian thinkers who have been attracted to it, and for the same reasons. They believe these thinkers have betrayed ‘the cause’ by abandoning and criticizing the archaic categories of classical Marxism with its functionalist and determinist underpinnings, i.e., a naïve foundationalist conception of Marxism and social and political theory more generally. Hence why Anderson lumps Foucault, Derrida and others belonging to the Left-Heideggerian camp in with the late Wittgenstein (and by implication, Marxian thinkers attracted to his late work coming

from the analytical tradition), seeing in both a pernicious radical relativism (Anderson, 1984, pp. 38-39; 1998, pp. 25-26). In reality, these thinkers have merely moved away from archaic foundationalist conceptions of reality whilst retaining a commitment to the Marxian conception of critical theory, thereby making significant progress by enhancing the explanatory power and critical potential of their work. Developments in the philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge, as exemplified in the works of Thomas Kuhn and W. V. O. Quine and the Wittgenstein-inspired social scientists of the Edinburgh school of strong sociology, as well as the works of Bourdieu and Left-Heideggerians like Foucault and Derrida in the field of political and social philosophy, have made clear that clinging to a naïve conception of foundationalism as these Marxist critics attempt to do is highly problematic, leading among other things to the scholastic fallacy of “taking the things of logic for the logic of things” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 49; 2000b, pp. 54-60).<sup>17</sup> On these grounds alone their attempts to criticize the late Wittgenstein from a foundationalist perspective can be seen as thoroughly misguided, not only being out of touch with broader developments in philosophy and the social sciences over the past decades but also with developments within Marxian social and political theory itself. Somewhat ironically *they* are the conservatives in this respect.

## Conclusion

Thinkers in the Marxian tradition have responded to Wittgenstein’s work in a variety of ways, ranging from the positive to the negative. Those belonging to the latter category rely on misguided interpretations of Wittgenstein’s thought, perceiving it as putting forth a defense of conservatism or radical relativism. Yet both positions do not stand up to scrutiny, for among other reasons that they are based on inadequate readings of statements taken out of context and ignore important biographical information and Wittgenstein’s many other writings (Uschanov, 2002, pp. 38-39). Most importantly, the criticisms disregard the relevance of Wittgenstein’s move to his later philosophy, the relation the underlying ontological and epistemological commitments of his later philosophy has to the basic commitments underlying newly developed forms of Marxian thought by a new generation of thinkers working in this tradition, and the origins of these shared commit-

ments in Wittgenstein's discussions with Sraffa. Current positive accounts of the relationship between Wittgenstein's and Marxian thought similarly ignore this dimension, instead focusing on superficial commonalities between Marx's and Wittgenstein's work, thereby not being able to explain why a diverse range of otherwise conflicting thinkers in the Marxian tradition have been attracted to and made use of Wittgenstein's later thought. In order to remedy these shortcomings and provide an explanation for this, I made use of the concept of language ideologies, which uncovers the commonalities in the underlying structures of varying philosophies of language. It is possible to distinguish two types of language ideologies with distinct underlying ontological and epistemological commitments, the Augustinian and naturalistic (Silverstein, 1979, p. 193).

Wittgenstein's later work fits the definition of a naturalistic language ideology, meaning that in terms of its underlying epistemological and ontological commitments it is characterized by an opposition to foundationalism, and hence essentializing conceptions of language. Instead it adheres to a conception of the structure of language as being public and social. With these commitments uncovered, it becomes clear why Marxian thinkers have been positively disposed toward Wittgenstein's later work given that they share the same underlying commitments. Moreover, the origin of these shared commitments further explains why this is so, for Wittgenstein's discussions with the Marxian thinker Sraffa, who himself was influenced in this direction by Gramsci, played an instrumental role in his move toward a naturalistic language ideology in his later work, with the concomitant non-foundationalist commitments. This indicates that the shared commitments between the naturalistic language ideology of the late Wittgenstein and the concerns of Marxian thinkers have their origins in this close intellectual relationship. By having thus clarified what lies at the basis of the attractions to and uses of Wittgenstein's later thought by a diverse range of Marxian thinkers, I hope to have not only demonstrated that they are legitimate, but also to thereby encourage further and more extensive uses of Wittgenstein's later work by those working in the Marxian tradition.

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## Notes

1. I use the terms 'Marxian' to denote those thinkers whose work is influenced by Marxism but are not necessarily Marxist in their overall outlook, and 'Marxist' to denote those whose work is firmly within the Marxist tradition and generally adhere to its classical conception. Recent thinkers belonging to the latter tend to be dogmatic in their outlook, whereas those belonging to the former are open to other forms of thought and perspectives. While this distinction contains a normative dimension it is also reliant on an analysis of the specific thinkers involved.
2. Wittgenstein expresses his intellectual indebtedness to Sraffa in the introduction of the *PU* as such: "Even more than to this – always powerful and assured a criticism – I am indebted to that which a teacher of this university, Mr. P. Sraffa, for many years unceasingly applied to my thoughts. It is to this stimulus that I owe the most fruitful ideas of this book" (2009, p. 4).
3. The importance of this will be explicated in detail in the third section.
4. See for example Bourdieu's criticisms of the classical Marxist conception of social space which reorients it to a focus on a non-essentialized conception of practices (including a linguistic one): "Constructing a theory of the social space presupposes a series of breaks with Marxist theory. First, a break with the tendency to privilege substances – here, the real groups, whose number, limits, members, etc., one claims to define at the expense of



*relationships*; and with the intellectualist illusion that leads one to consider the theoretical class, constructed by the sociologist, as a real class, an effectively mobilized group. Secondly, there has to be a break with the economism that leads one to reduce the social field, a multi-dimensional space, solely to the economic field, to the relations of economic production, which are thus constituted as co-ordinates of social position. Finally, there has to be a break with the objectivism that goes hand-in-hand with intellectualism, and that leads one to ignore the symbolic struggles of which the different fields are the site, where what is at stake is the very representation of the social world and, in particular, the hierarchy within each of the fields and among the different fields" (1985, p. 723).

5. See Schatzki et al. (2001) for an extensive overview of the 'practice turn' in contemporary social and political theory drawing heavily on Wittgenstein's later work.

6. Hence their description as Left-Heideggerians (Marchart, 2007, pp. 4-5 & p. 110).

7. This term was suggested to me by drs. Frans Schaeffer.

8. See Schatzki (2002) for an analysis of the shared aspects of such a conception, termed materialist by him, in Marx and Wittgenstein.

9. Not all terms have a reference to the True or the False, in some cases there is neutrality of thought, such as when fictional characters like Odysseus are part of a sentence. Such ambiguities, which arise out of the commitment to foundationalism, only serve to further complicate Frege's model and the Augustinian picture of language more generally. Wittgenstein's concept of language-games resolves these issues (Frege, 1960, p. 58 & pp. 62-63; Hacker, 1996, pp. 105-106).

10. For a more detailed overview of this, see Hacker (2007a, pp. 101-102; 2007b, pp. 21-22).

11. Heidegger's association with Nazism is well-known, see Bourdieu (1991, pp. 3-4).

12. As Ray Monk notes in his acclaimed biography of Wittgenstein, he at no time identified himself as a Marxist and greatly distrusted key normative aspects of its theory such as its scientism, expressed in the belief that social ills could only be alleviated by the progressive development of science (Monk, 1991, p. 348 & p. 486).

13. This also explains why Gramsci is one of the few thinkers coming out of the classical Marxist tradition who has remained popular among the new generation of Marxian thinkers.

14. See Wittgenstein (1922, §4.002, p. 39).

15. The relations between the two ended abruptly, an episode Monk recounts, further demonstrating the great influence Sraffa had on Wittgenstein: "In May 1946 Piero Sraffa decided he no longer wished to have conversations with Wittgenstein, saying that he could no longer give his time and attention to the matters Wittgenstein wished to discuss. This came as a great blow to Wittgenstein. He pleaded with Sraffa to continue their weekly conversations, even if it meant staying away from philosophical subjects. 'I'll talk about anything', he told him. 'Yes', Sraffa replied, 'but in *your way*'" (1991, p. 487).

16. There is no mention of it whatsoever in Marcuse, Adorno, Anderson or any other critical Marxist account of Wittgenstein's thought I have read. Given that many of them hold Gramsci in very high regard, it should not be surprising that the connection is kept quiet.

17. An interesting movement in philosophy has sprung up in the past decade or so embracing and combining these developments and attempting to go beyond the traditional analytical-continental divide. This is not only true for theoretical philosophers but also for those working in the fields of social and political philosophy. The broadly post-foundationalist approach that defines this movement, which coincides with what has been referred to as 'neo-pragmatism', is in my view the direction Marxian thinkers should move toward if they have not already. David Owen (2002), Titus Stahl (2013) and Oliver Marchart (2007) are some examples of Marxian thinkers who have done interesting work as part of this movement. Naturally, those taking on this post-foundationalist approach are sympathetic to Wittgenstein's later work by virtue of this.

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