

State power conceal what it doesn't want to know - a 'theoretical' laboratory which has been found to be well-equipped for this universal function of non-thought, the effects of which can be spotted as much in the discourse of Marxist scholars as in that of professional revolutionaries.
(Note added February 1973)

22b To go into this in any depth, it would be necessary to demonstrate the interrelation between this theory of ideology and the police-revisionist conspiracy theory. The theory states that workers do not have the capacity to produce an anti-capitalist ideology, and hence as *autonomous* anti-capitalist practice. So if this worker claims to speak and act for himself, he immediately reveals himself to be a false worker, and thus a real police-agent.
(Note added February 1973)

23 Let us specifically state, should it still be necessary, that what is in question here is not Althusser's personal position in a particular set of circumstances, but the political line implied by his theory of ideology. Rarely has a theory been more rapidly appropriated by those who have an interest in it. In the name of science, the workers' struggles against wage-scales are resisted - don't they misunderstand the scientific law which says that each is paid according to the value of his labour-power? In the same way, the anti-hierarchical struggles in the university fail to understand that 'the ultimate nature of the staff-student relation corresponds to the advance of human knowledge, of which it is the very foundation'. (J. Pesenti: 'Problèmes de méthode et questions théoriques liées à la refonte des carrières', July 1969). One could not admit in a more ingenuous manner what constitutes the 'foundation' of the theory of science to which one lays claim.

The impasse in which Althusser finds himself is demonstrated in a recent article in *La Pensée* 'A propos de l'article de Michel Verret sur Mai étudiant' (June 1969). In it, Althusser affirms the basically progressive character of the May student movement, and denounces the reactionary interpretation of this movement by an over-zealous defender of 'Science'. But he cannot - or will not - see it in the simple justification of a reactionary politics. He only sees the mark of an *inadequacy*: the Party 'has not been able to' analyse the student movement, to keep in touch with student youth, to explain the forms of working class struggle to it, etc. The conclusion of the article shows that he is thus still limited to the twin recourse to science and the Party apparatus. It is on the latter that he relies 'to furnish all the *scientific* explanations which will allow everyone, including the young, to understand the events they have lived through, and, if they wish, to grasp on a correct basis where they stand in the class struggle, by revealing the correct perspectives to them, by giving them the political and ideological means for correct action.'



Common sense

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Correct ideas, says Mao Tse-tung, do not fall from the sky: they are formed by social practice. What is true of correct ideas holds also for ideas in general. No ideas fall from the sky. They are all rooted in given historical situations. They all represent, or reflect, certain forms of past or present practice. But the relationship is often a complex or confused one, and rarely as simple as the case pin-pointed by Mao Tse-tung as the ideal: correct ideas in a correct social practice.

Marxists have often seen the ideological struggle in terms of a wrestling match. On the left, in the red corner, dialectical materialism; and on the right ... This is a fallacious and dangerous image. The enemy of a theory or a doctrine is never a rival or competing theory but is the world of social practice in which that theory is rooted. The battle of ideas can be engaged at a refined level, one theory against another. But this is only a minute aspect of the struggle. For in general the enemy camp is composed not of one theory but of several. Furthermore these are not so much theories as such but ways of thought formed from a mixture of different elements which serve to connect these theories to a day-to-day practice.

Marx himself was well aware of the complexity of the situation. His critique of religion in a case in point. Marx saw religion not as an arbitrary, metaphysic dreamed up by some armchair philosopher, nor as an ingenious deception exercised by the ruling class on the masses, but as a form of thought which had deep roots in the spontaneous experience of the mass of the people. The combination of elements which go to make up religious thought has its origins ultimately in the real world. Religion is one of the ways in which people live in an illusory relationship with reality, the illusory 'spiritual aroma' of a contradictory world.

The religious aroma has for the most part (Festival of Light notwithstanding) been deodorised by advanced industrial capitalism. The struggle against religion is no longer the necessary starting point of cultural revolution. Platitude, not mystery, is the present enemy of critical and scientific thinking, and of a revolutionary practice. Religion has been replaced by common sense.

But the lesson of Marx's critique of religion should not be overlooked. Nor should the connection between religion and common sense as it was implied by Marx and more explicitly developed by the Italian marxist, Antonio Gramsci. Common sense is so often invoked as being the ultimate no-nonsense conception of things, alien to all forms of religious and metaphysical speculation, that the association may at first sight appear surprising. But in fact not only does religious thinking have its origins in the common sense of a particular world, but it has in turn acted on common sense, so that our present everyday conceptions contain all sorts of elements which are in fact speculative and mystical rather than realistic and scientific.

Common sense is fundamentally reactionary. The key to common sense is that the ideas that it embodies are not so much incorrect as uncorrected and taken for granted. Common sense consists of all those ideas which can be tagged onto existing knowledge without challenging it. It offers no criterion for determining how things are in capitalist society, but only a criterion of how things fit with the ways of looking at the world that the present phase of class society has inherited from the preceding one.

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This may seem a brutal way of stating the question. After all common sense does consist, at least in part, of the popular thinking of the oppressed in opposition to the ideologies of their oppressors. A philosophy of common sense has also served a positive function historically in the battle against the worst forms of reaction, notably at the time of French Revolution and in early radical thought in Britain.

But was it common sense, as we understand the term today, that had this positive role? And is this so-called 'common sense' really to be identified with the thinking of the people in rebellion against oppression? In a historical perspective, the answer must be no.

We tend to think of common sense as a permanent feature of our thinking about the world. But this is true only to the extent that there have always been forms of popular thinking and these forms have rarely been revolutionised but have gradually evolved into each other, shedding some beliefs and adding some new ones. But the content of these beliefs has changed, and will continue to do so. In the seventeenth century it was common to believe in witchcraft and to believe that the sun went round the earth. Both beliefs were reasonable ones. They provided a more plausible explanation of the world than did the available alternatives. But neither belief was abandoned without a struggle on the part of the defenders of the old conception, and it took a long time for new scientific conceptions, developed in opposition to common sense, to be integrated into ordinary thinking and become part of the common sense of the latter world.

There is in fact no such thing as an universal common sense, valid at all times and places. Not only does the content of popular beliefs change, if only slowly, but the concept that we have that these popular beliefs somehow make up 'common sense' is itself a recent development and one which has also changed its form in the course of the last two centuries. What we now believe about common sense, where it begins and ends and how it stands in relation to other forms of thinking, is in fact a product of a particular class ideology of the eighteenth century.

The original concept of common sense was based on the belief that there exists an understanding of the world which is 'common' in the sense of natural to everybody. It was part of the belief in Universal Reason, the ideology of a class that was contesting the 'irrational' institutions of Church and King. It was also part and parcel of eighteenth-century individualism and of the belief in a 'natural man' who, if left to himself and uncorrupted by existing social forms, would automatically develop the right ideas about the world. But just as Robinson Crusoe, on his desert island, 'spontaneously' develops a primitive capitalist mentality, so both Universal Reason and 'natural man' acquired from the start a distinctly middle-class character.

It is not just that the content of common sense beliefs belonged to the middle class. The fact is, only the bourgeoisie could have invented such a concept. For the bourgeoisie is the only class in history for whom individualism is an article of faith and which has a vested interest in seeing itself in individual rather than class terms and thus as the embodiment of all mankind.

From the outset the abstract and individualistic conception of common sense ran headlong into a contradiction. What the eighteenth century mistook for universal common sense had no correspondence with actual thinking. The development of thought is a social phenomenon and not the product of an encounter between a disembodied mind and a previously unthought-about reality. The mind is not just a blank sheet on which the truths of 'common' sense can be imprinted. The common sense that the bourgeoisie exalted was what they considered 'reasonable'.

Part of the ambiguity inherent in this concept of common sense has survived to this day, though in a form that is far less heroic. On the one hand common sense means a form of pragmatic reasoning based

on direct perception of the world and opposed to all form of thought that lack this direct link with experience. On the other hand it means whatever understanding of the world happens to be generally held. The two meanings come nearest to converging in the mentality of the person for whom ancient folk wisdom also represents an adequate vehicle for coming to terms with the world. But even at this level there is an element of hideously crude class mystification present. When Heath calls on industry to 'stand on its own two feet' he is expounding the philosophy of *laissez faire* capitalism but in terms which have a resonance in popular thinking, a gritty unimaginative common sense which is also the class sense of the petty bourgeoisie.

Common sense, then, retains the class character imprinted on it from the outset. As a philosophy it is also bolstered up by academic philosophers. In the eyes of English philosophical orthodoxy especially, common sense is the Holy Grail of truth itself. The world is as it must be. It can only be as the English language (as spoken in Oxford) tells us that it is. Every mystified formulation that has crept into the English language to describe a bourgeois reality, as seen by the bourgeoisie, is sanctified as for ever inviolate. The idea that the world appears to us as it does only as a result of a long process of integrating various forms of thinking about the world into a single fabric of language, and that this fabric may have to be torn apart to allow new conceptions to develop, has never been heard of in those bastions of reaction. Common sense is good enough for them, so it can be good enough for the people too.

Common sense is neither straightforwardly the class ideology of the bourgeoisie nor the spontaneous thinking of the masses. It is the way a subordinate class in class society lives its subordination. It is the acceptance, by the subordinate class, of the reality of class society seen from below. As soon as the exploited realise that their oppression is not a natural fact but appears as natural only through the medium of a mystifying use of language - common sense - they challenge it. Why is it common sense that a capitalist 'deserves' a return on money invested, when capital as such in point of fact produces nothing? Why is it the case that women 'must' be 'feminine', when the attributes of so-called femininity bear only the most tenuous relation to the biological datum of being a woman?

These are indeed 'facts of common sense' because they have a certain validity as a mirror of the way society operates. But no class conscious worker or member of women's or gay liberation could submit to them as truth. To paraphrase what Marx originally wrote about religion, the struggle against common sense is indirectly the struggle against the world of which common sense is the passive reflection.

We have to struggle against language, against its well-worn metaphors about black and white, masculine and feminine, noble and common. Even more we have to fight common sense with a conception of the world which is radically antagonistic to everything common sense stands for.

It is a great mistake to think that common sense will reform itself on its own. The heroic days are long past when common sense could be seen as the language of progressive values against the mystique of feudalism, and as the language of science against the abstruseness of philosophy. Common sense is always to be the lowest common denominator of what people can collectively believe. It integrates those features of scientific and progressive thinking which have become 'acceptable'. It is now for example common sense to believe that the earth goes round the sun. Our social conceptions have also changed. But there is always an area in which science will be in advance of and in contradiction to the apparent truth of common sense.

'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'. Science alone cannot teach us where we are misled by appearances. We must learn how to contest the built-in truths of language every time we pick up a pen or open our mouths.