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Review of *Common Sense: A Political History*

Don Herzog

University of Michigan Law School, dherzog@umich.edu

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Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. 368. \$29.95 (ISBN 978-0-674-05781-4).

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This is a completely charming book: smart, literate, subtle, putting pressure in all the right places. Rosenfeld wants to show that surprisingly much of modern political history—the rise of democracy; its anxious and baleful critics; the turn against priestcraft, statecraft, and babbling intellectuals—is distilled in invocations of common sense. She’s calmly and confidently in control of disparate and illuminating material, from England to Amsterdam, Philadelphia to Paris, the seventeenth century to the twentieth. Even readers not persuaded of some of her central claims will enjoy feasting on the often hilarious primary sources she lays out.

Rosenfeld is drily aware that the content of what we call common sense has changed. She reminds us, for instance, that people once found it easy to say that common sense vouched for the existence of God. Even better, she’s aware that what philosophers would call the sense of the concept—what we mean in labeling something common sense, that is—has shifted. From Aristotle to (in some moods) Arendt, it can be some internal mental faculty of judgment that helps sense observations hang together. It can be basic or elementary beliefs—that black isn’t white, say—that more or less everyone grasps. It can be the stubborn good sense of ordinary people who can’t be bamboozled by glib pooh-bahs, whether they are priests, intellectuals, or government ministers fond of the mysteries of state.

After the Glorious Revolution, Rosenfeld suggests, various writers embraced common sense as the grounds of an urbane or civil peace, with the frenzies of religious enthusiasts and staunch republicans delicately but firmly cast aside as delirious insanity. This sort of thing makes later writers worry about the suffocatingly ideological work that common sense does. Anyway, that bid for a peace treaty failed. “Perhaps, though,” Rosenfeld muses later, “this is simply the way of appeals to common sense... such appeals work better as the foundation of scorched-earth crusades directed against their opposites than they do as forms of informal, centrist regulation” (199). The real fun and fireworks of her book lie in probing the uses of common sense as a weapon.

We know that sweeping transformations have turned *democracy* from a term of vituperative abuse into an honorific so profound that even today’s thuggish regimes claim it for their own. And we know that that linguistic change marks the site of endless political conflict. So too, Rosenfeld demonstrates, for common sense. She offers writers priding themselves on disdaining the views of the vulgar. But many of her spirited democrats don’t imagine they can rise much “above the herd” (79, 133). They delight instead in puncturing the bloated non-sense that social superiors spout to justify their own positions. Rosenfeld rightly

dwells on the extraordinary success of Tom Paine's *Common Sense*. Though she doesn't mention it, his cute pun, replacing *nobility* with *no-ability*, is a perfect example of the motif she has in mind. Paine thinks even ordinary language has suckered people, that anyone willing to think clearly can see right through the threadbare pretensions of England's social order.

But then of course the way is always clear for a further reaction. Take opponents of the French revolution, opponents on both sides of the Channel, who roll their eyes in contemptuous disbelief at the cosmic stupidities and tragedies that followed the war on priestcraft. I've long enjoyed their supercilious sneers: if the barebreasted Goddess of Reason is your thing, they suggest, if you are enchanted by the thought of carving the map of France into geometrically regular districts, then you too need a withering blast of common sense. In this way, who gets to lay claim to common sense becomes one of the great political questions of modernity.

I liked this book so much that it seems churlish to register any hesitations, but I suppose book reviewers have their duties. Though Rosenfeld's prose is usually elegant, there is some unhappily clotted jargon in her introduction gesturing toward something like a social history of ideas. I wanted to cheer—I think the distinction between social and intellectual history is a confused train wreck—but later I sometimes found myself wishing for less discourse, more context. If for instance you already know just how powerful and wealthy the Catholic church was in *ancien régime* France, or just what demographic and economic profiles the three estates conjured up, Rosenfeld's account of postrevolutionary French debates will be even better than it already is.

Don Herzog
University of Michigan
