

International Gramsci Journal

Volume 4
Issue 2 *PHILOSOPHY; EDUCATION;*
SUBALTERN; COMMON SENSE / REVIEWS

Article 9

2021

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Recommended Citation

Liguori, Guido, Common Sense / Senso comune: Gramsci Dictionary, *International Gramsci Journal*, 4(2), 2021, 125-129.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol4/iss2/9>

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Abstract

This is an abstract of the entry on "Common sense" (translated into English) published in the Dizionario gramsciano (Gramsci Dictionary). There exist more than one "common senses" distinguishable by area, social stratum and period, continually enriched with scientific notions, and standing in-between folklore and the philosophy of the scholars. It is a "disorderly aggregate of philosophical conceptions" in which "whatever one likes" may be found. It must be subjected to critique, since it is often connotated by the various forms of conservatism. It is a social group's most wide-spread and often implicit ideology, and dialectically related to philosophy, meaning that a social group that aligns itself with the subalterns must enter into a dialectical relation with common sense in a mutually transformative way. Differently from Bukharin's approach, the critique of common sense, Gramsci states, must be one of the starting points for a compendium of Marxism: forcing the introduction of new truths into common sense is proof of its capacity for expansion. At stake is the transformation of the subalterns' conception of the world, by and through launching a struggle for hegemony involving a new common sense, culture and philosophy which, together, form a mass ideology which rendering politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass.

Keywords

Common sense, coherence, folklore, ideology, philosophy, Manzoni, Sorel

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The expression “common sense” appears both in the list of main subject matters that opens Notebook 1 and in the list found at the beginning of Notebook 8, linked in both cases to “folklore”. As early as Q1§65 Gramsci is explicit in his view that there exist more than one “common senses”, distinguishable according to their social connotation and geographical area. But he also uses the expression with a non-positive connotation: he writes that

every social stratum has its own “common sense” which is ultimately the most widespread conception of life and morals [...] Common sense is not something rigid and static; rather, it changes continuously, enriched by scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage. “Common sense” is the folklore of “philosophy” and stands midway between real “folklore” (that is, as it is understood) and the philosophy, the science, the economics of the scholars. “Common sense” creates the folklore of the future, that is a more or less rigidified phase of a certain time and place (Q1§65, Gerratana, Critical Edition p. 76; *PN* Vol.1 p. 173).¹

From this passage one deduces that: a) “every social stratum has its own ‘common sense’” and therefore in a society there exist different common senses; b) common sense is defined as “the most widespread conception of life and morals” within a given social stratum; c) common sense derives from the sedimentation left behind by previous philosophical currents; d) common sense is in continuous modification (and therefore different common senses follow one another over time).

Common sense appears as a variant of the concept of ideology, understood in Gramsci’s terms as a conception of the world. It is the conception of the world of a social stratum, often characterized

¹ References to the *Notebooks* followed by paragraph and page numbers are to the Critical Edition of the *Quaderni del carcere (QdC)*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, Torino, Einaudi 1975. *PN* refers to the planned but now interrupted integral translation into English of the *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press Vol. 1 (1992), Vol. 2 (1996) and Vol. 3 (2007). *SPN* refers to *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1971.

as the moment of passive reception compared to the active elaboration of the intellectual-leadership group of the social group itself. In so far as it is passive, common sense undergoes a delay and also elementary moments of elaboration. But the fact that “every social stratum has its own ‘common sense’” excludes the case that it may be defined as the qualitatively lowest level of a conception of the world. In general, what is being dealt with is the most widespread and often implicit ideology of a social group, of a minimal level. As such, common sense is related dialectically to philosophy, i.e. with the higher segment of ideology, belonging to the leading groups of the various social groups. Equally with this, a political force that aligns itself with the subalterns must install a dialectical relation with common sense, in order that common sense should be and is transformed, up to reaching a new common sense, necessary in the context of the struggle for hegemony.

In Q3§48 of (*QdC*, pp. 328-32; *PN* Vol. 2, pp. 48-52), dedicated to examining the spontaneity-leadership nexus with explicit reference to the *Ordine Nuovo* group, Gramsci brings into play the importance of the element of popular spontaneity, albeit as an element that has to be educated. He writes that at the time of *Ordine Nuovo*,

this element of ‘spontaneity’ was not neglected, much less disdained: it was *educated*, it was given a direction, it was cleansed of everything extraneous that could contaminate it, in order to unify it by means of modern theory but in a living, historically effective manner (Q3§48, p. 330; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 50 or *SPN* p. 198),

i. e. by means of Marxism. Here, common sense is posed in relation with “the ‘spontaneous’ sentiments of the masses” formed precisely “through everyday experience in the light of ‘common sense’”. But above all a “‘quantitative’ difference, of degree not of quality” is asserted between philosophy and “common sense”, since Gramsci recalls that “Kant considered it important for his philosophical theories to be in agreement with common sense; the same is true of Croce” (Q3§48, p. 331; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 51 or *SPN* p. 199).

It must not however be forgotten that for Gramsci common sense has precise weak points, including ones of a logical type. The “distortions” in its “way of thinking” have to be corrected, among other things because they are bound up with the “philosophy of the man in the street” formed by “oratory and declamation” (Q4§18, p.

439; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 160). Still more negative is the judgment on common sense in relation to the subject of the “objective existence of reality” (Q4§41, pp. 466-7; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 189), which Gramsci considers “the most important question concerning science”, but which for common sense “does not even exist”. Such certainties enter into common sense “essentially [from] religion” [...] from Christianity” (*loc. cit.*). Here common sense for Gramsci is a backward vision of the world, both because it is conditioned by religious ideology, which denies immanence, and because it does not accept the new aspects represented by science: it is a pre-modern view of the world. Gramsci often also connotes common sense with conservatism: it “is led to believe that what exists today has always existed” (Q6§78, p. 745; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 58). In the *Notebooks*, the mainly negative assessments and annotations regarding this category – often with the adjective “vulgar” appended – seem clearly to prevail over the positive ones.

Gramsci criticizes Croce for “continuously flirting with the ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’ of the people” (Q7§1, p. 853; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 156). In Notebook 8 the reflection on common sense undergoes its maximum expansion, taking its cue from comparing Bukharin’s theories with those of Croce and Gentile. We read for example that

Croce often seems to take pleasure in the fact that certain philosophical propositions are shared by common sense, but what does that mean in concrete terms? But what can this mean concretely? In order to prove that “all men are philosophers” there is no need to resort to common sense in this way. Common sense is a disorderly aggregate of philosophical conceptions in which one can find whatever one likes. (Q8§173, pp. 1045-6; *PN* Vol. 3, pp. 334)

And again, a little further on, “Gentile talks of an ahistorical ‘human nature’, and of the ‘truth of common sense’, as if one couldn’t find whatever one wanted in ‘common sense’ and as if there were just one immutable, eternal ‘common sense’” (Q8§175, p. 1047; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 336). It seems to Gramsci that Croce and Gentile link up *tactically* and *instrumentally* to common sense because they want the subalterns to continue to remain such. In the redraft of the last note quoted from, Gramsci adds a consideration that represents a balanced equilibrium of his reasoning, starting from the recognition that

what has been said [up to now] does not mean there are no truths in common sense. It means rather that common sense is an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept, and that to refer to common sense as a confirmation of truth is a non-sense. It is possible to state correctly that a certain truth has become part of common sense in order to indicate that it has spread beyond the confines of intellectual groups [...] because common sense is crudely neophobe and conservative, so that to have succeeded in forcing the introduction of a new truth is a proof that the truth in question has exceptional evidence and capacity for expansion (Q11§13, pp. 1399-1400; *SPN*, p. 423).

Gramsci argues that, since one can find everything there, in common sense, too, there are elements of truth. It is certainly important to note that a thesis has become common sense, above all for those who want to create a *new* common sense, even if common sense is linked to an image of an ideology of neophobia, prejudicially opposed to new factors and therefore conservative.

In Q8, on the basis of his assessment of common sense, Gramsci engages in a sharp confrontation with Bukharin. Regarding the dialectic he had already accused Bukharin's *Popular Manual*² of having "really capitulated before common sense and vulgar thought" (Q7§29, p. 877; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 179 or *SPN* p. 435). Now he adds that

a work like the *Popular Manual*, that is aimed at a community of readers who are not professional intellectuals, should have as its point of departure an analysis and a critique of the philosophy of common sense, which is the "philosophy of non-philosophers", in other words the conception of the world *acritically* absorbed from the various social environments in which the moral individuality of the average person is developed. Common sense is not a single conception, identical in time and space. It is the "folklore" of philosophy, and like folklore it appears in countless forms. The fundamental characteristics of common sense consist in its being a disjointed, incoherent, and inconsequential conception of the world, that matches the character of the multitudes whose philosophy it is (Q8§173, p. 1045; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 333, or *SPN* p. 419).

Gramsci emphasizes in the first place his own definition of common sense as a "philosophy", albeit "of the non-philosophers", as a "conception of the world", as the "'folklore' of philosophy": an *n*th confirmation of that conceptual family in which Gramsci's concept of ideology is articulated. But Gramsci adjectivizes "common sense" and the links in the conceptual chain of reference that

² N. I. Bukharin, *The Theory of Historical Materialism. A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology*, first published in English by Allen & Unwin, London 1926; more recent edition *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press 1969.

are nearest to it, yet again in an extremely critical way: “acritically absorbed”, syncretic, “incoherent”, “inconsequential”. Going on in the note, Gramsci adds that “historically, the formation of a homogeneous social group is accompanied by the development of a ‘homogeneous’ – that is systematic – philosophy, in opposition to common sense” (*ibid.*).

What is at stake is the conception of the world of the subalterns, which must be transformed or replaced by launching a hegemonic challenge. Marx, too, who had alluded to the “fixed popular opinion” – Gramsci argues – implicitly asserts “the need for ‘new popular beliefs’, that is, for a new ‘common sense’ and thus for a new culture, a new philosophy” (Q8§175, p. 1047; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 336)³. Ideology is a material force in given situations: one is dealing with the production of “a new philosophy” which, in defeating existing common sense, becomes a mass ideology, a new common sense. If the indication of the goal – overcoming common sense – is clear, it must not be forgotten that “the conception of the world that is widespread among the popular masses in a historical period” (Q8§213, p. 1071; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 360) cannot be something that is totally negative:

It is a matter therefore of starting with a philosophy which already enjoys or could enjoy a certain diffusion because it is connected to and implicit in practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a renewed common sense possessing the coherence and the sinew of individual philosophies. But this can only happen if the demands of cultural contact with the ‘simple’ are continually felt (Q11§12, pp. 1382-3; *SPN*, p. 330, footnote).

There returns here the assertion of the need for contact with the “simple” people, the politico-philosophical programme starting from *Ordine Nuovo* and going on to the *Notebooks*: “the position of the philosophy of praxis is the antithesis of the catholic” since “the philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the ‘simple’ in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life”. The aim is “to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups” (Q11§12, p. 1384-5; *SPN* pp. 332-3).

³ [This wording is reused by Gramsci in the argument of Q11§13, *SPN* p. 424 – trans. note.]