

Common Sense

Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given time and place.

—SELECTIONS FROM THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS, 326

Senso comune, in the notebooks, is that accumulation of taken-for-granted “knowledge” to be found in every human community. In any given time and place, this accumulation provides a heterogeneous bundle of assumed certainties that structure the basic landscapes within which individuals are socialized and chart their individual life courses. The problem for those who read the notebooks in English, as I do, is that *senso comune* has no simple, English equivalent. The standard translation, common sense, is a mistranslation. The Anglophone reader who wants to grasp the meaning *common sense* has for Gramsci needs to begin by recognizing the difference between the English term *common sense* and *senso comune*.

The term *common sense* has a complex history, laid out in exemplary fashion in Sophia Rosenfeld’s *Common Sense: A Political History*. It originated as a technical term (*koinè aisthèsis*) in Aristotelian philosophy that named a supposed extra sense, beyond the five basic ones (vision, hearing, taste, smell, and touch). Possessed by all humans, this sense was thought of as enabling us to organize the disparate impressions received from the other five. It was at the beginning of the eighteenth century that this old philosophical term first acquired its modern English meaning: “[T]hose plain, self-evident truths or

conventional wisdom that one needed no sophistication to grasp and no proof to accept precisely because they accorded so well with the basic (common sense) intellectual capacities and experiences of the whole social body” (Rosenfeld 2011, 23). For the English-speaker, common sense came to denote, in the words of the *OED*, “good sound practical sense; combined tact and readiness in dealing with the every-day affairs of life; general sagacity.” *Senso comune*, by contrast, is a more neutral term that lacks these strong positive connotations, referring rather to the beliefs and opinions held in common, or thought to be held in common, by the mass of the population; all those heterogeneous narratives and accepted “facts” that structure so much of what we take to be no more than simple reality. Despite its being a mistranslation, I have nevertheless chosen to use the English term rather than leave *senso comune* untranslated.¹ Coupling *common sense* and Gramsci’s radically different understanding of the taken-for-granted in everyday life will, I hope, help draw attention to some of the hidden baggage that comes with the English term, and in addition provide Anglophones with an alternative way of thinking about this apparently self-evident word and what it names. I begin with the English concept of common sense.

Plain Wisdom

As human beings, we have a basic need to feel we understand the world in which we live. All of us, whoever we are and wherever we live, are continually engaged in a process of making sense of the everyday reality we confront. Most of the time, we do not consciously think much about this: we feel we know the world (or worlds) we inhabit and are able, more or less unthinkingly, to fit what happens to us into our preexisting narratives of how things are. We may be happy, angry, or resigned to what we perceive as reality, but in general we tend to assume that we know how to navigate our way through it. Those of us who are English-speakers often refer to the knowledge we use in this scarcely conscious way as common sense, the meaning of which we take as self-evident. And as long as we do not think too hard about it, common sense can be defined easily enough along the lines of the *OED* definition, given above, or, to take another of the *OED*’s definitions: “The endowment of natural intelligence possessed by rational beings; ordinary, normal or average understanding; the plain wisdom which is everyone’s inheritance.” The obviousness of common

1. For an argument for staying with the Italian term, see Thomas (2010, 16).

sense is the obviousness to which the Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart appealed when, in 1964, he famously refused to define hard-core pornography, explaining, “[P]erhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it” (*Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 US 184 [1964]). In other words, on being shown a possibly pornographic movie, all those with “ordinary, normal or average understanding” know whether it is indeed pornographic, even if they could not articulate why. Central to the notion of common sense is that its truths need, as Rosenfeld writes, “no sophistication to grasp and no proof to accept.” Their truth is agreed to by “the whole social body,” and immediately apparent to anyone of normal intelligence.

But is this plain wisdom supposedly possessed by all normal rational beings always so obvious, or shared by the whole social body? Take, for instance, the statement by one political commentator, Chris Matthews, in a full-page ad for the MSNBC cable channel in the *New York Times* (December 25, 2011). Alongside two giant photos of Matthews are three short sentences: “Rebuilding America creates jobs. It’s not about politics. It’s about common sense.” This is an example of common sense as an appeal to an incontrovertible fact, something that any rational being cannot but recognize as true. But what does “rebuilding America” mean? How would it translate into actual policies? It seems unlikely that the common sense of a self-professed liberal like Matthews would seem similarly obvious to a libertarian like Ron Paul, or a Tea Party enthusiast. All too often one rational being’s obvious fact is another’s questionable, or flat out wrong, assertion. There is more than one common sense. And then these incontrovertible facts have a way of shifting over time. A film that might have seemed obviously pornographic in the 1950s, might by today’s standards be judged as warranting no more than PG certification.

An additional complication is common sense’s two distinct strands of meaning. “In modern parlance,” as Rosenfeld writes, “we sometimes use common sense to mean the basic human faculty that lets us make elemental judgments about everyday matters based on everyday real-world experience . . . Other times we mean the widely shared and seemingly self-evident conclusions drawn from this faculty, the truisms about which all sensible people agree without argument or even discussion” (2011, 1). The slippage between these meanings is one source of common sense’s persuasive force: no person with this assumed basic human faculty could deny the truth of commonsense facts.

Common Sense and Good Sense

It is the second of Rosenfeld's meanings that predominates in the notebooks: in general, common sense is the assemblage of truisms accepted within a particular social world, the popular knowledge referred to in the epigraph of this chapter, which, while always heterogeneous, also assumes relatively rigidified forms (SPN, 326). In this, Gramsci's common sense differs from another way of conceptualizing taken-for-granted knowledge that has been adopted by many social scientists. This is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Habitus is defined by Bourdieu as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, . . . principles which generate and organize practices and representations" (Bourdieu 1990, 53). In the course of their socialization, individuals internalize the particular dispositions of their time and place. Given how many social scientists have adopted habitus as a way of naming taken-for-granted knowledge, it is worthwhile noting the key difference that while *common sense* in the notebooks refers primarily to the content of popular knowledge, *habitus* refers to the cognitive structures or dispositions that generate that knowledge.²

In addition to focusing on popular knowledge rather than mental structures, the common sense of the notebooks, unlike habitus, is inherently unsystematic. Certain elements of these assemblages of truisms may exhibit shared characteristics (the extent to which they do can only be determined by empirical investigation), but as a whole these accumulations are too multiple and various to constitute a coherent system. This incoherence, for Gramsci always a negative quality, reflects the condition of subalternity itself. As he writes in one passage, "Common sense takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and [inconsistent], in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is" (SPN, 419).³

Common sense is not confined to the masses, however. In another note, for instance, after distinguishing between philosophy and common sense, Gramsci immediately adds, "But every philosophy has a tendency to become the common sense of a fairly limited environment (that of all the intellectuals)" (SPN,

2. Crehan (2011b) provides an in-depth exploration of the difference between Gramsci's *common sense* and Bourdieu's.

3. Where *inconsistent* appears, Gramsci writes *inconsequente*, which Hoare and Nowell Smith translate as *inconsequential*. In this context, *inconsistent* would be a more accurate translation. I am grateful to Frank Rosengarten for drawing my attention to this mistranslation.

330). To some degree, we all live in a commonsense world, just not the same one: “Every social class has its own ‘common sense’” (SCW, 420). We all continually channel the stream of events that wash over us into familiar narratives, making sense of what would otherwise appear random. The knowledge we draw on to do this is derived both from the particular circles in which we move, and our own life experiences as these are mediated by the narratives available to us. Over time this knowledge comes to constitute a solid, emotionally persuasive core against which we test both what happens to us, and how others explain the world to us. In a sense, we all have our own particular stock of common sense. Much of this will be shared by others in our immediate environment, diverging as those others become more distant. At any historical moment, even within the same place, there will be multiple narratives, some closely connected and overlapping, some conflicting and contradictory, but all of which are, to some rational beings, self-evident truths. One way to think about this tangle of narratives, which seem in certain ways to resemble each other and yet may not share any single characteristic, is as sharing what Wittgenstein termed “family resemblances.” When we look at the multitude of apparently self-evident truths defined as common sense, it is hard to identify any one constant feature. We see rather “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” that, as with “the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross” (Wittgenstein 1968, 32). Similarly, while there is no one characteristic that all instances of common sense share, they seem, nonetheless, related. And it is these seemingly obvious similarities that help persuade us that there is indeed a single entity, common sense.

Despite all his criticisms, Gramsci’s attitude to common sense is far from wholly negative. Embedded within the chaotic confusion of common sense that is both home and prison, he identifies what he terms *buon senso* (good sense). For instance, taking the common expression “being philosophical about it,” he notes that while this expression may contain “an implicit invitation to resignation and patience,” it can also be seen as an “invitation to people to reflect and to realise fully that whatever happens is basically rational and must be confronted as such.” This appeal to use reason rather than blind emotion constitutes “the healthy nucleus that exists in ‘common sense,’ the part of it which can be called ‘good sense’ and which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent” (SPN, 328). Note that this good sense still needs to be made “more unitary and coherent,” work that is done by intellectuals. Reflecting on “the merit of what is normally termed ‘common sense’ or ‘good

sense;” he concludes that this merit consists not simply “in the fact that, if only implicitly, common sense applies the principle of causality, but in the much more limited fact that in a whole range of judgments common sense identifies the exact cause, simple and to hand, and does not let itself be distracted by fancy quibbles and pseudo-profound, pseudoscientific metaphysical mumbo-jumbo” (SPN, 348).

For Gramsci, we could say, common sense is a multistranded, entwined knot of, on the one hand, clear sightedness (good sense), which is not fooled by the sophistry of spin doctors; but, on the other, blinkered shortsightedness clinging defensively to the comfortable and the familiar. Common sense is, as he puts it, “crudely neophobe and conservative” (SPN, 423). But common sense is more than this; its nuggets of good sense also reflect “the creative spirit of the people.” Those in search of genuine social transformation need to begin with those nuggets. As he writes in a passage quoted in the previous chapter, “Is it possible that a ‘formally’ new conception can present itself in a guise other than the crude, unsophisticated version of the populace?” (SPN, 342).

The doubleness of the attitude to common sense we find in the notebooks is sometimes missed, as by Rosenfeld, when she claims that Gramsci advocates that revolutionaries simply incorporate the good sense to be found in common sense directly into their political narratives. She cites an anonymous publication, *La femme patriote, ou le gros bon sens* (The patriotic woman, or solid good sense), written at the time of the French Revolution, supposedly by a “simple woman.” The “common sense political theory,” advanced by this simple woman was one that, as paraphrased by Rosenfeld, “should be obvious even to the most humble in her audience: kings rule only because they take power by force; hereditary privileges are unjust; and everyone needs bread” (Rosenfeld, 189). This, Rosenfeld claims, “is precisely how Antonio Gramsci, writing in prison in the 1920s, imagined an effective revolutionary making his (or her) case. Rather than disdaining an often contradictory and *retardataire* common sense, . . . revolutionaries need to do as the woman of ‘basic good sense’: identify with the sentiments of ordinary people and build directly on those precepts of folk wisdom that are nascent and feel true but are currently obscured or immobilized by other basic conceptions embedded in the collective mind. In this manner, a new practical consciousness or common sense should come into being for a people as a whole (Rosenfeld 2011, 189–90). But this is to gloss over the complicated dialectical relationship between “precepts of folk wisdom” and developed and coherent political philosophies. Gramsci does make a fundamental epistemological claim that the “good sense” elements contained within common sense, which represent awareness born out

of the concrete experience of subalternity, are the seeds from which new political narratives emerge. But these seeds, unlike plant seeds, do not contain within themselves all the genetic information they need to grow; they are no more than “rough and jagged” beginnings (*SPN*, 343). Only through dialogue between subalterns and their organic intellectuals can these beginnings develop into effective revolutionary narratives.

Gramsci's Antiromanticism

Gramsci takes common sense so seriously precisely because he discerns within its confusion the embryonic beginnings of new political narratives, narratives with the potential to challenge the existing hegemony in ways that go beyond mere defensive resistance. At the same time, he never romanticizes common sense. And here his dispassionate and clear-eyed attitude is in sharp contrast to that of a number of social theorists who have appealed to common sense as something like a touchstone of truth. A good example is the great theorist of totalitarianism, and near contemporary of Gramsci, Hannah Arendt, who would “build a political theory rooted in common sense” (Rosenfeld 2011, 248). At first sight, it might seem that what Arendt is talking about when she speaks of common sense is so different from the common sense to be found in the notebooks that it scarcely makes sense to compare them. But in fact this very difference can help reveal both the originality of Gramsci's concept and the particular character this protean entity assumes in the notebooks.

Over the years, Arendt's definition of common sense would shift back and forth between its two strands of meaning. Sometimes she wrote of it very much as “the basic human faculty that lets us make elemental judgements about everyday matters,” as when she argues that “common sense occupies such a high rank in the hierarchy of political qualities because it is the one sense that fits into reality as a whole our five strictly individual senses and the strictly particular data they perceive. It is by virtue of common sense that the other sense perceptions are known to disclose reality and are not merely felt as irritations or our nerves or resistance sensations of our bodies” (1998, 208–9). Sometimes, however, she broadens her definition to include a particular body of knowledge as well as a mental faculty, as when she writes that totalitarianism has led to a “growth of meaninglessness and loss of common sense (and common sense is only that part of our mind and that portion of inherited wisdom which all men have in common in any given civilization)” (1994, 316–17). Her positive assessment of common sense, however, remains constant. The general “rightness” of common sense comes across strongly in

her essay, “Understanding and Politics” (1954), in which she grapples with the problem of how it is possible for theorists to grasp the nature of totalitarian political systems. Common sense here becomes an Ariadne thread, securely guiding the scholar, who “must become very humble again and listen closely to popular language”:

True understanding always returns to the judgements and prejudices which preceded and guided the strictly scientific inquiry. The sciences can only illuminate, but neither prove nor disprove, the uncritical preliminary understanding from which they start. If the scientist, misguided by the very labor of his inquiry, begins to pose as an expert in politics and despise the popular understandings from which he started, he loses immediately the Ariadne thread of common sense which alone will guide him securely through the labyrinth of his own results. If, on the other hand, the scholar wants to transcend his own knowledge—and there is no other way to make knowledge meaningful except by transcending it—he must become very humble again and listen closely to the popular language, in which words like “totalitarianism” are daily used as political clichés and misused as catchwords, in order to re-establish contact between knowledge and understanding. (1994, 311)

A little later in the same essay, Arendt describes one of the sad realities of twentieth-century totalitarian societies as “the breakdown of our common inherited wisdom . . . we are living in a topsy-turvy world, a world where we cannot find our way by abiding by the rules of what was once common sense” (314).

Gramsci, too, insists that intellectuals must listen to “popular understandings,” but he has none of Arendt’s deference towards such understandings. While he stresses the importance of treating common sense seriously, he is anything but humble toward it. Indeed, he is scathing about intellectuals, such as Giovanni Gentile, who celebrate common sense. Gentile, a leading fascist intellectual and Minister for Public Education in Mussolini’s government, had claimed that philosophy could be thought of “as a great effort accomplished by reflective thought to gain critical certainty of the truths of common sense and of the naive consciousness, of those truths of which it can be said that every man feels them naturally and which constitute the solid structure of the mentality he requires for everyday life” (quoted in *SPN*, 422). For Gramsci, this was simply “yet another example of the disordered crudity of Gentile’s thought.” Homing in on Gentile’s formulation “the truths of common sense,” Gramsci asks: “And what does a ‘truth of common sense’ mean? Gentile’s philosophy, for example, is utterly contrary to common sense, whether one understands

thereby the naïve philosophy of the people, which revolts against any form of subjectivist idealism, or whether one understands it to be good sense and a contemptuous attitude to the abstruseness, ingenuities and obscurity of certain forms of scientific and philosophical exposition” (SPN, 422–23). This does not mean, Gramsci continues, “that there are no truths in common sense. It means rather that common sense is an ambiguous, contradictory and multi-form concept, and that to refer to common sense as a confirmation of truth is a nonsense” (SPN, 423). As he puts it a little earlier in the same note, “Common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one likes” (SPN, 422). The author of the notebooks, one feels, would have been equally dismissive of Arendt’s notion of common sense as “the Ariadne thread” that guides the scholar “securely through the labyrinth of his own results.”

For Arendt, it is the existence of a shared, common sense that enables human beings to live together. Common sense, as she writes in “Understanding and Politics,” “presupposes a common world into which we all fit, where we can live together because we possess one sense which controls and adjusts all strictly particular sense data to those of all others” (Arendt 1994, 318). Here, as so often, she is drawing on Immanuel Kant, for whom a *sensus communis* (a common sense) “fits us into a community” (Arendt 1982, 70). The notion of a single common sense, “which all men have in common in any given civilization,” is quite foreign to the spirit of the notebooks. For Gramsci, as for Marx, “any given civilization” is so fractured by inequality that understanding it requires us to begin with that inequality, those “most elementary things, which are the first to be forgotten,” the fact that “there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led” (SPN, 144). Common sense in all its multitudinous confusion is the product of a fractured world.

The common sense of the notebooks, unlike that of Arendt, is neither unitary, nor an unflinching source of truth. It may contain valuable good sense but it is inherently unreliable; we cannot use common sense as a touchstone of truth. Emerging out of a world structured by inequality, common sense’s ever-shifting accumulations of disparate truisms are the precipitates of heterogeneous life worlds occupying quite different social and economic locations. The narratives that become hegemonic are those that reflect the world as seen from the vantage point of the rulers rather than the ruled. Those that emerge from less privileged locations are forced to exist within the interstices of the dominant explanations; an ability to impose commonsense truths, which assume that existing power relations are the only ones possible, is a crucial dimension of any power regime. Hegemony, it should be noted, does not require

that those who are ruled, the subalterns, see their subjugation as justified, only that they see it as a fixed and unchangeable reality it would be futile to oppose. Only to the extent that we accept, whatever our actual social and economic location, the hegemonic narratives portraying the world as seen from the vantage point of those who hold power might we say that we inhabit a common, shared world.

Toward a New Common Sense and a New Culture

We find none of Arendt's romanticization in the notebooks. Here common sense is a confusion of unexamined truisms that must be continually questioned. We are all born into a particular time and place with its own ways of naming the world and the forces that shape it. But the knowledge we inherit is far from being any kind of plain wisdom. This may be the place we feel at home, but this home, with its known and well-worn furniture, can also be a prison. We need to recognize its confining walls, and refuse the embrace of its seductive familiarity. In a passage that reflects the Sardinian peasant milieu in which he spent his childhood, Gramsci describes our earliest "conception of the world" as being "mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world (and this can be one's village or province; it can have its origins in the parish and the 'intellectual activity' of the local priest or ageing patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old woman who has inherited the lore of the witches or the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity and inability to act)" (SPN, 323). As the dismissive tone makes clear, Gramsci's argument is that while we may have no choice but to begin from the common sense into which we are born, we should not accept its comforting familiarities unthinkingly, but continually question them, dragging into the light of day all the implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions buried within that which presents itself as simple reality. We must subject everything we are told is just "the way things are" to careful and rigorous questioning. As an individual, one has an obligation "to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality" (SPN, 323–24).

The reference here to taking "an active part in the creation of the history of the world" indicates that working out "consciously and critically one's own con-

ception of the world” is not some solipsistic exercise, but part of the process by which the individual comes to make an active political choice. Whether we like it or not, we are all part of some collectivity: “We are all conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs?” (*SPN*, 324). The point is to examine critically the choices we have, and to make a conscious choice. Those who interrogate their “conception of the world . . . to make it a coherent unity,” will raise their thought “to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world” (*SPN*, 324). In other words, they will identify with the progressive forces propelling history forward. It is clear that the creation of the history of the world Gramsci has in mind is epochal social transformation. And for him, an essential element of such social transformation is the bringing into being of a new common sense and a new culture. Marx himself, he notes, makes many references to common sense in which we can see an implicit “assertion of the necessity for new popular beliefs, that is to say a new common sense and with it a new culture and a new philosophy which will be rooted in the popular consciousness with the same solidity and imperative quality as traditional beliefs” (*SPN*, 424).

Common sense in the notebooks, as in this passage, is treated as part of a broader concept of culture. And culture, the author argues, is central to twentieth-century Marxism, which “in its most recent stage of development . . . consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and in attaching ‘full weight’ to the cultural factor, to cultural activity, to the necessity for a cultural front alongside the merely economic and merely political ones” (*FSPN*, 345). Elsewhere I have explored Gramsci’s understanding of culture at length (Crehan 2002) and I shall not repeat that discussion here. Given the entanglement of common sense and culture in the notebooks, it is important, however, to say something about the place of culture in those reflections. Culture, for Gramsci, names shared ways of being and living that have come into existence as a result of the interaction of a myriad of historical forces, and that remain subject to history. Certain cultures may appear to persist unchanged for long periods of time, nonetheless they are always inherently in flux: coming into being, undergoing transformation, passing away. The nature of their persistence or transformation can only be discovered by careful empirical study. Similarly, the degree to which they constitute coherent wholes, the degree to which they hang together, cannot be assumed. This, too, is an empirical question.

A brief look at the difference between the attitude to culture we find in the notebooks and that characteristic of anthropology may help clarify what

Gramsci understands by “the cultural factor” and “cultural activity.” And why he insists on the need for “a cultural front.”

Culture in Anthropology and Culture in the Notebooks

The importance the concept of culture has for this Sardinian Marxist is one reason so many anthropologists have been attracted to his work. As Clifford Geertz observed in a famous essay, culture was the concept “around which the whole discipline of anthropology arose” (Geertz 1973, 4). The problem is that while the concept of culture has been defined by anthropologists in many different ways, their motivation for studying it and their attitude to its preservation have not been those of Gramsci. We do not, for instance, find anthropologists arguing for “the necessity for a cultural front.” To understand anthropologists’ attitude to culture, we need to go back to the discipline’s origins, in Europe and North America.

In Europe, the discipline’s origins were rooted in that continent’s expansion into new and unfamiliar worlds. While there was a desire to dominate these new worlds, there was also recognition that success depended on understanding them. And this gave rise, even if often indirectly, to a desire to understand these unfamiliar “others” in their own terms. Anthropologists may often have failed to live up to this ideal, but whatever their faults, colonial anthropologists tended to be more concerned to understand and preserve the “cultures” they studied rather than transform them—one reason why colonial administrators often found the work of anthropologists of little practical use. In North America, an expanding settler state’s confrontation with indigenous people gave a somewhat different slant to the anthropological project: a focus on preserving some record of ways of life that were seen as inevitably doomed once they encountered more “advanced” Euro-American culture. In the 1970s, this approach would be termed, rather disparagingly, “salvage anthropology.”⁴ In the course of their history, both the European and the North American anthropological tradition, however, would develop a strong commitment to cultural relativism and a belief in the value of cultural diversity. Cultures, it tends to be assumed, have a right to exist simply because they are distinct cultures. Gramsci, committed as he is to the project of revolutionary transformation, has no such automatic reverence for existing cultures. Part of what subalternity means for him is being trapped in a world that reinforces and

4. The phrase *salvage anthropology* was coined by Jacob Gruber in his “Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology” (1970).

reproduces a culture of subordination. Overcoming subalternity necessarily involves cultural change.

All of us come to consciousness as members of particular cultural worlds, and one of the ways the realities of class inequality are lived is through culture. The contours of our cultural worlds, including their hierarchies of power and their associated tangles of commonsense notions, are likely to appear to us as beyond question, so obviously real that it would be absurd to ask for evidence or proof: this is just the way the world is. Disparities of wealth and power, for instance, may be thought of as manifestations of the laws of economics or of divine will; they may be celebrated or railed against, but to those who inhabit a world structured by these disparities it is hard to imagine that things could be other than as they are. For there to be fundamental social change, therefore, there needs to be cultural transformation, “that is to say a new common sense and with it a new culture” (*SPN*, 424), that enables subalterns to imagine another reality. Otherwise, challenging existing power structures is likely to seem as absurd as Don Quixote charging windmills.

As an activist-intellectual working toward social transformation, Gramsci was committed to bringing about cultural change. This is very different from the respect for existing cultures so deeply ingrained in the anthropological tradition. To some anthropologists, calls for cultural change can have an uncomfortable echo of the exhortations of the modernization theorists of the 1960s, who argued that underdevelopment was the result of “traditional” cultures, which held back progress. The kind of cultural change envisaged by this Marxist writing in the early twentieth century, however, is one that represents a subordinated class overcoming its subordination, not a capitalist North imposing its economic culture on a South perceived as backward. The concern with culture and common sense that we find in the notebooks is rooted in the conviction that a vital dimension of the overcoming of subalternity is the creation of a new culture and a new common sense. This creation is the cultural front that Gramsci sees as so necessary. He stresses, however, that the precise forms the new culture and the new common sense will take cannot be known in advance; they will be determined in the course of history. All we can say is that they will be the result of dialogue between a subaltern group and its intellectuals, and will build on the good sense that exists within common sense.

Cultural transformation rarely happens overnight, although change can appear to be sudden. In the summer of 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States, reflecting the extraordinarily rapid shift in American attitudes to same-sex marriage, ruled that the Constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage. In reality, this recognition was the culmination of decades of work by

LGBT activists. A key moment seems to have been the adoption of a narrative structured around a claim that LGBT people were being denied a basic civil right: All adults have the right to marry, why was this denied to gays and lesbians? The LGBT community had, we might say, tapped into one of the most powerful American commonsense beliefs about their society, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” The appeal to common sense is indeed foundational to American political discourse. As Thomas Jefferson later explained, his aim in drafting the declaration was “to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent” (quoted in Tindall and Shi 1999, 235).

The ongoing struggle to transform culture can be seen as part of what Gramsci termed the war of position, as opposed to the war of movement, the kind of frontal attack that is rarely possible for a subaltern class, precisely because it is subaltern.⁵ The distinction between a direct seizure of power and the slow, incremental struggle characteristic of subaltern classes echoes Engels’s argument in his introduction to Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France 1848–1850*, written in 1895. The proletariat, Engels explains, is “a long way from winning victory with one mighty stroke, it has slowly to press forward from position to position in a hard, tenacious struggle” (Marx 1964, 16). A key part of that struggle is the struggle for cultural change.

Common Sense and History

In English, common sense, whether understood as a universal sense, or as the incontrovertible knowledge that such a sense gives us, is generally thought of as unchanging and true across space and time. It is seen, so to speak, as outside history. For Gramsci, however, the “fragmentary, incoherent and inconsistent” heterogeneity that is common sense is always the product of a tangle of different historical processes. Common sense, he writes, “is a collective noun, like religion: there is not just one common sense, for that too is a product of history and a part of the historical process” (SPN, 325–26). Just as material debris gradually accumulates in any area of human habitation in a somewhat random fashion, so too do beliefs and ideas; there are always new ideas continually drifting down to join the existing agglomerate of common sense. Some only remain there momentarily, others for somewhat longer, while some manage to embed themselves in seemingly more secure ways. At the same time, to

5. See SPN, 229–41.

continue with the metaphor, the bits and pieces that make up common sense are also subject to processes of erosion and other forms of destruction. Certain ideas lose their plausibility and are discarded. Not so long ago, for instance, it was common sense that marriage meant a union between a man and a woman. The aggregate that is common sense is never stable but continually changing in piecemeal ways.

For Gramsci, the task of the analyst confronted with the confusion of common sense, like that of the archaeologist confronted with the material debris of the past, is to sort through the mass of beliefs and opinions. They need to identify the different elements that make up this mass, and trace out the links between particular assumed truths and social realities. As with material strata, the forces acting to consolidate or destroy the various elements of common sense are multiple and the results of their interactions are always unpredictable. Nonetheless, there are reasons why some elements persist and some do not; understanding this process in any actual context requires empirical analysis. We need to look at how the different elements are disseminated. What is it that makes them so self-evident, and self-evident to whom? Whose common sense (men's, women's, poor people's, the better off, the more educated, the less educated, the old, the young, particular religious groups, and so on) are they? What are the mechanisms through which they are, or are not, internalized by individuals—what, indeed, does it mean to internalize them? To what extent do different elements hang together? Do individuals pick and choose between them? How do they choose between them? And on and on.

Just as physical landscapes are shaped by geological forces, biological processes, and human activity, the landscapes of common sense are shaped both by deep structural forces and more contingent history. For Gramsci, as a Marxist, the tectonic plates grinding against each other deep below the visible landscape of common sense are a society's fundamental class cleavages. It is in those underlying cleavages that the questions that seem most pressing to the philosophers of a given historical moment have their ultimate origins. And the initial way those questions express themselves, albeit in a naive form, is in popular common sense. The history of philosophy should not be seen as consisting of the succession of a series of great minds, we need to look at the connection between ideas and their historical context. If, Gramsci writes, "philosophy develops because the general history of the world (and thus the social relations in which men live) develops, and not at all because a great philosopher is succeeded by a greater one and so on, it is clear that the practical work of creating history also creates 'implicit' philosophy, which then becomes 'explicit.' This will be the case in so far as philosophers elaborate it

coherently, in so far as problems of knowledge ensue which, over and above the 'practical' form of solution, sooner or later find theoretical form through the work of specialists, after having immediately found their naïve form in popular common sense, i.e. among the practical agents of historical transformations" (*FSPN*, 387).

Ultimately, as this passage makes clear, for Gramsci it is the everyday reality of subaltern experience that gives birth to the implicit philosophies to be found within common sense. Progressive intellectuals have the task of articulating these philosophies in a coherent form. Fundamental social change comes about when such philosophies are embodied in social movements. The "practical agents of historical transformations" are subalterns, but their effectiveness depends on their bringing into being, as they emerge from subalternity, their own organic intellectuals. Together, subaltern experience and the intellectuals that are born of it give rise to a new culture and a new common sense, a common sense with deep roots in subaltern experience that carries the emotional charge of traditional beliefs while reflecting a coherent, rational philosophy. For this to happen, however, there needs to be a dialogue in which the emergent intellectuals genuinely listen to popular common sense, not humbly (as Arendt insists), but attentively and critically, mining its good sense.

The value of Gramsci's concept of common sense is that it offers us a way of thinking about the texture of everyday life that encompasses its givenness—how it both constitutes our subjectivity and confronts us as an external and solid reality—but that also acknowledges its contradictions, fluidity, and flexibility. For all its apparent solidity, it is continually being modified by how actual people in actual places live it. We can think of his notion of common sense as naming the comfortable, predictable certainties that provide all of us with much of our basic mental furniture. The fact that it does not define the nature of that furniture is what makes the concept such a useful way of approaching the empirical analysis of the lived reality of subalternity. On the one hand, this approach allows us to hear the contradictory, multiple voices that speak through popular knowledge; on the other, without romanticizing common sense, it helps us discover the good sense contained within its confusion. The next chapter explores the content of popular knowledge, and the nature of the relationship between subalterns and their organic intellectuals in more detail.