



Common Sense

A Journal of a wholly new type



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BRIAN Mc GRAIL

Common Sense

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The second issue of Common Sense will appear in July 1987.

Note for contributors: send articles in clean typescript, single-space or space-and-a-half (not double-space). Leave wide margins on both sides.

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AN EDITORIAL OF A WHOLLY NEW TYPE

Common Sense has no editors and hence contains no editorial. Its aim is to challenge the division of labour in contemporary society according to which theoretical discussion is monopolised by universities and confined to the pages of trade-journals read by professional and academic elites.

The term "common sense" signifies: (i) shared or public sense, and (ii) the interplay of differing perspectives and theoretical views. These meanings imply one another. Both are undermined to the extent that a social division of labour prevails. For theory, the undermining of common sense means that philosophy becomes separated from empirical enquiry, to the impoverishment of both. The arid abstraction of analytical philosophy and the plodding boredom of positivism are the complementary results. For practice, the undermining of common sense means that political action is denied any space for self-reflection and so goes forward in terms which confirm the social status quo. Common sense admits of no fixed definition. No less elusive than it is intelligible, it exists only where criticism and self-criticism are the order of the theoretical and political day. A continuing development of critical theory is the only brief which the journal Common Sense holds.

The idea behind the journal is explained in the announcement published in Edinburgh Review No. 76, and reprinted overleaf. There is no reason why a whole number of similar journals should not be started in the same way. Found your own journal, or send contributions for our second and subsequent issues to: Richard Gunn, 13 Northumberland Street, Edinburgh. Issue no. 2 of Common Sense will appear in July, cost 2 pounds: send s.a.e. to the above address.

Common Sense

A Journal of a wholly new type

Problems of production, of sales/distribution and of editorial policy seem intrinsic to the publication of any journal, whether mainstream or alternative; these problems have stood in the way of the emergence of new alternative journals especially of a theoretical and therefore a relatively non-popular kind. The consequence of this is that universities and professional-academic journals retain their fateful monopoly on the life of the mind. In a period of recession, with universities becoming more restrictive and bureaucratic and with (as a result) increasing numbers of people being driven away from universities, whether into unemployment or non-academic employment, this monopoly seems even more vicious than it was before. A non-university based theoretical journal has thus a sound political point.

In order to minimise the problems of production/distribution/editing, such a journal must be of a wholly novel type. In fact, these problems can almost entirely be avoided if journal-production is thought of in a fresh way.

Technology, (word-processing, xeroxing, etc.) is increasingly on our side. Contributors to such a journal would submit their work in readable (which means: attractively readable) typescript, A4, single spaced, so that articles are not retyped but merely photocopied; the resulting bundle of different articles can then be stapled together and put between simple folded covers (a different colour for each issue, perhaps, but retain the same format each time in order to keep production-costs down). The *only* tasks confronting the production-group would then be photocopying, stapling and distributing. An editorial policy could *virtually be dispensed with* since there would be no fixed limit on the number of articles a given issue might contain; for the same reason, articles could be short or long. The journal could be published occasionally rather than regularly depending on material to hand. It would be sold at more or less cost price.

Initially, its circulation could be minimal: today, a readership of half a dozen and tomorrow the world Back-issues could be reproduced either as a whole or in part, depending on demand, simply by xeroxing a master-copy. Starting small would keep initial costs very low; we could build up a readership by means of a 'network' of personal contacts depending solely on the quality of the material carried; there could also be some local sales. Thereby, problems of distribution could be avoided no less than the other problems mentioned above. Financial risks would be minimal, and we would need to aim only at producing a 'readable-attractive' as opposed to a 'commercial-attractive' publication since it would only be the quality and interest of our contents that was germane.

The attraction of the scheme is its anarchism: it ignores all problems, all commerce, all professional boundaries, all academic establishments, all editorial anxieties. We could publish matter which was esoteric, heterodox, inflammatory and beyond every pale. Articles on anarchist collectives would sit side by side with articles on aesthetic theory; medieval theology could be juxtaposed with venomous political attacks. There would be absolutely no need to write in a popular or accessible way, and yet there would be no need to write in an academically respectable fashion either. The only material to be anathematized would be material which was boring. Through a minimalist approach to journal-production, we solve all problems by ignoring them and circumvent all authority by attacking it, not head-on, but from behind its back.

The first issue of Common Sense is now available, price (to cover costs only) £2. Contributions for next and subsequent issues welcome.

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Judith Squieres on:
Feminist Epistemologies
and
Critical Political Theory

Feminism is overtly political; it aims - in all its many forms - to change social relations and theoretical assumptions to the benefit of women. It is also, I wish to argue, inherently critical. Feminist epistemologies provide, to varying degrees, a firm basis from which to develop a critical political theory.

On an epistemological level, the basic feminist premiss is that dominant theories of knowledge are not neutral but androcentric; not objective but interest-constituted. A second major premiss is that feminist theories of knowledge are equally interest-constituted, but have an interest in exposing and challenging the status-quo rather than perpetuating it - and therefore appear more overtly politically engaged. To the extent that this is the case feminist theories are critical in character.

Critical theory is to be distinguished from traditional theory along the lines originally drawn by the early critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. Critical theory, argued Max Horkheimer - one of its major exponents - is politically engaged; it has a practical interest in fostering self-consciousness and an understanding of existing social conditions in order that we may alter and improve them. It does not seek to be objective or abstract; yet it does seek to avoid relativism and scepticism. It is, argues Richard Bernstein, "the explicit recognition of the connection of knowledge and interests that distinguishes critical from traditional theory, and that justifies calling such theory critical." (1976 p.180)

Traditional theory, in contrast, is based on inductivist principles of observation and description, or deductivist principles of formal logic. It claims an objectivity for empirical and abstract analysis by asserting a strict fact/value distinction. Though its roots lie with 17th century Baconian inductivism and Cartesian dualism, traditional theory reached its ultimate form in the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle of the 1920s. The intellect, they argued, free from the prison of private concerns, could operate in one of two ways - by induction or by deduction.

Those statements which were neither a formal statement nor empirically testable were rendered non-sensical in a move entitled 'value non-cognitivism'. This left no place for political theory and philosophy was relegated to a second order discipline which could only analyse and criticise the theories of science. Critical thought was smothered by scientism.

Asked what, in retrospect, were the main defects of logical positivism, A.J.Ayer - whose work on linguistic analysis did so much to popularise it in this country (1936) - replied;

"Well, I suppose the most important of the defects was that nearly all of it was false." (B.Magee ed. 1978, p.131)

Quite. But this has not stopped the spread of scientism, or led to a fundamental challenging of the principles of traditional theory amongst most political theorists today. Feminist theory, I shall argue, offers an important basis from which to issue such a challenge to traditional theory.

Feminist theories tend, to varying degrees, to be sceptical of scientism. Claims to objectivity are seen to entail subjective assumptions about gender, so the fact/value distinction is immediately undermined as an existing reality. And in using their own gendered experience as a basis from which to critique theories and develop new ones, the desirability as well as the reality of the fact/value split is challenged. This challenge is not specific to feminism, and has been made within male-stream theory. The point however is that women have a practical interest in pursuing these theoretical ideas.

Thus feminist theories offer a challenge to the epistemological position which undermines critical political theory. This is so even if it is not the intention of the theorists - as in the case of liberal feminism. Feminist theory is as diverse as the experience of the women who produce it. In order to simplify the diversity I shall categorise the multitude of feminist positions into four main methodological groups - empiricist, woman-centred, marxist standpoint, and post-modernist. I shall outline the epistemological underpinnings of these theories and relate them to the project of developing a critical political theory.

Feminist Empiricism

Feminist empiricists accept the legitimacy of positivistic claims about the objectivity and neutrality of empirical statements. They adopt the fact/value dichotomy and have no critique of scientism. Feminist empiricism does not intend to differ epistemologically or methodologically from traditional theory; only in the assertion of the importance of the social bias against women and its affect on the contingent results of this methodology does feminist empiricism differ from the traditional empiricists. Recognition of this bias results in a call for the stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of inquiry in order to correct the manifestations of sexism - which are not thought to be inherent to the epistemology itself and can therefore presumably be distinguished and removed from it.

This form of feminist theory involves the pursuit of clear-thinking and rational argument based on actual observation rather than prejudice, in order to expel the sexist distortions from our knowledge. The assumption is that this process will take us closer to the realisation of the impartial observer - detached and rational, uninfluenced by the distorting prejudices of sexism - and hence provide the most objective theoretical stance available. This line of argument sounds not unlike an echo of the Baconian plea for inductive reasoning in the face of prejudice and mysticism. It works within the positivistic framework of analytic and synthetic ways of knowing; and it adopts the liberal tradition of assuming the existence of an Archimedian standpoint of a disinterested and detached spectator in a Rawlsian bid for neutrality.

Janet Radcliffe Richards displays just this sort of concern with the techniques of logic and induction in her argument for the importance of the feminist task of improving upon the existing mode and content of theoretical inquiry. There is, she bemoans, "undoubtedly evidence that feminism has some tendency to get stuck in the quagmire of unreason." (1983, p.32) And what is this reason that she endorses so strongly? It is a process of "collecting evidence and basing the conclusion on it." (1983, p.39) There is no critique of the process itself, only that women have failed to be a part of it.

