

Alice Crary and Joel de Lara, *Wittgenstein and Political Thought*

Book description. Wittgenstein was not a political theorist; he did not write much about political affairs; his political engagements were idiosyncratic and episodic; and the political views he expressed were an iconoclastic mix of left- and right-wing. Nevertheless, many readers have insisted on the possibility of extrapolating distinctive approaches to political thought from Wittgenstein's works and philosophical methodology. This book provides a comprehensive overview of and critical commentary on the most important reflections on this theme. It opens with those who have attributed to Wittgenstein some form of political conservatism. In the late '50s and early '60s, Ernest Gellner and Herbert Marcuse inaugurated this strand of reading, complaining that Wittgenstein counseled a stymied and uncritical approach to philosophical and political problems. Over the next half century, numerous scholars continued in this vein. J.C. Nyíri (1970s-80s), Anthony Giddens (1979), John Dunn (1985), Denis McManus (1995), David Bloor (2000), and Alan Badiou (2019) have all argued that Wittgenstein's philosophy is either explicitly and positively conservative, and thus in line with thinkers like Oakeshott and Spengler, or simply reactionary in virtue of its putative conception of ordinary language as sacrosanct. Relatedly, thinkers including Hans-Johann Glock (1996), Robert Kirk (1999), and A.C. Grayling (1988, 2001) have claimed that Wittgenstein was committed to some form of cultural relativism, according to which moral or political condemnation (or support) for views from people outside one's own culture is rendered illegitimate. Lastly, in a twist on this last line of interpretation, some prominent intellectuals who likewise affirm that Wittgenstein excludes rational cultural criticism have tried to make the case that this posture opens up space for radically transformative political interventions (Fish 1980, 1989 and Rorty, 1982, 1989, 1991).

This book brings out forcefully that, and how, such readings are untenable. Starting with Hanna Pitkin's 1973 book (the first such treatment of our theme), conservative appropriations of Wittgenstein have been subjected to strong critiques, including from Stanley Cavell (1989), Cora Diamond (1994), Alice Crary (2000), Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., and John R. Wright (2002), and Christopher Robinson (2006, 2009), the key points of which we will recap. However, among scholars who are unconvinced that Wittgenstein's philosophy was conservative, there remains little agreement over how to positively situate him. Some philosophers have sought to classify Wittgenstein as a traditional liberal, including James Tully (1989), Robin Holt (1997), Richard Eldridge (2003), Robert Griceleaf Brice (2014), and Hans Sluga (2014). Meanwhile, others—including David Rubenstein (1981), Susan Easton (1983), Gavin Kitching (1988), Kitching and Nigel Pleasants (eds.) (2002), and Dmitris Gakis (2015)—have argued that Wittgenstein is better viewed as a kind of classical Marxist. The lack of consensus has opened up the space for recent arguments that Wittgenstein either offered no substantive approach to political thought (e.g., Robert Vinten [2015, 2017]) or one that does not fit traditional right- or left-wing politics (e.g., Luke Plotica [2013]).

As Nigel Pleasants argues (2014), there is also a largely neglected history of the positive impact of Wittgensteinian thought on a number of critical theorists, including Jurgen Habermas (1984), Jean-François Lyotard (1984), Giorgio Agamben (2000), Chantal Mouffe (2000), Antonio Negri (2004, 2009), Paolo Virno (2008), and Rahel Jaeggi (2018). Following up on Pleasants' efforts, this book elucidates some of the key lines of these different modes of inheritance.

Drawing on this much-needed comprehensive review of the scholarship on Wittgenstein and political thought, *Wittgenstein and Political Thought* defends the thesis that Wittgenstein's

philosophy is indeed valuable for political thought and that it is helpfully understood as presenting us with a distinctive contribution to critical theory. The book lays out a case for reading the later Wittgenstein's distinctive methodological approach to philosophy, as well as to thinking about the connection between words and world, as offering the seeds of a compelling and largely overlooked account of immanent critique. It contains an argument for holding that, far from having a conservative political bent or committing us to a classical liberal or Marxist view, Wittgenstein's method gives us a radical alternative: it equips us to challenge both the emphasis on instrumental reason that is the hallmark of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, and the logical ideal of political rationality that is its counterpart and that holds sway in contemporary liberal thought. Wittgenstein once wrote that "the sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings" (RFM II 23). Our book will offer both an introduction to the scholarship on Wittgenstein and political thought (for use by advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and Wittgenstein scholars) as well as a contribution in its own right to showing how Wittgenstein's work can help us to diagnose and treat the sicknesses of our own time.