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Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, 337 pp. Images, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 US \$ (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-05781-4.

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“We never find anyone to have good sense except those who agree with us.” — François de la Rochefoucauld.

Common sense is an old term whose roots can be traced back, in one form or another, to Aristotle and his followers, who regarded it as vital to the performance of the most basic human activities and as the common property of all individuals. The Romans used the term *sensus communis*, by which they meant the shared values and beliefs of a community. As Sophia Rosenfeld notes in her new book on this topic, common sense has become central to our democratic creed ever since the publication of Tom Paine’s classic work on this topic in 1776. Paine expressed confidence in the capacity of ordinary people to govern themselves and reminded them that common sense was firmly on their side (not on their rulers’) in their fight for freedom and justice. Ordinary citizens do not need any special expertise in order to be able to participate in the political decision-making process because they have access to simple and self-evident truths in light of their shared experience and nature.

The elevation of common sense to the rank of an undisputed epistemic authority during the Enlightenment was a consequence, not only of consolidation of Protestantism, but also of the re-evaluation and challenging of older sources of authority such as religion, tradition, custom as well as political and religious hierarchies. The last two centuries witnessed the emergence of a new form and style of politics in which the concept of common sense has come to play a key role. It has led, among others things, to the triumph of political equality and furthered the emergence of various forms of populism based on the idea that “the people, when not being misled by false authorities, are in possession of a kind of infallible, instinctive sense of what is right and true...that necessarily trumps the expert judgments and knowledge of a minority of establishment insiders” (p. 6). The enduring appeal of common sense is made plain by the fact that in his widely-read works, the philosopher John Rawls spoke of the democratic common sense and invoked (in order to justify his theory of justice and political liberalism) the “common sense of citizens” in modern liberal democracies.[1]

Rosenfeld is right to remind us that, for all its plainspoken nature, common sense remains paradoxically an “amorphous,” “vague,” and somewhat “slippery” subject which proves difficult to analyze for several reasons. Firstly, “claims about common sense are, in public life, almost always polemical” (p. 15) and deeply rooted in evolving contexts and social practices. “Common sense’s tenets,” Rosenfeld argues, “are culturally and temporally variable in content. What gets counted as common sense is also never fully consensual even in its time” (p. 15). Moreover, there is something paradoxical about a concept which “comes out of the shadows and draws attention to itself [mostly] at moments of perceived crisis or collapsing consensus” (p. 24). Secondly, common sense is difficult to analyze properly because it belongs to—and must be analyzed in relation to—a larger conceptual field that also includes good sense, common reason, *sensus communis*, *le sens commun*, *le bon sens*, *gemeiner* (and/or *gesunder*) *Verstand*. Equally important, it is essential to remember that “common sense almost always exists in contrast to other

views perceived as superstitious or marginal, or overly abstract, specialized, or dogmatic” (p. 15). To account for the diversity of all these terms, resemblances, and contrasts, one needs a cross-disciplinary approach which takes into account their development across both sides of the Atlantic as well as their strong links with related concepts such as popular sovereignty, populism, self-rule (self-government) and political and civil equality.

Not surprisingly, as the author herself points out, this is a book as much about common sense and the emergence of a new style of politics (challenging older forms of authority) as about the marriage between the common sense and the populist appeal to the people’s common sense, and the legitimization of new forms of authority and dissent in modern European and American history. The method used in this book is an eclectic one, combining the history of concepts, the social history of ideas and knowledge, with particular emphasis on the ever-evolving everyday beliefs and practices. The author uses an impressive array of original sources such as pamphlets, some of which were anonymously published, accompanied by a few carefully selected illustrations. In so doing, Rosenfeld offers a learned exercise in philosophical history and gives her readers a compass with which they can follow the history of common sense in its main incarnations in London (1688-1739), Aberdeen (1758-1770), Amsterdam (1760-1775), Philadelphia (1776), and Paris (1790-1792). The last chapter presents the avatars of common sense in the modern world, from Königsberg to New York and beyond.

Organized chronologically, the six chapters of this beautifully illustrated and well-written book present a fascinating story that begins in England, Scotland, and the Netherlands in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, continues across the ocean in Philadelphia, returns to Paris around the time of the French Revolution, and finds a new voice in the works of twentieth-century philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and Hans-Georg Gadamer. It is no accident that the voyage starts in London and Aberdeen, for common sense has often been defined as an English trait *par excellence* and the English constitution was seen, in Chesterfield’s own words, as being “founded upon common sense itself, and every Deviation from one is a Violation of the other” (p. 42). In England, the country of the common law, in the first decades of the eighteenth century, common sense was first regarded as “a virtue of the relatively cultivated and the at least moderately well-off” (p. 32) and thus came to be associated with politeness, sociability, and political moderation.[2]

It is only gradually that common sense became a sort of tribunal *sui generis*, a potential source of social cohesion and a foundation for a secure participatory political order associated with liberty, equality, and the rising public opinion. As a Latitudinarian and Whig creation, the culture of common sense developed as “a historically specific reaction against perceived excesses of all kinds” (p. 34), and an antidote to religious and political fanaticism, superstition, destructive “party spirit” (p. 28), and other dangerous forms of enthusiasm. Rosenfeld also demonstrates that appeals to common sense ended up legitimizing new forms of dissent as evident by the prestige enjoyed by *Common Sense: or the Englishman’s Journal*, a weekly paper that, in the 1720s and 1730s, became a humorous platform for the propagation of the ideas of the opposition. Eventually, common sense became a significant means of developing and legitimizing the claims of a legitimate opposition and a rival source of authority in England.

An excellent chapter on Aberdeen, 1758-1770 traces the development of a coherent philosophy of common sense (defined as “that power by which we perceive self-evident truth” [p.74]) in the works of Thomas Reid (*An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764) and James Beattie (*Essay in the Nature and Immutability of Truth*, 1770) that spanned various disciplines such as science, religion, political theory, and practical morality. What made their writings important and influential, Rosenfeld argues, is that their theories of common sense served an eclectic agenda that combined both conservative and radical elements and brought to the fore the role of common sense as an antidote to the growth of moral and epistemological skepticism perceived as a threat to society. Beattie’s and Reid’s uses of common sense were meant to preserve Christian beliefs and keep the ethical universe, communal

ethos, and social bonds intact. At the same time, by affirming the authority of common sense, they injected “a largely unintended democratic ethos into the realm of public judgment” (p. 61). This eclectic combination paved the way for a powerful critique of elitism and the emergence of a new form of epistemological egalitarianism that, in turn, led to a “decidedly populist epistemology” (p. 62) and a new style of politics which affirmed the people’s inherent capacity for sound judgment and finding the truth.

This new style of politics, Rosenfeld claims, was to gain wide recognition in Amsterdam where it followed, however, a different direction than the one envisaged by the Scottish philosophers. The reputation of the Netherlands as a land of freedom and good sense is well known, especially after the publication of the first volume of Jonathan Israel’s new history of the Enlightenment.[3] It was in Amsterdam that many subversive tracts were published, some of which had been written in France (by Pierre Bayle, d’Holbach, the Marquis d’Argens, and the Baron de Lahontan). They celebrated the virtues of common and good sense and turned the two related concepts into powerful ideological weapons against established conventions, tradition, and religion. As Rosenfeld points out, good sense or common sense became part of a larger anti-establishment international project meant to promote, in the name of common sense, “just what Beattie and company had most feared: seditious laughter, from outside established institutions, at the expense of the Christian religion” (p. 96). In this respect, Amsterdam represented a unique place where radical thinkers were free to articulate a bold political agenda which used common sense as a means of building an alternative moral, religious, and political order.

The French case is particularly intriguing for the historian of common sense (and good sense) because it offers, at least in its seventeenth-century incarnation, “the very obverse of the kind of reasoning that formed the backdrop to the Common Sense philosophy of the Scots 150 years later” (p. 103). It combined a good dose of elitism and “a long strand of distrust of all that is popular, habitual, a matter of common sense” (pp. 99-100), which had several sources, some of which were related to the laudable attempt to dispel prejudice and challenge authority. Rosenfeld highlights the contribution of Descartes who in the *Discourse on Method*, took distance from commonly received opinions and demonstrated a strong determination to free himself from all forms of customary knowledge regarding matters of religion and morality in order to weed out all forms of falsehood, absurdities, contradictions, and hypocritical pretensions to truth.[4] Some of his compatriots such as La Mothe le Vayer, author of an *Opuscule or Small Skeptical Treatise on the Common Expression ‘To not have any Common Sense’* (1648), went so far as to claim that “there were no opinions more assuredly false than the most universally believed” (p. 101) and thus dismissed the legitimacy of common sense as an incoherent mix of subjective and unreliable opinions. As Rosenfeld notes, the irony was that these critiques of common sense were “a means to destroy, in the name of pluralism and toleration, the notion that any such consensual knowledge could ever be found” (p. 102). On the right, the idiom of common sense was used in France to criticize political innovation and reform, giving birth to an odd form of populism which celebrated, in the name of common sense, an authoritarian style of politics imbued with references to traditional values.[5]

The populist idiom that came out of Europe would eventually find a solid institutional anchor across the ocean in America where common sense became a veritable “call to arms” (p. 136), leading to the building of a common sense republic, inspired by the values of the Enlightenment and the ideas of Tom Paine’s celebrated *Common Sense*. Paine’s theory has been discussed at length by other authors. Here, Rosenfeld focuses on the extraordinary legacy of his pamphlet. She explains why and how, by combining the conservative connotations of common sense in the writings of the Scots and the radical *bon sens* of French thinkers, Paine’s eulogy to common sense offered the rationale for a pathbreaking political revolution in the New World and gave fresh impetus to polemical writing of all sorts. In so doing, Paine’s iconoclastic and bold pamphlet legitimized popular rule and unambiguously affirmed the political capacity of ordinary people to build a (more) just society. He also laid the foundations for a powerful strand of intellectual anti-elitism in America and introduced, as Rosenfeld points out, “a very

modern fusion of egalitarian epistemology and social biases into the debate about the future of the American colonies” (p. 145). The outcome was nothing short of revolutionary, since Paine managed to make natural what until then had appeared as impossible. In Pennsylvania, the echoes of his pamphlet made themselves heard in the heated debates on the new state constitution, above all with regard to such topics as electoral franchise, political participation, and monocameralism, issues on which Rosenfeld has important things to say in her book. She also examines several critical responses to Paine, most notably coming from the pen of Charles Inglis and Benjamin Rush, the latter being the author of an important piece on common sense published in 1791.

It would be impossible to deny that more than 200 years later, faith in popular common sense and equality remains a central undisputed pillar of democracy in America, where, as Tocqueville once noted, the art of self-government has been developed much more than on the soil of Europe. Nobody could deny that the Americans’ high propensity to form civil and political associations has a strong link to the philosophy of common sense which has imbued American political culture from the founding of the Republic. At the same time, an uncritical faith in common sense has sometimes led to odd developments, some more controversial than others. In America, for example, the dominant anti-intellectualism and the skepticism toward intellectual elites have made it virtually impossible for public intellectuals to play a role similar to the one they have enjoyed to this day in France. Another example, though perhaps of a more controversial nature, might be the populism which can be found in some (though not all!) circles associated with the Tea Party movement. As for Europe, the language of common sense has sometimes been linked there to—and served—the rise of nationalist movements in which demagogues and populists rhetorically invoking the wisdom of the people played an important and often nefarious role.

Be that as it may, the reader of Sophia Rosenfeld’s story is tempted in the end to endorse Hannah Arendt’s claim (quoted in the last chapter of the book) that, for all of its limitations, common sense retains a “high rank in the hierarchy of political qualities” (p. 252). It might very well be the most important virtue of legislators, along with moderation, another paradoxical and difficult virtue which shares many things in common with common sense while also being different from it in other respects.[6] In particular, I should like to emphasize the eclecticism of both moderation and common sense, and the fact that, appearances notwithstanding, those who endorse them can, in fact, promote (and do sometimes promote!) bold and radical reforms.[7] A similar point was persuasively made in 1848 by Émile de Girardin who highlighted the eclecticism and complexity of good (common) sense as follows: “Nothing is more radical and more conservative than Good Sense. Good Sense is radical because what it wants is the reform of all abuses, the abandonment of all errors. Good Sense is conservative because what it wants is the conservation of all that pertains essentially to the duration of societies, the well-being of peoples, the progress of civilization” (p. 232). To ignore this duality would amount to misinterpreting both common sense and moderation. Sophia Rosenfeld’s learned book is a convincing proof of Girardin’s point and a persuasive invitation to rediscover a set of virtues in short supply in today’s politics.

NOTES

[1] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 14.

[2] Among those who made important contributions to the history of common sense during this period in England, Rosenfeld points out the Earl of Shaftesbury, author of an important philosophical tract entitled *Sensus Communis* (1709), the essayists Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, the editors of the *Spectator*.

[3] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[4] In the last chapter of her book, Rosenfeld shows how Kant, who distinguished between *sensus communis* and common sense, developed his critique of the latter into a coherent philosophical agenda. It will be recalled that Kant did not look favorably upon the philosophical endeavors of his Scottish colleagues.

[5] The reader will find an excellent discussion of this topic in chapter five of the book (Paris, 1790-1792). Rosenfeld makes excellent use of a wide array of sources, from newspaper articles and dialogues to writings of lesser-known figures such as the interesting Buée brothers.

[6] Nobody would argue, of course, that Tom Paine was a moderate because he was a defender of common sense. Moderation is conspicuously absent from the index of Rosenfeld's book although it is present in its pages, often between the lines. To be sure, there are many affinities between common sense and moderation that would deserve close attention. Also worth studying in further detail would be how common sense is translated into political institutions, constitutions, and laws.

[7] On this issue, see Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 238-250. The institutional embodiments of political moderation and common sense may differ significantly. A moderate is likely to endorse institutional and constitutional complexity while a radical defender of common sense (like Tom Paine, for example) would argue against it.

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