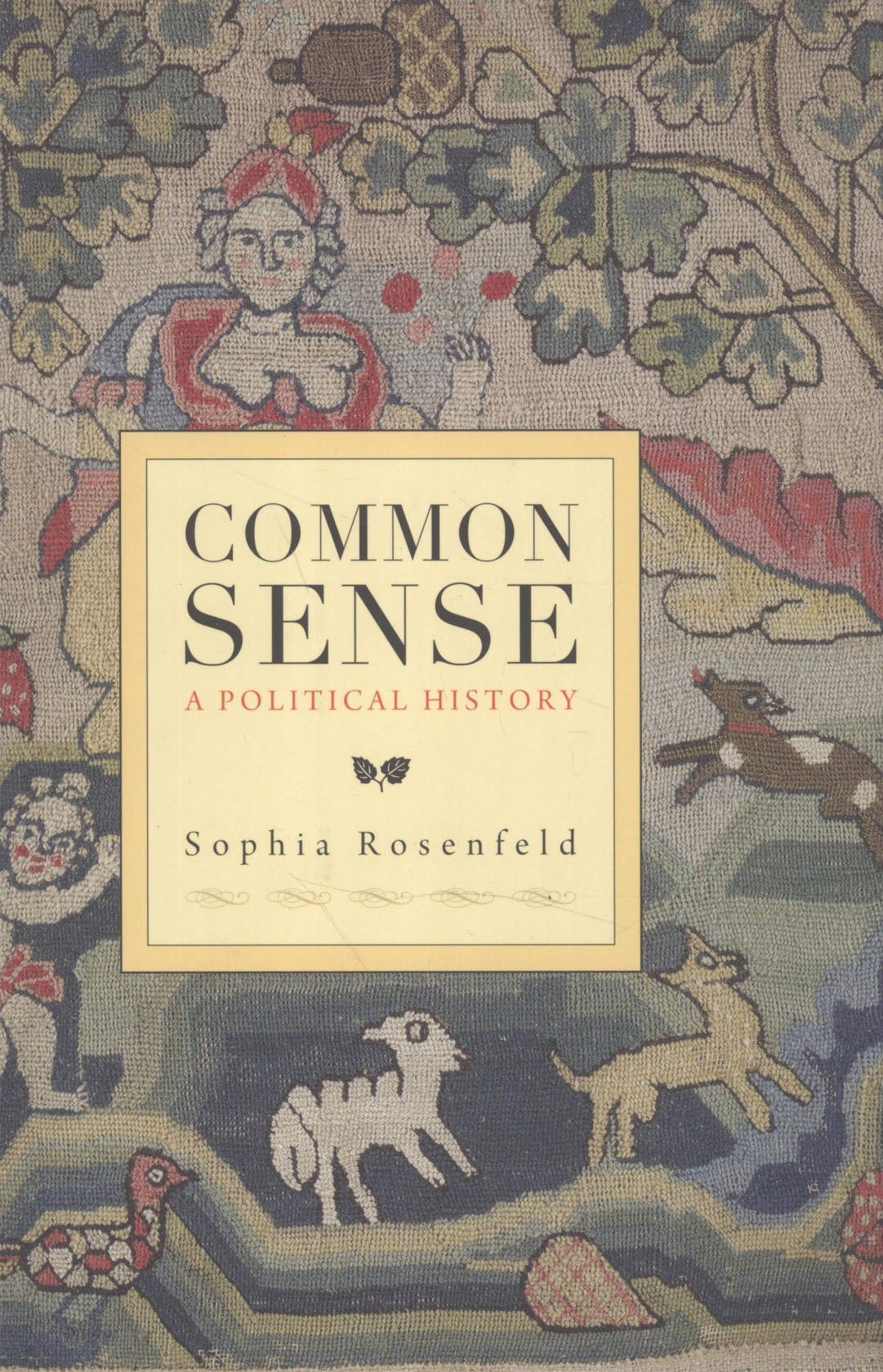

COMMON SENSE

A POLITICAL HISTORY

Sophia Rosenfeld

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Introduction

The familiar, precisely because it is familiar,
is for that very reason unknown.
G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

HOT THINGS CAN BURN YOU. Two plus two make four. Seeing is believing. Blue is different from black. A leopard cannot change its spots. If I am writing these words, I exist.

There are many reasons not to write a book about common sense, especially if you happen to be a historian. For one, common sense is, by definition, ahistorical terrain. In modern parlance, 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 (e.g., If you used your common sense, you would know the principles stated above!). 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, including principles of amount, difference, prudence, cause and effect. Either way, common sense is supposed to define that which is the common property of all humans regardless of the variance of time or space.[1]

If that is not problem enough, the tenets of common sense are ostensibly so banal, so taken for granted, that they generally go without saying. On the rare occasions when they are explicitly stated as such, it is, normally, only to counter perceived violations. The rest of the time, the

speaker feels compelled to employ a preceding "of course" as a signal that he or she is stating the obvious and offering up a cliché rather than treating the interlocutor as childish or insane. Otherwise these presuppositions simply inhere in the ordinary words we use, forming the tacit backdrop to all our more conscious activities and thoughts and supporting us through daily life.[2] For historians, this makes for an amorphous subject indeed.

Moreover, when historians do consider common sense, they generally do so from a position of hostility; it is what social scientists see as their professional obligation to work against.[3] Philosophers may spend their days pondering its epistemological validity. But those who study the past typically interest themselves in common sense with the goal of undermining the authority of what passes for it today in the particular society in which they live and write. Do you think it is common sense that a family is made up of two parents of opposite sexes and their direct offspring? Historians looking backward, like anthropologists looking in other places, can show you that there is nothing natural or inevitable here, only culture that familiarity and indoctrination have rendered falsely commonsensical in feel. This is the message several decades' worth of readers have taken from Clifford Geertz's great essay "Common Sense as a Cultural System."[4]

There *is* a good reason, however, why historians might well want to pause and reflect on the history of common sense itself, including its evolving content, meanings, uses, and effects. That reason is the centrality of the very idea of common sense to modern political life and, especially, to democracy.

Consider for a moment Thomas Paine's eighteenth-century boast that common sense is firmly on the side of the people and thus opposed to the rulership of kings. We have no reason, even now, to accept this pairing of common sense and republican governance as anything more than wishful thinking or a rhetorical masterstroke on the part of Paine. For most of history, and indeed even in North America in early 1776, the opposite was surely the case; the direct rule of the people was deemed an obvious recipe for disorder, instability, and worse. It is worth noticing, though, that ever since the appearance of *Common Sense,* Paine's famous call to arms of that fateful year, Americans in particular, but ultimately

exponents of democracy everywhere, have paid enormous lip service to the epistemological value of the collective, everyday, instinctive judgments of ordinary people. This is particularly true when it comes to matters of public life. Not only has the superiority of the many to the few become one of those basic, unchallengeable assumptions that, following the lead of political philosopher John Rawls, could now be said to constitute "democratic common sense."[5] Trust in common sense—meaning both the shared faculty of discernment and those few fundamental, inviolable principles with which everyone is acquainted and everyone agrees—has, in the context of contemporary democratic politics, itself become commonsensical. Politics has been recast (no matter the growing complexity of the world we inhabit) as the domain of simple, quotidian determinations and basic moral precepts, of truths that should be self-evident to all.

A few modern political philosophers, including Hannah Arendt, have gone even farther in contemplating this pairing and argued that common sense is the lifeblood of democracy. In the more than 200 years since Paine's little pamphlet came off the Philadelphia presses, the idea of common sense has repeatedly jumpstarted the participation of ordinary citizens, that is, those with no specialized knowledge or expertise, in the business of making political judgments. In turn, Arendt has proposed, the common sense produced by ordinary people engaging in unfettered discussion and debate should be thought of as constituting the shared ground on which a rich, communal political life—or real democracy—becomes possible.[6] For Arendt, writing in the wake of World War II but with the revolutionary era firmly in her thoughts, democracy is largely a result of habits of mind. And common sense becomes both the groundwork and the goal of any successful democratic regime.

Arendt thus leads us back to a basic historical question, albeit one framed in light of the present: How did this come to be? How—and with what lingering consequences—did common sense develop its special relationship in modern times with the kind of popular rule that we call democracy?

The answer requires stepping back, at least initially, well before the era of Paine. Both those basic assumptions that collectively go by the name

of common sense and the very idea of common sense (or, allowing for limited conceptual variation and translation, good sense, common reason, *sensus communis, le sens commun, le bon sens, il senso comune, il buon senso, gemeiner Verstand,* and *gesunder Menschenverstand,* among other terms) have long and complex pasts, despite definitional claims to the contrary. This is a history that, in modern times, stretches across both sides of the northern Atlantic world. It is also a history that is closely bound up with the rise of new conceptions of popular sovereignty between the Glorious Revolution of the late seventeenth century and the French Revolution of the late eighteenth—or what is sometimes called, following Paine's own coinage, the "Age of Revolutions."[7]

In the course of those hundred or so years, the appeal to the "oracle" of common sense became, as Immanuel Kant was to complain less than a decade after the first printing of Paine's famous pamphlet, "one of the subtile discoveries of modern times, by means of which the most superficial ranter can safely enter the lists with the most thorough thinker and hold his own."[8] What Kant does not mention is that the story of the transformation of what was once a technical term of Aristotelian science into a democratizing rhetorical trope, or way of legitimizing the airing of nonexpert opinion in the public sphere, was itself made possible by a series of prior developments. It also produced rather extraordinary effects.

During the seventeenth century and for reasons that we will soon encounter, the idea gradually took hold in northern Europe that certain basic, largely unquestioned notions were common (in the sense of shared or jointly held) to common (in the sense of ordinary) people simply because of their common (again, shared) natures and, especially, experiences. That included observation of the world around them and communication with one another.[9] What is more, these elemental and universal judgments, even if arrived at without prior formal training and unprovable to the standards of science, offered an unusually high level of certainty or truth-value. They were maximally plausible without any further evidence or even discussion being required. Common sense was thus ripe for revalorization by the start of the eighteenth century as a new "epistemic authority" with the potential to go head to head with considerably more established forms of authority, including history, law, custom,

faith, logic, and reason, especially when it came to matters of social or moral life.[10] This process occurred first in philosophy (much to Kant's dismay), where readers were encouraged to join a new alliance against the conspiracy by which ostensibly authoritative thinkers of the past had imposed their fantastical and misguided views on the world. (Think of the great English philosopher George Berkeley famously "siding with the mob" at the very start of the century.) Very soon thereafter, the appeal extended into the political sphere. There common sense provided a platform for a challenge to the existing political order in terms of people and ideas alike. It also led to a reformulation of the very domain labeled "politics." Indeed, in the context of profound challenges to traditional notions of both representation and regulation, this new way of thinking about thinking would cease to be simply one idea circulating among many and would become absorbed into the realm we still call common sense.

This is a largely unfamiliar story. In the standard liberal account, the triumph of "Reason," born of the Reformation and then the Scientific Revolution and heavily nurtured in the eighteenth century, plays the crucial role in the invention of the modern rights-bearing individual and the liberal constitutionalism on which democratic politics was eventually constructed. This explanation is itself a creation of the posthumously named Age of Enlightenment and has endured ever since, appropriating new ingredients (natural rights theory; resistance arguments aimed at sovereign authority; and the rise of capitalism, empire, and a new, educated middle class eager to see its needs reflected in "public opinion") in its wake. Even postmodernists tell the same tale and simply invert the moral, making the individual endowed with instrumental reason the source of the twentieth century's greatest tragedies rather than triumphs.

Yet democracy as it came into being in the late eighteenth century and exists to this day is actually a strange hybrid, combining a literal reading of the old idea of popular sovereignty, or the rule of "the people," with constitutionalism and representative government. The concept of a collective common sense—sometimes in alliance with the idea of the rational individual, sometimes in conflict—played a vital, if often tacit, role in

the construction of democracy's popular, as opposed to constitutional, face. In this regard, common sense seems much like sympathy and natural sentiment, those now widely discussed eighteenth-century emotional inventions that were also seen as important sources of social bonds and communally produced truth in the Age of Revolutions. One might even be tempted to think of the role of common sense in similarly communitarian terms, especially given the emphasis on social cohesion that links the two. But what the concept of common sense in its modern form enabled is actually less a particular vision of how political order should be constituted than a new political style and a new approach to what politics is. The idea of common sense provided an epistemological foundation and justification for the populism that remains one of democracy's pillars (if we are to subscribe to Arendt's view), but also one of democracy's primary and perennial threats.[11]

What is populism? Political theorists do not agree on any one definition. Most often they describe it as a form of persuasion, available to any part of the modern political spectrum, which depends upon an appeal on behalf of those who feel left out of the political process for a more active public role for those same people.[12] Typically that means the mass of ordinary folks (the illusory "people" or "silent majority")[13] who believe that those who rule do not or cannot adequately represent their interests. One argument in defense of this position can be called historical or even nostalgic in form: that "the people" have in recent times been denied a power that they once freely and rightfully possessed. The other, though, is epistemological in that it depends on a particular understanding of human cognitive and moral capabilities. Here the standard claim is 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, born of or nurtured by day-to-day experience in the world, that necessarily trumps the "expert" judgments and knowledge of a minority of establishment insiders. The latter category—the peddlers of dangerous nonsense—has by now expanded to include, varyingly, intellectuals, scientists, financiers, lawyers, journalists, power brokers, politicians, and other overeducated, elite pretenders, as well as foreigners and outliers of different kinds. Yet the point has remained the same. Not only do ordi-

nary people (in the aggregate) know better, but politics itself will become simpler, clearer, and ultimately less contentious once all the complex speculation and obfuscating jargon associated with an exclusive political class are finally pushed aside and the *real* people are finally able to see it and tell it like it is.

In its best-known forms, this is a style of politics with its roots in the late nineteenth century, especially in the American Midwest and South. Michael Kazin, for example, while insisting on the tenacity of the populist idiom in U.S. history, opens his wise and witty *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* with the rise in the 1890s of the oxymoronicly titled People's Party of the Great Plains and Old Confederacy.[14] However, one of the arguments of the present book is that at least a century before anyone called him- or herself a populist, this plainspoken, angry, and ostensibly grassroots mode of persuasion was already taking form around the abstract notion of common sense. This happened in multiple Enlightenment outposts, among radicals and conservatives alike, and with mixed but lasting results for the practice of democratic politics.

In the course of the eighteenth century, faith in the collective, quotidian insight of "the people" (and not simply the rational capacity of the individual) emerged hand in hand with the idea of self-rule. Then, in Philadelphia in 1776, common sense buttressed the first modern experiments in generating widespread popular participation in governance. It remains a central element of the democratic creed. But precisely because the rule of the people is such a vague formulation and so difficult at times to reconcile with democracy's other, constitutional face—in America as well as elsewhere—common sense has, over time, become as much an antagonist to democracy's modern, establishment permutations as a form of support. Its other roots lie in the international Counter-Revolution provoked by events in France after 1789. And ever since, common sense has also served to underwrite challenges to established forms of legitimate rule, including democracies, in the name of the special kind of intuition belonging to the people. This, then, is meant to be a book about a slippery subject: the long, complex marriage between the populist (and now largely taken for granted) appeal to the people's common sense and the political form we call democracy.

Methodologically, this provides an intriguing challenge. Can one write the intellectual history of a fundamentally anti-intellectual construct that signifies an assortment of pre-rational, tacit suppositions? Some help in this endeavor can certainly come from the history of concepts, or *Begriffsgeschichte,* the branch of intellectual history concerned with tracing the sources and evolution of the mental and linguistic apparatuses used for classifying and categorizing our thoughts.[15] The revelation of lost distinctions, forgotten connections, and unfamiliar or contested uses of abstract terms, whether by ordinary people or philosophers, can be helpful in making sense of the roots of political innovation in the past. It can also aid in thinking about the limitations of our contemporary political vocabulary or considering how those same concepts might be used in the future. For this reason, we begin with an account of ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of what we now label common sense, keeping an eye on both discontinuities in signification and the lasting residue of antiquated meanings, especially in the realm of metaphors. However, in our larger endeavor we need also to look for aid to the social history of ideas (the area of history focused on the social context in which ideas take root); the social history of knowledge (the historical field concerned with the changing structures within which what counts as knowledge are produced, disseminated, and adapted to new uses); and, particularly, the history of what French historians call *les usages commun:* the evolving, everyday perceptions, beliefs, and social practices of whole social bodies in the past.[16] After all, concepts themselves take form and gain authority not only in texts but also in social life. Our ambition is ultimately to explore the relationship between, on the one hand, the development of the kind of articulate idea—common sense—that is the normal bread and butter of intellectual history and, on the other, the history of a set of beliefs that rarely gets articulated, despite its importance to religion, ethics, politics, and daily life, precisely because history has relegated it to this very same, naturalizing rubric. This is, in other words, intended to be a story about the discursive construction of the social (insofar as common sense is an imaginary common realm born directly out of daily interaction with the world and its inhabitants and specially oriented toward social life).

It is also designed as a story about the social construction of the discursive and conceptual.

The solution employed here is thus closest to what historians of science call "historical epistemology." Typically this method involves revealing the seemingly timeless organizing concepts of modern science and knowledge production—categories like truth or objectivity—not only as historical constructs but also as products of practices and values that now seem far removed from the domain we have set apart as "science." These include standards of beauty, manners, and morals, economic competition, the search for social status, institutional pressures, religious practices and ideals, and gender norms, as well as genres, discourses, and disciplines.[17] However, the focus of this study is ultimately on the links between what has long been considered most unchanging and invisible in the historical record—common sense as a way of knowing—and what is seemingly least—political life.[18] And as it turns out, the epistemological, emotional, and evidentiary foundations of politics are not always consonant with those of the natural, physical, or even social sciences. Even though the new science and common sense were close allies for most of the eighteenth century, sharing roots in a Protestant emphasis on direct, experiential knowledge, simplicity, and the value of "ordinary life,"[19] their proponents eventually parted ways, producing a schism whose implications have lasted to the present. Science increasingly became the domain of specialists for whom experience, without controlled experimentation backed up by technical training, was insufficient as a foundation for arriving at truths.[20] Political reasoning took a different turn. It is in tracing the ways by which an anti-expert ethos attached itself particularly to the realm of politics that a cultural and intellectual history of populism finally becomes possible.

Three large historical shifts that took varied forms in different locations across the Northern and Western hemispheres provide the framework for this story. And as befits a study of what the ancient Greeks called *endoxic* or commonplace knowledge,[21] these broad themes help bring to light the extraordinary paradoxes that run through the history of common sense and, indeed, of populism as a style of politics based on this imagined authority.

The first of these major developments is the phenomenal growth of cities, most of them clustered near the edges of the northern Atlantic or in some way connected to transoceanic commerce. London, Paris, Aberdeen, Philadelphia, Edinburgh, Amsterdam, Geneva, the Hague: these urban centers should be understood to be places of local knowledge, marked by a variety of particular and distinctive mores, religious cultures, legal regimes, political systems, businesses, institutions, class formations, languages, and even public spaces, from universities to printing shops to restaurants, in which ideas could take shape. They were also all, to different degrees depending on location and size, places of movement and exchange, borrowing, appropriation, and diffusion. Early modern cities on both sides of the Atlantic and Channel existed in a symbiotic relationship with smaller towns and the surrounding countryside, which they depended upon for food and labor. They also functioned in an increasingly international arena. Those cities whose fortunes were linked to the Atlantic in the eighteenth century were centers of communication as well as capital, places where terms, ideas, gossip, information, goods (including manuscripts, books, pamphlets, and journals), and people were frequent transplants from elsewhere. Tom Paine, with his wanderings between London, Philadelphia, and Paris, is simply a case in point. Even those who themselves never strayed far from their birthplaces, from slave laborers born in the New World to philosophers in Prussian university towns, were implicated in a global system of trade, an increasingly borderless Republic of Letters, interimperial conflict, or all of the above. This tension between stasis and flux, the local and the global, is critical to our story. Common sense, with its culturally specific inflections and universalizing pretensions, came into being as part and parcel of urban life across the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.[22]

The second critical substory here is the growth, within these cities big and small, Catholic, Protestant, and multireligious, of a new social type: the person who would set about to establish himself (and soon herself), whether through plays, novels, essays, newspaper articles, prints, pamphlets, philosophical tracts, lectures, or street corner harangues, as an independent spokesperson for the truth. *Gens de lettres* (men of letters) did not represent a particular social class or institutional type in the

eighteenth century. We will meet representatives ranging from debauched libertines on the run from their noble families like the Marquis D'Argens, to impoverished country parsons-turned-moralizing professors like James Beattie, to the cantankerous artisan and radical pamphleteer Tom Paine himself. Their ranks increasingly expanded in the course of the century to encompass women, too; we will also encounter the French revolutionary playwright Olympe de Gouges, the English counter-revolutionary Hannah More, and the imagined female characters Mothers Gérard and Duchesne, though assumptions about the relationship between women and common sense were always complex. A good number of these figures had deep roots in Protestant culture, with its long tradition of valuing the quotidian over the exceptional and unmediated experience over higher reflection, whether as a vocation or in pursuit of salvation and truth in daily life. But by the eighteenth century, advocates of common sense could come to their positions from within orthodox Catholicism or from within a range of heterodoxies, from deism to full-blown atheism, too. The success of these figures in economic terms varied as well. A few even found themselves, as circumstances changed within their own lives, alternately holding formal positions in churches, universities, or governments, currying favor with private patrons, living off family income, and trying to survive by their pens alone.

What eighteenth-century *gens de lettres,* whether male or female, typically shared by virtue of the job they set out to do, was a need to articulate their own function in terms that were at once social and epistemological. Most had little obvious regard for common people, especially those who clearly did not belong to the literate public behind that other new (and extremely well-documented) enlightened social force, public opinion.[23] Even at the height of the American and French Revolutions, and even among those who would ultimately prove to be instrumental to its modern apotheosis, few expressed anything but horror at the notion of "democracy" insofar as it collapsed the distinction between themselves and the rabble. But against a backdrop of a crisis of authority that began with the Reformation and continued in the context of the new science, writers also tended increasingly in the eighteenth century to try to make a name for themselves as challengers to those with greater social status or