



Common Sense

A Journal of a wholly new type



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Common Sense

Issue No. 5 (July 1988)

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Notes for contributors: send articles in clean typscript,
single-space or space-and-a-half (not double-space).
Leave wide margin on both sides, and wide gaps at top
and bottom of each page. Start first page half way down.

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Common Sense

The journal Common Sense exists as a relay station for the exchange and dissemination of ideas. It is run on a co-operative and non-profitmaking basis. As a means of maintaining flexibility as to numbers of copies per issue, and of holding costs down, articles are reproduced in their original typescript. Common Sense is non-elitist, since anyone (or any group) with fairly modest financial resources can set up a journal along the same lines. Everything here is informal, and minimalist.

Why, as a title, 'Common Sense'? In its usual ordinary-language meaning, the term 'common sense' refers to that which appears obvious beyond question: "But it's just common sense!". According to a secondary conventional meaning, 'common sense' refers to a sense (a view, an understanding or outlook) which is 'common' inasmuch as it is widely agreed upon or shared. Our title draws upon the latter of these meanings, while at the same time qualifying it, and bears only an ironical relation to the first.

In classical thought, and more especially in Scottish eighteenth century philosophy, the term 'common sense' carried with it two connotations: (i) 'common sense' meant public or shared sense (the Latin 'sensus communis' being translated as 'publick sense' by Francis Hutcheson in 1728). And (ii) 'common sense' signified that sense, or capacity, which allows us to totalise or synthesise the data supplied by the five senses (sight, touch and so on) of a more familiar kind. (The conventional term 'sixth sense', stripped of its mystical and spiritualistic suggestions, originates from the idea of a 'common sense' understood in this latter way). It is in this two-fold philosophical sense of 'common sense' that our title is intended.

Why is the philosophical **sense** a two-fold one? Classical and Scottish thought was always alive to the circumstance that senses (i) and (ii) of 'common sense' are interdependent. On the one hand, a public or shared sense amounts to more than a contingently agreed-upon consensus only when those who share it are individuals whose experience is totalising: in other words they must be individuals who are self-reflective and thereby autonomous and answerable for what they do and say. On the other hand (conversely), individuals who thus totalise their experiences can do so only through interaction with others: that is, they can achieve totalisation and autonomy only as members of an interactive - a social or 'public' - world. Individuality is here social without remainder, as Marx signals in his construal of the 'human essence' as the 'ensemble of the social relations' and as Hegel also signals when he urges that self-consciousness (human self-aware subjectivity) exists 'only in being recognized'. Hegel draws the conclusion of the interdependence of the two senses of common sense when he urges that it is only in a community of individuals

who are mutually recognitive that truth can appear.

Having explained our title, it remains to justify it. The Scottish philosophers understood that common sense, in its two-fold meaning, enters crisis where ever (as in, according to their terminology, modern 'commercial' society) a social division of labour obtains. For then individuals become constrained to their role-definitions and functions; mutual recognition vanishes and, with it, autonomy; we can no longer see ourselves and our experience through others' eyes. (Just as we can no longer see others' experiences through our own eyes.) As in Burns, 'seeing ourselves as others see us' becomes less an actuality than a wish. In Hegel and Marx, the same theme is sounded under the heading of 'alienation'. Marx perceptively connects alienation from our 'species being (Gattungswesen)' (that is, alienation from our capacity to be autonomous and self-determining) with alienation from others with whom we associate and interact. At one and the same stroke, the two senses of common sense are nullified or at least rendered problematic. Capitalism is that social form (or practical totality) wherein common sense (practice's theoretical and self-reflective moment) enters crisis in a paradigmatic way.

That which enters crisis can exist only critically. In an alienated - a crisis-ridden - social world, common sense can exist only as critique; common sense exists as critical theory in a society which threatens to erode its roots. Conversely, inasmuch as truth and autonomy are (as Hegel emphasised) interdependent, the project of a critical theory can exist only as the project of a renewed common sense. Something of this appears in Gramsci, who urged that 'common sense' (in the sense of commonly agreed-upon obviousness) must be translated into critical 'good sense' (common sense in our title's meaning), and that such a translation can be finally effected only when 'universal subjectivity' (Hegel's 'mutual recognition') appears. To achieve this, common sense has to thematise the crisis of the social order which challenges it: the crisis of common sense is not merely its own crisis, but that of the social order wherein its project stands to be renewed. Critique and crisis (or 'theory' and 'practice') are no less interdependent than are the two senses of common sense distinguished above. Epistemological crises are social crisis and vice versa. To paraphrase Wittgenstein: to imagine a critical form of language is to imagine - but we don't have to imagine it - a crisis-ridden form of social life.

Hence, critique - the interrogation of existing circumstances - is the only brief which the journal Common Sense holds. In our initial publicity it was stated that, as a matter of editorial direction, 'the only material to be excluded or anathematized is material which is boring', 'Boring', here, has not just an aesthetic meaning. Rather, it refers to material which is uncritical in the sense of failing to place at issue the categories of the world it inhabits, i.e. the categories which proffer themselves as those of unselfreflective theorising whatever the topic of such theorising may be. Boring theory is theory which, lacking practical reflexivity, 'recognizes the world by means of different interpretation of it', to quote once more Marx. The immodest goal of Common Sense is to place at issue anything and everything. Where enstrangement prevails, mutual recognition (the space of common sense) can exist, at most, only on the margins and in the

interstices of a massified world. But crisis places the margins at the centre, and so this immodesty finds its justification.

Placing anything and everything at issue, Common Sense relates ironically to 'common sense' in the sense of received (or soi disant) obviousness. Projecting critical theory as common-sense-theory, Common Sense builds on but also qualifies 'common sense' in the sense of that mode of thinking which in an estranged world happens to be public or shared. In an estranged world a shared sense is an estranged sense. However, at the same time estrangement (alienation) exists not as a seamless monolith but as the movement of contradiction. Every social world, says Hegel, 'is not a dead essence but is actual and alive': this applies to alienated social worlds too.

Common Sense is the movement (the movement-towards-resolution) of the resulting contradiction. Common Sense is the centralisation of the margins, and the margins can be centralised only as common sense.

The editors of Common Sense have no "power" - no apparatus of authority based on resources or professional prestige - and, in this regard, are non-existing. Our journal, which is as much an idea as a set of pages which can be physically held and turned, will have succeeded when a network of similarly-produced journals covers the land. Common Sense is an 'invisible college' devoted to the propagation of critical thought.

In order to provide opportunity for discussion of issues raised in Common Sense, we have organised a series of meetings to be held in the Edinburgh Unemployed Workers' Centre, 2 Cranston St. Edinburgh, on the first Thursday of every month. Our first meeting will be held on Thursday 1st September 1988 at 7 p.m., when Werner Bonefeld will introduce discussion on 'Thatcherism in the context of international crisis'. All welcome.

