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## The Nostrums of Common Sense

### Abstract

This article provides a Marxist analysis of the concept of 'common sense'. It traces the evolution of this concept – through various philosophers from Aristotle to Thomas Paine – in order to throw light on Gramsci's own radical mobilization of the notion of 'common sense' as a mode of thought, and the role it plays in his broader philo-sophical system of class consciousness and hegemony. The piece seeks to both appreciate the revolutionary aspects of Gramsci's analysis of 'common sense' but also to draw attention to some of its limitations. Building on this, the final part examines the way in which 'common sense' as a concept has been mobilized – contra Gramsci – by the ruling classes of our own epoch; how it becomes a key component in the 'political correctness gone mad' narrative and a way, therefore, of justifying some of the most reactionary initiatives – from the xenophobia which feeds anti-immigrant bigotry to the neoliberal austerity measures which have flayed the living standards of those at the bottom in order to enshrine the wealth of those at the top.

### Keywords

Gramsci, common sense, Marxism, dialectics, political correctness, Enlightenment

## *The Nostrums of Common Sense*

Tony McKenna

It is difficult to escape the notion of “common sense” in today’s political discourse. It is, generally speaking, considered to be a positive quality, and it is something which not only attaches itself to individuals, but also to whole peoples. It can inhere as an aspect of someone you know, a friend or member of the family, but it can also be used to describe the collective character of a nation. As an English man, of a certain age and generation, I am well used to characterizations of my nationality expressed in terms of ‘good common sense’ and that all important ‘stiff-upper lip’.

Images of the dutiful and commonsensical English shopkeeper organizing the books or the stoical and down-to-earth housewife managing the finances of the home have been employed by the media and politicians *ad-infinitum* in order to lend succour to certain political and ideological projects. Think, for example, of Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal mandate to radically reshape the UK economy being framed in terms of a dutiful homemaker trying to balance household bills. As I write, there is an eerie silence in the street outside my window; the Coronavirus crisis has sent people scurrying for cover, and now the majority of us are confined to our homes for the majority of time. A depressing, and at times oppressive situation; but, our media assures us, we will come through this, and why? Because “our national character is all about common sense and buckling down”.<sup>1</sup>

But despite its ubiquity, pinning the notion down is no easy task. As Peter Thomas points out, “common sense” has different lineages in different “linguistic registers and cultural systems” – there is, for example, “no clear correspondence between the Italian and English terms”.<sup>2</sup> For the English, it might be said to imply something more than someone who is simply practical, someone who is good with their hands – good at fixing things etc. And yet, at the

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<sup>1</sup> John Humphrys, “The Crisis : Should the Government Be Listening More to Us?”, YouGov, April 17 2020:

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/04/17/crisis-should-government-be-listening-more-us>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, Chicago, Haymarket Books 2010, p. 16, note 61.

same time it also suggests something less than a coherent and conscious set of ethics; a person, one feels, can be good or bad, and yet still have a great deal of common sense. Do women have more of it than men? Is it something innate or is it something you can learn? Having had my head in the clouds for the last few decades, having concocted one hair-brained scheme after the next, is it possible that – under the right influence or tuition – I might attain a better level of common sense? These questions are not easy to answer. There is an ephemeral quality to the concept; as soon as you seize upon it, it slips away like so much sand through the fingers.

And yet most of us do feel we have a handle on what common sense is. Even if we can't explain it, even if we can't express it as a precisely delineated logical definition. It is something which resembles Justice Porter Stewart's definition of pornography; I might not be able to intelligibly define it, argued the venerable judge, "but I know it when I see it". With this, the judge himself was perhaps engaged in an act of common-sensical thinking. The problem, however, is at once apparent; the definition of pornography is often an elastic one – there are places in the world, for instance, where a woman exposing her leg in a market place would be considered the very height of pornographic obscenity. The concept itself is exposed to the changes and pressures wrought by social circumstance and historical time. And something similar is true in the case of "common sense".

In her *Common Sense: A Political History*, Sophia Rosenfeld finds that the concept first emerged as "a technical term of Aristotelian science".<sup>3</sup> In Aristotle's work, *De Anima*, the great philosopher of antiquity would argue that the "common-sense" is in fact something akin to a sixth-sense; specifically, it is the means by which the other five senses are able to interact. The eyesight allows us to perceive the purple colour of that particular flower, while the nose might allow us to take in the sweetness of its fragrance; but another sense entirely is required in order to distinguish between the 'purple colour' and the 'sweet fragrance' – to be able to experience these sensations as discrete and separate phenomenon while at the same time to allow us to recognize that the purple colour and the pleasant smell are both properties of the same

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<sup>3</sup> Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History*, Cambridge (MA). Harvard University Press 2011, p. 4.

object, i.e. the flower. Not only humans, but also animals must have some means, some faculty, “some one thing”<sup>4</sup> by which sensations might be both distinguished and compared. Common sense then, for Aristotle, is in some way the unifying pre-condition for consciousness itself.

Of course, this is very far from the way we understand it today. In Roman times, however, the concept becomes something more recognizable to us. Whereas Aristotle had treated common sense as a technical facet which allows for the physical possibility of consciousness, the Romans tend to treat it more in the manner of a metaphysical set of beliefs which had a clear ethical component. It was used to describe those beliefs which were in some way formed in the crucible of collective, social life. According to Toni Vogel Carey, the Roman concept of *sensus communis* is to be understood through philosophers and statesman such as Cicero who saw it ‘as the shared, often unspoken values and beliefs of a community.’<sup>5</sup>

This was important because *sensus communis* was not something consciously articulated, developed by the most sophisticated philosophers in terms of a rational and systematic set of ethical precepts; rather it was something unconscious, something ‘unspoken’, formed in and through the practical activities of the mass of people as they went about creating the foundations for Roman society – building the viaducts, bridges and colosseums, fighting in the wars, praying in the temples, haggling in the markets and rioting in the cities; the political and cultural processes which were taking place all the time and from which arose the values and sensibilities of the Roman collective. Common sense, therefore, was not something you could glean from the most refined of teachers but only something you might discover in the midst and furore of vast swathes of people as they came together in the broader community. C. S. Lewis, for instance, wrote of the Roman scholar and educator Quintilian that he felt “it is better to send a boy to school than to have a private tutor for him at home; for if he is kept away from the herd (“congressus”) how will he ever learn that *sensus* which we call *communis*?”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, Column 427a: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Toni Vogel Carey, ‘The Life & Death of Common Sense’, *Philosophy Now*, 2015: [https://philosophynow.org/issues/110/The\\_Life\\_and\\_Death\\_of\\_Common\\_Sense](https://philosophynow.org/issues/110/The_Life_and_Death_of_Common_Sense).

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, London, Cambridge University Press 1960, p. 146.

So it is clear that the Roman concept of common sense involves certain sensibilities which were in some way pre-rational and intuitive, and also had a strong democratic impetus, i.e. they arose in and through the life of the broader community. At the same time we have to remember that this was not just *any community*; Quintillian was waxing lyrical at the time when Rome had entered its most glorious phase of expansion and empire, the famous *pax Romana*. When Roman patrician philosophers talk about the shared ethical sensibilities of the Roman collective, they are also talking about a culture whose boundaries have been delineated in precise opposition to the regions, kingdoms, tribes, villages and polities which had been subsumed as part and parcel of the Roman imperial project. Consequently the community standard which Roman common sense embodies often takes on a rather superior and elitist tinge; Scott Philip Segrest, for instance, argues that for Cicero common sense implied “elegant manners”,<sup>7</sup> while C.S Lewis suggests that, for Horace, “the man who talks to you when you obviously don’t want to talk lacks *communis sensus*”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, common sense, for the Romans, seems to have been a somewhat paradoxical thing; on the one hand, it was said to issue from the lives of the broader majority of people – but at the same time had a certain patrician inflection – i.e. it was bound up with notions of social superiority and upper-class etiquette; for the Romans, common sense might (loosely) be translated into what the British mean today when they talk about someone having “breeding”.

In the modern era some of the same contradictions abide. At its outset, Descartes introduces a set of claims about common sense which are knotty and problematic, but highly intriguing. On the one hand, he talks about common sense as being the faculty which helped mediate between the body with the mind ; for this reason he located it as something at work in his ‘penal gland’, that infamous *deus ex machina* of Cartesian dualism. But over and above this almost Aristotelian conception, he also brought to the fore another type of common sense understanding which the philosopher labelled ‘*bon sens*’ or good sense. For Schaeffer, Cartesian “good sense” represents a return to elements in the Roman stoical tradition, it

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<sup>7</sup> Scott Philip Segrest, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press 2010, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, *cit.*, p.146-7.

was something which emanated from the masses, and it was tied to the ability to navigate life on a practical level – good sense was at the same time “practical judgment”.<sup>9</sup> But such a conception stood as a potential anomaly within the Cartesian system itself; remember that, for Descartes, truth in its purest and most powerful form was conveyed by the “clear and distinct ideas” which existed as an a priori fact which had been imprinted on the human mind by an all-powerful deity. A-priori universality formed the very foundation of Cartesian rationalism; but notions of a common sense which developed in and through the experience of the majority of people in the course of practical social life smacked of a certain empiricist dimension which Descartes’ philosophy implacably opposed.

Future versions of ‘common sense’ evolved very much with this contradiction in mind. Descartes may have been one of the first of the modern era to evolve a conception of “common sense” which was tied to the practical life of the majority, but such a conception was very swiftly weaponized, very quickly trained on the philosopher who had authored it. Francis Bacon had argued against metaphysical speculation, bringing to the fore the role of empirical science – the reading of physical reality from a series of experimental steps. For him, therefore, common sense was a kind of counterpart in ordinary life to what the Renaissance scientist was able to achieve in and through experimentation; i.e. the perceptions and inclinations of common sense were developed out of the actually existing empirical reality which people encounter in and through sense perception. Common sense did not rise to the level of the type of scientific induction which Bacon himself helped develop, that is true; but it nevertheless proceeded from the correct premises – i.e. the empirical reality itself and not the chimeras cast by the fleeting phantom-like operations of the ephemeral rationalist mind.

And this contradiction assumed explicitly political dimensions too. Common sense increasingly became associated with a down-to-earth type empiricism which could be opposed to an elevated and esoteric rationalism that had become the intellectual property of a superior and lofty elite. As F. L. van Holthoon would argue, references to common sense could be mobilized against the *Anciens Régimes* which were associated with more elitist philosophical

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<sup>9</sup> John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press 1990, p. 69.

leanings – Queen Christina, for instance, had famously patronized Descartes and even invited him to the Swedish Court. Bishop Berkeley would go on to write how Enlightenment itself requires a “revolt from metaphysical notions to the plain dictates of nature and common sense”.<sup>10</sup> Of course Berkeley’s statement is problematic – not least for the fact that his own brand of empiricism eventually yielded the most unadulterated and extreme form of idealism, but also because Cartesian universalism and the method of doubt – the scepticism which gave life to it – provided a powerful impetus to Enlightenment thought.

But the overall point stands; a certain philosophical conception of common sense – which adopted the universalism of Enlightenment thought while at the same time locating the source for that universalism not in the pristine and generic rationality of the individual ego but in the swell and practical life of the mass of the population – could become a philosophical conception with extremely radical dimensions. In jettisoning the “metaphysical baggage”, in providing a form of Enlightenment universalism which proceeded from empirical grounds, such a universalism could then be tied to the radical life and rebellious energies of the masses as a whole at the level of their day-to-day existence. And in an epoch where it was essential for the most revolutionary representatives of the bourgeoisie to be able to pull the masses into the revolt against the forms of aristocracy and kingship which buttressed the old order – the reconfiguration of common sense thinking according to a radical paradigm was one which allowed a broader social collective to assert its rights and hegemony against the tyranny of individual and arbitrary power.

The apotheosis of this approach arrived with Tom Paine’s *Common Sense*. A pamphlet which was written at the outset of the American Revolution and War of Independence, it is often credited with helping the vacillating rebels move from a position of compromise and toward one of total rebellion and complete severance with the British Crown. For this reason, *Common Sense* is thought to have been a significant influence on the Declaration of Independence. In the pamphlet Paine combines Enlightenment universalism – ideas about the inherent equality of all men framed in terms of a

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<sup>10</sup> George B. Berkeley, *George Berkeley: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, London and New York, Routledge 2016, p. 58.

series of natural rights – with the kind of plain-speaking proselytizing which had come out of the radical traditions of lay-preaching Protestantism (and his own religious background in Quakerism). The insidious and corrupting nature of kingship, and the yearning of the average citizen to the rights of liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness – the intellectual case for all of this is laid bare in and through “simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense”.<sup>11</sup>

By framing his rhetoric in just such a way, Paine not only wanted to argue that the common sense thinking which arose from the average citizen in the course of his practical life had a radical component which was inherently anti-tyranny and tended toward the type of Enlightenment thought which worked to secure the legal rights and protections that pertained to just such a life. In fusing common sense thought with a radical set of Enlightenment political ideals, Paine was reaching out beyond a purely theoretical compass; he was simultaneously fusing the broader life of a layer of the masses with the explicit goals of a radical section of the American bourgeoisie and their struggle to free themselves from the dominion of the British crown. He was, to put it in the political idiom of the modern day, helping forge the basis for a mass movement. In the same vein, if the key to radical empowerment lay with a broader section of the population, then the King, by virtue of his isolation and privilege – his abstraction from the larger human realm – was by nature particularly ill-suited to realize a conception of the needs of society at large. Consequently, he, the King, was in no position to dictate how society should be run:

There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy; it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgment is required. The state of a king shuts him from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly; wherefore the different parts, by unnaturally opposing and destroying each other, prove the whole character to be absurd and useless.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ‘Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs’, US History.org: <https://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense4.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ‘Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution’, US History.org: <https://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense2.htm>

Paine went on to give concrete examples of exactly how kingship had functioned in the past; to throw into relief the contrast between the realities of monarchy which were fused with conquest and dominion and the exhortations against tyranny which Paine was able to pick out (it must be said rather selectively) from the Bible, a book he seems to have known incredibly well. He relentlessly honed in on specific historical abuses by monarchs:

no man in his senses can say that their claim under William the Conqueror is a very honourable one. A French bastard landing with an armed Banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it.<sup>13</sup>

Thus Paine was able to demystify the principle of monarchy, the irrationality of hereditary rule, the threat of tyranny and violence which, of necessity, underpins it – and in so doing Paine was able to strip George III of his divinely mandated aura; he was able to reveal him in plain and simple common sense terms as the “Royal Brute of Britain”, and thereby provide vital impetus to the movement which was developing against him.<sup>14</sup>

However, the radicals of American Independence did not hold a monopoly on the concept of common sense. Indeed conservatives and reactionaries endeavoured to mobilise it for their own ends; James Chalmers, for instance, produced a riposte to *Common Sense* which was released just a year after Paine’s influential pamphlet. Chalmers titled his rebuke *Plain Truth* – and it was about occupying the same ground which Paine himself had staked out. Chalmers preceded from the same essential premise arguing that

the rich and high born are not the monopolisers of wisdom and virtue; on the contrary, these qualities are more often to be found among the middling class in every country, who... in reality become better acquainted with the true interests of the society in which they live.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ‘Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession’, US History.org: <https://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense3.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Paine himself very much saw his tract in this way; he renounced his copyright so that *Common Sense* might be read as widely as possible, and indeed it was, from London to Vienna to Moscow.

<sup>15</sup> James Chalmers, ‘Excerpts from Plain Truth’, Alpha History: <https://alphahistory.com/americanrevolution/plain-truth-1776/>

The broader majority here is delicately and diplomatically framed by the notion of ‘the middling class’ which no doubt excluded slaves, native Americans, women and the poorest, property-less whites – but the underlying logic is the same; i.e. those who are acquainted with the practical life of the economy on the ground, the merchants, farmers, fisherman, storeowners, carpenters and so on – these people are invested with a certain unconscious but practical wisdom which allows them to see through the mire of convoluted political rhetoric and to understand the issues of their day in essence.

But Chalmers’ deployment of common sense thinking led to very different conclusions from those of Paine. For him, Paine’s conclusion that common sense demanded a violent schism, a break with the mother country was mere “quackery”. In actual fact, in his high-falutin and rather abstract attack on the notion of monarchy itself, Paine had lost sight of the immediate practical details which made a symbiotic connection between King and Country an absolutely vital one:

There are many advantages of our connection with Britain; It will cause us to avoid the horrors and misfortune of war. Paine surely forgets that when we are independent, we cannot trade with Europe because the treaties are made under England’s name.<sup>16</sup>

For Chalmers, common sense was all about compromise; indeed what made the British political apparatus so effective was that it provided an exercise in moderation in which all the component powers provide checks and balances against all others: “The British government is a beautiful system because it is ruled by the king, the upper class, and the people...our constitution is a compound of Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy”.<sup>17</sup> Paine’s notion of common sense wasn’t actually common sensical at all – in threatening to do away with the King and the aristocracy and in absolutizing the ‘democratic’ element in politics thereby, his thinking had lurched into dangerous extremism; in the desire to explode “America’s” colony status, his thought had assumed an idealistic

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<sup>16</sup> James Chalmers, ‘Selected Paragraphs from Plain Truth’, Baltimore County History Labs Program:

[https://www.umbc.edu/che/tahlessons/pdf/historylabs/Should\\_the\\_Colo\\_student:RS08.pdf](https://www.umbc.edu/che/tahlessons/pdf/historylabs/Should_the_Colo_student:RS08.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

and abstract gloss which blurred and obscured the practical realities and everyday needs of the thirteen colonies themselves.

The way in which the concept of “common sense” could be mobilized for different political causes became something of a mainstay in American politics; the same thing happened during the prosecution of the American Civil War. On the one hand, Abraham Lincoln, sitting by the fire in his log cabin, rocking back and forth in his old chair, ruminating over an open book on his lap – could be portrayed as the very epitome of home-spun, common sense wisdom; but at the same time the Confederacy could depict the anti-slavery position of the North as the endeavour of an industrial and cosmopolitan elite determined to impose its particular brand of modernity on a rural economy which had operated in a time-honoured fashion for centuries according to the rhythms of the land and the passing of the seasons. In this particular ideological vision it was the denizens of the great slave estates (and I don’t mean the slaves) who became bastions of a stoical, common sense tradition, and it was no doubt a common sense proposition, as clear as day, to resist with everything they had the undermining and abnegation of a system of slavery on which their culture and way of life was premised.

In these cases we have two conflicting claims to the truth of “common sense” which, ultimately, arise from very different and conflicting political and social interests. In these cases both sides purport to hold the “one true version” of what common sense thinking really is. But it was the great innovation of the brilliant Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, writing in the early part of the twentieth century, to recognise that “common sense” could be mobilized in multiple ways according to various social interests because it itself wasn’t “one thing”, that “there does not exist only one common sense”.<sup>18</sup> In addition, for Gramsci, any common sense thought was inherently political – that is to say, it carried latent within it a certain conception of the world and the way in which it was organized. For Gramsci, thought provides a “totality of determined notions and concepts” which themselves arise, in the last analysis, from the “social groups” and “social elements” which have come to fruition at the level of historical being. The nexus of all

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<sup>18</sup> Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, New York, International Publishers 1957, ed. and trans. L. Marks, p. 60; see also *SPN* p. 325: “there is not just one common sense”.

thought is merely the totalized “system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions” – which mediate human beings with the social forms they encounter at the level of historical being in its entirety. However, a given individual doesn’t simply encounter “thought” as a complete and fully furnished totality. In the first instance, the individual experiences thought in a “disjointed and episodic way”, “seeing things and acting” in the world based on the fragmented conceptions which are inherited from those social forms or groups which mediate his or her particular existence. Such conceptions might, for instance, have their “origins in the parish and the ‘intellectual activity’ of the local priest or aging patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old woman who has inherited the lore of the witches or the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity”.<sup>19</sup>

Such “conceptions of the world” which come to constitute one’s self-consciousness, which provide a way of ‘seeing things’ and which becomes the premise of ‘acting’, of living one’s own life – for Gramsci, inhere in every self-consciousness from that of a five-year-old child to that of an Aristotle. For this reason, “everyone is a philosopher”. But while, some “conceptions of the world” are immediate and “mechanically imposed by the external environment ... by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world” – over time it becomes possible to “work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world...be one’s own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one’s personality”. It becomes possible to supersede those fragmented and partial conceptions in order to see the world in terms of a totalized and “coherent unity”, the product of the “historical process to date” and in so doing take a conscious, rational and “active part in the creation of the history of the world”.<sup>20</sup>

For Gramsci, common sense was a “conception of the world” which was still very much immediate and fragmented and, in the tradition of some of the Roman stoics and later thinkers such as Vico, he argued that common sense was in some way pre-rational.

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<sup>19</sup> The phrases quoted in this paragraph are all from the same source in the *Notebooks*: Q11§12 and its Note I, *Quaderni del carcere* (henceforward *QdC*), ed. V. Gerratana, Torino, Einaudi 1975 pp. 1375-6; and, in English, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (henceforward *SPN*) London, Lawrence and Wishart and New York, International Publishers 1971, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, and subsequent reprints, pp. 323-4.

<sup>20</sup> Again in this paragraph we cite the same source: *QdC* pp. 1375-6 and *SPN* pp. 323-4.

In this way Gramsci is able to distinguish between common sense and philosophy. While a commonsensical conception of the world involves thoughts which arise from the “confused and dispersed characteristics of a generic thought of a certain epoch and a certain popular environment”<sup>21</sup> involves those thoughts about the world which have been intellectualized consciously, which have been raised up in the light of a “reasoned” and systematic body of thought for the explicit ends of providing a coherent “political” description of the nature of reality – “in philosophy the characteristics of the individual elaboration of a thought are especially prominent”.<sup>22</sup> But the nub lies in this; the philosophies which are raised to the level of self-conscious rationality in any particular epoch – the gains of such philosophies in their outlines, their fundamentals, are often gradually disseminated such that they are absorbed implicitly and in some ways uncritically into the collective consciousness of the following age as commonsensical sensibilities and perspectives.

Consider the example Gramsci provides – the popular phrase, that of ‘looking at things philosophically’. This, says Gramsci, contains a series of implicit assumptions and a powerful argument about the underlying rationality of the world and its development: it provides “the invitation to reflection, to explain to oneself that what is happening is at bottom rational and that it should be faced up to as such, concentrating on one’s own rational powers and not letting oneself be dragged along by instinctive and violent impulses”.<sup>23</sup> In the common sense exhortation to “look at things philosophically” – is distilled elements of philosophy inherited from the past; the famous dictum of Hegel’s at once comes to mind: “what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational” – but “to look at things philosophically” also has the aroma of Roman Stoicism, the wise man who, according to Seneca, in some way escapes the necessities the objective world inflicts upon him, by rationally understanding them and thus willing their inevitability: “He escapes necessity because he wills what necessity is going to

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<sup>21</sup> Gramsci, *QdC* Q11§12, p. 1382. Here in English we quote the translation included in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, *cit.*, p. 64, footnote; alternative translation in *SPN*, *cit.*, p. 330, footnote. [Gramsci encloses the entire passage which contains these words between parentheses in this extended argument of his - editorial note]

<sup>22</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.

force upon him.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the simple and gentle rejoinder to “look at things philosophically” which can be uttered almost unthinkingly as a way to encourage calmness and stepping back from a situation – is in some sense inconceivable had it not been for the flowing of philosophy in the time of the first century Roman Empire or the culmination of classical German philosophy in early-nineteenth century Heidelberg.

“Common sense” for Gramsci involves an explicitly historical dimension; that is to say, it involves the accumulated debris of previous epochs of thought recycled into semi-conscious and intuitive feelings about the way in which reality is structured and how it behaves. Of course, if it is the case that the self-conscious modes and systems of “philosophy” which depict the spirit and realities of a particular epoch can be transformed into a more intuitive and pre-rational set of sensibilities in the next; then the obverse also applies. The common sense thought of any given age can itself be converted from a set of implicit, pre-rational assumptions to something which can attain the self-conscious clarity and critical awareness of philosophy. Indeed the way in which this occurs falls under Gramsci’s notion of “translatability”, i.e. “[t]he philosophy of praxis ‘absorbs’ the subjective conception of reality (idealism) into the theory of the superstructures; it absorbs and explains it historically”.<sup>25</sup>

For Gramsci, a class which successfully builds its hegemony – that is, its ability to ideologically justify its claims to power and ascendancy – is a class whose intellectuals are able to locate those commonsensical propositions within the complex and contradictory morass of popular consciousness – and tease into rational self-awareness those propositions which best facilitate its own class ends, pulling sections of the masses who hold such propositions into alignment with its own struggle. More generally, the “organic intellectuals” as Gramsci terms them, are those who are called into being along with the development of a new social

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<sup>24</sup> Seneca, ‘Asthma’, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, ed. Phillip Lopate, New York, Anchor Books 1995, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Antonio Gramsci cited in Stephen Shapiro and Neil Lazarus, *Translatability, Combined Unevenness, and World Literature in Antonio Gramsci*, “Mediations” – *Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* Volume 32, No. 1 Fall 2018: [https://mediationsjournal.org/articles/gramsci-world-literature#endref\\_24](https://mediationsjournal.org/articles/gramsci-world-literature#endref_24). (*QdC* Q10II§6II, p. 1244; in English *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, and Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press 1995, p. 306.)

class and are able to give it “homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and philosophical fields”;<sup>26</sup> on this basis, the organic intellectuals aspire to mobilize and advance the interests of said class.

Different classes, therefore, mediate different ‘common sense’ conceptions as part of their historical development, and for this reason, organic intellectuals endeavour to actualize and mobilize different strands of common sense for often opposing class interests. It is true that the phrase ‘look at things philosophically’ contains the germs of a radical conception of reality which in some way intuits the rational necessity behind historical development (albeit at the level of the individual destiny), but at the same time the same formulation also contains the seed of a certain passivity – a lulling and reactionary mandate to bow before the blows you receive, to accept the status quo and the powers-that-be, to submit to injustice meekly and gently with the knowledge that no other world is possible. For Gramsci there were many different versions of common sense, precisely because they were ideological fragments generated by the living movement of classes with opposing and sometimes violently clashing social interests. A class which aspires to political and economic power or a class which seeks to maintain it must, according to Gramsci, not simply exert itself through economic and political coercion but propagate its own values and norms such that other elements and social layers experience these as immutable and unchanging elements in the nature of reality itself. Gramsci describes this process as “hegemonic”, and class struggle more broadly as “a struggle of political ‘hegemonies’ and of opposing directions”.<sup>27</sup> Part of achieving ‘hegemony’ means allowing the values which enshrine the power of a particular class to appear to the majority of the population as ‘commonsensical propositions’ which most people take for granted. For example, in the epoch which is dominated by a financial bourgeoisie and a philosophy of economic individualism it might well be a commonsensical proposition not to stop for strangers on the road because they will probably end up robbing you, simply for the ‘fact’ that human beings are inherently selfish and self-interested.

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<sup>26</sup> *QdC* Q12§1, p. 1513; in English *SPN*, *cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> *QdC*, Q11§12, p. 1385; in English *SPN*, p.333.

So the formation of a type of new type of ‘common sense’ which operates to normalize certain implicit justifications for the dominance of a particular ruling class or, in the same vein, the claims of a particular class aspiring to power – is a key part of establishing hegemony. The ruling class has, if you like, its own form of common sense to draw upon, just as the oppressed and the exploited have theirs – “every social stratum has its own common sense”<sup>28</sup> and these are manifested in the broader “struggle of ‘political hegemonies’”.

But while different strands of common sense do reflect and mediate different class interests, I don’t think it is accurate to say that the ruling class has its own form of common sense in the way that Gramsci believes. To elaborate. Part of the power of common sense thinking – identified from the Roman Stoics onwards is that it develops as part and parcel of the “crowd”, the “herd”, the “mass” – it is incubated in the life-forces of the broader population.<sup>29</sup> In the modern world, just as in ancient Rome, there is a stark division between the direct producers who create and recreate the immediate physical means by which all live, and the intellectual wing of society whose freedom from such direct forms of production allows them to study, to specialize, to philosophize as part and parcel of a professional paid project, to form the think tanks which so often support so much of the ruling class policy, to become the professional TV personalities who appear presenting programmes on nature and art, to spend years in the universities and laboratories developing the scientific know-how which will eventually be applied in order to better develop the technology which the direct producers mobilize as part of their labour process.

As Marx describes it,<sup>30</sup> there develops a schism, an “antithesis between mental and physical labor” whereby those who are responsible for direct production are often reduced to the level of automatons, persons who carry out physical, repetitive labour

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<sup>28</sup> *QdC*, Q1§65 p. 76 (in English *PN* Vol. 1, p. 173), cited in Kate Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, Durham and London, Duke University Press 2016, opening epigraph of book: [https://www.amazon.co.uk/Gramscis-Common-Sense-Inequality-Narratives/dp/0822362198/ref=tmm\\_hrd\\_title\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Gramscis-Common-Sense-Inequality-Narratives/dp/0822362198/ref=tmm_hrd_title_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

<sup>29</sup> This, of course, tallies with Gramsci’s description of “common sense” emerging from the lived experience of subaltern groups, even though Gramsci does not restrict “common sense” to them in isolation.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx-Engels Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>

without simultaneously possessing the knowledge of the science and technology which underpins that labour. For their part, those technicians and engineers, the professional philosophers and social scientists who develop their knowledge in a condition of abstraction, separated irrevocably from the forces and powers which engage with economic reproduction on a day-to-day basis – often form conceptions of the world which are isolated from the social realities on the ground.

Gramsci famously talks about the “subaltern” which is a somewhat disputed concept. I think he means by this, fundamentally, the proletariat (he is after all a Marxist) but also all the other exploited layers or oppressed groups which the proletariat must attract to its banner if it is to successfully challenge for power and achieve its own hegemony. In a lucid and persuasive piece, David Arnold argues that the term “subaltern” can be regarded a “convenient shorthand for a variety of subordinate classes – industrial workers, peasants, labourers, artisans, shepherds and so forth”.<sup>31</sup>

These groups are, in the main,<sup>32</sup> also the direct producers; i.e. those who produce the material means by which society is able to sustain. And so it is in keeping with the Gramscian notion of “common sense” that the “common sense” which issues out of the subaltern groups is in some way bound up with the way in which they labour and the direct, practical character of that labour as something which, ultimately, produces and reproduces the means of social existence. One may be doing some form of unskilled, manual labour, may not have a degree in philosophy or engineering, but one learns very quickly – intuitively and on the ground – what to do in order to avoid an electrical shock from a faulty piece of machinery; one may not have trained as a doctor, but one soon develops the first hand practical knowledge of the best thing to do when a fellow worker suffers a burn.

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<sup>31</sup> David Arnold (1984) *Gramsci and peasant subalternity in India*, “The Journal of Peasant Studies”, 11(4), 155-177, DOI: 10.1080/03066158408438246

<sup>32</sup> This division of labour between the manual and the mental does not exhaust Gramsci’s conception of the split between the direct members of a class and its intellectuals, for he does introduce mediating and mixed categories like that of “the technicians” who are “closely bound” to the group of entrepreneurs through the role that is “organic” to capital which they play (*QdC*, Q4§49, p. 475; in English *Prison Notebooks* Vol. 2 (hereafter *PN*), ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press 1996, pp. 199 *et seq.*; second draft text in Q12§1, cf. above.)

The direct producers in their encounter with production and their experiences as a “subaltern” style underclass often develop this kind of practical knowledge – and this can provide the framework for a broader form of thinking; an intuitive sense of savvy, a wry conception of the world and how it functions at the level of its fundamental mechanics. Those who are locked in the ivory towers of higher education and are abstracted from the life and the swell of the masses often lack any real awareness of the grinding processes by which the engine of society turns over – they lack the ability to achieve simple, practical tasks like changing a lightbulb or a tyre – and their world view is inherently idealistic for the same reason; they have not had to go through the experiences and tribulations of ordinary people which might help ground and sober them.

What is more common sensical, for instance, than the notion of someone addressing their lack of formal education by saying they have passed through ‘the university of life’? It expresses in an immediate and intuitive form something fundamental about the division of labour, the antithesis which Marx describes between “mental and physical labor” – and thus it contains a powerful and radical truth about the underlying political and social contradictions which are latent in our society. At the same time, that same phrase also contains a germ of the reactionary – it can incite workers to disregard the intellectual sphere in a self-satisfied way; it occludes the understanding that the working class must win its way through to an intellectual awareness of the revolutionary nature of its own historical process – and that this has to be done in dialogue with the most able leaders and intellectuals – the “organic intellectuals”, in Gramsci’s own words. Indeed the way common sense conceptions of the world can be fetishized becomes the object of Gramsci’s criticism of Henri de Man, whom, Gramsci argues, “empirically [...] counterposes to Marxism” “common sense”, “falling into the position of somebody who, after discovering folklore, witchcraft, etc., are tenaciously entwined in the psychology of specific popular strata, believed that he had ‘transcended’ modern science”.<sup>33</sup>

And yet, while Gramsci acknowledges that it is important not to absolutize the ‘spontaneous’ conceptions of the world which arise from the masses at the expense of any systematic philosophy of

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<sup>33</sup> *QdC*, Q3§48, p. 328; in English *SPN*, *cit.*, p.197, and alternatively *PN* Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 49.

praxis – Gramsci also acknowledges that “every ‘spontaneous’ movement contains rudimentary elements of conscious leadership, of discipline”<sup>34</sup> and that these must be cultivated in the process by which a more systematic and totalizing conception can be formed as a pre-requisite for collective political action – i.e. the basis on which a class becomes “for itself”.<sup>35</sup>

It seems that we encounter this kind of thing repeatedly with common sense statements, just as Gramsci points out – that they contain within themselves a duality – elements of the radical and the reactionary at work within the same proposition. But why is this the case? I think, in line with the tradition of the Roman Stoics onward, that common sense does indeed arise in the life forces of the population but at the same time it cannot reflect clearly and coherently a revolutionary perspective. Workers can develop common sense understandings and conceptions of the world, in the last analysis, through their encounter with production and the problems that arise from the practical issues which develop in the context of productive and direct labour.

So, for example, builders building a house might become well versed through practical experience in all the ways to avoid getting injured (especially if the business they work for isn’t unionized), or they might become adept at using the minimal materials in the most efficient way so they might leave the job an hour early. Or a householder who has never had a formal education in business or maths, but becomes skilled at rationalizing numbers and anticipating financial outcomes precisely because s/he has had to hone her/his experience and manage the finances in such a way that s/he can continue to put food on the table. It is this ability ‘to think on one’s feet’ which develops out of the encounter with immediate practical realities, which is then used to form broader ‘philosophical’ conceptions and generalizations about the world at large.

But what is vital to recognize is that such conceptions arise from the awareness which is cultivated in and through the achievement of practical tasks which have, generally speaking, isolated and individualized ends. The householder learns to balance the books in the interests of themselves and their individual family unit; the builder endeavours to work more efficiently or frugally in order to

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<sup>34</sup> *QdC*, Q3§48, p. 329; in English *SPN*, p.197, and alternatively *PN* Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> *QdC*, Q3§48, p. 328; in English *SPN*, *cit.*, p.196, and alternatively *PN* Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 49.

get off a little earlier, to create a bit more free time outside work. Common sense forms of thinking then arise in the life of the masses as a whole – they grow out of proletarian, petite bourgeois and domestic labour more generally – but they grow out of the way in which this particular labourer or worker or householder is compelled to engage with the practical necessities of the objective world from the purview of his or her individual aims in isolation. So from the start, common sense thinking is marked by two essential characteristics: one, it is immediate, intuitive and pre-rational – it emerges organically and semi-consciously from the awareness of strategies one uses to deal with practical necessities; two, it is a form of thinking which can often work within the framework of the isolated ends of a pure individuality – even if it arises from the productive life of the masses more broadly.

Because common sense is a form of thought which nearly always operates on a purely individualistic basis, here is where its reactionary potentials inhere. Consider the example we have cited several times already. The case of the commonsensical housewife shrewdly and frugally managing the household finances. In the 1980s Thatcher used this image as a metaphor for the economy more broadly as part and parcel of justifying her neoliberal programme. In the 2010s, the Conservative coalition government drew upon something similar to support their own brand of austerity economics. The argument went as follows: the essentials of the national economic policy were simple – just like any ordinary household you had incomings and outgoings; the thing to do was make sure that you didn't borrow money outside your means.

In reality, however, any national economy is a considerably more complex and paradoxical affair. If a single household decides to cut back on its spending by 15%, such a reduction won't affect the external incomes of any of the household members. If a government cuts the national budget by the same amount, employment and/or wages fall in the public sector, which means that those self-same people – nurses, police, teachers – end up spending less in the economy more generally, thereby harming businesses which are not directly under the auspices of government investment. The so-called 'multiplier' effect means, all things being equal, such cuts can, ultimately, result in the type of reduction in Gross Domestic Product which comes from a decrease in demand, and therefore the

government itself finds the overall pool of taxable income very much reduced. Cutting down household spending, won't reduce the wages of those employed outside the house; but by "cutting its spending the government also ends up reducing its own income".<sup>36</sup> Or to say the same, a reduction of spending on the household level can have precisely the opposite effect of a reduction of spending on the level of the economy as a whole. This is because of the way in which the broader categories of the state, state workers, the private sector and consumers more broadly are fused in social and symbiotic relationships of investment, consumption, waged-labour and taxation.

Applying the metaphor of a householder managing domestic finances to the national economy as a whole, therefore, allows the complex and contradictory network of social and class relationships which underwrite the economy to be reimagined as a zero sum paradigm of a generic amount of money coming in and money going out. This, in turn, in turn, allows the state to rationalize measures of austerity – slashing to the state expenditure and social welfare – as coming under the rubric of the good commonsensical need to be careful with one's finances in the most simple and practical of fashions. In the 2008 case, what was, in fact, an act of vast social redistribution from the bottom upwards – i.e. the slashing of social welfare and harder taxation policies against the poor majority in order to relieve the debt burden of high-finance – becomes transfigured into a purely individual tale of a government, having fallen on hard times, trying to be that bit more careful with the purse strings and needing to balance the books.

When the economic issue is understood according to common sense thinking it takes on a generic and individualized aspect which obliterates the social and class contradictions it evolves out of. This provides a very powerful aid in rationalizing the predatory economic policy on the part of a ruling class. For not only is the aspect of class exploitation occluded by the sense that this is a simple, practical measure which is working in terms of a society (reconfigured as an individual) with a single and unified set of interests – but also the elite politicians and spin doctors who have to 'sell' the policy can do so by claiming that the thinking behind it

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<sup>36</sup> Frank Van Lerven, Andrew Jackson, 'A Government is not a Household', New Economics Foundation 26th October 2018: <https://neweconomics.org/2018/10/a-government-is-not-a-household>.

is operating according to the undeniable dictates of a simple and practical common sense which members of the broader population employ every day of their lives. In this way, the ruling class endeavours to fuse its immediate political and economic goals with the life of the populace, more generally hegemonizing them in alignment with its own particular ends.

It is worth noting how often the ruling class mobilizes attitudes of common sense in its favour in these ways. After the 2008 economic crisis which was caused by the unbridled casino capitalism of the elite sections of high finance, wealth-ridden investment banker Nigel Farage helped to shift focus from the wheeling and dealing of his stock market friends in and through a xenophobic narrative which sought to demonize the poorest immigrants, to see in them the source of the lack of housing, an underfunded and oversubscribed NHS, and the lack of decently paid jobs. The antipathy toward the immigrants inevitably had a strong racist tenor, mainly directed against East Europeans and Muslims, but what was interesting about such reactionary political interventions is that they were also justified according to the language of common sense.

One of the reasons for this is because common sense thinking allowed the immigration question to be located as a purely practical issue, another zero-sum paradigm, which would allow the odious Farage to disavow some of the more noxious and toxically racist sensibilities of his UKIP/Brexit/Reform UK parties where and when necessary. The country could be described in purely quantitative terms, as having only so much space, and only so many jobs; the question of limiting the people who were flowing in, therefore, could be posed as a purely logistical one rather than one which carried particular ethical or racial implications.

Once more, posing a complex social issue in a purely commonsensical fashion – i.e. i.e. conceptions of the world which arise in a spontaneous, immediate and semi-intuitive way – often means treating it in a purely individualized aspect which essentially obliterates the string of social factors at work behind the scenes. The amount of resources a society has to draw upon is never simply a static and unmoving quantity; in fact if a public health service is under strain it is often because the government is encouraging developments in the private sector health industry, if there is not

sufficient housing available, it is often because wealthy landlords are allowing numbers of properties to sit fallow, and if poor immigrants are working for pittance amounts it is often because the government has failed to introduce a decent minimum wage. And in reality, despite all the spiel about poorer immigrants draining jobs and resources in and through their increasing numbers, the effects that mass immigration actually has on a nation are nearly always contrary to common sense thinking. Indeed the immigrants from the 10 poorer countries, such as Poland, Estonia and Hungary who had joined the EU in 2004, and who had migrated to Britain in the ten years which followed – actually contributed significantly more to the UK economy than they had taken out in benefits. Five billion pounds more to be exact.<sup>37</sup>

But in condensing all these complex political issues down, and projecting them onto a zero-sum paradigm of a set amount of resources vs a set amount of people – not only do we shift the political focus from the social elements at the top to those at the bottom, not only do we alleviate the parasitical role of high finance in terms of setting the basis for the financial crash, but we also manage to smuggle in what is a racist discourse demonizing the most vulnerable in and through the dispassionate and pragmatic mobilization of something called common sense; as Nigel Farage has it: “Getting immigration right isn't racist, it is common sense!”<sup>38</sup> In and through the prism of common sense conceptions of the world can become transformed from an organic whole in which various social and class interests are at work from behind the scenes, locked into conflicting relationships of antagonism and exploitation – to a purely individualized entity with a single and shared set of interests which can be quantified and adjudicated in an immediate and pragmatic fashion. In other words, issues which are a consequence of social and class exploitation become reconfigured as purely logistical concerns on the part of a society which is now conceived as a purely uniform entity.

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<sup>37</sup> Editorial, *What have the immigrants ever done for us?*, “The Economist” 8 November 2014: <https://www.economist.com/britain/2014/11/08/what-have-the-immigrants-ever-done-for-us>.

<sup>38</sup> Nigel Farage cited in Cyrus Engineer, *Farage hits back – ‘Getting immigration right isn't racist, it is COMMON SENSE’*, “The Express” 11 July 2016: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/688020/nigel-farage-immigration-racist-lbc>.

To return to Gramsci then. I agree with his analysis of common-sense as something which often inherits elements of ‘philosophy’ from previous epochs and absorbs their precepts into its own body of thought on an organic and unconscious basis. I also agree with his analysis of common sense as a form of thinking which is nurtured in the womb of the collective so to speak, which arises on the part of the population in the broadest sense of the word. But I part ways with him when he argues that ‘every social stratum has its own common sense’. I think it is more accurate to say that common sense often develops within the direct producers and those who facilitate the reproduction of domestic life – but that the ruling class appropriates common sense modes of thinking which arise from the subaltern classes in order to mobilize them in terms of its own interests. I think one might argue that when it comes to “common sense” conceptions the ruling class achieves what might be called in Gramsci-speak a type of “passive revolution”, that is to say it instrumentalizes such conceptions ‘from above’ in order to preserve its own hegemony. And while I think Gramsci is correct to say that common sense thinking is pre-rational, and that it possesses both reactionary and revolutionary aspects, he does not go to the heart of the matter here; he does not sufficiently explain how and why common sense conceptions of the world carry both the revolutionary and reactionary moment. It is correct to argue that the radical aspect comes from the fact that common sense conceptions of the world often arise through the practical life of those tied most directly to the means of production and its corollary in the domestic sphere. However, Gramsci doesn’t recognize that the reactionary aspect comes from the fact that such conceptions often tend to express the lives of those same social layers in a purely individualized fashion: a method of thinking which, when applied to broader political problems, more often than not neutralizes their social roots – the forms of social and class exploitation which set the basis of them – in favour of a purely individual and pragmatic paradigm.

Because of this I am, I must confess, far more pessimistic than Gramsci when it comes to the possibility of achieving what he hopes to do; that is, to convert “common sense” into “good sense” – to actualize the radical components of common sense thinking, drawing them into a self-conscious and rational revolutionary

schema. Perhaps it is because, in my own time, people like Nigel Farage – but also the ruling class consensus more broadly – have managed to mobilize common sense conceptions so successfully and so adroitly in their own favour. Common sense plays a part in what is one of the most fundamental constructions of ruling class hegemony and it works in tandem with another fundamentally important concept, that of ‘political correctness’. Political correctness involves the essentially Nietzschean inversion that those who are most oppressed, most exploited, are actually those who have managed to sneakily accrue real political influence and power from behind the scenes. A sense of ‘political correctness’ is precisely what allows them to achieve this; so, for example, a common narrative runs as follows – more and more immigrants are given access to houses and jobs<sup>39</sup> at the expense of ‘indigenous’ workers because a ‘liberal elite’ is working to create a political climate in which this is commonplace in and through the creation of ‘politically correct’ laws and forms of behaviour. ‘Political correctness’ here works as an antipode to ‘common sense’. The ‘liberal elite’ want open borders, they want to allow as many immigrants in as possible simply because they have the luxury of righteousness; their elite jobs won’t be affected and if the public health system is overwhelmed by foreigners – they themselves can rely on private means. The person on the ground, however – the ordinary Joe going about his or her daily life – understands (so the argument goes) that the influx of immigrants provides an existential threat to their economic and cultural existence – and they understand this from a clear, common sense point of view which does not require any rational interrogation of the deeper political and social forces at work in society at large. They understand it pre-rationally as a given fact which grows from the nature of their immediate and direct ‘experience’ – and thus it doesn’t matter what the boffins or the intellectuals or all those people who are divorced from ‘the real world’ actually think, precisely because the understanding of such people is, by virtue of their social position, bereft of plain, ordinary common sense.

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<sup>39</sup> Mail on Line Reporter, *Half of new homes built in Britain the next five years will go to migrants*, “The Daily Mail” 5 February 2017: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4192506/UK-needs-new-home-five-minutes-house-migrants.html>.

So here we see how common sense becomes a vital component in helping to construct a Nietzschean vision of the world in which the most vulnerable and the most exploited – immigrants working for low wages often doing jobs nobody else wants to do – are transfigured into a sinister social power which is gradually relieving the ‘ordinary’ (read white) people who are in some way ‘indigenous’ to the country of their economic and cultural benefits. Furthermore, they, the immigrants, are able to achieve this because there is a complicit layer – the liberal intelligentsia – who are all the time working to help cultivate “immigrants’ rights” because their elitism disqualifies them from the ordinary experiences of the everyday reality and allows them to think in purely politically correct terms. And how do we become aware of such a social situation? Well, we have access to it through using the good common-sensical thinking which arises from the direct and immediate nature of individual experience. For this reason, such thinking cannot be refuted by appeals to statistics or scientifically orientated facts about what, precisely, immigrants earn, the levels of public housing they actually have access to, or the number of their representatives who actually manage to hold positions in the corridors of power.

These things don’t matter because this type of common sense thinking is explicitly irrational – that is, it fetishes the intuitive immediacy of ‘direct experience’ over and against the more laborious and rational endeavour to discover and describe the fundamental social and political agencies which are at work behind the scenes. The common sense narrative ‘cannot’ be refuted by rational argument precisely because it has not been evoked by rational argument. Anybody who has ever tried to counter these kind of anti-immigrant views with statistical examples of why they don’t hold has almost certainly had the experience of this; the rationality and logic of your arguments can be sarcastically dismissed by the fact that to ‘intellectualize’ such issues is to remain indifferent or unaware of the actual ‘ordinary’ people on the ground who feel the deleterious effects of mass-immigration in the marrow of their bones and on a day-to-day basis.

Of course, the Nietzschean-style conclusions which are bolstered by this type of thinking do not truly mediate the interests of ordinary people but rather are advertized and promoted most vividly by the ruling classes, appearing in all the most rabidly right-

wing papers which are invariably owned by multi-millionaire press barons. Papers which constantly mobilize notions of common sense against a ‘nannying welfare state’ – a welfare state which, for example, wants to provide workers with protections for ‘health and safety’ without realizing that this is to spend a lot of money on nothing, because anyone who is involved in a trade has the simple common-sense to ‘think on their feet’ and doesn’t need to be smothered in the type of bureaucratic red-tape and ridiculous rules which will hinder them from better doing their job.<sup>40</sup> In practice, of course, such a common sense view inevitably helps the position of bosses who then have to spend less kitting their workers out safely.

Or the ‘ridiculously’ politically correct laws which liberal politicians are ‘compelled’ into enacting by ‘militant feminists’, laws which police gender relationships in the work place so that it is no longer possible for people to initiate romantic relationships based on a general common-sensical understanding of physical boundaries, and instead men become absolutely terrified of being sued by a female colleague just for the fact of having looked at her the wrong way. In practice, of course, militating against the nearly always inadequate laws which address sexual harassment in the work place provides a means to inscribe the power of wealthy, typically male bosses against their junior and less powerful underlings, while also pressing against those movements which are trying to provide victims with voices such as Metoo.<sup>41</sup>

In these times, therefore, common sense has been deployed incredibly effectively by the ruling class as a strategy to attack workers’ rights, the emancipation of women, the legal protections of migrants, , the status of Muslims and minorities more generally, whilst furiously defending the interests of financial elites and the most privileged sectors of society – in that same moment common sense conceptions of the world allow such claims to be presented in terms of the ‘everyman or woman’ and his or her practical struggle by way of an ordinary existence which is increasingly stifled and menaced by a liberal elite and the forces of political correctness.

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<sup>40</sup> Richard O’Hagan, *Common sense would cost a lot less than ‘health and safety’ rules*, “The Daily Mail” 26 August 2009: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1209162/Common-sense-cost-lot-farcical-health-safety-rules.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Jathan Janove, J.D, *During #MeToo Movement, Replace Avoidance with Common Sense*, “The Society for Human Resource Management” 6 May 2019: <https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/default.aspx>.

Common sense and Political Correctness here provide the antipodes, antithetical concepts which work to structure a vision of the world which operates according to a Nietzschean-like inversion whereby the interests of the powerful are presented as those of the powerless, and the rights of the powerless are to be crushed in the name of individual freedom and the struggle against elites.

For this reason, I cannot concur with Gramsci's strategy of trying to mobilize conceptions on the part of the working class and its satellites – because, in our day and age, trying to tease out the radical elements in common sense thinking (which no doubt exist) is conceding too much; helping to equip people with a train of thought and a way of thinking which neatly dovetails with the emotive, irrational and individualistic means by which the powerful are able to prosecute their interests in and through a plebeian motif, an aura of ordinariness. But it is about more than this. The harnessing of common sense conceptions for social transformation probably reached its pinnacle with Tom Paine's pamphlet and the way in which its sentiments were able to help fuse a broader mass movement for American independence. But one should also note that the American Revolution of 1775-83 was probably the least radical and thorough-going of any of the great modern revolutions. In essence it was a political revolution, that is to say, in the words of the late, great Marxist historian Neil Davidson, it was a struggle "for control of the state, involving factions of the existing ruling class, which leave fundamental social and economic structures intact".<sup>42</sup>

It was not an event which touched the socio-economic structures of society and resulted in a fundamental transformation of them – as the later American Civil War would do in abolishing the slave mode of production in the American South. The essential social forms remained unmolested and intact – what happened was that a very visible foreign power which had become increasingly parasitical in terms of its tax demands was jettisoned from its political and economic control of the thirteen colonies. The modes of exploitation which the British employed against the colonists were naked and visible for the eye to see, the lack of political rights which the colonists had and the debt burdens they were accruing were as clear

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<sup>42</sup> Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, Chicago, Haymarket Books 2012, p. 494.

as day, and thus the change (the revolution) the bourgeoisie wanted to affect could be presented according to the clear immediacies of common sense and its capacity to pose social problems in a highly individual and isolated manner; i.e. in terms of the oppression of a youthful 'nation' by an ancient and tyrannical monarchy.

But once we come to the issue of proletarian emancipation in our own time, we discover that the ends of the revolution cannot be convincingly articulated in a common-sense fashion. That is partly to do with the fact that the proletarian revolution is a 'social revolution' in the most profound sense; it involves a transformation of society which goes to the very roots, and such a 'social revolution'<sup>43</sup> can only be conceived of by a rational understanding of the underlying social relationships which it seeks to transform at the most essential level. In the case of the proletarian revolution this involves the way in which the class of capitalists are able to appropriate some portion of proletarian labour in terms of profit and set into motion capital reproduction.

But the ability of proletarian labour to yield this 'surplus value' to be appropriated by the bourgeoisie is premised on the fact that the commodity 'labour power' is able to attain a value over and above the socially necessary labour-time required to bring it to market and which determines its market value therein. In other words, the value of labour power is both equal to itself, in terms of producing the value which is necessary for its own continued reproduction – and is greater than itself in terms of being able to self-generate a value over and above its price as a commodity which can be absorbed as profit. This is a profoundly dialectical contradiction – on it the whole edifice of revolutionary Marxism rests; i.e. the practical necessity for the proletariat to take control of the means of production on a democratic and collective basis can only be adduced from a precise theoretical and philosophical awareness of how the bourgeoisie is able to appropriate a portion of surplus labour from the proletariat, how capital itself is labour power in a veiled and alienated guise; and how – as the estranged product of an excess of proletarian labour – capital can and must be brought under the auspices of proletarian power in and through a revolutionary unfolding.

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<sup>43</sup> Actually on reflection, this is not the case for the majority of social revolutions in history, but truly and profoundly does apply to the proletarian revolution.

But common-sense understanding in its immediacy and irrationality can never penetrate the true secret of the labour power-capital relationship because such a relationship can only appear to the purview of common sense in a reified guise, i. e. it appears in a purely individual guise by which a particular company or capitalist agrees on a purely subjective basis to pay a particular type of worker a particular wage. The common sense point-of-view might, on occasion, encourage the worker to clamour for a higher wage, in order to better serve the needs of his or her individual family unit which have arisen in the context of their particular and practical existence – but precisely because of its immediate and individualistic tenor common sense understanding can never pierce the nature of labour as a general and abstract social phenomenon which manifests in the guise of labour power; it can never, therefore, bring to light the process by which a portion of labour power is extracted by the bourgeoisie, and consequently, it can never apprehend the revolutionary necessity which inheres in the proletariat by virtue of its social-historic position vis-à-vis the processes of production. One is tempted to call to mind Lenin’s conception of ‘trade union consciousness’ in which workers feel the necessity to ‘combine in unions’ in order to seek the type of “labour legislation”<sup>44</sup> which would lead to better wages and working conditions but which leaves the capital – waged-labour relationship in its fundamental form untouched. Is Lenin’s conception of “trade union consciousness” an example of a Gramscian common sense conception of the world? Arguably, yes, in as much as, for Lenin, “trade union consciousness” is part of the “spontaneous awakening”<sup>45</sup> of working class consciousness in its earliest, immediate and unsystematic form; while for Gramsci too common sense conceptions of the world are also an expression of the “‘spontaneous’ feelings of the masses ... ‘Spontaneous’ in the sense that they are not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by ‘common sense’”.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> V. I Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* “The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats”, Marxist Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *QdC*, Q3§48 p. 331; in English *SPN*, *cit.*, pp.198-9 and alternatively *PN* Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 51.

In other words, even the most radical form of common sense conception applied to the fundamental question of class exploitation in our present day only leads to reformist conclusions; it can never point beyond them toward a fundamentally revolutionary transformation, and is unable, therefore, to touch on the possibility of an authentic and society-wide emancipation. And because common sense cannot by its very nature apprehend the underlying relation of exploitation which structures the capitalist social world, it cannot adequately comprehend many of the peripheral issues which arise from the social contradiction which opens up between capital and labour power; rather it can only interpret economic crises, housing shortages, political strategies of austerity and so on, on the basis of an immediate and pragmatic irrationalism which most fundamentally poses these issues in abstract and profoundly individualized terms.

I don't say that this can never have any radical benefits; it is good common sense, for example, to say that rich people with ten houses might give some of those up at a time when there is a housing crisis; but more generally speaking the 'logic' of common sense most regularly works to obscure the network of social relationships which is concealed beneath the surface of social reality, instead personalizing and individualizing them in terms of a rather robust and pragmatic form of moralism. In our own day, I think that the narrowing capacity of more progressive social agencies to translate "common sense" into "good sense" in the characteristic Gramscian mode is expressed not only by the fact that the ruling class have so effectively hitched common sense to their own ideological project – but, relatedly, even though Gramsci identified correctly the pre-rational essence of common sense and its component of spontaneity, he did not sufficiently draw attention to the fact of its individualized and isolated character and the inability it has to conceive of the most fundamental problems we are faced by as being social phenomena which require social solutions – something which is particularly important when one is dealing with a capitalist set of social relations which inevitably assume a profoundly reified appearance.