

Common Sense: A Political History

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Marion Ledwig

In this original and excellent volume Rosenfeld has succeeded in providing the reader with a political history of common sense from London in the 1680s through to almost present-day American politics. When one reads the front flap of the book, though, one gets the impression that even George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's politics will be analysed in depth with regard to their common sense politics. Yet this is only spuriously done. It is also surprising on first sight to see that philosophers such as Kant, Gadamer, and Hannah Arendt, not to mention James Beattie and the common sense school of Thomas Reid, are discussed at considerable length, as one wouldn't immediately have thought that they had had so much political influence. Yet Rosenfeld manages to include not just these thinkers, but also ideas drawn from Dadaism and Native American culture in her breath-taking endeavour. All serve in one way or another Rosenfeld's overall goal, stated at the end of the introduction:

'this study should be approached as an exercise in philosophical history ... That means the goal is to discover not only what happened in the past but also whether Arendt was right. Is it really common sense, born of the quotidian experiences and social interactions of ordinary people, that both makes democracy possible and sustains it? And if so, at what price? The pages that follow are intended as one historian's answer' (p. 16).

Does Rosenfeld really answer these questions in the span of the book? In the end, it might be that the reader feels a little bit puzzled, because Rosenfeld makes clear that over the centuries the term common sense has taken on a multitude of definitions and has been instrumentalised by so many diverse political factions that it

becomes increasingly difficult to see how such a thing could make democracy possible and even have the capacity to sustain it. Rosenfeld, however, points out that:

‘Democracy requires for its success both the promotion of common values and the very notion that there is something out there called “common sense” that has an important role to play in political life’ (p. 256).

She also makes clear the price to pay, namely that common sense limits ‘what we can hear and from whom’ (p. 256), so that:

‘It is vital that some individuals in the modern world consciously position themselves outside of the reigning common sense and keep a close eye on the complex and powerful work that it does.’ (p. 257)

The overall content of the volume can be summarised as follows. In the first chapter, the period of 1688–1739 in London is depicted, and it is pointed out how the Aristotelian concept of common sense contributed to the peaceful and non-coercive social and moral order of the day in order to secure stability for the ruling class. One of the many illuminating side points of the chapter is that even anatomists, such as Leonardo da Vinci, tried to locate common sense in the human body.

Chapter two turns to Scottish Aberdeen, encompassing the years 1758–70, and dealing with James Beattie and the common sense philosophy of Thomas Reid. I find it quite interesting that Rosenfeld spends so much time on Beattie, since nowadays Beattie is rarely discussed as a philosopher, with most modern philosophers considering his work inferior to that of Thomas Reid. Rosenfeld even argues that Beattie’s basic principles of common sense sound like a hodgepodge from our modern philosophical perspective. In this regard I would disagree, however. For the list Beattie comes up with would still be considered by most philosophers of today as vital and fundamental philosophical issues, such as the problem of induction, what is truth, does God exist, what is personal identity, what is causation, what is real, what is morally right, etc. Furthermore, Beattie’s method of proving something by showing that the opposite leads to absurdities is even today a technique in philosophy for discrediting a person’s position. However, the reason Beattie is discussed so thoroughly by Rosenfeld is of course explained and justified by Beattie’s major role in popularising common sense.

According to Rosenfeld the main points the Aberdonians promoted were first, the universality of common sense putting weight on the judgments of everyman, second, that common sense could be a foundation for knowledge and promote a sense of community, and third, that it could be used as a method against their adversaries.

In chapter three Rosenfeld defends (among other things) the view that proverbs are a form of common sense. (1) Moreover, she points out that whereas the Aberdonians left space for God with their common sense, the non-conformist writers of Amsterdam in the period of 1760–75 took common sense to mean that one should think like reasonable savages untrained in Christian thinking, so that common sense can be used as a means to different ends. That the latter is possible could in my opinion also be supported using proverbs, because for many proverbs there exist counter-proverbs, such as the German proverbs ‘Gegensätze ziehen sich an’ (opposites attract each other) versus ‘gleich und gleich gesellt sich gern’ (similar things like to get together). Thus, it seems possible to find proverbs according to one’s needs bolstering the position one wants to defend.

Chapter four proceeds to revolutionary America, to Philadelphia in 1776, and analyses Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense*, which highlights the fact that common sense doesn’t derive from mass behaviour, common usage, and/or universal consent. According to Rosenfeld in Paine’s view employing common sense leads to sure knowledge and is a means for undermining what are considered unquestionable positions. With

regard to the pamphlet it is valuable to know that Paine originally had another title in mind and that the notion of common sense is only employed four times in the whole manuscript which might explain why some contemporaries considered his way of using the concept to be ambiguous.

In chapter five, Rosenfeld jumps back to Paris, 1790–2, to defend the view that common sense was used to criticise democracy. Rosenfeld comes up with the following explanation as to why common sense failed in aiding the revolutionary cause in France: she points out that the first innovations of the French revolution such as dividing France into geometric departments and writing the national constitution had nothing in common with self-evident truths, one of common sense's hallmarks. I was wondering, however, whether an earlier manifestation of current French-American mutual antipathy might be responsible for the missing influence. Yet, Grave (2) points out that it was actually Royer-Collard who imported common sense philosophy to France and that Royer-Collard's pupil Cousin as minister of public instruction made common sense philosophy part of the official philosophy of France. The latter, however, occurred many years after the French revolution. Another French common sense philosopher was Buffier (1724), but this was many years before the French revolution, making Buffier even a predecessor to Reid. Thus, Paine's common sense ideas might not have swept back to France, because common sense was already established there.

Chapter six proceeds to the modern world, namely from Kant's Königsberg to Arendt's New York City. Rosenfeld defends the view that Kant applies common sense only to aesthetics and not to morality or politics. However, the eminent Kant scholar Ameriks (3) is of a different opinion by at least adding ethics to common sense's agenda. In favour of the latter position is Kant's statement: 'No doubt the concept of "right", in its common-sense usage, contains all that the subtlest speculation can develop out of it'. (4) Di Giovanni (5) seems to suggest an even wider scope of common sense in Kant by claiming that Kant (6) advocates critical common sense in his 1786 essay *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself In Thinking?* Ledwig (7) even goes so far as to claim that there is a certain parallel between Reid's common sense principles and Kant's a priori knowledge, namely that they both mean certain propositions believed in common. Thus, it is not as obvious as Rosenfeld wants the reader to believe that Kant applies common sense only to aesthetics.

Leaving Kant for a brief period behind, but staying with aesthetics, Rosenfeld turns to Dadaism and portrays the movement as a subversion of sense, also including common sense. Starting out from Kant's aesthetics Gadamer, like Rosenfeld, advanced the restoration of concepts such as Bildung, common sense, judgment, and taste with regard to their ethical and political connotations. Rosenfeld translates Bildung as cultivation. I find that problematic, for Bildung literally translated means education, and although one would hope that someone who is educated is also cultivated, that doesn't necessarily follow. Moreover, it seems reasonable that Gadamer meant education, for during the Second World War a proper education couldn't be guaranteed in Germany because of the extensive bombings, teachers becoming soldiers, etc. and the provision of education thus had to be rebuilt after the war.

Finally, Rosenfeld deals with Hannah Arendt, like Gadamer a former student of Heidegger. According to Rosenfeld, Arendt's answer to the question why democracy hadn't prevented the totalitarianism of Hitler and Stalin and the barbarism of the Second World War is the failure to cultivate common sense, as found in New England town meetings. I agree with Arendt, for there must have been a good reason why Hitler ordered the *Gleichschaltung* –referring to the different legal measures taken by the Nazi government after Hitler took power as chancellor of Germany to ensure collective adherence to the Nazi doctrine – which prevented the discussion of different opinions typical of town meetings. Rosenfeld ends her book by pointing out that in contemporary politics common sense is used mainly by right wing politicians and explains this by its recurrence to simple solutions. She, however, also emphasizes, and I agree with her, that in today's world simplicity, although desired by so many different people, might not be enough to master our increasingly complex world.

As an overall evaluation of the book I would say that it is eloquently written and deals with an enormous amount of primary and secondary literature, including many references to popular journals, magazines, pamphlets and even plays. In her book Rosenfeld points out the diverse ways common sense has been used

throughout history and also what common sense actually stands for. Her endeavour has been unique, since the different political implications and usages of common sense have not been dealt with before. Moreover, with her volume she puts the salience of common sense to the political forefront – something which one wouldn't have guessed considering the simplicity of common sense. As common sense has been ridiculed and hasn't been taken seriously by many philosophers, this book might partially rectify the status of common sense and its importance for at least political endeavours.

One drawback of the book might be that not all philosophers who can be considered common sense philosophers are covered by Rosenfeld's book. However, this would have been impossible to accomplish and not conducive to her main end and project – besides it might be a matter of controversy who falls under that concept. Another drawback could be that there are quite some French quotes which are not translated into English. There are also 14 pages of pieces of art, title pages, etc. depicting common sense in its various guises with no explicit reference to it in the main text of the book. Though there are some explanations underneath the respective pieces and although it is laudable to have them enclosed, the reader might be a bit puzzled to have them in the middle of the book without any kind of reference to them in the main text. Moreover, it seems strange that in the acknowledgments the author states that Einstein had something intriguing to say about common sense without mentioning Einstein in the main text at all. I was really curious what he actually said! But these are only minor misgivings. In general, it was a real pleasure reading the book and there is much to learn from it. With regard to the audience for this book, I would recommend it to experts in the field of history of philosophy and political theory, but advanced graduate students might also profit from it since it is written in such a way that everyone can understand it. One might even go so far as to say that anyone who is interested in history, philosophy, and politics would find this book a great read.

Notes

1. M. Ledwig, *Common Sense: Its History, Method, and Applicability* (New York, NY, 2007), chapter five. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 2–4. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. K. Ameriks, 'A commonsense Kant?', in *Proceedings and Addresses of The American Philosophical Association*, ed. W. E. Mann, 79, 2 (2005), 19–45, 19. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. I. Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by N. Kemp Smith (London, 1976), B61. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. G. di Giovanni (1998), 'Hume, Jacobi, and common sense: an episode in the reception of Hume in Germany at the time of Kant', *Kant-Studien*, 89 (1998), 44–58, 47, 53. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. I. Kant, *Kants Werke*, vol. 8 (Berlin, 1968). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Ledwig, chapter three. [Back to \(7\)](#)

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