**New Meanings for Old Words**

**Wittgenstein on Social Praxis and Language**

In paragraph 491 of *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein writes: «Not: “without language we could not communicate with one another” — but for sure: without language we cannot influence other people in such-and-such ways; cannot build roads and machines, etc. And also: without the use of speech and writing people could not communicate». Language has practical roots (cfr. OC: § 475) and purposes: we need it to communicate, work, collaborate and, in general, to act in the society in which we live. Language is a constitutive part of human social life. In the first part of my talk, I will analyse the value of Wittgenstein’s idea that language uses are part of the natural history of human beings (cfr. PI § 25).

The understanding of what happens in our private and public life takes form in language. We conceptualize the phenomena by language and so we create a critical linguistic space where it is possible to think and re-think them. New phenomena were structured by old words which get new meanings: they perform new functions. Social praxis and language are characterized by an unavoidable twine in that which we will describe as Wittgenstein’s Marxian way of thinking. Since, according to Wittgenstein, it is impossible to fix once and for all the rules for understanding the changing phenomena in the world and what happens in our lives, in the second part of my talk I will argue that ways of speaking come from the surrounding of experience and our experiences were thought and conceptualized by language. In this regard, Wittgenstein affirms: «What is happening now has significance — in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance. And the word "hope" refers to a phenomenon of human life. (A smiling mouth *smiles* only in a human face)» (PI: § 583). Therefore, he also writes: «a word can have meaning only in the praxis of a language» (RFM: § 124). By considering Wittgenstein’s uses of the concept of praxis across the corpus of his writings, we will remark that, although Wittgenstein focused on the role of praxis in the meaning processes of language, he missed to consider these processes from an historical point of view. This shortcoming distances Wittgenstein’s philosophy from the Marxian method of thinking.

In the times of crisis which we are living, what does the relation between social praxis and language that we can assume by Wittgenstein’s philosophy mean? If we do not have fixed rules for understanding new phenomena like that of the Covid-19 pandemic and the following crisis which hit the world as we have not fixed rules for using the words in many different contexts; and, if we have only this language to talk about the events, to understand them correctly, to influence human behaviours and thought, then we should find new meanings for old words trying to use them appropriately for describing new situations in the ordinary life. In the last part of my talk I will examine some language games used to talk about the Coronavirus crisis (e.g. “we are in a war”; “pandemic is a gateway to a better world”), in order to observe how language uses are woven by social praxis (cfr. PI § 7) and how language can positively or negatively influence human actions. The goal is to demonstrate that, as Wittgenstein taught us, we need to maintain a critical attitude towards our language and the popular thought which takes form from it and deposits in it.