



ARTICLE

Foucault and Wittgenstein: Practical Critique and Democratic Politics

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims to explore a set of convergence points between Foucault’s and Wittgenstein’s perspectives on philosophy and language, integrating them into a mutually complementary approach that I term ‘practical critique.’ The concept of ‘practical critique’ is founded on three pillars: the understanding of philosophy and language as critical practices, the public nature of language, and confessional subjectivity. I examine these three areas of convergence across three subsequent sections. In the concluding section, I discuss how this perspective can be fertile for understanding democratic politics today. I argue that all three pillars predominantly support democratic politics over any other political form. To explain that, I engage with the debate on the language of democratic theory and the potential expansion of the understanding of the public sphere. The notion of the public that emerges from this perspective offers an alternative or supplementation to the classical Habermasian view of the public sphere and democratic theory. It is envisioned as an open space of discursive multiplicity and diversity, where practices of exclusion or oppression can be made visible, challenged, and resisted.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, Ludwig Wittgenstein, practical critique, democratic politics, public language, confession, subjectivity

INTRODUCTION¹

In this paper, I will examine two philosophical projects—those of Wittgenstein and Foucault—in order to see how their perspectives on critique, language, and subjectivity might provide insights into contemporary democratic politics. I argue that Wittgenstein and Foucault engage in specific, practice and language-oriented philosophical critique,

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distinguishing it from the primarily theory-driven conceptualizations of democracy found in contemporary philosophy. The concept of practical critique that I outline here is built upon three key principles: an anti-foundationalist understanding of philosophy as a fundamentally practical activity, an anti-referentialist view of language as an activity grounded in public rules (practices), and an anti-Cartesian perspective on subjectivity as a process of confessional self-formation. I argue that the philosophico-political perspective emerging from the concept of practical critique can offer valuable insights into our understanding of democratic politics today.

In referencing Wittgenstein and Foucault, my aim is not to propose a systematic comparison or advocate for a shared theoretical approach. Instead, I intend to explore certain 'family resemblances' between selected concepts that could help us see some elements of contemporary democratic theory and politics in a new light. In this interpretative exercise, I will, on the one hand, juxtapose Foucault's critical project with Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach to language. On the other hand, I will identify potential political applications of Wittgenstein's concepts by considering them in the context of Foucault's politically engaged critique.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first part, I will analyze the concept of philosophy as a practical critique. I will explore three axes that reveal the complementary and shared aspects of Wittgenstein's and Foucault's projects: their relationship to Kantian critique, their method of analyzing the singularity of events or particular cases, and their transformative orientation within philosophical critique. In the second part, I will discuss Wittgenstein's idea of language games and Foucault's concept of discourse within the common framework of the publicness of rules and practices, as well as their critique of private and inner sensations. Moving on to the third part, I will reference Wittgenstein's and Foucault's concepts of confession, parrhesia, and autobiography to illustrate how 'confessional subjectivity,' resulting from their approaches, offers an alternative to the Cartesian view of subjectivity. Finally, in the concluding part, I will draw upon Wittgenstein's and Foucault's concepts of practical critique and the publicness of language to challenge the dichotomy between agonistic and deliberative politics. I will also suggest potential applications of this approach for critiquing the classical liberal view of the public/private distinction.

PHILOSOPHY AS 'PRACTICAL CRITIQUE'

The best way to introduce the problem of critique in Foucault and Wittgenstein is to refer to one of the most spectacular philosophical debates of the XX century: a mostly virtual discussion between Habermas and Foucault concerning the understanding of critique, modernity, and power. One of the main objections Habermas had against Foucault's 'genealogical historiography,' raised in *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*,² concerned the

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* [1985] (1987), 248.

problem of its 'relativist self-denial,'³ which was an effect of a 'performative contradiction'⁴ implicit in his critique. According to Habermas, Foucault's critique accuses all knowledge of being inspired by power, and, as a consequence, it contradicts itself because any critique has to refer to normative foundations ultimately. Therefore, Habermas calls Foucault 'cryptonormativist.'⁵ To put it briefly, he suggests that either we accept, to some degree, Kant's philosophical project or we have to fall into irrationalism.⁶

The questions raised by Habermas are, in a way, crucial for understanding today's dilemma of philosophical critique. His objections could be reduced to one fundamental doubt: is it possible to conduct any philosophical critique if we dismiss Kantian claims to the universality of principles of reason and deprive our critique in this way of its rational foundations? I argue that the critical-practical-therapeutic approach, which we can find in Foucault and Wittgenstein, offers a positive answer to this question and, in a way, avoids 'Habermas' blackmail.'

Foucault introduces the concept of 'practical critique' (*critique pratique*) in his reflection on the Enlightenment and modernity. As he presents it, he aims to transform the Kantian negative task of critique (searching for the limits of reason) into the positive task of transgressing concrete limitations that currently constrain our thoughts and actions by exposing their contingency.⁷ As he announces, he substitutes 'the analysis of rarity for the search for totalities, the description of relations of exteriority for the theme of the transcendental foundation.'⁸ Foucault's method weakens the transcendental moment by taking into account the inevitable historicity of events and introduces practice as its essential point of reference and object of the study of discourse.⁹

This point is well elaborated in Foucault's methodological manifesto, *Archeology of Knowledge*, where he refers to such concepts as 'positivity,' 'historical a priori,' or 'the archive,' describing the primary unit of discourse – *l'énoncé*. This is an openly Kantian moment in his work, but most of all it is Bachelardian. In the spirit of Bachelard and Canguilhem, for Foucault the *a priori* in discourse refers not so much to the condition of validity of judgements, as in Kant, but rather to the condition of 'reality for statements.'¹⁰ Bachelard believed that the highest manifestation of human rationality is science, and studying scientific concepts is the best way to understand what rationality is. In Bachelard, human rationality has a historical character (because the scientific concepts are historical – they are constructed by the scientist), and our rationality is not a uniform and monolithic object, that is, it is not universal. His conception rejected the possibility of looking at the history of science from the perspective of cosmic time (so, simply speaking,

³ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 281.

⁴ *The Philosophical Discourse*, 281.

⁵ *The Philosophical Discourse*, 202.

⁶ We could call this 'Habermas' blackmail,' a contemporary version of 'the blackmail of Enlightenment,' see Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" [1983], in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (2007), 109.

⁷ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 113.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* [1971] (2002), 141 (later cited as *AK*).

⁹ Amy Allen, "Foucault and Enlightenment," (2003).

¹⁰ *AK*, 143.

he rejected objectivism in history) and put stress on historical discontinuities, 'breaks,' 'errors,' and 'obstacles' in the development of scientific disciplines, which could not be viewed as a cumulative and linear progress towards truth.¹¹

Foucault deems that the *a priori* of actual statements could be found within the 'archive,' constituting 'a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function.'¹² Importantly, besides the purely linguistic rules behind the production of statements, Foucault also emphasized the role of non-discursive (economic, political, institutional) practices¹³ in constituting discursive formations. Foucault labeled such practices as 'extradiscursive dependencies.'¹⁴ Therefore, the archive is not transcendental, unlike in the Kantian model, but historical and temporal.

This weakening of the transcendental moment through historically situated practical critique is directly addressed by Foucault's concept of 'eventualization'¹⁵ (*événementialisation*), introduced in his lecture for the French Philosophical Association in 1978, "What is Critique?," and developed in a couple of interviews. The concept represents a recurring motif throughout Foucault's work, reflecting his philosophical grounding in the epistemological history influenced by Canguilhem, as well as his view of history as a discontinuous process marked by shifts and breaks. In "What is Critique?," against the *Annales* historians, Foucault indicates a need to return to a focus on the 'singularity' of events with the aim of breaching the self-evidence of our practices.¹⁶ This is to be done by 'rediscovering connections' which can be identified between 'mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge.'¹⁷ Foucault opposes eventualization to what he calls 'investigation into the legitimacy of historical modes of knowing' based on value judgments and truth-reference, which he ascribes to Kant, Dilthey, and Habermas.¹⁸ Instead, Foucault offers a 'systematic reduction of value' (he calls it a nihilistic approach)¹⁹ in his eventualization procedure and proposes a 'polyhedron of intelligibility,'²⁰ which draws on analyzing the existent practices according to multiple processes constituting them. In other words, eventualization is to expose how it came to be that some practices are recognized as accepted or true, taking into account the operation of coercion mechanisms.

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind: A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge* [1938] (2002).

¹² AK, 131.

¹³ AK, 68.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "History, Discourse, Discontinuity" [1968], in *Foucault Live: (Interviews, 1961-1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (1996), 38.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" [1990], in *The Politics of Truth*, 59; Michel Foucault, "Impossible Prison," [1980] in *Foucault Live*, 277.

¹⁶ Foucault, "Impossible Prison," 277.

¹⁷ Foucault, "What is Critique?," 59.

¹⁸ "What is Critique?," 58.

¹⁹ "What is Critique?," 60.

²⁰ "Impossible," 278.

However, another aspect of Foucault's practical critique renders it practical in a more direct sense. From his early writings onward, Foucault openly expressed skepticism toward the traditional notion of theory as a universal foundation to be applied in practice. In an interview with Deleuze, he concurred with Deleuze's perspective that '...theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice. But it is local and regional, as you said, and not totalizing.'²¹ From this viewpoint, he also perceives the role of the intellectual, who must engage in their 'specific' domain (such as the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, etc.) and refrain from making prophetic pronouncements of universal truths about humanity.²² This stance, however, does not imply that Foucault rejects all emancipatory discourse. Clearly, he departs from the Marxist notion of liberation as a process applicable to all of humanity or its essence (*Gattungswesen*). Still, he takes the political engagement of intellectuals in bringing about 'concrete freedom' or 'possible transformation'²³ very seriously. Examples of this kind of activity can be found in works like *Discipline and Punish* or *History of Sexuality*, where he actively engages in the practice of dispelling illusions regarding our understanding of power, particularly the traditional notions of 'juridical monarchy' or 'sovereignty.'²⁴ In political theory, 'cutting off the head of the king' means making us aware of forms of power that are not revealed by these conventional views and that can intensify relations of domination. By emphasizing the historicity of 'coercion mechanisms' (or simply power) in relation to our knowledge and practices, Foucault underscores the transformative moment of practical critique. Recognizing contingency in what has been accepted and presented to us as necessary and inevitable allows us to see how the limits on our thought and action have been produced in specific historical moments. This also highlights the contingency of our practices and the possibility of change. Foucault's eventualization is to lead to 'desubjugation'²⁵ or 'the opening up of the space of freedom'²⁶ by pointing at possibilities of thinking, acting, or governing in a different way.

I will now present the themes related to critique and practice in Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophy, drawing connections to the areas I discussed within Foucault's concept of practical critique. These areas include the relationship to Kantian critique, analysis of the singularity of events, and challenging their necessity, and the transformative moment.

Many interpretations of Wittgenstein's philosophy note affinities with the Kantian project and directly ascribe a kind of transcendentalism to Wittgenstein's philosophy.²⁷

²¹ Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power" [1972], in *Foucault Live*, 75.

²² Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" [1977], in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (1980), 126-128.

²³ Michel Foucault, "Critical Theory/Intellectual History" [1983], in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (1990), 36.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1* [1978] (1978), 88-89.

²⁵ "What is Critique?," 47.

²⁶ Foucault, "Critical Theory," 36.

²⁷ Hannah Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (1972); Eric Stenius, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus; a Critical Exposition of Its Main Lines of Thought* (1960).

The transcendental interpretation of the *Tractatus* as the search for the conditions of possibility of the meaningful use of language seems to be an unquestioned interpretation of Wittgenstein's early philosophy. However, ascribing Kantian provenance to his later philosophy seems to be less obvious since the limits of sense are set there not by logic but by grammar. In Wittgenstein, the relation between grammar and language is identical to the relation between the description of a game (rules) and the game itself.²⁸ Consequently, the command of a language does not consist in being able to explain its grammatical rules but, rather, in speaking the language itself, i.e., in being able to communicate with others. In this approach, the rules of the game or grammar are appropriate to the game or grammar itself and serve no purpose outside of the game or language. Therefore, the rules of grammar, like the rules of any game, are both arbitrary and autonomous. Grammar is a convention grounded in the actual practice of using words. This insight is supported by Wittgenstein's claim that 'grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary.'²⁹

Indeed Kant and Wittgenstein (and Foucault as well) shared an interest in curbing the metaphysical pretensions of philosophy and dispelling some illusions of reason, but if we accept that grammar is a convention grounded in the actual practice of using words, an autonomous and arbitrary system, then it would be difficult to defend the existence of synthetic *a priori* truths as true descriptions of the world.³⁰ According to Wittgenstein, 'language must speak for itself,'³¹ and this excludes any universal claims and final (external) justifications of our knowledge. This 'water-downing' of transcendental arguments,³² similarly as in Foucault, both indicates the importance of some Kantian themes in Wittgenstein and how his work transgresses the Kantian project.

Wittgenstein describes the philosophers' tendency to refer to universal claims and final justifications as a 'craving for generality'³³ and associates it with philosophers' tendency to imitate the scientific method, which for him constitutes one of the main sources of philosophical puzzlements. For Wittgenstein, philosophical problems are not empirical ones but rather conceptual confusions generated by misunderstandings concerning our use of language, which can be solved through gaining insights into the workings of our language. Therefore, Wittgenstein assumes an anti-theoretical stance, replacing the search for scientific explanations with the search for understanding, which consists in 'seeing

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar* (1974), 60.

²⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, 184.

³⁰ P. M. S Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Comparisons and Context* (2013), 49.

³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Collected Works of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Philosophical Grammar* (1998), 40, 63.

³² Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Comparisons*, 53.

³³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations"* (1969), 18 (later cited as *BBB*).

connections'³⁴ and studying 'particular cases.'³⁵ He calls this philosophical attitude the 'perspicuous representation'³⁶ of our grammar.

Wittgenstein contends that the effective use of language requires clarity because of our persistent inclination to misconstrue and distort language due to our illusions, desires, superstitions, or disquietudes.³⁷ This tendency of human misguidance through language becomes most conspicuous in the connection between language and mental 'pictures,' which forcefully intrude upon our thoughts and imaginations.³⁸ In his later writings, particularly in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein frequently employs the notion of the 'world picture' (*Weltbild*),³⁹ borrowed from Spengler, as a 'system,' akin to the rules of games, which molds our perceptions and way of speaking about the world.⁴⁰ According to Wittgenstein, this *Weltbild* is not the result of deliberate or rational contemplation; rather, it closely resembles the concept of a language game and the form of life. It serves as an 'inherited background,'⁴¹ 'a framework through which we look at [things]','⁴² and has the capacity to captivate our thoughts and actions.⁴³ All these mental images and world pictures shape our conceptual framework, guiding us to perceive and envision the world in a predetermined manner, deeming it as natural and indispensable.

Wittgenstein associates the potential for liberation from the picture captivity with the perspicuous representation of our grammar. The capacity to perceive other connections in the picture enables us to see things differently and to free ourselves from the pictures that captivate our thoughts and actions. 'The clarification of our language's grammar is emancipating, enhancing our personal freedom of thought...'⁴⁴ Therefore, Wittgenstein conceives of philosophy not as a formulation of statements or a theory but as an activity, a practice, with the goal of bringing clarity to our grammar. The condition of freedom, understood as the capacity to control one's actions, is the understanding of the meaning of one's actions. This can only be achieved through the clarity in one's conceptual framework.⁴⁵ Consequently, this philosophical exploration of concepts is inherently practical, serving as a transformative self-examination that enables us to change our perspective and, by doing so, expand our ability to govern our own thoughts and actions.⁴⁶ In essence, it broadens our freedom.

³⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [1953] (1968), §122 (later cited as *PI*).

³⁵ *BBB*, 17.

³⁶ *PI*, §122.

³⁷ *PI*, §109-111.

³⁸ *PI*, 178.

³⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (1969), §§93-96, §167 (later cited as *OC*).

⁴⁰ Hans Sluga, *Wittgenstein* (2011), 69.

⁴¹ *OC*, §94.

⁴² *PI*, §114.

⁴³ *PI*, §115.

⁴⁴ Gordon Baker, *Wittgenstein's Method* (2011), 196.

⁴⁵ Thomas Wallgren, "Radical Enlightenment Optimism: Socrates and Wittgenstein," in *Wittgenstein and Plato*, ed. Luigi Perissinotto and Begoña Ramón Cámara (2013).

⁴⁶ David Owen, "Genealogy as Perspicuous Presentation," in *The Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy*, ed. Cressida J. Heyes (2007).

PUBLIC LANGUAGE

There are at least three clear affinities between Foucault's and Wittgenstein's views on language. Both share their interest in language or discourse as central points of reference for their philosophical methods. Consequently, they both pay much attention to the connection between language and practice and the idea of the publicness of language.

Ian Hacking situates Foucault and Wittgenstein in a relatively broad tradition of philosophers who consider language to be central for philosophical reflection and essentially public. Hacking contends that 'language went public' at the time of Hamann, who believed 'that there is no such thing as a person except what is constituted in a social setting, characterized by a unique historical language. Language is essentially public and shared; it is prior to the individuation of one's self...'⁴⁷ The idea of the publicness of language is, first of all, oriented against the representationalist view of language, which considers words essentially as 'signs for ideas' serving to help the recollection of previous thoughts (as in Hobbes, for example). The conception of language as public excludes the possibility of strictly personal language as a language of monological subjectivities reflecting private experiences or thoughts. In this perspective, language becomes a public space, 'the space of things which are objects for us together,'⁴⁸ enabling not only the expression but also the constitution of phenomena central to human life.

Many interpreters recognize Foucault as one of the architects of 'discourse theory' or 'discourse analysis.'⁴⁹ His nominalist account of discourse is aimed, as he puts it, to avoid, on the one hand, the structuralist idea of language as a closed structure or system independent of parole;⁵⁰ and, on the other hand, the hermeneutic tendency of searching for hidden and fixed meaning.⁵¹ Of course, Foucault's relationship both with structuralism and hermeneutics (including phenomenology as well) was much more complex than that which can be inferred from his explicit statements. His early writings, with *The Order of Things* as a climax, shared many important characteristics with structuralism. However, starting from the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault began clearly to distance himself from the idea of fixed structures underlying language and knowledge. According to Foucault, discourse is basically a *practice* that forms the objects that are being spoken about.⁵² It consists of actual statements ('discursive events') in their multiplicity, dispersion, and natural regularity, which an archaeologist can only capture.

In order to emphasize this 'positive'⁵³ nature of discourse, Foucault introduces the concept of 'discursive practices,' understood as historically and culturally specific sets of rules organizing and producing different forms of knowledge. Discursive practices

⁴⁷ Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (2002), 135-136.

⁴⁸ Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (1985), 264.

⁴⁹ Diane Macdonell, *Theories of Discourse: an Introduction* (1986); David Howarth, *Discourse* (2000); N. Akerstrom Andersen, *Discursive Analytical Strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann* (2003).

⁵⁰ See AK, 219-221; "Critical Theory," 22-23.

⁵¹ AK, 122-124.

⁵² AK, 49.

⁵³ AK, 141.

constitute an 'archive,' which could be compared to the grammar of a language in Wittgenstein, which, as a set of rules constituted by the practices of using language, allows certain statements to be made. The archive determines which statement could 'appear' and which would be excluded as erroneous; it is a condition of existence for actual statements. As mentioned earlier, it is important to note that Foucault insists on the existence of extra-discursive practices that include 'institutions, political events, economic practices and processes,'⁵⁴ and which also have their share in constituting an archive.

The key concept here is the concept of practice, which we can define as 'regularity or regularities of behavior, usually goal-directed, that are socially normatively governed.'⁵⁵ According to Foucault, the rules of which practices are composed must necessarily have a public, regular, and linguistic character. This means that individual practices and rules require the existence of other practices and rules that make up a community. There is no such thing as private practice. The role of subjectivity or individuals in discursive practices in archeology is reduced to 'subject positions' understood as spaces from which one speaks and observes in a discursive formation, which may be filled in certain conditions by various individuals or other subjects. These spaces are defined by specific institutional settings, legal regulations, professional hierarchies and other relations.⁵⁶ The archive's functioning appears here as a social sanction of the publicity of statements or 'serious speech acts.'⁵⁷

The discussion of the connection between language and practice and on the publicness of language are also leading themes of Wittgenstein's reflection. One of the core motives of his philosophy, both early and late, is a conviction expressed in the *Tractatus* that 'All philosophy is "critique of language."' ⁵⁸ This stance is also expressed in Wittgenstein's motto of philosophical therapy, which he defines as an activity aimed at bringing language back from a metaphysical to its everyday use.⁵⁹ The 'practice turn'⁶⁰ in Wittgenstein's later work is most of all based on the idea that it is a practice that determines the form of our language and thought. Describing a 'language game' as a 'form of life,' a practice related to the use of words,⁶¹ Wittgenstein rejected his own earlier objectivist or reifying view of language, whereby he had claimed that words have their fixed meaning situated outside of language ('objects' connected to 'propositions' through common 'logical form'). The reference to the form of life indicates that language games

⁵⁴ AK, 68.

⁵⁵ Todd May, *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze* (1997), 52; Mark Olssen, "Wittgenstein and Foucault: The Limits and Possibilities of Constructivism," in *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education: Pedagogical Investigations*, ed. Michael Peters and Jeff Stickney (2017), 312.

⁵⁶ AK, 53-58.

⁵⁷ Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982), 48.

⁵⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921] (1992), 4.0031.

⁵⁹ PI, §116.

⁶⁰ Kjell S. Johannessen, "The Concept of Practice in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" (1988).

⁶¹ PI, §23.

are 'interwoven' with non-linguistic activities and that this non-linguistic, social or cultural⁶² context is essential to understanding our language.

The idea of the publicness of language is a consequence of Wittgenstein's 'anthropological' view of language as a shared human activity analogous to a game and his anti-Cartesian, communal view of subjectivity. Wittgenstein's view underscores its public and communal nature, its rule-governed character, and the importance of normative aspects and shared customs in the practice of language.⁶³

Wittgenstein's concept of 'language game' uses the analogy to a game to illuminate that language, like a game, has rules that govern its use, and to use it correctly, language users must adhere to rules to engage in meaningful communication. He distinguishes between mere regular behavior and 'rule-following,' which is not just a matter of behaving in a certain way; it is a practice that must be learned and involves a 'commitment' to the rule.⁶⁴ This introduces a normative aspect to rule-following⁶⁵ and requires establishing criteria for the correctness of behavior. For some expression or behavior to be recognized as rule-following, it must have a communal context, that is, there must be someone who will be able to recognize it as conforming to the rule or failing to conform to it. Therefore, to be able to apply the rules, follow rules, and obey them, we need 'the common behavior of mankind,'⁶⁶ exemplified by 'customs (uses, institutions).'⁶⁷

The community-oriented conclusions of Wittgenstein's considerations on rule-following are also supported by his reflection on private sensations, which is called the 'private language argument.' Wittgenstein questions the idea that we can have a truly private language in which words refer to our inner, subjective experiences (such as pain). He argues that if a language cannot be understood by others, it cannot function as a language at all. Language, he suggests, is inherently public and relies on shared conventions and practices. When I say, 'I am in pain,' I am not making a statement based on my behavior; I am not describing anything, but I am expressing my experience. Similarly, when attributing pain to someone else based on their behavior, one is not describing their internal state but expressing one's interpretation of their condition.⁶⁸ If we understand private language as one in which words refer to what can only be known to the person speaking and as such cannot be understood by another person,⁶⁹ then we have to admit that this kind of language is not a rule-governed language; in fact, it is not a language at all. Hence, language is essentially a 'system of communication' rather than

⁶² *BBB*, 134.

⁶³ *PI*, §§207-208.

⁶⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures, Cambridge 1930–1932, from the notes of John King and Desmond Lee* (1980), 40.

⁶⁵ Sluga, *Wittgenstein*, 115.

⁶⁶ *PI*, §206.

⁶⁷ *PI*, §199.

⁶⁸ Sluga, *Wittgenstein*, 73. Cf. *PI*, 178.

⁶⁹ *PI*, §243.

one of representation,⁷⁰ and an activity that establishes a public space where we constitute and express ourselves and phenomena constitutive of human forms of life.⁷¹

In both conceptions, language is understood as diverse and multiple practices established through and in accordance with rules, which are understood as a range of interactional and necessarily public norms. Meaning is generated within the context of a language game in Wittgenstein, and discourse in Foucault. However, while Wittgenstein emphasizes that rules are shaped through the everyday use of language, he is not concerned with potential distortions of these rules caused by extra-linguistic mechanisms of coercion. In this context, Foucault's reflection on discursive exclusions can be understood as a critical practical complement to Wittgenstein's private language argument. Foucault's research into rules aims to demonstrate how they are produced through the workings of power and practices of exclusion. He draws attention to the various forms of discursive exclusions, such as prohibition, division, rejection, or the establishment of true/false oppositions.⁷² In this sense, Foucault illustrates how discourse is established by excluding certain practices from the realm of what is considered public. In this context, 'public' refers to that which is sanctioned as scholarly, rational, socially/economically useful, true, and so on. Foucault's great achievement is his interest in the other side of discourse or the public, themes excluded by our rational and civilized Western thought. Although Wittgenstein is also interested in the limits of sense established either by logic or later by grammar and everyday use, he is not quite interested in going beyond those limits, or, to put it differently, he is not interested in asking about the processes of domination present in our everyday language.

CONFESSIONAL SUBJECTIVITY

Wittgenstein's and Foucault's reflections on the publicness of language, rules, and practice have significant implications for the understanding of subjectivity and reflection on the self, which are central topics of modern philosophy. Both philosophers challenge the traditional Cartesian 'picture' of subjectivity and the belief that introspection is the primary source of knowledge, providing the mind with privileged, direct access to its own thoughts and experiences. In this section, I will focus on interconnected themes that specify fertile ground for introducing the concept of 'confessional subjectivity' in Wittgenstein and Foucault. I will draw upon the concepts of 'confession' (found both in Wittgenstein and Foucault), 'parrhesia' (elaborated by Foucault), and 'autobiography' (explored by Wittgenstein). These concepts will be used to propose an 'aspectival change' in the view of subjectivity. This shift is based on recognizing the transformative, public, and self-formative aspects inherent in human forms of life.

⁷⁰ BBB, 81.

⁷¹ Taylor, *Human Agency*, 264.

⁷² Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse" [1971], in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (1981).

The issue of subjectivity has been one of the central themes in Foucault's interests since his early writings. Even in *Madness and Civilization*, where he traces the history of madness and its relationship with reason, he believed that the subject is not a fixed, essential, or transcendental entity but rather a historically contingent construct that can be de-centered and transformed by historical events and shifts in discourse. In this context, Foucault views Descartes as one of the architects of the modern exclusion of madness from the realm of reason.⁷³ His early writings were focused on tracing 'techniques of objectification,' the processes through which various aspects of human experience and existence are transformed into objects of knowledge within a given historical, cultural, and political context. We can see this approach in *The Order of Things*, where objectifications of Man in language, life, and work emerge, as well as in his later works, such as those dealing with prisoners or the subject of sexuality. Foucault considers subjectivity in the close relationship with power and knowledge, encapsulated in his concept of 'power-knowledge.'⁷⁴ Subjectivity plays a dual role in this framework— it is both a product of historical power relations and the primary agent through which power accesses knowledge and exercises control over the population. This dynamic signifies a mutual exchange and support between power and knowledge rather than a one-way relationship.

More or less since *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault became more interested in expanding his studies of subjectivity on techniques of subjectification rather than objectification, or 'technologies of the self,' which

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁷⁵

Foucault reveals a 'prehistory' that underlies contemporary 'technologies of the self' in early Christianity. In this context, he also identifies the emergence of desire as a subject and the production of elements that define today's apparatus of sexuality. His primary focus lies on the practice of confession, which he describes as 'one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth'⁷⁶ and a central element of *scientia sexualis*. Since the Middle Ages, 'Western man has become a confessing animal,'⁷⁷ driven by religious obligations to introspect, gain insight into one's inner workings, acknowledge one's shortcomings, identify temptations, and understand desires. It was a shared duty for everyone to open up about these aspects, whether to God or within their community,

⁷³ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* [1961] (1988), 199.

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (1995), 27-28.

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self" [1982], in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (1988), 18.

⁷⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

⁷⁷ *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

thereby engaging in public or private self-examination and confession,⁷⁸ which could take spoken or written forms ('self writing'⁷⁹: diaries, letters, self-narratives, autobiographies, etc.).⁸⁰ However, confession was for Foucault not only a means of self-examination but also a way of constituting oneself. By knowing oneself, examining oneself, and truly expressing one's inner reality, one becomes a subject for oneself.⁸¹

The concept of confession, crucial according to Foucault for understanding our 'confessing societies,' with psychoanalysis as one of our dominating forms of life, was supplemented, or rather replaced, by the concept of parrhesia. This concept was introduced and elaborated upon in several late lectures, especially at the Collège de France and UC Berkeley in 1983. This 'shift'⁸² in Foucault's late thought was related to his growing interest in the political and critical dimensions of telling truth to power. The focus on parrhesia brings him back to ancient Greece and Rome, where he finds the first formulations of this political technique in Euripides or Plato. 'Parrhesia' is a form of free and fearless speech, telling the truth to the public, which is based on a certain relationship between the speaker and what they say,⁸³ and involves the risk related to telling the truth in public.⁸⁴ Foucault underscores the crucial role of parrhesia in democracy. On the one hand, it serves as an instrument of democratic vigilance, functioning as a counterbalance to potential authoritarian tendencies, governmental policies, or societal norms challenging the foundations of democratic governance. On the other hand, following Plato, we should distinguish 'good' parrhesia from 'bad' parrhesia; the latter consisting in 'saying anything one has in mind, without any distinction, without taking care of what he says,' or other, more dangerous forms of public speaking, such as flattery or demagoguery,⁸⁵ which could be dangerous to democracy itself. However, Foucault sees in parrhesia a counter-hegemonic practice which is able to subvert relations of domination and transform individuals or collectives in order to achieve a 'concrete freedom.'

In contrast to Foucault, Wittgenstein did not formulate any positive notion of subjectivity. His perspective on this matter emanated from his reflection on language. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein's stance, characterized by its anti-Cartesian and anti-objectivist tenets, conceives of the human subject as related to a language game and as a manifestation of a form of life, thereby exhibiting noteworthy parallels with Foucault's view of subjectivity. After *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was openly skeptical towards the Cartesian view of subjectivity characterized by a self-transparent, autonomous, and

⁷⁸ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 40.

⁷⁹ Michel Foucault, "Self Writing" [1983], in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997).

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress" [1983], in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 277; Bob Plant, "The Confessing Animal in Foucault and Wittgenstein," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34:4 (2006).

⁸¹ Nicolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (1990), 240.

⁸² Philippe Büttgen, "Foucault's Concept of Confession," *Foucault Studies* 29 (2021), 8.

⁸³ Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth and Parrhesia*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud, Daniele Lorenzini, and Nancy Luxon (2019), 40.

⁸⁴ Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*, 42.

⁸⁵ *Discourse and Truth*, 41, 113.

substantive self. He maintained that ‘there is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas.’⁸⁶ This critical standpoint regarding Cartesian philosophy persisted throughout his later writings after the ‘practice’ or ‘anthropological’ turn. According to Wittgenstein, ‘I’ does not refer to some immaterial, bodiless entity which has a ‘seat in our body.’⁸⁷ In *Philosophical Investigations*, he explicitly articulated this critique, asserting that “‘I’ does not designate a person, “‘here’” does not denote a place, and “‘this’” is not a proper name.’⁸⁸ Wittgenstein’s anti-Cartesian stance is further reinforced through his reflection on private language and rule-following, wherein he disavows the notion of a solitary, monological subject endowed with unmediated access to its inner sensations and experiences and capable of articulating them in a personal linguistic idiom. For Wittgenstein, the ‘I’ is not an ‘object’ and cannot be a constituent of the world at all.⁸⁹

In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein asserts that ‘really one should write philosophy only as one writes a poem.’⁹⁰ This declaration, along with numerous other reflections on literature and art in Wittgenstein’s oeuvre, has prompted questions within Wittgenstein scholarship regarding the interplay between his style and his philosophy or method. Authors such as Cavell⁹¹ or Pichler⁹² claim that style and philosophy in Wittgenstein are intimately related and draw attention to the form of Wittgenstein’s writings as a prerequisite for understanding his philosophy. In this context, a connection emerges between Wittgenstein’s literary style and his understanding of subjectivity, particularly his form of life as a philosopher:

Work on philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)⁹³

Wittgenstein’s writing style could be characterized as ‘confessional.’ It is closely linked to his philosophical way of life, which he regarded as a form of self-constitution or ‘writing the self.’⁹⁴ He alludes to confession in both a personal sense and in terms of its language game. Throughout his lifetime, he diligently maintained notebooks and diaries, where philosophical contemplations were frequently interwoven with personal remarks and reflections on his own life. The motif of confession accompanied him in difficult moments in life, for example, when he decided to confess his mistakes to his closest friends and later to the family or when he appeared in Otterthal in 1936 to apologize personally to

⁸⁶ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.631.

⁸⁷ *BBB*, 69.

⁸⁸ *PI*, §410; Hans Sluga, “‘Whose house is that?’ Wittgenstein on the self,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. Hans Sluga and David Stern (2018), 321.

⁸⁹ Sluga, “‘Whose house is that?’,” 328.

⁹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1980), 28.

⁹¹ Stanley Cavell, “The Investigations’ Everyday Aesthetics of Itself,” in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. J. Gibson and W. Huemer (2004).

⁹² Alois Pichler, *Style, Method and Philosophy in Wittgenstein* (2023).

⁹³ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 24.

⁹⁴ Michael Peters, “Writing the Self: Wittgenstein, Confession and Pedagogy,” (2000), 354.

children he had hurt.⁹⁵ He was obviously influenced by the confessional style of Augustine and Tolstoy. As Monk notes, Wittgenstein begins the *Investigations* with a quote from Augustine's *Confessions* not only to illustrate primitive language learning but also because 'for Wittgenstein, all philosophy, in so far as it is pursued honestly and decently, begins with a confession.'⁹⁶

One of the modes of confessional writing considered by Wittgenstein was autobiography. In fact, the idea of organizing *Philosophical Investigations* as an 'album' or 'landscape'⁹⁷ follows the format of 'philosophical autobiography.'⁹⁸ However, Wittgenstein's view of autobiography was quite far from the traditional understanding of confession or autobiography, as we find, for example, in Rousseau, who declares, 'I cannot deceive myself about what I have felt.'⁹⁹ Wittgenstein would respond: 'Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving yourself.'¹⁰⁰ He did not believe that confession could be a straightforward means of self-expression and self-revelation and was quite skeptical about the possibility of the true expression of one's own inner thoughts and experiences.¹⁰¹ Instead, he highlights the intricate relationship between the language game and the representation of personal experiences:

The criteria for the truth of the *confession* that I thought such-and-such are not the criteria for a true *description* of a process. And the importance of the true confession does not reside in its being a correct and certain report of a process. It resides rather in the special consequences which can be drawn from a confession whose truth is guaranteed by the special criteria of *truthfulness*.¹⁰²

Both for Wittgenstein and Foucault, telling the truth within confession deviates from the classical understanding of truth as correspondence. According to Foucault, confession is a site where truth is produced, shaped, and controlled. The truth emanating from confession is not objective or absolute; instead, it is contingent upon the institutional and political dynamics within which it unfolds. Similarly, in Wittgenstein's perspective, understanding confession involves participating in a distinct language game specific to confession itself, where the criteria for truth may differ from those found in other language games. While Wittgenstein remains aloof from any political engagement, Foucault convincingly illustrates how confession and parrhesia become a central element of the democratic form of life. For both philosophers, confession serves as a means of subjectivity formation, which I refer to as 'confessional subjectivity'—in Wittgenstein as a

⁹⁵ Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1990), 367-372.

⁹⁶ Monk, *Ludwig*, 366.

⁹⁷ *PI*, viii.

⁹⁸ Pichler, *Style*, 47.

⁹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions: And, Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes* [1782] (1995), 234.

¹⁰⁰ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 39.

¹⁰¹ *PI*, 221.

¹⁰² *PI*, 222.

philosophical way of life related to the ‘contextualization of self-writing,’¹⁰³ and in Foucault as ‘technology of the self’.

CONCLUSION: PRACTICAL CRITIQUE AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

I will now explore some implications of Wittgenstein’s and Foucault’s practical critiques for the understanding of democratic politics today. Following Wittgenstein and Foucault, I aim to situate my reflection on democratic politics within the context of a ‘particular case’ of the political developments in East/Central Europe. This region celebrated the end of Soviet-sponsored state totalitarianism and the implementation of a new political liberal-democratic order thirty years ago. These events were heralded as a grand victory of the free democratic world and, for some, were equal to the end of politics as such. Today, however, many countries in the region are governed by autocratic populist leaders who mobilize nationalist sentiments through the production of external and internal enemies, oligarchical arrangements, and public corruption. This way of corrupting democratic politics by ostensibly building on the democratic premise of the majority rule while rejecting the principle of the rule of law was recently referred to by Agnes Heller in the context of Hungary as a ‘new tyranny.’¹⁰⁴ However, its reach is wider, and other European and non-European countries seem to be following suit. Therefore, I propose that the current situation in Central Europe serves as an important ‘laboratory of populism,’ with developments in the region acting as a significant indicator for the Western world in the near future. I argue that Foucault’s and Wittgenstein’s practical critiques could be particularly fertile in the current evident crisis of the democratic project; a crisis which concerns not only actual democratic politics but also democratic theory itself.

The architecture of practical critique is built on three pillars: the understanding of philosophy and language as critical practice, the publicness of language, and the confessional subjectivity. I argue that all these pillars support democratic politics more than any other form of politics. The practical approach in democratic theory critically addresses the over-theorized reflections on democracy that not only deepen the gap between democratic theory and practice but also fail to explain the divergence between the needs and demands of the people, the democratic subject, and the aims and interests of current political representation and institutions. Populist leaders in Central Europe have correctly identified the shortcomings of existing democratic theory and practice, proposing simple solutions that replace the elitist language of liberal theory with simplistic oppositions, such as those between corrupt elites and ‘ordinary’ people. This populist solution has activated and radicalized the conflictual potential of politics, capturing the emotions and imagination of the people. However, the accurate diagnosis has ultimately been translated into an inherently anti-democratic strategy that poses a

¹⁰³ Bela Szabados, “Autobiography after Wittgenstein,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1992), 50, 1, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Agnes Heller, “Hungary: How Liberty Can be Lost,” *Social Research* 86:1 (2019).

threat to liberal democracy itself, as it replaces the principles of the rule of law, human rights, and protection of minorities with the simplistic concept of majority rule, paving the way for authoritarianism and the elimination of plurality and diversity.

The practical critical approach, grounded in the concepts of practice, the centrality of language, and its public nature, illuminates a deeply democratic and critical potential within Foucault's discourse and Wittgenstein's language games. By highlighting the communal and participatory nature of language—where understanding and meaning are collectively constructed rather than imposed by any single authority—and emphasizing the inherent multiplicity and diversity of language, both conceptions pave the way for a more democratic interpretation of politics and, consequently, for more democratic politics itself. I propose two crucial areas where the interplay between Wittgenstein's emphasis on everyday language and Foucault's focus on domination and exclusion in practical critique reveals its democratic potential. First, if we agree, as I believe most democratic theorists do today, that language is an essential element in understanding democratic politics, then practical critique, which brings to the fore the key role of our everyday language in politics, becomes essential for re-engaging in dialogue with fellow citizens within the realm of democratic theory. This approach departs from the universalistic claims of post-Kantian political theory and philosophy and calls for in-depth anthropological and dialogical research into the understanding of ordinary language and practices within current democratic forms of life. Second, maintaining constant vigilance against and exposing any exclusionary practices, including the appropriation (or privatization) of language and the public sphere by populist tyrannical states, is crucial for reclaiming the public sphere as a cornerstone of democratic politics. The ability to resist domination, enabled by making the oppressive practices or 'mechanisms of coercion' visible, along with the democratic potential inherent in citizens' efforts to 'deprivatize the public' by constant 'work on themselves,' represent deeply democratic responses to the current anti-democratic tendencies in Central Europe's politics. I will explain these two claims by referring to the debate on the language of democratic theory and the possible extension of the understanding of the public.

Accepting the anti-foundational and anti-theoretical stance of practical critique allows us to see 'new connections' in the mainstream picture of democratic theory appropriated by a dispute between deliberative and agonistic views of democracy. On the one hand, the deliberative ideal of achieving rational agreement among free and equal participants in the conversation of humanity, which legitimizes norms and rules for our social and political coexistence, is hardly defensible in a time when politics has become impassioned, aggressive, and unpredictable, disregarding all the rules and expectations that have governed liberal democracies since the 1970s. On the other hand, liberal and leftist politics today clearly struggle to mobilize the emotions of people with a positive vision of a better future built upon principles of equality and social justice. With remarkable success, the tools of political strategy proposed by agonistic theorists have been appropriated by populist leaders and turned back against liberal democracies. The left-populist solution

recently advocated by Mouffe,¹⁰⁵ which alludes to the ‘horseshoe theory’ and aims to regain popular support from the radical right, could, if put into practice without a clear and positive agenda, likely devolve into a competition with the radical right involving public corruption and the manipulation of people’s emotions. This could lead to the emergence of a new form of populism that poses a threat to liberal democracies.

If we look at this debate from the perspective of Wittgenstein’s and Foucault’s views of language as mutually complementary, we can gain important insights into the functioning of language and discourse in democratic politics which are overlooked by both deliberative and agonistic perspectives. Foucault’s concept of discourse shares one crucial characteristic with Habermas’ discourse ethics: they both view discourse as practice extending beyond ordinary language. Foucault regards statements as ‘serious speech acts’¹⁰⁶ which have undergone some form of institutional testing to qualify as candidates for truth. Habermas similarly perceives practical discourse as a language that transcends the ‘sea of cultural taken-for-grantedness,’¹⁰⁷ necessitating engagement in rational argumentation as a prerequisite for reaching consensus. Both concepts fail in this way to recognize Wittgenstein’s therapeutic lesson regarding the scrutiny of our meanings and concepts in the light of their everyday use. Wittgenstein’s reflections on rules as inherent in our linguistic practices indicate that rules and norms are not instituted top-down through rational engineering but rather emerge as ‘abridgments of practices’¹⁰⁸ rooted in the common form of life. This aspect of discourse is also neglected by proponents of agonistic democracy, who adopt an all-encompassing concept of discourse as the ‘meaningful totality,’¹⁰⁹ thereby blurring the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic practices and veering towards linguistic idealism. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider something that both Wittgenstein and Habermas overlook but which Foucault underscores: comprehending how ‘coercion mechanisms’ embedded within our practices contribute to shaping and regulating our language games. I refer to this problem as ‘the appropriation of the public sphere.’

In the context of a ‘particular case’ (or ‘event’) of Eastern and Central Europe, it is possible to pose a question often ignored in the context of discussions on the public sphere: how is the public sphere possible when the public is systematically appropriated by the populist state and when the dominating ideology negates or obstructs the expression of some identities, rendering them ‘private’ in a sense? Wittgenstein’s and Foucault’s notions of language and discourse suggest two significant points in this context. First, both conceptions suggest an inseparable connection between the public and language. It is a language that allows for the appearance of the space of common things

¹⁰⁵ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (2018).

¹⁰⁶ Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 48.

¹⁰⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “A Reply to my Critics,” in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. John B. Thompson and David Held (1982), 272-273; James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key: Volume 1, Democracy and Civic Freedom* (2008), 47-62.

¹⁰⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), 69.

¹⁰⁹ Ernesto Laclau, “Discourse,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, eds. Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit (1993), 545.

which are accessible to all and whereby we are able to constitute ourselves. Second, as implied in their discussion of confession, the extension of the public into the private does not necessarily entail the rejection of human freedom, as is suggested in classical liberal or neoliberal views (as in Hayek,¹¹⁰ for example). In fact, quite the opposite: our everyday language, the ways in which we 'write ourselves' or publicly convey our thoughts through parrhesia, serves as the arena where our self can be constituted and freedom actualized, provided that we have clarity in our concepts and actions. In this sense, reclaiming publicness is linked to expanding the public onto the private, or 'deprivatization of the public,' a process in which the private, understood as the 'appropriated public,' becomes a linguistic reservoir of democratic identity and autonomy.

This challenges the traditional Habermasian understanding of the public sphere as a unitary space independent of the state and beyond the private, where public consensus is negotiated through free, unconstrained, and rational discussion of the public good.¹¹¹ The multiplicity of language games and forms of life, along with the dispersion and diversity of discursive practices that shape our everyday language and rules that must be observed in order to engage in communication, is reflected in the multiplicity of forms of publicness in which citizens take action. The public sphere that emerges from this view is an open space of discursive multiplicity and diversity where practices of exclusion or oppression can be made visible and challenged or resisted. Since all language is essentially public, it is impossible to conceive of spaces that would be deprived of publicness. The practical critique demonstrates that even extensive appropriation of the public by a populist aggressive state will always produce multiple areas of the private, which will become the reservoir for reclaiming the public in the future, thereby becoming a new impulse for reviving democratic politics.

To conclude, in this paper, I explore the intersections between Michel Foucault's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophies, developing a framework I term 'practical critique' to understand democratic politics. This approach is grounded in the belief that the public nature of language, the critical practice of philosophy, and the notion of confessional subjectivity offer a new lens through which to view democracy. Through my analysis, I argue that embracing the diversity and public aspect of language can rejuvenate democratic engagement, steering us beyond the stalemate between agonistic and deliberative politics towards a richer, more inclusive conception of the public sphere. I emphasize the critical relevance of this combined philosophical perspective in tackling the current challenges facing democracies, especially in light of the rise of populism and authoritarian tendencies. By combining Foucault's and Wittgenstein's insights, I propose a renewed commitment to the core values of democracy, advocating for a re-engagement

¹¹⁰ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), 315.

¹¹¹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1962] (1989); Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* [1992] (1996).

with its foundational tenets through a careful and practical critique of language, power, and subjectivity. This, I believe, holds the promise of restoring democratic discourse and practice at a time when both are sorely tested by the complexities of modern political landscapes.

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