

On the Ambivalences of Common Sense: Common Sense as Theoretical Framework, Political Longing, and Springboard for Political Practice. An Interview with Sophia Rosenfeld

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1. Introduction: The Inauspicious Political Actuality of an Age-Old Concept

Thomas Telios (TT)

Dear Sophia, thank you for agreeing to meet me and talk about the concept of common sense.¹ I have three sets of questions that I would like to discuss with you. The first set contains questions that situate the concept of common sense in our actual political reality. The second set is dedicated to your work on common sense where what interests me is not only your work trajectory from *Common Sense. A Political History* (2014) to *The Age of Choice: A History of Freedom in Modern Life* (2025a) via *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (2018), but also how common sense relates conceptually to other concepts like truth, freedom, democracy and choice. The third set of questions, finally, is more theoretical or abstract and concerns how to understand what the ‘common’ in common sense is, or maybe even how to make sense of the word ‘sense’ in common sense, and finally whether or what kind of political practices are we to derive from common sense, depending on how we conceptualize it of course. Given your historical, intellectual and philosophical expertise in these topics, I am sure that we will have a great discussion here. Coming to my first set of questions, it is undoubtedly the case that we are experiencing a revival of the term ‘common sense’. Not only did Donald Trump mention it in his second inaugural address, but also a series of US officials in the first few days and weeks afterwards talked and presented Trump’s political agenda as a political programme based on common sense. I read your last interview (Rosenfeld 2025b) in *Current Affairs* with Nathan J. Robinson, and we do not have to go over the same topics, but I would still like to know what your first personal, or maybe even visceral, reaction was when you heard Trump declaring common sense as a mantra of his new administration.

Sophia Rosenfeld (SR)

First, thank you very much for making the trip to Paris to talk with me. It is certainly better to have an interview conducted live, especially in a Parisian café, than online. Well, I was both

surprised and not surprised. I was surprised because nobody thinks of Donald Trump as a purveyor of common sense. He's erratic, he's full of crazy ideas, and most of the time he has to be reined in by people who have a little more sense than he does. On the other hand, there is a conservative tradition of speaking of common sense as the foundation of political life that is quite strong and also quite long in the US and in many places in the world now. In France, too, for instance, since we are talking about this subject sitting here in Paris, there is definitely a tradition of evoking *le bon sens* or *le sens commun* as the source for a kind of conservative politics that goes back to the counter-Enlightenment. There is nothing *inherently* conservative about common sense, then or now, but it has been an increasingly frequent prop for modern forms of right-wing politics, for reasons I can discuss, if you want, since the latter part of the twentieth century. So, it is surprising and not surprising to hear Trump refer to it as his possession.

TT

I have a question later about how *common* is the 'common' in common sense or what the different understandings of common sense could be, given the French variations of the term that you just mentioned, and how there might be a continuum between common sense and *bon sens* or *sens commun*, but we'll circle back to that later. Let me now ask you what your thoughts were upon hearing Trump's or his officials' use of the term or the word, since I am not sure if they have an elaborate concept of common sense which they work with. Was it being used, in your opinion, in a philosophical sense, or did you have the impression that it was being used in a rather instrumental way, as, for example, what Ernesto Laclau (2007) calls an 'empty' or 'floating signifier' to legitimise certain principles or political practices?

SR

I think it is more of the latter. And it is a clever strategy because invoking common sense gives Trump and his allies two things that they benefit from. The first is the more obvious. Common sense suggests the folk wisdom of ordinary people – the 'kitchen table logic' and the things most people know – but with no really precise sociological signifier about who these people are or what its precise contents are. Nevertheless, this category exists in opposition to others. And what is it in opposition to? It is in opposition to elite knowledge, to expertise, to 'foreign' ideas, to creative or really new ideas. And the first thing it helps the Trump administration do is score a point in an ongoing cultural war against intellectuals and certain kinds of knowledge elites and expertise. It lets him suggest that what he is doing is simply channelling ordinary people's thoughts. And in this sense, it is a *populist* tool, and it is useful to him. But there is a second way in which it is useful as well. The second way in which it is useful is that it allows him (and his surrogates) to argue against a kind of politics built on *pluralism*. Instead of implying there are many different views of this, and here is the one I stand with, by saying 'this is common sense', he suggests that there can be no further discussion, that anything else is *nonsense*. So, it adds to populism a *demagogic* strain in which common sense is that which is beyond discussion, beyond debate, unless you want to be the kind of person who spews nonsense outside the boundaries of rational discourse. Furthermore, you might say that Trump has a taste for saying the opposite of what he's actually doing. When he calls something 'true', it is usually false. When he calls something 'common sense', it tends to be a crazy idea. It is a kind of language game. So, I do not see Trump as embodying anything like a real common sense, but I see him as a master of the invocation of a category that allows him to advance a

particular political stance and position himself in what might be called an epistemic as well as cultural battle.

TT

Is Trump the sovereign of the discourse? Will what he defines as common sense be acknowledged and determined as common sense and will therefore everything else be excluded from what he thinks that common sense is?

SR

I think this is what he hopes. I think it is unlikely to be that effective. It is certainly effective with some people, but, as we know, in the US, as in many countries today, there are enormous political cleavages and multiple sources of information feeding those cleavages, and somebody simply declaring something as common sense, in the sense of acknowledged by all sensible people, is unlikely to make it such. But it is interesting because Trump, at almost the 250th anniversary of Thomas Paine's 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* (1986), has announced that he's engaged in 'a revolution of common sense'. And for an American audience, that echoes and suggests a kind of *reverse revolution*, not a revolution towards democracy, but potentially a revolution *away* from democracy. However, he is always a little bit joking. So, he has plausible deniability, as for example when he refers to himself as a king. He does not say he really is a royalist. But he plays with the language of politics this way. You could see him as the heir of Ronald Reagan, who also liked to talk about common sense as a kind of folksy idea, and you could also see him as playing on this deeper strand of American politics and at least toying with the possibility that he's a new kind of Thomas Paine, but Thomas Paine in reverse.

TT

Thank you for this cue and this parallelism between Trump and Paine. In the introduction of my book,² I argue that Trump knew very well what he was doing when evoking in his second inaugural speech common sense as what could 'make America great *again*', since what made America in the first place was common sense and of course we all know the repercussions of Paine's pamphlet in the War of Independence. For me, when Trump evokes common sense for a second time, he is paving the way and clearing the field for a new declaration of independence of some kind.

SR

Yes, absolutely. Common sense often has a nostalgic dimension. It is often used to suggest what politics has gotten us away from. So, in a setting in which democracy is lacking, common sense can be used as a tool to create a more democratic future. Ordinary people or women or workers can invoke common sense to say something like 'look, we might not have all the education and all the social standing you do, but we know something profound based on our experiences in the world. And that profound thing is as important or even more important in some ways than what you know from the remove of the library or the laboratory or the halls of power'. But in an established democracy, when you invoke common sense, it often works against democracy. And you are absolutely right, I think, to suggest that there is something potentially reactionary about its evocation as of late. Trump is in essence promising that 'we' used to know common sense, but we do not know it anymore, and you need me to get you back

there. It does not have to be that, but that is how most modern conservatives use common sense. It is not just folksy, as you suggested, to want to make America great again; it is also retrograde and meant to recall a simpler, whiter, pre-‘woke’ past. Gender, for example, is a topic about which you can easily appeal to people’s ‘ordinary’ sense of things. Do most people think that a baby is born male or female? Do most people identify as one or the other? Sure, this is how people have traditionally thought about gender difference, and it is how most people in the world still do. So, when you show up and you say, ‘I am gender fluid’ or ‘I am trans’, he has a perfect opportunity to say that ‘Those people are nuts! I do not know what they are talking about. Let’s go back to when we all knew what boys were and what made girls different’. Trump is constantly harping on this topic, not to mention linking it to common sense, not because it is the most important topic in American politics, but because it allows him to make the case for himself, no matter how radical his ideas are in general, as an anti-radical. For what he stands for corresponds to most people’s traditional sense of the way the world supposedly moves, a world that a lot of people miss.

TT

Perfect and thank you for that clarification; I think it says a lot about how Trump uses the term and the scope with which he has reintroduced the term. There is one further parameter that I would like us to tackle here, but I think it would be more appropriate to do that further in our discussion. For the time being, I would like to go back to your work and talk about your conceptual trajectory. Is there a common or red thread that, starting with *Common Sense: A Political History* (2011) or maybe even with *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (2001) to your most recent *The Age of Choice: A History of Freedom in Modern Life* (2025a) via *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (2019), ties your work together?

SR

In retrospect, yes. I sometimes call myself ‘a historian of the taken-for-granted’. Unlike most intellectual historians, who like to think about ideas that are heavily debated, I like to think about ideas that are, in a sense, so dominant, so doxic, that we rarely argue about them or maybe even notice them at all. And that meant that early in my career I became interested in how even the term we generally use for that category of ideas, namely common sense, came about, how it was weaponised, and how it simultaneously undergirded and challenged liberal democracy. All of my work explores the kind of ubiquitous ideas that I see structuring democratic thought and practice, even as they are often overlooked ideas from the point of view of political or historical analysis because they seem so natural to us. So, my first work, *A Revolution in Language* (2001) was on language, and really about how we think about the effects of the words we use on political life. The search at the time of the French Revolution for a perfect language through which to convey ideas that would not be subject to debate created a certain kind of democratic politics that is quite different from modern democratic politics, where we have given up on the idea that we should try to find a single sign system that would make dispute go away. *Common Sense* (2011) was an attempt to write about the whole category of *assumed* ideas. And *Democracy and Truth* (2019) was a response, growing out of that, regarding how the history of epistemology more broadly structures the way democracy is practiced and the problem of mis- and disinformation today. So all of these works are loosely about epistemological assumptions and democracy. The most recent book, *The Age of Choice*

(2025a), again takes up a category that I think is ubiquitous in modern democratic politics, but it takes up one that links democracy to economic thought and practice as well. The book asks what links human rights initiatives (including feminism) and capitalism. And this line of enquiry took me to choice. What lies at the core of the modern obsession with personal choice is in many ways a part of our current common sense: that picking from menus of options is what freedom feels like.

2. Common Sense as Political Principle and Vector of Democratization

TT

So, to make this point clearer and maybe also to put some names on the table: how does democracy relate to common sense? I am thinking of Hannah Arendt, who was so critical regarding the intricacies of common sense's partnership with democracy, at least in her early *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Further, what is the truth content of common sense, a point that was made prominent within the Scottish Enlightenment? Thomas Reid (1997), the father of Scottish Common-Sense Philosophy, was one of the first who adamantly – even if not always persuasively – argued that metaphysical speculation goes against the truth that common sense gives us and that we ought not to look for truth in metaphysical constructions but instead in common sense knowledge. And then of course, last but not least, we have the tension between choice and common sense, if we take, for example, Marx (1976; 2024) and Theodor W. Adorno (1998; 2005). Adorno debunked that the way we make decisions or the criteria according to which we judge the validity and correctness of our decisions, decision-making processes and the axioms of political economy as the result of capitalist and authoritarian mechanisms hidden carefully and instrumentally under the cloak of common sense. For this reason common sense is actually never truly common but rather serves the particular interests of a particular understanding of liberalism or capitalist economic production.

SR

Right, so there is a lot in what you just said, all of it quite true. Let's start with Arendt. I am interested in Arendt for two reasons: one, Arendt was very clear that democracy depends on certain habits of mind and that questions about epistemology, language, sensibility or emotion, for instance, are not to the side of political life. On the contrary, we cannot understand political life without understanding these kinds of mental practices – habits of judgement and thought and discernment – whether performed apart or together with others. Talking about institutions and laws and political behaviour alone is never going to be sufficient. And I have found that a very exciting idea for many years. Even as she does not take up every one of the categories in which I am interested, she provides a kind of theoretical foundation for all of my work. More specifically, Arendt takes from Kant (2000), as you well know, the specific idea of *sensus communis* and tries to give it a foundational political role that Kant did not. Here, what Arendt offers is less a description of how politics actually works than a kind of normative turn towards thinking what politics requires. And I am also always interested, even though I am a historian, in the relation between past thought and normative goals. Whereas someone like Trump evokes common sense largely as a rhetorical ploy, Arendt is also interested in common sense, or *sensus communis*, as an actual thing, whether it is invoked or not. And I do not think she is wrong,

which is another way of saying that I think that she is right that some actual, existing *sensus communis* is needed to sustain democracy. So I am interested in figuring out what the parameters of those basic, shared ideas are and *denaturalising* them, but not necessarily in order to totally do away with them. My work is more an effort to let people *become aware* of them. And democracy, as I think we have seen recently, is threatened when those norms disappear. So, it is not just when laws are broken that democracy is in peril; democracy is under assault right now at the level of habits of mind as well. For instance: if we do not believe in any collective sense of the good or in any kind of *solidarity* among humans, if we do not believe *rules* matter, if we do not believe *truth* matters across the right and the left of the political spectrum, it is very hard to imagine how democracy could possibly continue to work. Democracy requires some shared assumptions; these are not the only ones, but these are some that democracy needs to be functional. And what many right-leaning governments – not in the US alone, but around the world – are doing today is not just challenging existing laws. They are eating away at some of the basic bedrock ideas undergirding democracy. Take the one about truth, for instance. One of the premises of democracy has long been that we can have wildly different opinions across different value systems and parties. But we need first to agree about the basic facts. Does Iran have nuclear weapons or not? Is unemployment up or is it down in Europe or the US?

TT

Is the National Mall empty or full during Trump's first inaugural address, and whether its emptiness is an alternative fact and fake news or not?

SR

Exactly. Did the inauguration happen on this day or that day? How many people were there? Now, in general, democracy requires agreement on those premises, and then we can have wildly different interpretations of what it meant, what to do and why. But if even basic truth is entirely fungible, it makes it very hard to imagine how democracy can work; what *can* people reasonably debate? That is just one example. But the same goes for questions about solidarity. So, I think Arendt will be proven right as a normative thinker arguing in favour of common sense as a requirement for democracy. This does not mean that *sensus communis* needs to be thought of as entailing a wide or huge number of agreements. Today we want pluralist democracies. We want people who practice different religions, who value different things, who want to live in different ways, etc. But if there is no shared domain, then the only thing that can prevail is *strength*, on the one hand, or *retreat* into individual life, on the other. That is all we are left with.

TT

There is a question that I have for later, but I think it would be better to ask now, regarding rhetoric since you mentioned that common sense is for Trump a rhetorical trope. *Sensus communis* is something that we know primarily from Cicero (2001). Of course, a lot of Roman authors, like Horace or Seneca, used the term in varied ways, but it is Cicero who has become the primary reference author regarding the role of *sensus communis* for democracy. And what I call in my book Arendt's 'third wave' or 'third phase' of her occupation with common sense, i.e. the period where what she has already presented *in nuce* in the *Human Condition* (1958)

but did not ripen until later in her work and especially in *The Life of the Mind* (1978) and the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1992), is characterised by her abandoning Aristotle and taking up Cicero as her main interlocutor. Now, what both Aristotle (2018) and Cicero (2001) share is a rejection of the sophists' instrumentalization of rhetoric. However, for Cicero, himself a lawyer and politician, and unlike for Aristotle, rhetoric does pertain to persuading and winning over a crowd in favour of a certain (political or personal) purpose and gain that is not necessarily the philosophical discovery of truth. Nonetheless, in order for the rhetors to win over their audience, the rhetors, as Cicero (2001) explicitly puts it, have to orient themselves to the customs, ideas and mentality of the community. In doing so, however, Cicero seems to underline two different things: first, that by having to refer to the *sensus communis* within a community in order to guide it towards a certain direction does not necessarily mean that one is a sophist or a demagogue. Second, as I at least try to argue in my contribution to our special issue, Cicero seems to attribute to the community that precedes and engulfs both the rhetor and the audience a subjectivating functionality. Common sense in the variation of *sensus communis* is that vehicle of a rhetorical socialization of the subject through which predominant political and social logics, cultural norms, personal inclinations and moral customs get fused with one another and are engrained into the subject not only – and this is the crux – as a means of subordination but also as a means towards the subject's collective self-determination.

SR

Yes, exactly, and there are more examples in this regard. One is Thomas Paine, who, did not operate initially from inside power. He was not a politician or a famous writer in 1776, but he was able to take the existing common sense in the British North American colonies and turn it in a direction that was not yet but which was ultimately rendered the *new* common sense. And Gramsci suggests in the early twentieth century doing something very similar, namely, that if you want to persuade people – most of whom all seem to be going in one direction – to switch directions, you cannot just tell them that 'this is the wrong direction'. You have to come back to what they believe, to show them what is going on and what is at stake and appeal to their core beliefs. Gramsci's political project seems to answer the question: how one can take what people know instinctively to be the way the world works, and then from the inside, turn that in a different direction? Paine gives us an example when he says something along the lines of 'small things do not rule bigger things in the world, so how can an island rule a continent?' And of course, if you stop and really think about this logic, there is no reason politically why a small entity cannot rule a bigger one, but he was taking an assumption that was already built into most people's minds, namely that bigger things dominate smaller things. And then he made this point into a springboard to try and get the American colonists of his time to see things differently in geopolitical terms. I think many demagogues today are trying something like that, but they are less successfully attuned to what people really believe. It is, of course, much harder to do this in a more diverse, more pluralist world and in a world in which more and more different kinds of people have already been empowered as self-governing citizens. Even Paine was really only talking to white, English-speaking men in a small place. It is more of a project today to figure out how to speak to a whole nation, not to mention even larger entities, Europeans, for instance, in a way that accounts for the reach of different religions, ethnic and racial backgrounds, economic positions, lived experiences etc. Common sense: we invoke it all the time, but it is harder to find, perhaps, than in the past.

TT

Thank you for mentioning Gramsci who is of course a very important author regarding the authoritarian dangers lurking in common sense but also the democratic promises that it brings along, and we have a great piece from Henrike Bloemen in our issue underlining exactly that, namely how at the same time exclusive and inclusive common sense can be. We will come back to this point later, but for the time being I want to go back to what you just alluded to, namely common sense as a political principle or vector of democratization. This reminds me of the so-called ‘Böckenförde-Dilemma’, or ‘Böckenförde-Diktum’ in German, one of most important, unwritten constitutional-political principles in post-war Germany formulated by the German legal scholar and justice on Germany’s Federal Constitutional Court, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde. Originally formulated in the early 1960s while Germany was a conservative, in its majority Christian, and fairly homogenous country, with the injuries of the collective responsibilities from WWII still present and intact, the discussion around the ‘Böckenförde-Dilemma’ was reignited in the 2000s, i.e. in a period where Germany had already transformed itself into a secular and multicultural country. The punchline of the dilemma in its original version is that the liberal state cannot provide the fundament that can hold it together (Böckenförde 2020). In comparison to a fundamentalist, an authoritarian or an absolutist state, the liberal state is lacking a similar ideological bedrock, as you called it earlier. Almost forty years later, in a series of interviews, Böckenförde (2009; 2010) seems to have come up with what could hold the liberal state together. He calls that ‘a unifying ethos and common sense’, in German *Gemeinsinn*, that makes itself known among those who live in this state and makes them want to live and share this state with one another. Do you think that there is some sort of a *democratic common sense*? And what would be its principles, fundaments or pillars?

SR

This is a critique – and I wish I were more informed than I am concerning Böckenförde – that has long been exerted against Jürgen Habermas, too. The critique of Habermas’s axiom of a ‘constitutional patriotism’ (2000; 2001) is precisely that it does not provide us with a lot to hold on to and that liberalism in general does not give people enough emotional common core. This is also one of the critiques of the liberal idea of choice, for instance, when it comes to abortion. Liberalism seems to suppose that we do not have to agree about the ethical questions here; we just have to be able to say, look, democracy is a matter of making up your own mind, doing what you want to do for you. And in many ways, that is important and appealing. I do not want to be thought of as somebody who is opposed to choice or liberalism, because, in fact, I think there is much to be said in their defence. But there is also a profound critique here, which is important. And this critique might have something to do and correlate with the appeal of right-wing movements today, even the ones that attach themselves to common sense, and this critique pertains to the fact that liberalism might indeed provide a very thin basis on which to hold democratic societies together. Perhaps it is not enough to just say that to be a democrat means to exercise your vote, and then to get out of the way and live in the fashion that you want to live. The choice framework at the heart of liberalism does not answer any larger questions, and it does not help us solve our moral dilemmas. After all, we all know that there are some things that we do not think are a good choice for anyone. Which is another way to say that every society has some taboos. Even Western liberal democracies like the US have some prohibited forms of behaviour. You cannot sell babies. You cannot have sex with children. You cannot take

any illegal drug you want, whether you bought it or not. There are things that we consider properly forbidden because at some point we (or our representatives) determined that enough of us agreed that this thing was *beyond* our shared moral compass. Liberalism does not acknowledge that very much, i.e. that those spaces exist. But in a sense these are attached to our common sense. We feel that we would undermine the social fabric if we let people act on every impulse that they had. Not only would they be dangerous in a physical way, but they would be morally hazardous.

3. Making Sense of the *Sense* in Common Sense

TT

Perfect, thank you very much for that. I would like now to turn to the third, more theoretical set of questions. You mentioned the entanglement of norms and emotions as vectors that are needed to keep democracy together. And I find it interesting that you said that in democracies we have to believe in something in order to be able to endure or want or even choose to live together. Sense, or *Sinn*, in German, coming from the Latin *sentio* and its derivative *sensus*, has always connoted a continuum spanning between feeling and understanding. What constitutes then the *sense* in common sense?

SR

Common sense fits a little bit comfortably and uncomfortably in discussions of the five senses. Sometimes people refer to common sense as ‘a sixth sense’, because traditionally it was located in the brain and therefore treated like an additional sense capacity. Now we think less often of common sense as a sense in a purely physiological kind of way. And yet, common sense is still attached often to notions of instinct, of habit, of experiential norms. The reason? Because the one thing that is not important to common sense is book learning. Common sense is not something that you study at school; it is not what you read in a university or check out of a library. You learn common sense by using some kind of basic intuition combined with the experience of your other senses. That is how we all have always learned common sense. You put your hand in a fire, it is really hot, you get burned, and you do not do it again. And that’s because your common sense tells you that you had better not repeat that exercise of sticking your hand in a fire if you do not want to get burned. So it is a complex notion actually, because common sense is not a purely emotional or purely physiological or purely intellectual set of values and beliefs. Common sense seems to come from the fact that we are alive in the world as sensible creatures. As such it *should* be uncontentious. But today common sense often finds itself in conflict with other kinds of knowledge. There are a lot of examples where what you learn in a classroom and what your common sense tells you actually do not intersect at all, even as we think that the latter should be the foundation of all other kinds of knowledge.

TT

You know, and I am sorry for just jumping in here, I have always found intriguing and fascinating that in your book on common sense, when analysing Aristotle’s understanding of *koine aesthesis* in *De Anima* (2017), you call common sense a ‘super sense’ (Rosenfeld 2011: 18). In my terminology, common sense would be a ‘collective sense’ precisely

because it comprises of all these different moments that you listed: it is never purely sensitive or sensual, or sensuous or sensible, or emotional or intellectual but somehow all of these parameters together. Therefore, it is a *collective sense* for me. Why ‘super sense’ and not ‘meta-sense’?

SR

Common sense requires *all* the other senses. ‘Meta-sense’ might work as well. I call common sense a ‘super sense’ in that its source is the *whole sensor* that humans have. And the question of the ‘sense’ in common sense invites us to ponder the meaning that the term ‘common’ has in different languages as well. Common in English has obviously two different meanings, both of which are important. Common means shared or jointly held, and common means ordinary, everyday, commonplace. And what is so interesting about common sense is that it is *shared* in the sense of widely familiar, but it is also a product of *individual* ordinary life. In a sense, everyone has the experience of finding something hot, of something burning them. It does not mean it has to have happened all at the same time. But it is shared because we all have had the experience of finding – across all our different cultural divides, ages, everything else – that hot things burn us. Common sense is also something very ordinary. It is also the most ordinary experience in the world to find out that something hot can burn you. The French sometimes substitute *le bon sens*, or good sense, which has less of a collective dimension, though it is often said that good sense is shared by most people. But good sense is slightly more specific. And we have seen that even in political life, common sense, while being collective, always excludes somebody. Note nobody calls it a universal sense; they call it common sense, meaning widely shared but not the possession of every human. Common sense always leaves open the possibility that there are some people out there who do not have either good sense or common sense. And those people can be located at either end of the social spectrum. They could be people that one would refer to as ‘idiots’ or ‘mentally deficient’; these are nasty ways of referring to people who do not have what the mainstream takes to be common sense. But people who lack common sense could also be elites, they could be intellectuals, they could be foreigners with crazy ideas or people who are living with their head in the sky, philosophers in a tower who have all kinds of obscure jargon and theories and cannot figure out how to tie their shoes.

TT

What about the German meanings of the word common and how does that impact the conceptualisation of common sense? You work at the intersection of different disciplines, you work in different countries, you work in different languages, you write about different periods in different countries, and you already mentioned the difference between the two meanings in English, the two different meanings in French. There are also the two different meanings of common sense in German, one meaning ordinary and shared or even ‘healthy’ and the other one meaning communal. There are two very concrete examples from current Swiss politics where these two meanings of common sense or *Gemeinsinn* were demonstrated in a direct and immediate way. In an interview days before a referendum that would decide – after decades – the expansion of the Swiss social-welfare state through a significant packet of measures, our current liberal President of the Swiss Confederation, while still being Head of the Swiss Federal Department of Finance, appealed to the ‘common sense’ of the Swiss people and asked them to vote down the packet of measures. To do so, she used the English term

‘common sense’ and asked the Swiss population to reject the expansion of the social-welfare state based on ‘common sense’, again while using the term in English.³ Seven months later in her New Year’s Speech at the National Swiss Television and after having become President of the Swiss Confederation, she used the German counterpart of the term common sense, namely *Gemeinsinn*, in order to express her gratitude but also pride regarding the functionality of Swiss democracy and the strong feelings of social cohesion and belonging, rule of law, and solidarity that bind the Swiss people to one another.⁴ On the one hand, we have ‘common sense’, in English, in order to appeal to the population’s conservative criteria to avoid the expansion of the social welfare state, since rejecting the referendum would mean cutting down state expenses, and on the other hand, *Gemeinsinn*, in German, when it comes to solidarity, social cohesion, feelings of belonging and participation. What does it tell us about the different understandings of common sense?

SR

I think the way you use the two different language examples is exactly right to demonstrate the different semantic contents that inhere in common sense. To use the English is to invoke something practical, a pseudo-British utilitarianism or something American. But when you move to German, it gets to something different. It says something about the core values of the people in Switzerland or of the people of the German-speaking world more generally who are bestowed with a different kind of collective feeling. And this gets to why common sense is such a slippery concept. I think it is important to think about what precise word or term is being used for what kind of occasion or in which situation because, though the term exists in different forms and a lot of different languages, each version has a slightly different valence. You know, there is this wonderful French book called *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Cassin et al. 2014), and what it suggests is that though we can find ways of explaining and even translating certain alien concepts, some are close to untranslatable, and even those that appear to be translatable still acquire different feelings and attributes when they are simply reused in different languages. I think that is one reason why Arendt went back to *sensus communis*: to get away from putting her concept in a specific national framework. It was an attempt to find a kind of pure conception of common sense that does not and cannot fall prey to Kant’s conceptualisation of common sense as *Gemeinsinn* and that is also not tricked by the German language’s many possibilities in this realm. But in a way, it was also an attempt to avoid making it the property of any people specifically. Americans generally, of course, have no qualms about this because most Americans use English as if it were a universal language.

TT

In modern Greek the equivalent for common sense would be *common logic* (κοινή λογική). Whereas the classic Aristotelian term is *koine aesthesis* (κοινή αἴσθησις), the modern term used for common sense is common logic.

SR

There you go. This is, of course, very different too, because it moves away from the sensory parameter inherent in some of the other modern versions.

4. Conceptualizing the *Common* in Common Sense

TT

How *common* is the common in common sense then?

SR

Theorists of populism have had really interesting things to say that are, I think, very applicable here. The great appeal of populism is that it talks about *the* people, *a* people, without ever having to specify exactly who those people are. You could also say ‘the American people’, you could say ‘the good people’, you could say ‘the true people’ (which is very insidious) etc. And what do you mean when putting it that way in relation to common sense? You mean, in a deliberately unspecific way, people who think *like this*. And by necessity, it means *not* the people who think differently. And those excluded people – given that populists often target a combination of elites and their allies – are less often business elites than scientific elites, cultural elites, intellectuals, along with people like immigrants or members of a religious minority who are seen as in cahoots with a certain kind of elite. A populist like Trump, as I mentioned before, also wants to suggest who’s outside of his version of common sense. That would be people like experts, but it would also be people like immigrants, who, he insists, are rapists and murderers or deranged. This categorisation of who does not belong to his common sense attacks both the top and the bottom of the social pyramid but lets the middle remain largely untouched. So, what Trump represents is not really a class politics, because it does not say anything about what economic class these people belong to, and that is important. He is not offering a Marxist framework at all. It is appealing to a looser category of anybody who is neither an intellectual elite nor one of their allies in a disfavoured category. A very good person on this question is Jan-Werner Mueller, a political scientist at Princeton, who has really interesting things to say about why populism is always anti-pluralist. And I think he is right. He doesn’t say anything about common sense, but his theory fits very well. What I think he is missing is the way common sense is a necessary tool for populists because common sense is the category of knowledge that is, by definition, anti-pluralist. It is shared, as you say, but it is not shared by everyone. And it is not sociologically specific; it is not a class formation where I can derive your class location by asking you about your profession or income or wealth. So common sense is almost as anti-class as it is anti-pluralist. Business leaders, for instance, are often associated with common sense. It is said that businesspeople, even if they are very wealthy, must have good sense because they have succeeded. And that’s not something that a class politics would see that way. A class politics would see them, by contrast, as having exploited other people to get ahead.

TT

Is common sense then a Western concept?

SR

Very hard question.

TT

I am thinking of Jacques Derrida's critique in *The Truth in Painting* (1987) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of Vanishing Present* (1999) where they argue about the 'cultural deficit' of Kant's appropriation and dependence of the subject on the Other in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2000).

SR

In the ways it is used today, at least rhetorically, I would say that common sense is a product of Western thought. So even when, say, recent Korean politicians invoke it, as they have, they are doing so because it has a utilitarian or business ring to it that is reminiscent of a Western capitalist democratic model of organisation or thought. But I do not feel qualified to say that there are not commensurate indigenous ideas that might be quite similar in other parts of the world. I cannot say, for example, whether there exists in Japanese culture a similar term that qualifies as a sort of counterpart to what we are calling common sense; it might well be the case. There may indeed be a version of common sense that every culture develops and potentially names that suggests collective values and instincts. But I will defer to others here more knowledgeable about thought in Asia, Africa and elsewhere around the globe and hope they provide us with better answers.

TT

You know, we actually have a paper in the special issue from Alice Simionato that explores notions of common sense within Chinese Neo-Confucianism.

SR

Oh, that is good to know, and I am looking forward to reading it and discovering parallel figures of thought. Therefore, I will only say that my own experience with this concept is largely as a Western European and Western hemispheric concept that has been used now in many parts of the world because of those latent associations.

TT

Beyond whether common sense is a Western-European or transatlantic concept, another categorisation is to me of importance, namely whether you would consider common sense a product of modernity. My question stems from the fact that it was Descartes (1996a; 1996b; 2006) who introduces the distinction between *le bon sens*, a 'good' common sense and *le sens commun*, a 'bad' common sense. Neither Aristotle, nor Cicero, nor the Stoics differentiated between a 'bad' and a 'good' version of common sense. They knew of *koine aesthesis* (Aristotle 2017), *sensus communis* (Cicero 2001), *koinonoemosyne* (Marcus Aurelius 2011) and more, but they did not differentiate between a good version of *sensus communis* and a bad version of *sensus communis*. Would it be safe to argue that the ambivalence regarding the evaluation of common sense is a symptom of modernity and of modern thought, and if so, what does it tell us about our current modern, late modern or postmodern condition or identity?

SR

I think it is indeed a modern concept and that it is indeed an invention of modernity. However, two preliminary shifts were necessary in this regard, and I try to lay this out at the beginning of my book on common sense. One, the sense of what the brain entails shifts as an effect of the Scientific Revolution so that the common sense is no longer thought by the seventeenth century to be an actual part of the brain. That leaves it open to be interpreted much more metaphorically and thus to enter political discourse. And I really think it is in the politics of the early eighteenth century in Britain that common sense first becomes a part of political life. In that sense, common sense is a very modern concept, however, a modern concept with many ancient antecedents, as your work shows.

5. On the Concrete-Utopian Character of Common Sense

TT

Moving to the end of our interview, and thank you very much for the time that you have taken and for the detailed manner in which you have responded to my questions, can we agree then that common sense is not a faculty and something inherently innate to the subject, but at the same time is also not the product of a discourse that is imposed upon the subject?

SR

Yes, absolutely. I think common sense is both instinctive *and* culturally reinforced all the time. Like many things, it cannot be confined to one realm or the other. It is not *exclusively* a cultural product, as the example of getting your fingers burned by putting them in a fire tells you. But our instincts do not rise to the level of common sense *until* they are shared and articulated. So, partly it is the sharing and the articulation of these instincts that makes them into commonsensical truisms by which people live. That they are also culturally constructed is evident from the fact that if we look at what counts as common sense in different moments and times and places, it is also highly variable. That God created the drinks we are having is a culturally specific and even disputable claim. It was not for Thomas Reid in eighteenth-century Scotland, but it is for us. So, common sense can and does shift over time and space even as it has to be based in some kind of instinctual or sensory experience for it to be widely shared. In this light, and this is what interests me as a historian, we can say that there is a realm of things that are supposed to be trans-historical, trans-cultural, trans-class, trans-gender and trans all other forms of distinctions, and yet history can show that those things are contextually embedded and particular. And what interests me is their staying power, the fact that ideas that are deemed common sense are wider spread and generally endure longer than other kinds of notions. But then there *are* moments when that common sense is shattered. For instance, take the fact that so many people, especially among the young, now believe that there are not two sexes that are always easily demarcated one from the other. This suggests the beginnings of a shift in longstanding common sense, which may be why it is so threatening to so many people. It is fascinating to look at what causes basic ideas to evolve and the fact that in order for this to happen there has to be some relationship between the instinctual and the culturally specific.

TT

You know, I am enjoying our discussion especially because in your answers you kind of anticipate the questions that I have already preformulated. So, and given that you mentioned how concepts evolve and how even conceptual revolutions take place, next on my list is a bundle of questions concerning the futurity of the concept of common sense. Andrew Norris' paper in our special issue argues that common sense has an aspirational character that allows and urges us – as he puts it – 'not to describe what is, but to move towards what might be'. Can common sense prepare the future, or does it have a solely archiving function? Does it just document instincts and assumptions that – as you just mentioned – thanks to their sharedness have achieved the status of common sense, or can we use common sense as a transformative means of realising the future? You know my work and you know that one of the arguments in my book is that by trying to make common sense properly common, by including the excluded and by being on the lookout to avoid prospective exclusions, we lay down the fundamentals for a more inclusive and democratic, maybe even utopian, society.

SR

I agree with that, yet I am mostly concerned with the fact that common sense can sometimes be deeply reactionary in the sense that it reinforces the way we have always done things or the way we have always thought. So there is a way in which it can be profoundly *backward* looking. You started this conversation with the wonderful example of 'make America great again' being attached to common sense. This is very appropriate because it testifies to the inherent *conservatism* in some notions of common sense. But the utopian part, to my mind – and you can tell me if you agree or not – is that it holds the promise of shifting the discourse built upon it. And I think that the great theorists of common sense were actually all aware of that potential. If you can achieve some kind of low-level space of agreement and if you do not eliminate entirely the possibility of expertise as well, i.e. if you do not say that people with common sense have to reject everything else that doesn't correspond, then I do believe that you can shift the existing discourse with the aid of common sense. You can make new truths and new aspirations possible. So there is a utopian idea inherent in common sense, the same way expertise can include a certain utopian dimension. By itself, either is dangerous in the realm of politics; both common sense and expertise lead us astray when not tempered by the other. But in a smart combination, as, for example, following the dictates of Gramsci, meaningful change becomes possible. Take the case of gender, again, for instance. We have already, in the twentieth century, come a long distance in thinking about sexuality in ways that have undermined traditional common sense and produced new forms of liberation for women and gay people of both sexes. And that might be exactly what is going to happen with gender. We might not be at that point yet; in fact, we are at a point in many places, including the US, where what is most obvious is a kind of backlash and reaction to the undoing of the old common sense. But obviously something is also shifting in our common sense about gender, the same way it already has about sexuality in much of the world.

TT

Isn't this at the same time the democratic character of common sense? Common sense is not 'expert' knowledge, nor is it an avant-garde type of knowledge, nor is it a secluded, 'ivory tower' type of knowledge.

SR

Absolutely. And that is why it has been so important to so many kinds of liberation movements in the past. When enslaved people and then disenfranchised people could say something along the lines of ‘look, I did not go to school and I cannot read that book, but my common sense tells me what’s what’, then common sense became a moral sense as well as a practical sense, and you can build democratic movements upon that epistemic foundation without insisting that everybody be a university graduate with a PhD. So, yes, common sense always has the seeds of *potential liberation within it*. But at the same time, there is always a risk since it is a very flexible concept and term. Like populism itself, it is not a concrete ideology or set of ideas. It can attach itself to lots of objects and politics. I like to think of populism as a kind of narrative, and common sense is a part of that narrative. Populists insist that the ‘real’ people know something that other people do not; the real people know what’s real. And if we could get to a place where the real people’s type of knowledge was widespread enough, we would basically be able to transcend partisan politics. We would be in a place in which common sense had replaced political fights with simple, common and shared solutions. So, yes, common sense is utopian in that sense, but it can be used *both* for retrograde purposes and for progressive ones.

TT

Would you then say that there are *practical* or *political forms* of common sense? Are there or can there be *institutionalised* forms of common sense?

SR

Hmm. Let me think about that for a minute, because this is an excellent question. I think *grassroots movements*, by nature, have to be common sense movements to be successful. That’s because grassroots movements do not generally start from inside institutions and they do not start with an authority of their own. All leaders can do is come up with a persuasive argument and try to get a lot of people to share it and adopt it. So grassroots politics have to grow into common sense movements. And grassroots movements are really civil society movements; they are not even necessarily attached to political parties. Think of some green eco-movements, for instance. They have to start from some sort of shared assumption, like ‘the planet is getting warmer, and we ordinary people need to do something about it’. Then people can debate what that thing is going to be. Is it going to be flying less? Is it going to be buying different products? Or what? The problem right now, of course, is that extreme partisan politics make common sense movements difficult to achieve because they have bred a kind of scepticism whereby everything seems *political in the tribal sense* rather than commonsensical. So if, in an actual common-sense world, we would all basically agree that we need to do something to cool down the planet, in a highly partisan world, the minute I say ‘climate change’, the Trump-people say, ‘oh, that is your party’s idea, that is not my party’s idea, and it’s likely a hoax’. The irony is that the more Trump and similar figures talk about common sense, the harder it gets to locate any useful version of it.

TT

Yes, and I like the idea that grassroot movements are an ‘authentic’, or genuine political form of common sense, but the institutionalisation of common sense as an institutionalised common *good* would contain in it the danger of becoming authoritarian.

SR

Let us say I want to generate an ecological movement. I cannot start by printing out all the latest science articles from seven technical journals and handing them out on the street. That is not going to get me anywhere, is it? Because science is practiced today in a way that is actually antithetical, for good reason, to a lot of people's common-sense view of the world. It operates in different terms and by different means than daily life, including experimental and mathematical approaches to reality that most of us, myself included, do not have much access to. But if you can convince me with pictures and lived testimony and basic temperature readouts that summer is hotter every year, and this is true whether I live in sub-Saharan Africa or in Scandinavia, and this poses a danger to humans and animals alike, then I might be able to say, 'well, what can we do that would make us *all* more comfortable walking down the street?' And that is where a grassroots movement would originate. If the journal articles were important as data or as potential solutions, that work would have to be *translated* through some explanatory mechanism into an idiom that would be recognisable to ordinary people and that I would not need advanced mathematical skills to understand or explain. I think one reason common sense seems so appealing, even aspirational, at the moment is not just because we are terribly divided and it sounds like an easy solution, but also because a lot of ordinary people feel very left out of political life today. The problems are ever more complex and the touted solutions ever more obscure. For example, when the EU issues some enormous report of 1,000 pages on a pressing question, it is usually super technical, and most people have no idea what is in it, and they are never going to find out, they are never going to even look, and they would not know what to look for if they did. And that goes for well-educated people, I want to stress, as well. The world of economics and other sciences often seems to run counter to the way people navigate everyday life with good reason. We live in a very complex world, so this is not a critique of experts exactly. But when democracy seems to be run in a purely technocratic way, or when educational elites seem to have captured politics, common sense becomes a kind of weapon for the weak but numerous.

TT

Matteo Santarelli's paper in our issue underlines – from a pragmatist perspective – exactly this bidirectional character and the co-dependency between science and common sense and how this – at the very end – is crucial for a democratic reappropriation of common sense, as we already talked about. But there is also a second reason why I like this idea of yours, that grassroot movements are an 'authentic' or genuine political form of common sense. The reason is that it suggests that common sense needs to become or work in a somehow *expansive* way. It cannot be a kind of *heterotopia*. It cannot be something isolated, encapsulated, only for the some that live somewhere. Common sense needs to engulf as many people as possible or else it will not have the conceptual standing of something common. It cannot become exclusive.

SR

Exclusive is a good word. I think that is quite right. Common sense can be demagogic and dangerous, and it can be simultaneously collective and liberating. And it is that tension that is so interesting in this story. Either version has a kind of populism about it: it is something shared, instinctive, not about book learning, but because it is not ideological, it can be taken in

two different directions. It is all about the *content* it is given and the *social uses* it is put to rather than its inherent political orientation.

6. Common Sense as a Performative Concept

TT

I think this is a great last line, as it points to the *ambivalence* produced by and even inherent in the concept. Working on the concept, I found it always a complicated and vexing methodological question whether one *should* fixate on one use of the concept or rather observe common sense as an embedded and performative concept that unravels its own contextualized dynamic. If the former is the case, then one should take off from *one* of the paradigmatically suggested understandings of common sense. In this manner, common sense should be understood exclusively as an *epistemological truism* (Moore 2013), or an *innate human faculty* in the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, or an *analytical-logical category*, as I argue elsewhere (Telios 2026) leaning on Aristotle, or a *rhetorical vector* of socialization based on Cicero, or an *aesthetic means* according to Kant (2000), or a *purely political category*, in Arendt's (1992) appropriation of the term. In addition, one could also *either* declare it impossible, as – most emphatically – Jacques Rancière (1999; 2002; 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2015) does, or underline its productive, yet liminal and limitational character as Jean-François Lyotard (1988; 1995) or Gilles Deleuze (1994) do and Itay Snir persuasively showcases in his article for this special issue. Notwithstanding, if the latter is the case, namely if common sense is a *performative* concept that *unravels its own contextual dynamic*, then it does not mean that the semantics of the concept are determined by its social, political, cultural, economical etc. embeddedness and contextualization. As Philipp Hohg argues in his contribution to our issue, common sense could be said to have a critical character as long as it becomes a progressive process through which we become aware of the irrationality and limitedness of our opinions and help each other to widen our viewpoints so as to test and redesign the (social, political, cultural etc.) parameters and conditions of the ways we think. For me it is exactly this *performativity*, as I would like to call it, that common sense demonstrates and exerts, namely the fact that common sense (co-)defines its own contextualization and conceptualization, that I find so interesting in the concept.

SR

So, I would say two things. The reason it is so hard to write about common sense is maybe, one, that it evolves over time, that what we mean by a term that looks the same is very different in different moments. A kind of conceptual history would show that. At the same time or second, it has uses both rhetorical and practical that can lead to very different kinds of politics. Even as we think it is important, it takes us in a variety of different directions. So you could certainly describe it as a slippery concept or an 'ambiguous' concept, as you put it a moment ago. But at the same time, it is a fascinating one because it is also so *foundational to modern political life*. Without it, that is, if you did not think there was such a thing as common sense, it would be hard to explain why ordinary people should even be trusted with a vote in the first place. Why would you let a person who is seemingly ignorant in the school sense decide about the questions of politics? We do that in democracies because

we think that they can at least make decisions on the basis of some kind of common sense combined with lived experience; since they live in the world, they necessarily know what the world is like. And they do not have to understand the fine points on nuclear policy in Iran, for example, in order to decide what is generally in their own and their neighbours' and their fellow citizens' best interest. Politics, before about the eighteenth century, was considered a pretty *esoteric* science almost everywhere. It was not something that every random person walking down the street was thought to have any need to know about or any ability to know about. Common sense alone makes possible the idea that a) politics belongs to everyone and b) that common sense and politics go together, the former illuminating the latter. But we have been struggling with the details of their relationship ever since the eighteenth century.

TT

Dear Sophia, I think that this is all. I think I have all I need for the special issue, and the special issue does deal with a lot of the topics that we discussed. I would like to thank you for your time and your insights.

SR

The pleasure was all mine. Thank you very much for the invitation to talk, and I am looking forward to your book and of course the special issue.

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Notes

1. The interview took place on Saturday, 21 June 2025, at the Café Le Rostand in Paris.
2. This refers to my post-doctoral thesis (*Habilitationsschrift*) submitted in March 2025 at the University of St. Gallen under the title *Common Sense: A Declaration of Dependence* and currently under review to be published. In this book, I suggest an understanding of common sense as 'the articulation of differences to a collective'. To do so, I revisit Aristotle's concept of *κοινή αἴσθησις*, Cicero's concept of *sensus communis*, Immanuel Kant's concept of *Gemeinsinn* and Hannah Arendt's conceptualization of common sense as 'worldly togetherness'. Against understandings of common sense as a shared intellectual property, these four theoretical frameworks bring to the fore, following the fundamental insight at the core of common sense, the dependence of the subject on its/the Other(s), hence also the subtitle of the book. However, theoretical reflection is not enough to guarantee also the materialization and actualization of the common to a collective. Rather, this is the domain of political practice. To this purpose, I suggest constellational critique, overdetermined solidarity and *koinotopia* (from the Greek *κοινός*: the common + *utopia*) as forms of enactment of common sense. The purpose of these practices is to safeguard the common in common sense from tendencies that deny the constitutive dependence of the subject and its/the Other(s) on each other and, in doing so, to disallow the reappearance and reinstitution of authoritarian practices that have always haunted the concept of common sense.
3. Available at <<https://www.srf.ch/play/tv/-/video/-?urn=urn:srf:video:240e77f1-30df-40af-80dc-9282c35d973c>> (last accessed 22 October 2025).
4. Available at <<https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/neujahrsansprache-bundespraesidentin-keller-sutter-lobt-schweizer-bescheidenheit>> (last accessed 22 October 2025).

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