Marx and Wittgenstein
Knowledge, morality and politics

Edited by
Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants

Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought
Karl Marx and Ludwig Wittgenstein are often thought to be as deeply opposed to each other as it is possible for two major thinkers to be.

Despite this standard conception, however, a small number of scholars have long suggested that there are deeper philosophical commonalities between Marx and Wittgenstein. They have argued that, once grasped, these commonalities can radically change and enrich understanding both of Marxism and of Wittgensteinian philosophy. This book develops and extends this unorthodox view, emphasising the mutual enrichment that comes from bringing Marx’s and Wittgenstein’s ideas into dialogue with one another.

The contributors to this book are leading scholars drawn from sociology, politics, economics and philosophy. They focus on areas such as:

• the influence of the Marxist economist Piero Sraffa on Wittgenstein’s philosophical development
• the limitations of the conventional arguments on Wittgenstein’s significance for social science found in the writings of Peter Winch and Ernest Gellner
• the ‘philosophical anthropology’ of Marx and Wittgenstein
• the ethical and political status of Marxist knowledge-claims when seen in the light of Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

Essential reading for all scholars and philosophers interested in the Marxist thought and the philosophy of Wittgenstein, this book will also be of vital interest to those studying and researching in the fields of social philosophy, political philosophy, philosophy of social science and political economy.

**Gavin Kitching** is a Professor of Politics at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. In addition to *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis* (Routledge, 1988) and *Marxism and Science: Analysis of an Obsession* (Penn State, 1994), he has written books on Africa, Third World development and globalisation. A collection of personal essays, *Wittgenstein and Society*, will be published in 2003.

**Nigel Pleasants** is Lecturer in Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Exeter, UK. He is the author of *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory: A Critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar* (Routledge, 1999).
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Contributors

**David Andrews** is Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Social Science at Cazenovia College, New York, USA. His research focuses on the intersections of economics and philosophy. Most recently he has written articles on philosophy and the economics of Piero Sraffa and J.M.Keynes.

**Ted Benton** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Essex, UK. He is author of numerous publications on Marxist philosophy and social theory, history of the life-sciences and political ecology, including _Natural Relations_ (Verso, 1993), _The Greening of Marxism_ (editor; Guilford Press, 1996) and _Philosophy of Social Science_ (with I.Craib; Palgrave, 2001).

**Terrell Carver** is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Bristol, UK. He has degrees from Columbia and Oxford, at which he developed an interest in Wittgenstein. He has published extensively on Marx and Engels, as well as on gender. His most recent book is _The Postmodern Marx_ (Manchester University Press, 1998).


**Joachim Israel** was, until his death in 2001, Professor Emeritus, University of Lund, Sweden. His publications include: _Alienation from Marx to Modern Sociology_ ([1968] Harvester Press, 1979), _The Dialectics of Language and the Language of Dialectics_ (Harvester Press, 1979), _Sprache und Erkenntnis_ (Campus, 1990), _Martin Buber: Dialogphilosophie in Theorie und Praxis_

**Gavin Kitching** is a Professor of Politics at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. In addition to his *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis* (Routledge, 1988) and *Marxism and Science: Analysis of an Obsession* (Penn State, 1994) he has also written books on Africa, Third World development and globalisation. A collection of personal essays, *Wittgenstein and Society*, will be published in 2003.

**Nigel Pleasants** is Lecturer in Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Exeter, UK. He is the author of *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory: A Critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar* (Routledge, 1999).

**Rupert Read** is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, U.K. His publications include *Thomas Kuhn, the Philosopher of Scientific Revolution* (with W. Sharrock; Polity, in press), *The New Wittgenstein* (edited with Alice Crary; Routledge, 2000), *The New Hume Debate* (edited with Ken Richman; Routledge, 2000).

**Ferruccio Rossi-Landi** was born in 1921 and died in 1985. He held Chairs of Philosophy at the Universities of Padua, Lecce and Trieste as well as studying and teaching in the UK and the USA. He played a leading role in introducing Wittgenstein’s ideas to an Italian audience. His major publications in English include *Contact: Human Communication and Its History* (Thames and Hudson, 1981), *Language as Labour and Trade* (Bergin and Garvey, 1983), *Marxism and Ideology* (Clarendon Press, 1990) and *Between Signs and Non-Signs* (Benjamin, 1992).

**David Rubinstein** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois, Chicago, USA. He is the author of *Marx and Wittgenstein: Social Science and Social Praxis* (Routledge, 1981) and *Structure, Culture, and Agency: Towards a Truly Multidimensional Sociology* (Sage, 2001).

**Ted Schatzki** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Kentucky, USA. He is the author of *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change* (Penn State, 2002).

**Keiran Sharpe** is Lecturer in Economics at the Queen’s College, Oxford. He is interested in the classical tradition of economics that proceeds from the work of Piero Sraffa, and has published a number of articles on that subject. He is currently undertaking a constructively critical analysis of the concept of agency in economics along Sraffian and Wittgensteinian lines.

**T.P. Uschanov** is at the University of Helsinki, Finland, where he is planning a doctoral dissertation on the history of the reception of Wittgenstein’s thought from the 1920s to the present. His other major research interest is the philosophical critique of modernity as developed by such figures as Benjamin and Ortega y Gasset.
Preface

This book originated from an international symposium on ‘Marx and Wittgenstein’ held at Trinity College, Cambridge, UK, between 29 March and 1 April 1999. All but three of the sixteen who attended the symposium have written chapters for the book. However, even chapters derived from symposium papers have been considerably developed for publication here, and in four cases symposium participants have written a chapter especially for the book in place of their original paper. In addition to contributions by symposium participants the editors have also included two further chapters by other scholars (T.P. Uschanov and Ferruccio Rossi-Landi) in order to further deepen and complete the text.

The original symposium brought together people from six countries and four continents, and this book contains contributions from people from a further two nations. The symposium was, and this book is, therefore, a genuinely international initiative, in which a variety of cultural, as well as intellectual, perspectives are brought to bear on this fascinating topic. The symposium was also an unusually interdisciplinary event, bringing together not just philosophers but also economists, sociologists and political theorists interested in some aspect of the life and thought of Marx and/or Wittgenstein.

In a period in academic history in which academics are increasingly battered by demands that their activities be ‘practical’, ‘policy relevant’ and above all ‘income generating’, the symposium on ‘Marx and Wittgenstein’ was determinedly none of these things, which is perhaps why all its participants recall it with affection as one of the most intellectually stimulating events of recent years and one which has given rise to some lasting friendships.

The editors of this book, and the organisers of the symposium—Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants—wish to thank Trinity College for its hospitality in hosting the event and subsidising part of the costs, and also James Whiting of Routledge for commissioning the publication of the resulting book. The hopes we have for the influence which this book might exert are laid out in more detail in the Introduction which follows. But suffice it to say here that if this book were to result in a generalised dialogue both among and between Marxists and Wittgensteinians even approximating the openness, intensity and honesty displayed in Cambridge then its editors will be more than satisfied.

Gavin Kitching
Nigel Pleasants
June 2002
Introduction

Gavin Kitching

I never heard him talk politics, though who can doubt that he was deeply disturbed by the events of those years, and may have been shaken in the conservatism he brought from home. Yet, whenever a political issue came up he would bristle. Once when he said something derogatory about Marxism I turned on him furiously, saying it was nothing like so discredited as were his own antiquated political opinions. To my astonishment he looked taken aback. He was silenced!


Wittgenstein probably struck Pascal as an ‘old time conservative’ because of his hostility to Marxism. But many of Wittgenstein’s other friends received a very different impression. George Thomson, for example...speaks of Wittgenstein’s ‘growing political awareness during those years’ (the 1930s) and says that, although he did not discuss politics very often with Wittgenstein, he did so ‘enough to show that he kept himself informed about current events. He was alive to the evils of unemployment and fascism and the growing danger of war.’ Thomson adds, in relation to Wittgenstein’s attitude to Marxism: ‘He was opposed to it in theory, but supported it in practice.’ This chimes with a remark Wittgenstein once made to Rowland Hutt... ‘I am a communist at heart.’ It should be remembered, too, that many of Wittgenstein’s friends of this period... were Marxists. In addition to George Thomson there were Piero Sraffa, whose opinion Wittgenstein valued above all on questions of politics, Nicholas Bachtin and Maurice Dobb. There is no doubt that during the political upheavals of the mid-1930s Wittgenstein’s sympathies were with the working class and the unemployed, and that his allegiance, broadly speaking, was with the left.


Conventional wisdoms

Despite some occasional contrary voices, to whom I will refer shortly, it is fair to say that the dominant view in the worlds of philosophy and social science was, and probably still is, that no two thinkers have less in common than Karl Marx and Ludwig Wittgenstein. And certainly it is not difficult to place the two men at the extreme opposite ends of several spectra. Karl Marx, the thinker who
averred that ‘philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the thing however is to change it’ (Marx, 1970a: 30), confronts the Austrian philosopher one of whose best-known aphorisms is that ‘philosophy...leaves everything as it is’ (Wittgenstein, 1972: §124). Karl Marx, whose explicit engagement with philosophical issues ended early in his intellectual life and who turned firmly away from philosophical concerns to political activism and to ‘the critique of political economy’, is not difficult to contrast sharply with a thinker who, after a brief flirtation with aeronautical engineering, gave his entire life to academic philosophy and showed virtually no interest in conventional political activity throughout that life. Above all, perhaps, a thinker who is conventionally credited with founding the ‘science’ of ‘historical materialism’ and most of whose followers have considered themselves to be possessed of ‘scientific’ insights into society, economy and even into patterns of historical development, would seem to have little in common with a philosopher who once asked ‘who knows the laws by which society evolves? I am sure they are a closed book to the cleverest of men’ (Wittgenstein, 1980:60e) and who was profoundly sceptical (at least) of attempts to extend ‘scientific’ ways of knowing into the study of human beings and their activities.

So if there was—and still is—a conventional wisdom that Marx and Wittgenstein have little in common and even less to say to one another, it is not a conventional wisdom entirely without grounds to support it. And in fact it is not the aim of this volume to suggest that this conventional wisdom is entirely groundless or entirely wrong. Still less is it our aim here to argue some ridiculous thesis to the effect that Wittgenstein was a ‘closet Marxist’ (or Marx an unknowing Wittgensteinian). Our aim is rather threefold:

1. To draw attention to some ‘deep’ (i.e. not obvious or apparent) commonalities in the thought of Marx and Wittgenstein, and commonalities which set both of them against certain powerful—even dominant—trends in western philosophy and social theory.

2. To show that, despite these commonalities, there are still important differences between Marxian and Wittgensteinian views of the world and (therefore) differences over precisely how and to what degree these world views can be, or even should be, aligned. These differences were apparent among contributors to the original symposium upon which this book is based and they reappear in its pages. In particular, there is a marked difference of emphasis between those contributors—like Ted Benton and David Rubinstein—who think that the ‘idea of a social science’ still has some important validity (and in Benton’s case at least, that such a science can be founded on a Marxian framework) and others—such as Gavin Kitching, Nigel Pleasants and Rupert Read—who are more sceptical about this possibility, although on somewhat varied grounds.

In addition, however, it is the aim of this book to suggest that:
the perspectives of Marx and Wittgenstein on the world can be, as it were, 
mutually enriching—that a ‘Wittgensteinian Marxism’ (or a ‘Marxist
Wittgensteinianism’) can offer a way both of understanding and of being
in the social world which is in certain ways much richer and more
rewarding than that offered by either conventional Marxism or
conventional Wittgensteinianism.

Commonalities

No one who has taught any form of social science or studied historical and
contemporary debates in social theory can fail to be struck by the still
powerful methodological hold of a certain kind of dualism over the entire
field. That dualism takes several interlinked forms (see Rubinstein, 1981:181–
207) but the most fundamental of them (in the sense that it affects all the
others) is a subject–object dualism which is simultaneously a dualism of
observer and observed. That is, the student who is being introduced to the
fundamentals of any social science discipline will be asked to place themselves
in the imagined role of an ‘outside observer’, and an observer, moreover, of
some large-scale social scientific ‘object’—‘society’, ‘the economy’, ‘polities’,
‘history’, etc.—placed imaginatively over and against them. In this adopted
role of objective observer the student will then be set certain tasks vis-à-vis the
object, or constituent parts of the object: viz. to ‘describe’ it (or them) to
‘explain’ it (or them), and to theorise about the causes which affect the
functioning of this object or any of its constituent ‘parts’.

And with this subject–object, observer–observed dualism there comes
(rarely explicitly stated but all the more powerful for that lack of explicitness) a
particular conception of the relationship between the language of the observer
and the reality of what is observed. This conception is in turn twofold:

1 On the one hand the observer is conceived as the exclusive user of language
in this couple. That is, the social science observer applies language to an
‘object’ (society, the economy, politics, etc.) which is seen as essentially
non-linguistic.

2 And on the other hand, both the appropriateness of the language used by the
observer and the truth of what s/he asserts with that language are conceived
as determined by the non-linguistic object. That is to say, the language is
appropriate if it ‘fits with’ or ‘pictures’ (accurately) the social object which it
describes. And what is stated in that language is ‘true’ of the object if what is
asserted or proposed in that language matches or pictures certain social (or
economic or political) ‘states of affairs’ in the objective world.

To put it simply, it is a prime thrust and aim of several of the chapters in this
collection to show that both Marx and Wittgenstein take issue with this
subject–object/observer–observed dualism, and that they do so, moreover, in