


**Please cite the Published Version**

Jackson, Robert  (2021) "Good sense" in the twenty-first century. *The International Gramsci Journal*, 4 (2). pp. 130-141. ISSN 1836-6554

**Publisher:** International Gramsci Society, University of Wollongong, Australia

**Version:** Published Version

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**Additional Information:** Review of Gramsci's Common Sense. Inequality and its Narratives authored by Kate Crehan. (Durham, Duke University Press 2016).

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# International Gramsci Journal

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Volume 4  
Issue 2 *PHILOSOPHY; EDUCATION;*  
*SUBALTERNS; COMMON SENSE / REVIEWS*

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Article 10

2021

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### Recommended Citation

Jackson, Robert P., “Good sense” in the twenty-first century, *International Gramsci Journal*, 4(2), 2021, 130-141.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol4/iss2/10>

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## **“Good sense” in the twenty-first century**

### **Abstract**

This is the abstract of a review in English by Robert P. Jackson of the book by Kate Crehan, Gramsci's Common Sense. Inequality and its Narratives (Durham, Duke University Press 2016).

### **Keywords**

Common sense, intellectuals, subalternity, Adam Smith, Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street

## ***‘Good sense’ in the twenty-first century***

Robert P. Jackson

### *1. Introduction*

In *Gramsci’s Common Sense* (Durham: Duke, 2016), Kate Crehan, Professor Emerita of Anthropology at the College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center, CUNY, deftly explores three key Gramscian concepts (subalternity, intellectuals, and ‘common sense’ [*senso comune*]) and employs them to explain the ways in which different forms of structural inequality are produced (and reproduced) in society. In her previous writings, such as *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (London: Pluto 2002; in Italian *Gramsci, Cultura e Antropologia*, Lecce: Argo 2010), Crehan proposed that the Anglophone anthropological tradition and its notion of ‘culture’, understood broadly as a way of life, has much to gain from a renewed engagement with Gramsci’s thought. In particular, her work has highlighted that the significance of the concept of “culture” in the *Prison Notebooks* emerges from the fact that culture is “one of the major ways the inequalities of class are lived on a day-to-day basis” (p. x). Building on these substantial reflections on culture and power, *Gramsci’s Common Sense* insightfully illuminates the complexities of Gramsci’s inclusive understanding of class. Crehan not only situates a Gramscian conception of class far from the economic reductionism commonly ascribed to Marxist thinkers (as a means to dismiss them), but also maps the “terrain of class” in Gramsci’s writings through his articulation of the above-mentioned constellation of concepts (p. xi).

Crehan divides the book into two parts. In the first section, three chapters reconstruct the ‘broad contours’ of this trio of concepts (subalternity, intellectuals, and “common sense”) in the *Notebooks* (p. 10). The fourth chapter suggests that Gramsci’s analytical approach expresses a “dialogical relationship” between subalterns and intellectuals, linking the lived experience of inequality and the “political narratives that articulate that experience” (p. xii). Thus, Crehan contends that Gramsci allows us to make sense of the gap between the actuality of people’s circumstances and their explanation or narrative for understanding these circumstances. In the

second section, Crehan moves beyond the ambit of Gramsci's framework, using his conceptual apparatus to analyse three distinct case studies. The first of these surveys a range of literature concerning the political economist Adam Smith. Crehan moves beyond the prevailing caricature of Smith as the prophet of *laissez-faire* market fundamentalism, situating his life and work in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment. Crehan appraises Smith's contribution as an "organic intellectual" of the rising bourgeoisie, mapping out the ensemble of relations of which we can read him as a personification (p. 83).

Moving from the past to the present, Crehan then explores two recent socio-political phenomena, the right-wing populist Tea Party project and the anti-corporate Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. While emerging from opposing ends of the political spectrum, Crehan argues that we can understand both of these cases as efforts to remould contemporary "common sense" in the United States. She reads the achievements of these movements in terms of their capacity to create or popularise certain political narratives. On the one hand, Crehan analyses the Tea Party's narrative as a variant of the capitalist worldview, encouraged and promoted by wealthy corporate interests, while also resonating viscerally with the fears and anxieties of grassroots supporters. On the other, she argues that the narrative of OWS, epitomized by the slogan "We are the 99 percent!", represents the embryonic beginnings of an alternative to the prevailing hegemony, one that challenges inequality and exploitation by weaving together submerged elements of "good sense" arising out of the experiences of subaltern groups.

Being alert to the need, proposed by Gramsci himself, to search for the *Leitmotiv* and the "rhythm of the thought" in an author's work, Crehan resists the temptation to provide simplified definitions of Gramscian terms. Exhibiting and analysing passages from Gramsci's writings, she also intervenes in a variety of theoretical debates, engaging with the thought of twentieth-century thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak (as well as Michel Foucault, Ranajit Guha, Julien Benda, and James Scott). Counterposing Gramsci's ideas to the works of these figures enables Crehan to develop further the distinctiveness of Gramsci's thought, and to highlight its enduring

fertility for confronting the crisis of modernity. Stressing that Gramsci's reflections in the *Notebooks* are not simply a 'template' to be reproduced mechanically, Crehan draws on his writings as a resource to inform her case studies. She argues in the conclusion that Gramsci's thought can act as a "guide" for progressive political engagement in the twenty-first century (p. 198).

One of the book's key themes is Gramsci's understanding of the relationship between knowledge and opinion, and the passage from one to the other. Crehan draws on the *Notebooks* for an account of the formation of popular opinions, not from a disinterested standpoint, but from an engaged concern to explain their relationship to social transformation. She explores the emergence of genuinely new ways of understanding the world, and the ways in which those new understandings can become a material force that radically challenges the status quo (p. 188). At the same time, she points out that the tectonic processes that form the "self-evident truths" of "common sense" have often led intellectuals towards a position of disdain for the "effects of opinion", e.g. Foucault (p. ix). Contrary to this, for Crehan, Gramsci's conception involves "an epistemological claim" that new understandings emerge from knowledge fundamentally born out of the experience of subalternity (p. 39). However, if this inchoate knowledge is to translate into a new conception of the world, a dialogue is required between subaltern groups and the organic intellectuals that emerge from their ranks. For Crehan, this dialogue can only be successful if it grasps the multifaceted character of the structural inequalities (involving class, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) in the existing hegemonic order, and their entanglement with the "complex relations between subaltern experience and political narratives" (p. 185).

## 2. *Subalternity, Intellectuals, 'Common Sense'*

Crehan begins her discussion of Gramscian thought with the concept of subalternity, at first overlooked and subsequently much misunderstood in the Anglophone literature on Gramsci. Pointing towards the problematic tendency to treat this concept simply as a code word, "a euphemism for *proletariat*" (p. 14), Crehan underlines the heterogeneity of subalternity, which "refers to a relation of subordination to some other group, or a subordinate location within an

overarching institution such as the state” (p. 185). For Crehan, Gramsci shares with anthropology an attentiveness to subaltern voices. While it is one of the strengths of that discipline to be concerned with “genuinely listening” to the “native’s point of view” (p. 13), Crehan stresses that Gramsci is not concerned with the mapping and conservation of these perspectives. Rather, Gramsci’s project involves the translation of subaltern experiences into effective political narratives for the purpose of social transformation.

Crehan contrasts the complexity of Gramsci’s “double attitude” to subaltern agency with two opposing accounts developed by Spivak and Scott (pp. 11-14, 59-62). For Spivak, famously, the subaltern voice is radically mute, and her work explores, in particular, the silencing of female subalterns in the Global South. Thus, Spivak criticizes Northern theorists that claim to speak on behalf of subaltern groups. Scott, in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale 1990), insists that, despite the fearful silence of subalterns in the presence of “power-holders”, articulate subaltern criticisms of power can be detected in the “hidden transcripts” produced by subaltern groups (p. 13). Contrary to Spivak, Gramsci affirms the capacity of subaltern groups to generate collective oppositional narratives. Indeed, for Crehan, subaltern experiences are “the ultimate source of all genuinely new narratives” (*ibid.*). At the same time, Scott’s account of “hidden transcripts” underestimates the fragmentation characteristic of the subaltern condition. In comparison, Gramsci recognises the more or less incoherent nature of subaltern narratives, always disaggregated in relation to the existing hegemony.

Crehan then turns to consider Gramsci’s conception of the nature and role of intellectuals. She frames her exposition of the “organic intellectual” in distinction to Said’s use of the concept in his 1993 Reith Lectures, published as *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon 1994). For Crehan, Said misrepresents the “organic intellectual” as a simple technician that produces instrumental knowledge for a political or commercial end (p. 25). Said contrasts this unfavourably with a vision, inspired by Benda, of the universal intellectual, a principled individual, independent of particular interests, motivated by eternal emancipatory values, and locked in a moral struggle to speak truth to power. Crehan shows that, whereas Said focuses on the individual character of the intellectual,

Gramsci emphasises the collective relations between intellectuals and the processes of knowledge production and distribution. While Said is attendant on the vocation of the intellectual, and the particular skillset that she possesses, for Gramsci what is of primary importance is the role that intellectuals play in society, as the “form in which the knowledge generated out of the lived experience of a social group [...] achieves coherence and authority” (pp. 29-30). Crehan thus highlights Gramsci’s contestation of the ingrained and seductive notion of the lofty intellectual floating above the struggles between social groups. Crehan roots this account in a substantive reading of Gramsci’s distinctions between organic and traditional intellectuals, coherence and incoherence, and between knowledge, understanding and feeling. Central to Crehan’s account, of historical blocs and the relations between intellectuals and classes in Gramsci’s thought, is the “dialogical” relationship between “raw, inchoate experience” and its transformation by organic intellectuals into “articulate coherent narratives” in the course of the emergence of these intellectuals themselves (p. 36).

In the third chapter, Crehan engages with Sophia Rosenfeld’s *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard 2011), which identifies the eponymous term as having two main intertwined strands of historical meaning, signifying, on the one hand, a “basic human faculty” that allows us to make everyday judgements, and, on the other, “widely shared and seemingly self-evident conclusions” (p. 45). Identifying Gramsci’s conception of “common sense” predominantly with the latter, Crehan notes that “common sense” concerns primarily the “content of popular knowledge” (p. 46). She distinguishes Gramsci’s concept on this point from Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus”, which resembles a faculty with its reference “to the cognitive structures or dispositions that generate that knowledge” (*ibid.*). Returning to the *Notebooks*, Crehan criticises Rosenfeld’s account of Gramsci, arguing that it overlooks the “doubleness” of Gramsci’s attitude to “common sense”, in which there is a “complicated dialectical relationship” between elements of “good sense” among the masses and the “developed and coherent political philosophies” of intellectuals (p. 48). Thus, while Crehan points out the seriousness with which Gramsci treats “common sense”, due to its deep roots in subaltern experience, these are regarded as no more than the “rough and



jagged” beginnings of a new world (Q11§12, p. 1395; *SPN*, p. 343). Crehan contrasts Gramsci’s conception of “common sense” with Arendt’s advice that scholars show a “humble” deference to “popular understanding” (p. 50). Failure to do so, for Arendt, threatens our ability to live together in a common world, through a “breakdown of our common-inherited wisdom”, which tends in turn to produce totalitarian societies (*ibid.*). Contrary to this notion of “common sense” as a unitary and reliable source of truth, for Gramsci, it is an “ambiguous, contradictory and multi-form concept” (Q11§13, p. 1399; *SPN*, p. 423). Thus, Crehan emphasises Gramsci’s antipathy towards any romanticization of this “inherently unreliable” product of a “fractured world”, outlining his understanding of social transformation as a process that brings forth “a new common sense and a new culture” (p. 53).

In chapter four, Crehan draws together her readings of subalternity, intellectuals, and “common sense”, illuminating the relationships between these concepts with Gramsci’s reflections on the themes of language, folklore, and popular literature. At the same time, Crehan vividly illustrates the experience of subalternity using contemporary examples. For example, she discusses the visual art of Cindy Sherman that explores the social narratives presented to women by a male-dominated popular culture (p. 61). Crehan again highlights Gramsci’s “double attitude” toward subaltern “knowledge”, this time instantiated through language. She elaborates Gramsci’s approach to regional dialects, valorizing them as emotionally and imaginatively rich modes of expression, while also criticizing their intellectual limitations and parochialism in comparison to national languages (pp. 62-6). Crehan further develops this complexity in a rich account of Gramsci’s notion of folklore, as an archive of subaltern conceptions of reality, and its relation to ‘common sense’ (pp. 67-9). Finally, Crehan expounds Gramsci’s critical appreciation of the serial novel, demonstrating the significance of popular literature for “discovering shared subaltern conceptions of the world” (p. 70).

### *3. Three Case Studies*

In the second section of the book, Crehan places her exposition of Gramsci’s ideas in dialogue with three case studies, “each illustrative of an aspect of the passage from incoherent common

sense [...] to coherent political narratives” (p. 77). The first of these investigates the way in which a class elaborates, alongside itself, its own organic intellectuals. Crehan identifies, with historical hindsight, Adam Smith as emblematic of the organic intellectuals of the rising bourgeoisie. In so doing, Crehan reads Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* not, as it is often regarded, as a guidebook of “universal truths” about capitalism (p. 95), but, situated in its historical context, as his contribution to the Scottish Enlightenment. Crehan begins with an account of the economic, institutional and political factors that conditioned this explosion of collective inquiry, and the search for a “new Science of Man” that it heralded (p. 100). Crehan traces the emergence of new types of “knower” and “knowledge” during this period, displacing the earlier models of the “Christian philosopher” and the “gentleman-scholar” with the “scientist as expert” characteristic of modern industrial specialization (p. 91).

This reading reveals Smith to be not only an “advocate of free-trade”, but also a passionate opponent of “injustice and inequity”, promoting a vision of “opulence” for all (pp. 101, 104). Crehan emphasises the traumatic impact of Scotland’s subaltern relation to England on the genesis of the *Wealth of Nations* (p. 85), which Smith himself understood as a “violent attack” on the British commercial system (p. 102). Recounting the largely posthumous disputes over the meaning of Smith’s work, Crehan follows the path by which it came to provide an “organizing vision”, a universal narrative, for the emerging bourgeoisie (p. 116). The early association of Smith’s ideas about political liberty with seditious support for the French Revolution was revised later to present a more conservative picture of his work, detaching *laissez faire* economics from his sympathies with the “lower orders” (p. 113). The differing fortunes of these bifurcated elements of Smith’s intellectual legacy neatly frame Crehan’s subsequent discussion of two contemporary and opposing case studies, the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements.

Crehan’s analysis of the reshaping of politics in the United States by the Tea Party movement has taken on an increased significance since the publication of the book. In view of the Trump presidency, her study of the Tea Party phenomenon is a timely reminder of the wider shifts in “common sense” that enabled his rise to power. Crehan traces the protracted historical tendencies that “incubated” this movement, beginning with nascent opposition to the post-war

New Deal consensus, through the conservative backlash against radical politics in the 1960s, and leading to increased corporate support for right-wing think tanks and foundations during and beyond the “so-called Reagan revolution” (p. 122). Crehan complements her account of these intellectual attempts to formulate a conservative agenda of “free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, and [...] American values” (p. 127), with more recent initiatives to ground these policies in a grassroots movement that aims to move the Republican party and US discourse to the right.

Crehan recounts the moment in 2009, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, when these efforts caught a nerve, articulating the sentiments of those hostile to the new Obama administration. For some in the Democratic establishment, the Tea Party represented a populism without popular support. They questioned the authenticity of the grassroots of this movement. While outlining the elite Republican and corporate interests that shaped the Tea Party’s anti-tax, pro-business narrative “from above”, Crehan also draws on empirical studies, such as Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson’s *The Tea Party* (Oxford, OUP 2012), to detail the very real and visceral popular anger that this movement was able to channel. Contrary to dismissive characterizations of the Tea Party as “Astroturf” populism, Crehan argues that we should understand it as a movement shaped by lobbyists on behalf of wealthy interests, but also animated by support “from below”. The loss of control experienced by many of those “left behind” by the neoliberal economy resonated with the (frequently racialized) “common sense” discourse that distinguished between productive “makers” and undeserving “takers” (p. 139). Despite its radical imagery, the Tea Party narrative, for Crehan, does not challenge but reinforces the existing hegemony, representing merely one variant of the dominant assumptions that constitute the capitalist worldview.

For a genuine alternative to the status quo, Crehan suggests that we must look for examples of “the first stirrings of the kind of new common sense for which Gramsci called” (p. 146). In the final case study, she locates elements of this “good sense” in a different response to the economic crisis, the Occupy Wall Street movement. Crehan examines the process by which the lived experience of inequality in the twenty-first century, marked by unemployment, rising debt, lack of healthcare, and disillusion with the ‘American

Dream', coalesced in 2011 around the slogan, "We are the 99 percent". She relates the impact of international events, such as the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the Spanish *Indignados/as*, on a growing sense in the US of an economic and political system that was failing "the many". For Crehan, the example of OWS illustrates the difficulties that confront any new political narrative that goes "against the grain" of the prevailing order, since hegemony is "woven into the very fabric of the institutions and practices of everyday life" (p. 181). Thus, she investigates the ways in which embryonic conceptions of the world must struggle for spaces in which to develop.

Crehan explores the interaction between then relatively novel forms of digital organizing, using social media to communicate and to articulate personal experiences, and the tactic of "General Assemblies' occupying public spaces, which became a focal point for expressing discontent. Her discussion of the principles of horizontalism (consensus building, lack of hierarchy) animating OWS's strategy draws a balance sheet of the innovations and limits of this prefigurative politics (p. 182). On the positive side, she concludes that OWS's immediate "flash" of action created a ferment of "common sense" that was able to renew submerged elements of "good sense" (p. 147). At the same time, OWS was unable, and indeed did not attempt, to translate this "outbreak of the imagination" into wider forms of leadership and organization capable of sustaining a challenge to the dominant narrative (p. 160). Despite the relatively brief duration of OWS's physical occupation of New York's Zuccotti Park and its lack of clear demands, Crehan points to its success in "changing the conversation" regarding inequality, and views this as part of a wider "war of position" to transform the political landscape (p. 176). Crehan documents the surprisingly strong influence of OWS on mainstream politics in the United States, drawing (qualified) support from senior Democratic figures and even influencing the rhetoric of then-president Obama (*ibid.*). The subsequent growth in support for egalitarian and socialist ideas, affirmed by prominent figures such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, appears to corroborate further Crehan's argument that OWS marked an important staging point, alongside social movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, in a wider 'cultural battle to transform the popular "mentality"' (p. 183).

#### 4. *Reading Gramsci Today*

Crehan's reconstruction of the "multilayered richness" of Gramscian concepts like subalternity refrains from providing "easy answers" or "sound bite" versions of his thought (p. 14). Using these concepts to analyse different case studies, while also anchoring Gramsci's writings in their own historical context, Crehan demonstrates their enduring relevance for an understanding of contemporary political realities. The confrontations staged between Gramsci and other twentieth-century thinkers are illuminating, although in places the results might have had greater effectiveness with a more robust reconstruction of the opposing thinker's position. Thus, we might ask whether Gramsci would in fact have been "equally dismissive" of Arendt's deference to "common sense" as he was of Gentile's celebration of it (p. 51). Repurposing arguments in this way across different historical contexts places a high burden on mediating between the respective projects and circumstances of these thinkers.

Crehan bases her reconstruction of Gramsci's thought on a close reading of his texts. However, there are examples where her selection of terminology would benefit from further justification. Thus, while the concept of political "narrative" plays a central explanatory role in Crehan's interpretation, it appears relatively infrequently in Gramsci's own writings (usually in a critical context, e.g. regarding Benedetto Croce's historical "narratives" in Q10I§9, p. 1227; *SPN* p. 119). Crehan deploys this concept in senses often related to Gramsci's development of the notion of the political "myth". Indeed, it could have been informative for Crehan to draw her concept of "narrative" into dialogue with Gramsci's creative use of the "Sorelian myth", understood as a 'body of images' (Q13§1, p. 1555; *SPN* p. 126), given the contrasting (but dialectically related) theoretical frames arising from the terms narrative and image. Similarly, it would be of interest to explore what is at stake in Crehan's emphasis on the notion of "lived experience", and how it relates to Gramsci's notion of "praxis" (conscious action) in relation to the passivity of the subaltern groups.

Crehan's investigation of the Tea Party phenomenon is notable for its powerful discussion of the worldview of its rank-and-file supporters, who conceive themselves as patriotic tax-payers engaged in a revolt against tyrannical federal government and a

freeloading “other”, parasitic on the economy, and often characterized along racial lines (p. 134, 139). An important factor that might have contributed to Crehan’s explanation of this racialization of the “other” is the mainstreaming of hostile and racist discourse towards Islam and Muslims in the US in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the “War on Terror”. Indeed, there may also have been scope to compare the non-contingent nature of racism within the Tea Party narrative with Gramsci’s own struggle against the racialized ideology of intellectuals in Italy, articulated in the Notebooks under the rubric of “Lorianism” (e.g. in Q1§25, *PN* Vol. 1, pp. 114-6). However, these are, evidently, minor quibbles in relation to the overall import of this book.

*Gramsci’s Common Sense* achieves the substantial feat of combining a sophisticated reading of Gramsci’s views on class, inequality, and “popular opinion” with an accessible style that presupposes no prior knowledge of his writings. In the book, Crehan applies this rich and rigorous interpretation of Gramscian concepts to analyse contemporary examples of the transformation of “common sense”. With the deepening crises of the neoliberal order in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the continued global growth of far-right and authoritarian forces, Crehan’s studies of the recent dynamics of “common sense” are not only insightful scholarship, but also ought to inform the “progressive” perspectives of today’s engaged intellectuals. Crehan has already received much-deserved recognition for this work as co-winner of the Giuseppe Sormani International Prize for best monograph on Gramsci in 2017. However, this important study of Gramsci, bringing the fertility of his thought into dialogue with our own times, warrants an even wider audience.

#### *Acknowledgment*

I would like to thank Marieke Mueller for her very helpful comments on a draft of this review.

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