How to use Wittgenstein to Oppose Marxism

Miguel Ángel Quintana Paz

Valladolid, Spain | quintanapaz@gmail.com

Abstract

Our interest here will be limited to decide how *we* could use the philosophy of Wittgenstein to oppose Marxist theorizations. We will not imply, thus, that Wittgenstein himself made that use or wanted anybody else to make it. Our focus here is not Wittgenstein's possible intentions against Marxism, but his implications against it. We have found five possible implications of this kind. The first one links his private language argument and Ludwig von Mises' argument about why Marxists fail in determining prices. The second one goes from that very private language argument to a liberal argument against the dictatorship of proletariat. The third is a skeptical argument for participatory democracy that undermines some of Marx's ideas about power. Finally, the fourth and fifth implications use Wittgenstein's philosophy against the Marxist ideas of an essential divide in society and a common human progress, respectively.

As the title of this contribution shows, our interest here will be limited to decide how *we* could use the philosophy of Wittgenstein to oppose Marxist theorizations. We will not imply, thus, that Wittgenstein himself used his philosophical work to oppose Marxism, nor that he had any specific concern in anybody doing so. Reducing the interest of Wittgensteinian tools to the use that the individual called Ludwig Wittgenstein made of them or wanted others to make of them would be a curious case of the "intentional fallacy" (Winsatt and Beardsley 1946) that precisely Wittgenstein's philosophy so hardly combated (Winch 1972: 61-66; Holiday 1988: 88). Hence, our focus here is not Wittgenstein's intentions or inclinations against Marxism, but his implications against it. This is, for one, the same focus applied to Wittgenstein's political ideas by Alice Crary (2000).

Both Marxist (Eagleton 1982; Easton 1983; Moran 1972) and non-Marxist (Apel 1973: 275; Fann 1969; Holiday 1988: 2-23, 115-117) scholars have often linked the insistence on the importance of praxis of Wittgensteinian philosophy with Marx's *prima facie* similar positions on this issue. If we should follow this thread, Wittgenstein's philosophy would be useful mainly to defend Marxism, not to argue against it. Susan Easton (1983: 54-82) *e.g.* has claimed that Marx's second thesis on Feuerbach ("The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth [...] in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question") would be of help to understand how Wittgenstein tried to solve the problem of knowledge and his diffidence towards scholar philosophy. In fact, Wittgenstein himself went as far as to praise Lenin not for his philosophical works (he thought that his shortcomings as a philosopher were evident) but for his endeavor to apply to the praxis his theories (Drury 1996: 126). And when Wittgenstein was asked about his opinion on the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach (where Marx asks the philosophers to stop interpreting the world and start transforming it), the Austrian philosopher answered with a skeptical "Let them [the philosophers] try!" that emphasizes, if possible, Marx's distrust of the theories of the philosophers to achieve anything if they continue to be, as usual, severed from the praxis (Easton 1983: 76). If we also recall that one of the few philosophical figures to which Wittgenstein explicitly recognizes to be intellectually in debt is the Marxist economist Piero Sraffa (PI: ix-x), then the plausibility of his connections to Marxism might look stronger.

Nevertheless, without discussing the extent of these possible connections, the question we want to ask here is if and how we could find as well in Wittgenstein any arguments *against* Marxism. My position is that we may find at least five different kinds of Wittgensteinian (or Wittgenstein-inspired) arguments that can be used against some key contentions of Marxism.

The first one has an economic flavor and deals with the Marxist idea of how to determine the price of a commodity. Two Wittgensteinian specialists so relevant as Saul Kripke (1982: 112-113, n. 89) and David Bloor (1997: 74-78) have openly connected Wittgenstein's "argument of private language" and the criticisms that libertarian economists like Ludwig von Mises (1963: 698-715) have made against the Marxist idea of determining prices without a market economy, only on a bureaucratic basis. Let us remember that the argument of private language showed us that following a rule that cannot be corrected by other people is like not following a rule at all, is like acting whimsically. I do not follow a rule if everything that looks correct to me *is* then correct; someone must be in the position of hypothetically correcting me. Similarly, a price that is determined by a class of bureaucrats that cannot be corrected by other people (consumers, producers, etc.) is a price determined by no rule at all, a whimsical way of fixing prices. If, in a Socialist economy, every price that looks correct for this class of bureaucrats is *then* correct, and no consumer or producer is able to correct them, then no real rule is being followed by those Socialist bureaucrats. It will lead an economy to chaos in the same way that a language with only private rules will be, according to Wittgenstein, chaotic.

This might head us to a second argument inspired by Wittgenstein against Marxism. In fact, the same problem in economics with the absence of rules in the Marxist determination of prices can be used, in politics, against the absence of external control (and, hence, of rules too) over power in the Marxist dictatorship of proletariat. For Marx, this dictatorship implied that the government "was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive, and legislative at the same time" (Marx: 1986, 331). No need of checks and balances is shown in this description. The very idea of an external control of this government would be absurd for Marx: the government represents the democratic will of the people, and who is allowed to limit that democratic will? Why should democracy be limited at all? Any external control of this government would be undemocratic, because this government *is* democracy. This explains why liberal and "formal democracies", with their

checks and balances, were so virulently despised by Marxists.

However, what Wittgenstein might teach us here is that in a political system as the one envisaged by Marx, or in any totalitarian regime in which government does not accept external controls, governments rule without rules. If a government cannot be corrected by someone else, this government cannot be said to be following a rule at all. These regimes give thus to the government the possibility of practicing any irrational and capricious politics that they want. It is ironic that those regimes usually boast of being an especially rational and systemic organization of power, often on Hegelian grounds, as opposed to the disorganized multiplicity present in liberal democracies whereas, according to this Wittgensteinian argument, the truth is the reverse: these regimes put power beyond any rational rule.

A possible Marxist answer against this criticism of Marxism could go as follows: in fact, Marxism *did* accept the possibility of controlling those in power during the dictatorship of the proletariat. As Engels (1986) put it, this would be done by means of "the right of the same electors to recall their delegate at any time". However, we must not forget that the same Engels (1972: 730-733) qualified this statement elsewhere: "If the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists". Who decides if someone is an elector that legitimately wants to recall their delegate or is instead a reactionist that should be prevented by all means (even violence and terror) to do so? Once again, the lack of a Wittgensteinian rule (a rule external to the opinions of the Marxist ruler) is evident. And, thus, a Wittgenstein-inspired criticism of this Marxist element looks pertinent.

A third Wittgensteinian argument against Marxism may have to do as well with politics, more precisely with political participation. Of course, the Communist society that Marx foresaw as the last stage of human history would be a paradise of political participation, in which everybody will decide everything, as long as no government will exist. But political participation is on the contrary quite restricted in the previous Socialist stage of history, during the dictatorship of proletariat. As the word dictatorship clearly insinuates, this transitional period cannot be fully trusted to the mass of people who emerge from capitalism, given that "economically, morally and intellectually" they would be "still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges" (Marx: 1970, 13-30). Lenin was quite vocal in deducing from it the need of a one-party rule. This is quite contrary to the conclusions drawn from Wittgenstein political philosophy by authors like Aryeh Botwinick (1985).

According to his reading of Wittgenstein, only a staunch participatory democracy would be congenial with his contributions. Botwinick finds the basis for this reading in Wittgensteinian excerpts like this: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is" (PI: 124). If we try to apply these sentences to the world of politics, we may find that this world is also full of "language games" of many actors who share the political field. Now, the political philosopher's attitude to these array of language games cannot be "interfering" with them, or give any "political foundation" to this arena. A philosopher confronted with politics and its language games only may, as Wittgenstein states, "leave everything as it is." This Wittgensteinian denial of the ability of philosophy (and philosophers) to give a definite answer to the most important questions of the political sphere does not lead Botwinick to defend a passive approach to politics. In fact quite the opposite. If philosophical theory cannot give a definite answer to political questions, then the road is open to everybody to try and give it. If philosophers are unable to grasp the "truth" of politics, then everybody's opinion is welcome on that level. If no group holds the "correct answer" to politics, then it is everybody's task to cooperate in deciding our answers. A participatory democracy (in which everybody is allowed and incited to express their voice about any political matter and to take the last decision about it) is thus the system that best reflects Wittgenstein's conclusions about the relationship between philosophy and politics. No philosopher king (and no Marxist philosopher king, or bureaucrat, either) is allowed to steal the leading role from the hands of everybody's participation. When the (Marxist) philosophers (and the ruler who bases his or her decisions on their philosophy) are disempowered, participation of pethe ople is empowered.

This leads us to the fourth and fifth arguments that I would like to expose here. If there is no common ground for political action that a philosopher can determine, two typical features of Marxist philosophy must be discarded too. The former is the Marxist conviction that there is only one essential division in society that splits it in two main groups or classes: that of the (economic) oppressors and that of the (economically) oppressed. Now, according to the Wittgensteinian line of thought that we have exposed, no philosophical theory should take away from the people the right to decide which divisions are pertinent for them and when, and which are not. When we leave in the hands of the people (and not of a Marxist philosopher that tries to "instruct" them) which social divisions are pertinent for their political action, we find a plurality of them: gender divisions, religious divisions, national divisions, racial divisions, not only the economic division that Marx considered *a priori* the essential one. In this sense, Wittgenstein's arguments may be considered an early envisioning of the postmodern (and anti-Marxist) idea of a plurality of social conflicts, with no central gap to explain all of them (Schatzki: 1996).

This shows us the way to the last of the five uses of Wittgenstein against Marx that I want to cite here. If there are many possible divisions in society that the people, and not the (Marxist) philosopher, decide, then there are many possible stories (and many histories as well) to be told about that society and its political evolution, not only the dialectical history of progress that Marx believed that he had discovered. Some of these groups may see a concrete event in history as progress, some may see it otherwise, and an individual that belongs to several of those groups may thus see history *both* as progress and as regress. The Marxist idea of progress for the whole of the human race loses then any appeal; a loss that surely Wittgenstein, as a person, would hardly regret, by the way. However, we promised at the beginning of this paper not to indulge in Wittgenstein's inclinations (as an individual), only in his (and his arguments) main implications. Therefore, we will leave this possible thread for further research.

Literature

Apel, Karl-Otto (1973) *Transformation der Philosophie: Sprachanalytik, Semiotik, Hermeneutik, vol. 1,* Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Bloor, David (1997) *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions*, London: Routledge.

Botwinick, Aryeh (1985) *Wittgenstein, Skepticism and Political Participation. An Essay in the Epistemology of Democratic Theory*, Lanham-New York-London: University Press of America.

Crary, Alice (2000) "Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to political thought", in: Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds.) *The New Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge.

Drury, Maurice (1996) "Conversations with Wittgenstein", in: *The Danger of Words and Writings on Wittgenstein,* Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 97-215.

Eagleton, Terry (1982) "Wittgenstein's Friends", *New Left Review* I/135, 64-90.

Easton, Susan (1983) *Humanist Marxism and Wittgensteinian Social Philosophy*, Manchester: Manchester UP.

Engels, Friedrich (1972) "On Authority", in: *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Marx-Engels Reader*, New York: Norton.

Engels, Friedrich (1986) "Postscript", in: *Marx & Engels Collected Works, vol. 22*, New York: International Publishers.

Fann, Kuang T. (1969) *Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Holiday, Anthony (1988) *Moral Powers: Normative Necessity in Language and History*, London: Routledge.

Kripke, Saul (1982) *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language. An Elementary Exposition*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Marx, Karl (1970) "Critique of the Gotha Program", in: *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Marx/Engels Selected Works, vol. 3.* Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Marx, Karl (1986) "The Civil War in France", in: *Marx & Engels Collected Works, vol. 22*, New York: International Publishers.

Moran, John (1972) "Wittgenstein and Russia", *New Left Review* I/73, 85-96.

Schatzki, Theodore (1996) *Social Practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Von Mises, Ludwig (1963) *Human Action,* New Haven: Yale UP.

Winch, Peter (1972) "Nature and Convention", in: *Ethics and Action*, London: Routledge, 50-72.

Winsatt, William and Beardsley, Monroe (1946) "The Intentional Fallacy", in: David Richter (ed.) (1998) *The Critical Tradition*, Boston: Bedford, 748-756.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1958) *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell. [PI]