



From common sense to collective practices: a social-ontological commentary on Gramsci's concept of common sense

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Accepted: 26 October 2022 / Published online: 11 November 2022
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Abstract

In my paper, I start by providing a brief taxonomy of three types of theories that conceptualize common sense. Thereby, I differentiate between positive, negativist, and dualistic/dialectical theories of common sense. By juxtaposing a “good” form of common sense that he calls *buon senso* and a “bad” form of common sense he calls *senso comune* Antonio Gramsci falls undoubtedly within the reach of the dualistic/dialectical theories of common sense. In order to scrutinize Gramsci's idiosyncratic conceptualization of common sense, I turn to Kate Crehan's interpretation of this concept and argue that Gramsci's understanding of common sense is better understood as a social-ontological category that is historical, inclusive, relational, and intersectional. In this framework, collectivity is disclosed as the primary mode both of existence and of practice. Ultimately, and in order to demonstrate the current political ramifications of Gramsci's understanding of common sense, I turn to his figure of the “modern prince.” As I conclude, it is the “bad” form of common sense as *senso comune* that is most capable of addressing the current demands of an inclusive and radical democracy.

I. Making sense of common sense: in place of a cartography

Few are the concepts that can boast the same permeability as the concept of common sense that has been omnipresent throughout the entirety of (at least the) western European thought. Considering how this concept has been tackled throughout its rich intellectual history, the following cartography becomes discernible:

- (a) The first set of understandings of common sense entails theories that see in common sense an imperfect tool toward knowledge and truth (cf. Hegel 1970;

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Nietzsche 1996) that promotes political and social conformism (cf. Mill 2003), serves as an ideological weapon in the hands of economic elites (cf. Marx 1976), consolidates ideologically power structures (Hall and O’ Shea 2013), and ultimately subdues the singularity of the individual under the bids of a heteronomous, alienating, and reifying identity thinking (Adorno 1978). Common sense is not a faculty that accompanies perception and helps tame skepticism by bearing witness to the universality of human rationality, but an incomplete stage of knowledge that needs to be overcome. Call the theories of this set *negativist theories of common sense*.

- (b) Expectedly, there is also the opposite of such pejorative understandings of common sense that compose of theories that elaborate—in Georges Canguilhem’s understanding of the word (cf. Canguilhem 1970: 206)—upon the concept of common sense by scrutinizing its content, broadening its applicability, defining its limits, and, lastly, by universalizing this particular interpretation so as to exclude any other. This set consists of theories that spawn from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt (1992) and Jacques Rancière (2010) and engage the concept of common sense from a variety of viewpoints in order to address the metaphysical essence of the individual, the fundamentals of the subject’s ethical life, epistemological presuppositions, political forms, linguistic devices, aesthetic conceptualizations of society, etc. Call the theories of this set *positive theories of common sense*.
- (c) There is nevertheless, yet another, third set of understandings of common sense that entails theories that I would like to call *dualistic theories of common sense*. Their main characteristic is that they juxtapose a “good” version of common sense to a “bad” version of common sense. While the former is to be retained and the latter to be discarded, both are quintessential in order to grasp common sense since it is only through the mutual negation of each other that we can conceive what is the “proper” common sense. If we assume that the rejected, improper, understanding of common sense keeps on living—even if negated—within the proper understanding of common sense that it helped extrapolate, then it could be argued that this set of theories comprises not only of dualistic, but also of *dialectic* theories of common sense.

Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of common sense falls undoubtedly under this last, dualistic/dialectical, set of theories of common sense.¹ His theorization

¹ In “Common-sense neoliberalism,” Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea point to this duality when arguing that in Gramsci “[c]ommon sense and ‘good sense’ co-exist.” (Hall/O’Shea, 2013: 10) From them though, common sense leads to a compartmentalization and fragmentation of the individual. As they write, “there is an unresolved struggle over common sense *within* the individual as well as between individuals and groups.” (Hall/O’Shea, 2013: 20) As will be shown, I endorse the antagonistic character of common sense according to which common sense unravels a praxeological functionality that leads to collective practices. Nevertheless, common sense is for me thanks to its subjectivating function rather enabling instead of disallowing of collective actions. Common sense does not divide the individual. Rather, common sense helps to realize the subject’s collective structuration which leads to common sense manifesting the subject’s possibility for collective practices.

of common sense unravels from the dipole “common sense” (*senso comune*) versus “good sense” (*buon senso*). As Hoare and Smith note, the former connotes “the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become ‘common’ in any given epoch” (Gramsci 1971: 321) where the latter suggests something practical and empirical or, in Gramsci’s words, “a culture” and a “conception of the world with an ethic that conforms to its structure” (Gramsci 1971: 346). Therein, Gramsci picks up a line that goes back to Giambattista Vico (cf. Snir 2016) whose notion of common sense breaks once and for all with Descartes’ one-sided intellectualism (cf. Vico 1990). In Hans-Georg Gadamer’s words,

what gives [for Vico; T.T.] the human will its direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the *concrete* universality represented by the *community* [...]. Hence developing this communal sense is of decisive importance for living. (Gadamer 2004: 19; emphasis added)

It is this thread of thought that I would like to elaborate upon here. Gramsci’s understanding of common sense is dualistic not only on the formalist level, i.e., because he differentiates between a “good” form of common sense (*buon senso*) that could serve as the basis for a revolutionary collective consciousness, and a “bad” form of common sense (*senso comune*) that can only remain “uncritical and largely unconscious, dogmatic, [and; T.T.] antidialectical” (Gramsci 1971: 435). Gramsci’s understanding of common sense is dualistic because this diremption between “*senso comune*” and “*buon senso*” also marks the passage from the *individualism* of intellectualism to the *collectivity* of praxeology.

In order to corroborate my working hypothesis, I accroach, as a first step, Kate Crehan’s recent interpretation of Gramsci’s understanding of common sense. My intention thereby is to qualify common sense as a *social-ontological* and *intersectional* concept that bears witness to the subject’s dynamic configuration and subjectivation. As a second step, I turn to Gramsci’s figure of the modern prince in order to demonstrate how collective and inclusive common-sense practices can be modeled alongside such a conceptualization of common sense. As I ultimately argue, it is not the proper, “good” form of common sense as “*buon senso*,” but the “bad” form of common sense as “*senso comune*” what needs to be upheld. The reason is that it is this pejorative form of the “*senso comune*” as an incoherent and fragmented way of thinking that is capable of avoiding those reductionist and monosemantic reappropriations under a unifying, dominant, power-laden paradigm that has always haunted common sense and can accommodate the current, complex demands for an inclusive and radical democratic practice.

II. Toward a social-ontological understanding of common sense

It is Kate Crehan’s (2011) merit to have transformed Gramsci’s “far from self-evident” (Crehan 2011: 273) understanding of common sense to a “useful concept for anthropologists” (ibid.). Attempting to shed some light on this concept, Crehan

breaks it down to following three fundamental traits: Gramsci's common sense is (1) *antiromantic*, (2) it is *historic*, and finally it is (3) *broad and all-inclusive*.

By calling Gramsci's notion of common sense *antiromantic*, Crehan goes to war with theories that accuse Gramsci's notion of common sense of attempting to rehabilitate forms of community as a reconciled and harmonious form of life. As Crehan correctly underlines, Gramsci's take on folklore neither romanticizes nor demonizes popular culture (cf. Crehan 2011: 282). Rather, Gramsci sees in folklore "the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude" (Gramsci 1971: 421) that must always be our starting point (cf. *ibid.*). By referring to folklore as form, not *source*, of common sense, Gramsci does not privilege the idyllic community of myth over the fragmented society of interest. What he does, however, is underline and draw attention upon the (anonymous) collectivity underlying the origination of both myth and folklore.

Coming to the second element of Crehan's understanding of Gramsci's common sense, its *historicity*, Gramsci is terminologically idiosyncratic also in this regard. He fuses ideology and historicity to create the dipole of on the one hand historically organic ideologies that "are necessary to a given structure" and on the other hand ideologies that are "arbitrary, rationalistic, or 'willed'" (Gramsci 1971: 376f.). Whereas the latter are individualistic, coincidental, and transient/momentary, the former "have a validity which is 'psychological'; they 'organise' human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc." (*ibid.*) This diremption has severe repercussions also for Gramsci's understanding of common sense. The historicity of common sense becomes manifest as soon as we realize that common sense becomes understandable only when tracing its social, cultural, and political embeddedness back to a certain historical context of significations. As Gramsci argues, common sense is the "generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment" (Gramsci 1971: 330n). Yet, this is not to say that common sense(s) is a sterile or isolated endeavor. Rather, it is relational, as Thomas Patterson insightfully calls it. What Patterson draws attention to through this term is that common sense "only gains meaning in terms of its interconnections with other concepts: such as class structure, hegemony, intellectual, philosophy, science, religion, ideology, or folklore." (Patterson 2016: 253) This diagnosis is pivotal not only from an epistemological or cognitive perspective. If common sense corresponds to the "the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is" (Gramsci 1971: 421), then the realization that common sense cannot but be "a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions" (Gramsci 1971: 422), does not necessarily need to entail that common sense is something pejorative because it is "diffuse," and "unco-ordinate," (Gramsci 1971: 330n). Rather, common sense is, as Gramsci puts it, "multiform" (Gramsci 1971: 422) and therefore plastic, inclusive, and diverse. Seen this way, common sense is not only historic (Crehan) or relational (Patterson). It is also *intersectional*. Common sense seems to be the point of condensation where different ways of thought from class consciousness, religious beliefs, and folkloristic rituals to scientific axioms, ideological prejudices, and philosophical presuppositions that correspond to different identities and to the different forms of life of the subject encounter

each other. What appears to be “diffuse,” “unco-ordinate,” or the “chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions,” and therefore “fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential” is only so if we assume that there exists a concrete center with a concrete, and solidified, mono-semantic identity. Rather, what we are really faced with here is an affirmatively “multiform,” i.e., pluralistic, form of thinking. Such thinking cannot *but* be decentered exactly because it does not express the identity of one group. On the contrary, it integrates and carries within it, as Gramsci says, “the social and cultural position of those *masses*” (Gramsci 1971: 421; emphasis added) in plural, and not of the one, unified, mass in singular.

The final characteristic of common sense that Crehan brings forward is that of *all-encompassing inclusivity*. By drawing attention to the inclusive character of common sense, Crehan pinpoints to an innovative element of the Gramscian conceptualization of common sense that breaks away from what has been since Aristotle an intrinsic part of common sense, namely that of sharedness. Common sense is for Gramsci not something that is being shared and therefore a fraction of the autonomous individual that overlaps and is common also to other equally autonomous individuals. By embodying and then reproductively exhibiting the characteristics of the common sense that surrounds, delimits, and influences its becoming, the individual forfeits its autonomy and becomes itself the subject (lat: *sub-jacere*) and a fraction of the common sense that hegemonically surrounds it.² Seen this way, not the subject possesses a certain type of common sense that it shares with other subjects. Instead, the subject is being possessed by common sense to the extent that common sense, just like Althusser’s ideology, interpellates the individual to a subject.

In this light, it would not be farfetched to argue—regarding Crehan’s rendition of Gramsci’s common sense as interpreted here—that common sense is best understood as designating a *social-ontological* operation that is embedded and bound to a certain socio-political context. It does therefore not express an innate, *essentialist*, and therefore ahistoric faculty, capability, or quality. Rather, it corresponds to a given historico-political structure. When going back to retreat the features of Gramsci’s common sense under this new light, it becomes clear why Gramsci is entitled to speak of common sense, in the form of folklore, as an “*other* conception [...] of the world and of life” (Gramsci 1985: 191; emphasis added) or why this alternative conceptualization of ‘the world and of life’ is capable of defying “conceptions which are deemed to be *superior*.” (ibid.) If there is not just one, excluding/exclusive common sense, but a collection or collective of different sets of shared thought, then this plurality is indeed “multiform” and not simplistically “diffuse,” “unco-ordinate,” and/or “chaotic.” Gramsci’s common sense is not anymore the Aristotelian, epistemological, “super sense” (Rosenfeld 2011: 18) but is transformed to a *meta-sense*: an all-encompassing social environment that includes various identity discourses, ideological (state) institutions, and private or public forms of life (like family, peers,

² This is not to say that Gramsci’s subject is as determined as Althusser’s (1971) or Foucault’s (1982) subject. If at all, then to the extent that the socialization of the subject within a certain hegemonical context is at the same time the dialectical precondition for the subject’s—as will be shown later below—collective emancipation.

and subcultural groups) that generate their particular and respective forms of common sense. It is from the viewpoint of this intersectional inclusivity that we can ultimately legitimize Gramsci, when writing—in a celebrated passage—that.

[e]very social stratum has its own ‘common sense’ and its own ‘good sense’, which are basically the most widespread conception of life and of man. Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of ‘common sense’: this is the document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. ‘Common sense’ is the folklore of philosophy, and is always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time. (Gramsci 1971: 326n)

In light of the above analysis, common sense can indeed be self-transforming and can promise to “create” and bring forward the common “folklore of the future,” yet only because it brings together everyone living at, belonging to, or feeling attached to a certain historical context. Thereby, however, common sense is transformed into a quasi-Foucauldian dispositive. After all, and as Gramsci asserts, “there is no abstract ‘human nature’, fixed and immutable [...], but [...] the totality of historically determined social relations” (Gramsci 1971: 133). If then common sense designates a social-ontological, i.e., anti-romantic, historical, all-inclusive, relational, and—last but not least—intersectional, dispositive what form can the practices of a thusly produced subject acquire? And the answer to this question can be in the figure of the “modern prince” that Gramsci lends from Machiavelli.

III. The modern prince: a model for common sense practices

As Gramsci redefines this term, “the modern prince [...] cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form.” (Gramsci 1971: 129) The first element of common sense’s collective practices raised in this redefinition is that every form that claims to set common sense into practice needs to possess a form of organization. Gramsci’s project is strictly opposed to individualistic or spontaneistic forms of politics. Organized collective politics might be immanent since they are societally embedded and conditioned, just as they might contingent one, since Gramsci rejects any form of political teleology. However, they cannot be based on arbitrary or epochal cooperation. Collective politics has a very specific goal, which—corresponding to the emergence of common sense as a broad and all-inclusive state of mind—can be nothing but encompassing inclusion; a goal that can only be guaranteed through an organized form of practice which cannot be left to the discreet volition of the different (individual) political actors.

Furthermore, the collective political form is not to be subdued to a unilateral political program that draws its validity from an external (normative or metaphysical) truth or ideal. Against such understandings of collective political practice, Gramsci opts for a “democratic centralism” (ibid.), which he defines as a process that “consists in the critical pursuit of what is identical in seeming diversity of form and on the other hand of what is distinct and even opposed in apparent uniformity” (ibid.). Seen this way, democratic centralism does not connote collective practices that lead to a unifying and unilateral, “common” project. On the contrary, democratic centralism is this political form that corresponds to the acknowledgement that there are different forms of life that co-exist simultaneously next to one another. Therefore, it is being guided by difference and deferment as bases for a political program guaranteeing thereby the democratic dispersion of power. Seen this way, democratic centralism as form of collective practices is not a matter of choice or of political engagement. Rather, organized collective practices are for Gramsci a matter of necessity. As he puts it, democratic centralism “comes alive in so far as it is interpreted and continually adapted to *necessity*.” (ibid.; emphasis added) If difference and diversity were to be unified under a common paradigm, then there would be no possibility not only for collective politics but more importantly for politics itself.

In this light, what becomes essential is realizing that collective politics are not bound to quantitative numerics but to qualitative differences. Just as common sense is not depending on the number of adherents but on the differences and differentiations of the forms of life that each and every way of thinking expresses, collective practices are not depending on the number of the members of the different political groups. Rather, collective practices are the proof that there exist different forms of life that are being materialized in different political practices. As Gramsci figuratively writes,

[t]he unitary elaboration of a collective consciousness requires manifold conditions and initiatives. [...] The same ray of light passes through different prisms and yields different refractions of light [...]. Finding the real identity underneath the apparent differentiation and contradiction and finding the substantial diversity underneath the apparent identity is the most essential quality of the critic of ideas [...]. (Gramsci 1975, 128-9)

What Gramsci conveys here is not an uncritical support for a unified front. On the contrary, what he acknowledges is the necessity that to be able to do politics, we have to make sure that we keep track and remain aware of the differences out of which the different politics originate in order to enter the political stage. In this light, for collective politics to remain collective and avoid reductionism under a dominant ideology or paradigm, they need to retain their collectivity based on irreducible difference.

If this analysis is right, then the radical democratic potential that was found to permeate the collective common-sense practices returns to question the privileged treatment that Gramsci, in his dualization of common sense, bespoke to the “good”

form of common sense (*buon senso*) at the expense of the “bad” form of common sense (*senso comune*). The democratic potential of the common-sense politics that was just found to depend on a radical restructuring of life and whose goal was pinpointed in avoiding the subordination of pluriversal life under one unifying principle casts new light in the evaluation of the “bad” form of common sense.³ Being “diffuse,” “unco-ordinate,” “fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential,” or, lastly, the “chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions” is no longer problematic. Quite the contrary. Upkeeping the diffusion, incoordination, fragmentation, incoherence, inconsequentiality, and decenteredness of the “bad” form of common sense seems to become the only way that can guarantee that the production of sense (and therefore of practices) is not reduced and suffocated under a common and unilateral mode of thought or praxis. Seen this way, the rejected—and not the craved—form of common sense becomes the precondition for a pluriversal, inclusive, and holistic radical-democratic politics, i.e., for politics that can defy being subsumed under a hegemonic paradigm. Instead of glorifying or even lamenting the loss of a common sense that we allegedly could (and used to) lean upon as an essential quality inherent to human nature, we should rather embrace the fragmentation of such a unifying and normalizing common sense and rejoice on the proliferation of the different forms of common sense since it is only with such an understanding of the subject’s plural construction that we can engage in common and collective struggles.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of St.Gallen

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³ Andrew Robinson is one of the first scholars to have drawn attention to the radical potential hidden in common sense. I am unsure, however, whether he would ascribe to reversing the evaluation between *buon senso* and *senso comune* (cf. Robinson 2005).

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