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Source: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 1-54

Published by: [University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/529076>

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# Before Democracy: The Production and Uses of Common Sense

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And all henceforth, who murder Common-Sense,  
Learn from these Scenes that tho' Success you boast,  
You shall at last be haunted with her Ghost.

(HENRY FIELDING<sup>1</sup>)

Many of the factors that shaped modern political life remain obscure to us. Some of these factors are now imperceptible because they were private, illegal, off-limits, or socially marginal. Others were, in Alain Corbin's elegant phrase, simply too banal ever to have been much remarked upon, even if they made whole categories of thought and experience possible.<sup>2</sup> Corbin was famously talking about what we call sense experiences: smelling, touching, and the like. But what of the historical evolution and significance of our most commonplace and trite assumptions about these banal experiences—or what is best known as common sense?

Common sense is, of course, hardly an unfamiliar notion these days. Talk of it permeates every aspect of contemporary Western democratic political culture. We evoke or appeal to common sense in order to signal that the practical, everyday wisdom of ordinary people in ordinary situations, as opposed to the unrealistic and extremist advice of so-called experts, provides the foundation for our political ideals. We also use the notion of common sense to suggest that bitter, partisan disagreements have been or should be jettisoned in favor of nonideological and therefore consensual solutions to the issues of our times. This is a rhetorical stance with which no one is likely to disagree. Speaking in the name of common

<sup>1</sup> Henry Fielding, *Pasquin. A Dramatick Satire on the Times: Being the Rehearsal of Two Plays, viz., A Comedy call'd The Election; and a Tragedy, call'd The Life and Death of Common Sense. As it is acted at the theatre in the Hay-Market* (London, 1736), act 5, 64.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Corbin, "A History and Anthropology of the Senses," in *Time, Desire, and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 190. On the latent and consequently invisible dimension of history, see also Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy, foreword by Hayden White (Minneapolis, 1994).

sense strikes most of us as a natural—indeed, commonsensical—part of democratic culture. Some leading political theorists have even suggested that common sense, in practice, plays an especially important role in democracies, providing them (alongside the individual reason that is so central to modern liberalism) with a practical and communitarian foundation. Writing in the wake of the Second World War, Hannah Arendt argued that healthy democracies require a dose of common sense, and not just the efforts of a collection of rational individuals making self-interested decisions, to thrive. Giving political salience to the Kantian idea that aesthetic judgments lay claim to validity because they are grounded in the capacity to think as part of a community, Arendt proposed that common sense was not simply the ground upon which democratic politics should be formed. The re-creation and reinforcement of common sense, through public discourse and debate, was a critical goal of democracy and the main safeguard against what she termed the ideological thinking of totalitarianism.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, just as the very politically engaged English satirist Henry Fielding long ago prophesied in a farce he called *Pasquin*, common sense has turned out to be a rather spectral presence in the modern world. Despite its assumed authority, it remains impossible to witness in action, seldom defined in its particulars, and rarely analyzed in terms of its specific function or consequences for public life. Generally, only its absence is lamented. Moreover, common sense, as a set of ideas or a value, has been almost entirely neglected as a historical variable. Partly this is because the story of the advent of modernity has, in the liberal, Enlightenment vein, been written for so long as the story of the triumph of reason over its chief opponents; common sense sounds a bit humble and, yes, even banal by comparison. Undoubtedly, this neglect also stems from the fact that common sense refers, by definition, to that which is in need of no further clarification or interpretation, to that which is self-evident to everyone. Either way, the results are apparent. Historians, who tend to be more interested in debunking common sense's contemporary content than in reflecting on its invention and uses, have largely taken for granted the value that we have come to place on the taken-for-granted.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Some of Hannah Arendt's most important statements on common sense and democracy can be found in three of her works: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951), "Understanding and Politics," *Partisan Review* 20, no. 4 (July–August 1953): 377–92, and *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago, 1982). See also Sandra K. Hinchman, "Common Sense and Political Barbarism in the Theory of Hannah Arendt," *Polity* 17, no. 2 (1984): 317–39; Anne-Marie Roviello, *Sens commun et modernité chez Hannah Arendt* (Brussels, 1987); and Michael G. Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Albany, NY, 1994), 139–234.

<sup>4</sup> On the tendency of the contemporary social sciences to be directed against

This essay should be read as a preliminary effort to rectify that situation: to uncover the traces of common sense moving back through time and to explain how, and with what effects, this ghost has haunted modern life and, especially, the emergence of modern democracy. From where did our faith in this particular form of epistemic authority develop?<sup>5</sup> How and why did it become so deeply intertwined with democratic political culture? What have been the long-term consequences of this little-noted marriage?

To answer, we must look in two directions. We need to try, in the guise of the historian of mentalities, to discern the most basic collective convictions, associations, and organizing principles that governed the behaviors and beliefs of people in the past across their most obvious social divisions. Some of these notions we now see as universally valid (i.e., three is greater than two); others are more situationally specific (i.e., there is a God, or the soul is eternal). The sum total of such operating rules make up what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz memorably referred to as a culture's "common sense."<sup>6</sup> But uncovering these norms cannot be the only project. At the same time, in the spirit of what has come to be known as historical epistemology, we need also to attempt to determine when and how and under what broad historical conditions assumptions about the existence of certain self-evident, shared principles came to be labeled and

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common sense, see the introduction to Pierre Guenancia and Jean-Pierre Sylvestre, eds., *Le sens commun: Theories et pratiques; Actes du colloque de Dijon* (Dijon, 2004). Antoine Compagnon makes a similar argument about the aim of all literary theory as "in effect the defeat of common sense," in *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, trans. Carol Cosman (Princeton, NJ, 2004), esp. 193.

<sup>5</sup> I borrow the term "epistemic authority" from Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton, NJ, 1998), whose work explores the tensions in a later period of English history over the question of "what epistemic norms ought to enjoy the stamp of communal authority" (532).

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," *Antioch Review* 33, no. 1 (1975): 5–26, reprinted in his *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), 73–93. Historians of mentalities, while usually learning heavily on cultural anthropology for explanations of their methods and goals, have generally used other terms, including historical psychology, *mentalité*, collective representations, structures of belief, and the social imaginary, to refer to a culture's basic and often unarticulated principles and values; see Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, NY, 1997). One exception is Robert Darnton, who in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1985) notes in passing: "Politics could not take place without the preliminary mental ordering that goes into the common-sense notion of the real world. Common sense itself is a social construction of reality, which varies from culture to culture[;] . . . it expresses the common basis of experience in a given social order" (23).

valorized as common sense; when and how and in whose hands this concept mutated over time; and to what varied ends it has been used as a word, a structure, and a system of belief.<sup>7</sup> Then the results must be connected not simply to the emergence of scientific knowledge, the concern of most historical epistemology, but also to the manifest record of modern political history. The idea is to reconsider the seemingly natural relationship between democracy and common sense, as theorized half a century ago by Arendt. My hope is to estrange us temporarily from both.

This task draws our attention back most obviously to the era and world of Thomas Paine. At the close of the eighteenth century, the idea of common sense famously helped underwrite the construction of a “democratic revolution” centered on popular sovereignty in America. Building on multiple Enlightenment philosophical currents, common sense was touted, not least in Paine’s *Common Sense*, as both the source and the purpose of the fight for self-rule in a republican mode. And shortly thereafter (in the Continental guise of *bon sens* as well as *sens commun*), it reappeared in France as an instrument of counterrevolution, a regulative corrective to excessive change in the name of abstract reason, again in response to new modes of thought that had taken form across the geography of the Enlightenment. The story of common sense in the later eighteenth century necessarily shuttles its pursuer from Aberdeen and Edinburgh to The Hague, Philadelphia, Paris, and many points between.

But most of these particular chapters and places in the history of common sense are for another day, though I will say something about some of them at the end of this essay. To tell the story of common sense and its increasing interdependence with democratic governance in the modern world, we need to begin by turning our sights toward England, and especially London, well before the age of democratic revolutions. That is, we must first return to the age and world of Henry Fielding. For considerably earlier than the establishment of what political theorists sometimes call modern democratic common sense, there developed a conception and use value for common sense that helped eventually to make democratic revolutions and then established democratic regimes, in all their contra-

<sup>7</sup> The term “historical epistemology” was coined by Lorraine Daston (see “The Moral Economy of Science,” *Osiris* 10 [1995]: 3–24) to refer to histories that explore the development of the key, and usually unquestioned, categories of modern science, including facticity, evidence, and objectivity, in relation to moral, emotional, social, economic, and aesthetic currents ostensibly external to science. This project takes on other names in other hands. In *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), for example, the philosopher Ian Hacking uses the term “historical ontology” to explain his parallel project, with its emphasis on the key concepts of modern social life and the law, subjects closer to the concerns of the present article.

dictions, possible.<sup>8</sup> In the wake of the particular kind of liberalism produced by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, common sense initially took on the multiple faces it has continued to wear. It became an imaginary foundation for a new kind of unified (and, in this case, elite) political community. It became an ideological weapon that helped fuel the creation of a culture of permanent opposition and dissent. And, at the same time, it became so ingrained and seemingly commonsensical an authority that we still hardly think about its parameters or uses, except to agree that it is *de facto* a force for the good. We continue to live with the consequences.

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To write the history of common sense, one could, of course, back up even further than the Augustan Age. “Common sense” is a very old term. In a formulation that proved to have extraordinary staying power, Aristotle suggested that every human comes endowed with an intuitive inner sense (*koinè aisthēsis*), located somewhere near the heart, that allows for certain judgments and actions to occur independent of reason.<sup>9</sup> He gave this “sixth” or “common” sense the vital role of comparing and coordinating data received from the other five—determining, for example, that a substance that simultaneously appears white and tastes sweet is likely sugar and not salt, but also that sweet and white are different kinds of sensible qualities. This understanding of humans’ mental capacity persisted in psychology, medicine, and aesthetics through the early modern era, though with certain modifications such as the migration of the faculty’s locale from the heart to the brain (see fig. 1). The common sense was deemed vital to the most basic and prosaic of human tasks: the discernment of the character of objects, individuals, and circumstances and

<sup>8</sup> In much of his work, including *Political Liberalism* (New York, 1996), John Rawls insisted that there were certain fundamental assumptions made by citizens of modern democracies that must be recognized by political theorists; the body of these assumptions amounts to, in the words of many of Rawls’s commentators, a kind of democratic common sense. Some cognitive scientists have tried more systematically to uncover these unconscious, “common sense” worldviews of contemporary participants in democratic culture; see, e.g., George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle *De anima* 3.1–5. For an extended analysis of Aristotle’s claims, see Danielle Lories, *Le sens commun et le jugement du phronimos: Aristote et les stoiciens* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1998); as well as Thomas De Koninck, “Les multiples acceptions du ‘sens commun,’ ” *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 110 (2003): 707–20. As Deborah K. Modrak explains (in *Aristotle: The Power of Perception* [Chicago, 1987], 55–80), Aristotle envisioned the faculty of common sense working simultaneously to judge the unity of complex sense objects, to discriminate among proper objects, and to perceive the common sensibles (i.e., motion, rest, number, figure, size).

# The outward and Inward Senses.

## *Sensus externi & interni.*

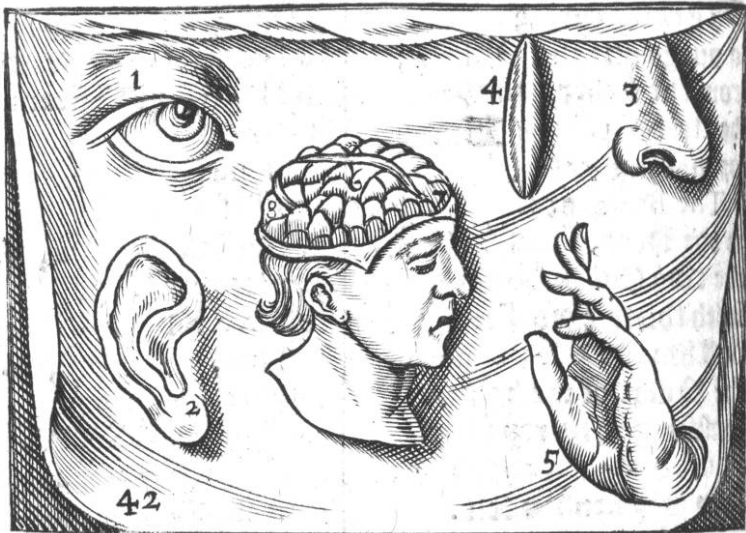


FIG. 1.—*The Outward and Inward Senses / Sensus externi et interni*, in Johann Amos Comenius, *The World Seen through Pictures*, trans. Charles Hoole (London: Charles Murne, 1685), 86, pl. 42. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Numbers 1–5 refer in the customary order to the outward senses. Numbers 6–8 show the location in the human brain of the three inward senses, including the common sense (number 7), “which apprehendeth things taken from the outward senses.”

of the basic differences between them.<sup>10</sup> Eventually it came to be used in less technical senses as well. Locke employed the term “common sense” and Descartes *bon sens* (literally, good sense) with the aim of signifying not a specific faculty but rather the rudimentary ability to form clear perceptions, make elementary judgments, and engage in simple reasoning about everyday, practical matters without falling into bald-faced contradictions and inconsistencies. It was assumed that such skills were—or should be—within the capacity of all humans, with the exception of the insane and the truly thick. In early modern Europe, to address oneself to common sense was a shorthand

<sup>10</sup> On medieval and Renaissance understandings of common sense, the definitive account is David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 1987), esp. 71–109.



way to appeal to the plain wisdom of ordinary people, not a very high threshold but a real one nevertheless. “By a man of *common sense*,” summarized one helpful early eighteenth-century commentator in a decidedly commonsensical manner, “we mean one who knows, as we say, *white from black, and chalk from cheese; that two and two make four; and that a mountain is bigger than a mole hill.*”<sup>11</sup>

But the enthusiasm for common sense that developed in England in the first two decades of the eighteenth century also marked something new, something that might be said to constitute the beginning of the modern history of common sense. Very early in the new century, during the reign of Queen Anne, two developments set common sense on a new course. First, as technical descriptions of a common sense faculty grew scarcer, the signification of the term began to expand. More precisely, its connotations became as much social as epistemological. The watered-down Aristotelian notion of a “common sense” faculty merged with the old Roman (especially Stoic) idea of *sensus communis*: the shared, though generally unstated, values and beliefs of a community, whether a class, a nation, or humanity as a whole. Common sense came also to mean those plain, self-evident truths or conventional wisdom that one needed no sophistication to grasp and no proof to accept precisely because they accorded so well with the basic (common sense) intellectual capacities and experiences of the whole social body.<sup>12</sup> To possess good or common sense was, conversely, to readily accept these “general notions” or commonplaces about quantities or space or time or other observed phenomena as how things were.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Amhurst, “*Terrae-filius*”; or, *The Secret History of the University of Oxford*, ed. William E. Rivers (1721; Newark, DE, 2004), no. 20 (March 24, [1721]), 178; italics in the original.

<sup>12</sup> See the definition offered in Edward Phillips, *The New World of Words; or, Universal English Dictionary* (6th ed., rev., “with the addition of near twenty thousand words, by J. K. Philobibl” [London, 1706]): “Common-Sense, those general Notions that arise in the Minds of Men, by which they know, or apprehend things after the same manner.” This definition—a direct translation of the definition of *bon sens* offered by Antoine Furetière in his *Dictionnaire universel* of 1690—appears for the first time in this edition of Phillips’s dictionary and was destined to be repeated with small variations in numerous other English dictionaries of the first decades of the eighteenth century. On the evolution of English definitions of common sense more generally, see Helga Korver, *Common Sense: Die Entwicklung eines englischen Schlüsselwortes und seine Bedeutung für die englische Geistesgeschichte vornehmlich zur Zeit des Klassizismus und der Romantik* (PhD diss., University of Bonn, 1967). See also the suggestive remarks in C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 2nd ed. (1960; Cambridge, 1996), 146–56.

<sup>13</sup> In *Common Sense: A New Look at an Old Philosophical Tradition* (Milwaukee, 2005), the contemporary philosopher Nicholas Rescher insists on the importance of distinguishing between common sense as process, rooted in a faculty, and common sense as product, meaning those things any halfway intelligent individual can or should



Finally, the aesthete and invalid Whig essayist Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, took this definition one step further in a meandering philosophical tract entitled "*Sensus Communis*": *An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, first published in 1709. Augustan commentators tended to agree that common sense was a distinctive form of knowledge in that it depended upon free and open conversation, the sharing of knowledge derived from sense experience in a social setting.<sup>14</sup> But Shaftesbury memorably insisted that detached, objective judgments and basic agreements about matters of both ethics and taste were also made possible by an innate "sense of the publick weal and of the common interest," a trait most often found among men of "thorough good breeding" (such as himself) though sometimes intuitively in the "common honest man" as well.<sup>15</sup> Shaftesbury called this instinct, after the Roman fashion, *sensus communis*, too.<sup>16</sup> In an era in which all sorts of old certainties seemed to Shaftesbury to have been thrown into question,

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realize and accept without argument, including ordinary distinctions among simple words, elementary facts about arithmetic, rudimentary knowledge about how familiar things work, and the basic tenets of prudence. However, he also points out how closely related these two meanings are, and in common usage this difference was, and remains, often obscured.

<sup>14</sup> On the social dimension of most Augustan literary understandings of common sense, see William Bowman Piper, "Common Sense as a Basis of Literary Style," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1977): 624–41, and *Common Courtesy in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Newark, DE, and London, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, "*Sensus Communis*": *An Essay on the Freedom and Wit of Humour* (London, 1709), repr. in vol. 1 of his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols. (London, 1711); repr., 3 vols. in 1, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge, 1999), 48, 60, 61; all further citations to "*Sensus Communis*" will be to the Klein edition.

<sup>16</sup> On this essay and the distinctive signification of *sensus communis* in it, see Richard Voitle, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, 1671–1713* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1984), 330–31; Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), 96–97, 196; Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, vol. 2, *Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge, 2000), 124–31; and, more theoretically, Hans Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (1960; New York, 1995), esp. 24–25; and John D. Schaeffer, "*Sensus Communis*": *Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham, NC, 1990), 41–46, which compares Shaftesbury's definition of *sensus communis* with that of Vico. Rivers points out that though Shaftesbury borrowed the term *sensus communis* from Horace and Juvenal and made it the focus of his second treatise, he rarely used the term thereafter, preferring a wide range of substitutes for this moral and aesthetic faculty. It is explained variously in the scholarly literature as love of humanity, of society, of the community, and of the public or common good.

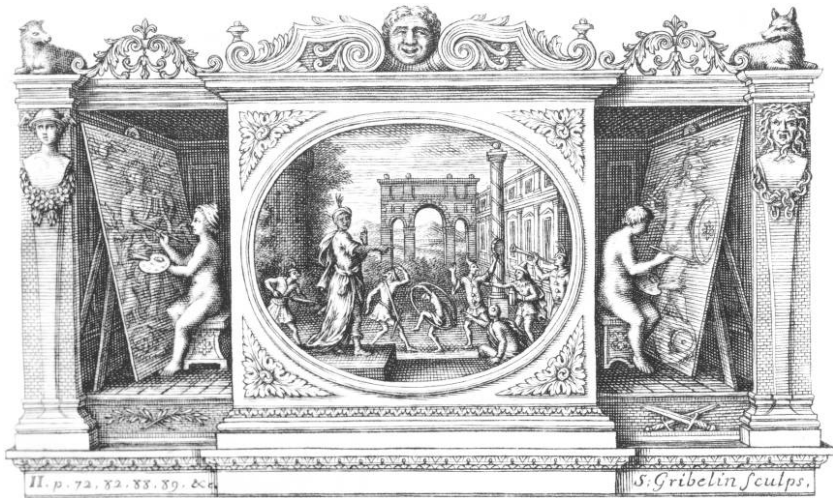


FIG. 2.—*Sensus Communis*, emblem designed circa 1711 by Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury; drawn under commission by Henry Trench; and engraved by Simon Gribelin, in Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (London, 1714), 1:312. Special Collections, University of Virginia Library. The triptych is intended to be an attack on Hobbes's skepticism, which is juxtaposed with Shaftesbury's own philosophy with its commitment to ridicule and to toleration. The central oval refers to a passage in "*Sensus Communis*" in which Shaftesbury imagines a "native of Ethiopia" witnessing Carnival in Paris or Venice and ponders the question of who would "laugh with better reason" at whom (Klein ed., 39 [see n. 15]). On the sides of the triptych, mankind is being depicted in two contrasting lights: on the left, as Shaftesbury saw it and, on the right, as envisioned by Hobbes.

not least by Hobbes's nominalism in the moral realm, common sense was presented as an independent, disinterested, and sure epistemic authority related to questions of beauty, harmony, goodness, truth, and other communal values (see fig. 2). Indeed, Shaftesbury envisioned this sense as both a potential source of social cohesion and a foundation for a secure moral and political order.

Definitions are only part of the story, however. A second development in the history of modern common sense took place simultaneously. Common sense became one of the exalted virtues of the Augustan Age, especially in Whig-dominated London. Soon it was, variously, an epistemic ideal, a slogan, a style of expression, a pen name, and even—in personified form—a fashionable literary character. Common sense was something repeatedly deemed all too rarely on display in the present world (for all its associations with instinct and commonality). And common sense, understood as a combination of "native wit" and an instinctive regard for social norms and the common

good, was something to be widely cultivated for the positive benefits it would soon bring to the English people or to the world at large. In short, this platitude came to stand for a new cultural disposition.

That image was directly connected to the particular tensions of the moment of its arrival on the scene. The first decades of the eighteenth century have long been characterized by historians of England as fraught with anxiety about factionalism or “party spirit” leading to renewed civil strife. Englishmen, we have been told by historians from J. H. Plumb onward, wanted nothing more at the turn of the eighteenth century than a means to overcome their ideological divisions and, consequently, enjoy social and political stability.<sup>17</sup> In fact, widespread desire for some kind of compromise was already pronounced at the conclusion of the Civil War in the middle of the seventeenth century; Charles II was welcomed back to England in 1660 for “the moderating of Extremities, the Reconciling of Differences, and the satisfying of all Interests.”<sup>18</sup> But this fundamental Whig ambition became even more marked after the revolution of 1688, the Toleration Act of 1689, and then, finally, the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695. Freedom of expression was henceforth firmly established as an (if not the) essential element of English “liberty.” Yet a bitter and threatening sectarianism seemed to dominate all of public life, from the coffeehouses one frequented to the hospitals in which one died.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> On the desire for, and achievement of, stability after the turbulence of the mid-seventeenth century, the classic text remains J. H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675–1725* (London, 1967). It is now, four decades after the publication of this work, abundantly clear that opposition, radical as well as Jacobite, continued to exist well into the eighteenth century and that a contentious extra-Parliamentary political culture grew in size and effectiveness in the first decades of the century. Nevertheless, it also seems evident, as Lawrence Klein remarks in “The Political Significance of ‘Politeness’ in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain” (in *Politics, Politeness and Patriotism*, ed. Gordon J. Schochet [Washington, DC, 1993], 75, 100 n. 11), that Plumb was essentially correct about both the continuing anxiety that the idea of opposition provoked in the early eighteenth century and the enormous value that the established classes placed on stability; despite the development of opposition, the avoidance of further revolution remains one of the distinguishing features of early eighteenth-century English history. For a different take on this issue, see Clayton Roberts, “The Growth of Political Stability Reconsidered,” *Albion* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 237–55.

<sup>18</sup> “The Earl of Manchester’s Speech to his Majesty . . . At his Arrival at Whitehall” [1660], quoted in P. K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford, 1973), 7.

<sup>19</sup> On Tory and Whig distinctions in civic spaces, including hospitals and coffeehouses, at the turn of the century, see Geoffrey Holmes, *The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and Early Georgian Britain, 1660–1722* (London, 1993). On the problem of political pluralism and “party spirit” at the level of discourse, see J. A. W. Gunn, *Factions No More: Attitudes to Party in Government and Opposition in Eighteenth-Century England; Extracts from Contemporary Sources* (London, 1972); and, more recently, Pasi Ihalainen, *The Discourse on Political Pluralism in Early Eighteenth-*

Beginning during the reign of Queen Anne and continuing after her death in 1714, when George I assumed the throne, Whig spokesmen and publicists became consumed with the question of how to produce order out of what the historian Lawrence Klein calls “the babble, diversity, and liberty of the new discursive world of the Town.”<sup>20</sup> Thinkers struggled not only to discover what, both internal and external to the mind, accounted for the wide variety of clashing opinions on matters of importance that came to the fore as a result of new freedoms. They also sought a means to achieve basic social and intellectual cooperation and to sow the seeds of a common culture—without resorting ever again to those artificial and tyrannical sources of unanimity that were absolutism and a related censorship apparatus.

One key solution, which J. G. A. Pocock, Klein, and a number of other historians have closely investigated in recent years, was politeness.<sup>21</sup> An upper-class gentility that prized emotional restraint and avoidance of extremes or individualistic zeal of any kind could be instrumental in forging a community of the fundamentally like-minded. Real conversation depended, as Shaftesbury pointed out repeatedly, upon toleration and freedom from external constraints, upon the ability to question, to ridicule, to debate. But politeness potentially helped to reconcile—or, at least, paper over—the differences among truth claims and the competitiveness upon which modern politics, urban social life, and commercial culture, as opposed to court or academic culture, seemed to thrive. Together with good taste, politeness suggested one path toward public virtue and concern with the general good—and away from constant ideologically driven strife.

A related (though now usually overlooked) proposal, insofar as it could be seen either as a desirable outgrowth of polite sociability or as the groundwork for its operation, involved the cultivation of common sense, within individuals and the collectivity. Common sense promised to provide a minimal form of authority on which a common identity could be founded. Conversely, the maintenance of a community built around certain widely accepted core assumptions suggested another potential antidote to political animosity and factionalism. The essayist Joseph Addison was only partly joking when he

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*Century England* (Helsinki, 1999); and Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> On politeness, see J. G. A. Pocock, “The Problem of Political Thought in the Eighteenth Century: Patriotism and Politeness,” *Theoretische Geschichte* 9 (1982): 14–17; Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989); Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, and “Political Significance of ‘Politeness’”; and John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997), esp. 99–114.

noted that he yearned for the day when associations of men took this, instead of sectarian pursuits, to be their goal. In the pages of *The Spectator*, Addison let himself imagine a “neutral body” that would be open to all individuals unwilling to call themselves Whig or Tory and disinterested in passion, speculation, or private interest, the typical sources of what he called “that furious Party spirit.” The criterion for belonging would simply be adherence to a set of basic mathematical axioms and linguistic distinctions upon which all honest men should have no trouble agreeing. One would have to swear that “two plus two make four,” that “six is less than seven in all Times and all Places,” and that “ten will not be more three years hence than it is at present.” It would also be essential that “we shall upon all Occasions oppose such persons that upon any Day of the Year shall call black white, or white black, with the utmost Peril of our Lives and Fortunes.”<sup>22</sup> Provided men were to stick to these common sense observations, the seeds of civil war might be extinguished and a sufficiently unified body politic finally reestablished.

The climate of division and animosity then current in England led, however, in the opposite direction, according to Addison. It was, in his commonplace formulation, “fatal both to Mens [*sic*] Morals and their Understandings.” Moreover, it “destroys even Common Sense,” by which he meant the ability to make sound judgments or agree on basic truths down to the very names of things.<sup>23</sup> At almost the same moment, Shaftesbury made the same claim: faction was simply “the abuse or irregularity of that social love or common affection [*sensus communis*] which is natural to mankind.”<sup>24</sup> And when necessary, Addison had a seemingly endless stream of anecdotes that he could marshal to demonstrate that a mean-spirited factionalism, often rooted in divergent speculative claims, had resulted in all sorts of nonsense and absurdities, not least petty fights over choices of words. But the revival of common sense struck Addison, like many of his contemporaries, as also a potential political cure, a minimum standard for social and ideological cohesion in the context of the risky experiment that was early eighteenth-century English liberalism.

In fact, the promise of common sense lay only partly in the formal political realm. The factionalism characteristic of early eighteenth-century political culture was still intimately related to religious disagreement, and

<sup>22</sup> *The Spectator* [ed. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele], no. 126 (July 25, 1711); and *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), 2: 1–4. All further citations to *The Spectator* will be to the original issue, followed by the Bond edition volume and page numbers. On Addison’s politics, see Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, *Joseph Addison’s Sociable Animal in the Marketplace, on the Hustings, in the Pulpit* (Providence, RI, 1971).

<sup>23</sup> *The Spectator*, no. 125 (July 24, 1711); 1:509–10.

<sup>24</sup> Shaftesbury, “*Sensus Communis*,” in *Characteristicks of Men*, 53.





FIG. 3.—*Enthusiasm Display'd: or, the Moor-Fields Congregation*, etching by George Bickham, published by C. Corbett (August 1739). © The Trustees of The British Museum. In this satire, the Methodist Reverend George Whitefield is shown preaching out-of-doors while held aloft by figures representing Hypocrisy, on one side, and Deceit, on the other. The verse below begins “Once in an Age, that Pest of common sense, / Enthusiasm, revives his old Pretence, / Clad like Simplicity, He stalks along, / And draws behind Him ye deluded Throng.”

religious sectarianism seemed to many commentators to stem directly from a kind of zeal and epistemological dogmatism similar to that which Addison disparaged on the political front. The source of the problem was the insistence on the certainty and exclusive truth of one’s own position, whether one spoke from the vantage point of the radical doubt and moral relativism of the skeptic, on the one hand, or the nonconformity of the enthusiast or religious individualist endowed with private revelations, on the other. Here, too, Shaftesbury evoked an instinctive common sense as a way to check such antagonistic views in the context of liberty of thought and expression. If, in politics, common sense found its antonym in “party spirit” and “interest,” in religion the pejorative “enthusiasm” played this role beginning in the previous century and continuing well into the new one (see fig. 3).

As early as the mid-seventeenth century, the Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote (whose sermons Shaftesbury had published at the beginning of his

career) had defined enthusiasm as, literally, “speaking without sense.”<sup>25</sup> Thereafter the great Latitudinarian Anglican divines of the later seventeenth century, including Edward Stillingfleet and John Tillotson, had together developed a kind of common sense Protestantism as both a reaction to and a bulwark against extreme positions of all kinds, from the excessive rationality of deists, Hobbists, Spinozists, or other devotees of post-Cartesian philosophy to the excessive irrationality of all kinds of radical Dissenters and fideists, including, above all, Catholics.<sup>26</sup> These moderate clerics had appealed to reasonable and mannerly English men and women in a precise and often prosaic language with few metaphors or learned citations and little emotional expression. This, of course, was a variant of the anti-Ciceronian and anti-Scholastic “plain style” made famous by the experimental philosophers of the Royal Society as well.<sup>27</sup> Following an age of bloody disputes associated with

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Whichcote, *Moral and Religious Aphorisms* (Norwich, 1703), quoted in Lawrence E. Klein, “Sociability, Solitude, and Enthusiasm,” in *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1850*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. LaVopa (San Marino, CA, 1998), 159. The same idea was repeated, in numerous variations, into the eighteenth century; see, for example, the definition in the *Grub Street Journal* (1735): “Enthusiasm is any exorbitant monstrous Appetite of the Human Mind, hurrying the Will in Pursuit of an Object without the Concurrence and against the Light of Reason and Common Sense” (quoted in Susie I. Tucker, *Enthusiasm: A Study in Semantic Change* [Cambridge, 1972], 18). Or see the passage in Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* (1742), when Parson Adams objects to the Methodist George Whitefield’s doctrine by referring to it as “Nonsense and Enthusiasm.” On the critique of enthusiasm more generally, see Michael Heyd, “*Be Sober and Reasonable*”: *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden and New York, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> On the epistemological position of seventeenth-century Anglican Latitudinarians, see Henry Van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630–1690* (The Hague, 1963); Robert T. Carroll, *The Common-Sense Philosophy of Religion of Bishop Edward Stillingfleet, 1635–1699* (The Hague, 1975); Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ, 1983); Frederick C. Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); and Roger L. Emerson, “Latitudinarianism and the English Deists,” in *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment*, ed. J. A. Leo (Newark, DE, 1987), 19–48.

<sup>27</sup> See Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton, NJ, 1971), 441–502; Brian Vickers, “The Royal Society and English Prose Style: A Reassessment,” in *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth: Language Change in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Los Angeles, 1985), 1–76; and, specifically, on styles of preaching, see Richard Foster Jones, “The Attack on Pulpit Eloquence in the Restoration: An Episode in the Development of the Neo-Classical Standard for Prose” [1931], in *The Seventeenth Century: Studies in the History of English Thought and Literature from Bacon to Pope* (Stanford, CA, 1951): 111–42. Jones quotes, for example, Samuel Parker’s *A Discourse of Ecclesiastical Politie* (London, 1670): “For were Men obliged to speak Sense as well as Truth, all the swelling Mysteries of Fanaticism would immediately sink into flat and empty Nonsense” (118–19) and



the triumph of various enthusiasms, these divines had employed this stripped-down, everyday idiom in favor of a reasonable Christianity that was consistent if not with the absolute, infallible truth of any one authority (pure reason, personal revelation, or the pope himself), then with moral certainty or the “mitigated scepticism” of what could not help but strike a reasonable person as self-evident.<sup>28</sup> This, claimed Stillingfleet, was as much certainty as most people required in their everyday lives.<sup>29</sup> It should certainly be enough to persuade the public of the existence of a benevolent God and the basic truth of Christianity.<sup>30</sup> Rejecting the need for speculation and interpretation whenever possible, the Latitudinarians offered a plain, direct doctrine that was intended to be entirely congruent with the practical good sense and established values of their audience. The benefits for its adherents would be evident in terms of health, material well-being, reputation, and social relations. As Tillotson, the archbishop of Canterbury in the reign of William III, had

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draws obvious connections to Thomas Sprat’s famous definition of the new rhetoric in *The History of the Royal-Society of London: for the improving of natural knowledge* (London, 1667).

<sup>28</sup> The term “mitigated scepticism” is borrowed from Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, new ed. (Oxford, 2003), 29–50; it has been taken up by a number of Popkin’s disciples, including Henry Van Leeuwen, to refer to the epistemological stance common in seventeenth-century English thought.

<sup>29</sup> Carroll, *Common-Sense Philosophy of Religion*, 11. In this regard, Stillingfleet drew a parallel between the degree of certainty required in legal matters and that required in religion. On the emergence in the late seventeenth century of this notion of moral certainty, which was characteristic of Locke too (despite his supposed skeptical tendencies criticized by none other than Stillingfleet), see Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994), 208–11. Writing at the start of the twenty-first century, Nicholas Rescher still equates the epistemology of common sense with the notion of maximal plausibility required by the law today: “Common sense is the certainty of life—the certainty of the legal standard of ‘being’ beyond doubt. . . . It is a nondiscursive and nonreflective belief of which one is as certain—as reasonably certain—as one can be of anything in the sense that it would be otiose to set out to find reasons for such a belief because the belief is just as—or even more—cogent and assured than would be the case with anything one might adduce on its behalf” (*Common Sense*, 29, 32).

<sup>30</sup> John Spurr, in *The Restoration Church of England, 1646–1689* (New Haven, CT, 1991), notes the three basic arguments that Latitudinarians employed against atheism: “that the design and course of the created world argued for a supreme creator; that it was the universal consent and practice of mankind to recognize a supreme being; and that each individual enjoyed an innate sense of God” (251). One could say, in other words, that they argued for God’s existence based on three different kinds of common sense: from design (the way the world is as one experiences it), from universal consent or general agreement, and from instinctive knowledge.

memorably put it, “The laws of God are reasonable, that is suited to our nature and advantageous to our interest.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, when it came to the teachings of Christianity, “God hath shewn us what is good by the general Vote and Consent of Mankind.”<sup>32</sup> The sermons of Tillotson and Stillingfleet overflowed with the kinds of statements that encouraged social cohesion and spiritual unity precisely because they could be so readily met with agreement.

This common sense approach to matters of theology continued, especially among Low Churchmen, well into the new century. The stock sermons of the Augustan church routinely borrowed their style and themes from Tillotson, and according to James Downey, Tillotson’s “His Commandments are Not Grievous” easily obtained the title of most popular sermon of the eighteenth century.<sup>33</sup> But this attachment to what was just as often called common reason or reasonableness (as opposed to pure reason or rationality, which tended to shade into either skepticism or Scholasticism) was also secularized between the middle of the seventeenth and the start of the eighteenth century. By the early 1700s, it had come to provide a solid, if modest, epistemic and stylistic foundation for numerous other disciplines, including law, philosophy, history, natural science, and literature.<sup>34</sup> For the members of polite society, common sense seemed an antidote not only to what were described, with increasing contempt, as popular superstitions and common prejudices, the results of irratio-

<sup>31</sup> John Tillotson, quoted in Norman Sykes, *Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century* (1934; repr., Hamden, CT, 1962), 258. In late seventeenth-century English religious writing, the term “reasonableness” was a commonplace when applied to God or Christianity; see, e.g., Charles Wolseley, *The Reasonableness of Scripture-Belief* (London, 1672), and *The Unreasonableness of Atheism made Manifest* (London, 1675); James Lowde, *The Reasonableness of the Christian Religion* (London, 1684); George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, *A Short Discourse upon the Reasonableness of Mens’ Having a Religion* (London, 1685); and, most famously, John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures* (London, 1695). “Reasonableness” meant in accordance with common sense, as in Richard Bentley’s first Boyle lecture (1691), reprinted in his *The Folly and Unreasonableness of Atheism* (London, 1693), in which he argues that it would be reasonable to quit religion only if its principles were “repugnant to Common Sense” and contradicted the “universal Notions and indubitable Maxims of Reason” such as “one and the same thing may be and not be at the same time and in the same respect, . . . that Two and two do make a Dozen, or that the Diameter of a Circle is as long as the Circumference, or that the same Body may be all of it in different places at once” (16)—which were clearly not the case.

<sup>32</sup> John Tillotson, “Sermon I: Of the Duties of Natural Religion, with the Ways and Means of Knowing Them,” in *Eighteenth-Century English Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussell, and Marshall Waingrow (New York, 1969), 209.

<sup>33</sup> James Downey, *The Eighteenth-Century Pulpit: A Study of the Sermons of Butler, Berkeley, Secker, Sterne, Whitefield and Wesley* (Oxford, 1969), 15.

<sup>34</sup> On these varied disciplines and their relations, see Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*; Van Leeuwen, *Problem of Certainty*; and Shapin, *Social History of Truth*.

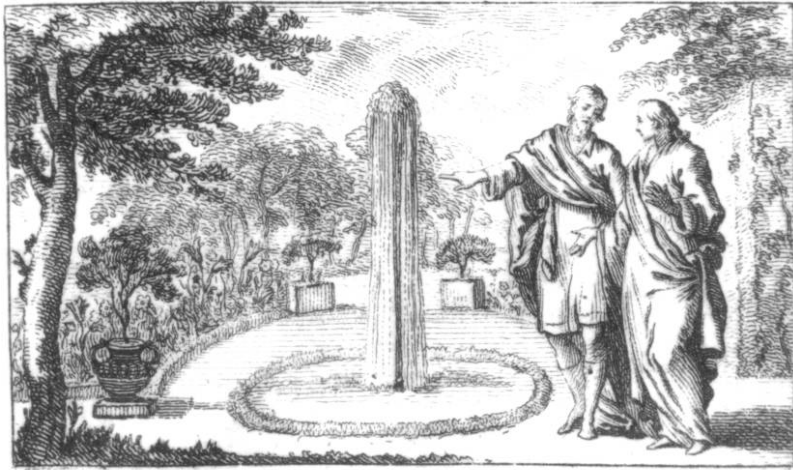
nal beliefs and enthusiasms. Advocates also touted common sense as a bulwark against all grand schemes and unnecessarily speculative or passionate enterprises, theological or not, since they too were likely to lead people down the path to error, sectarianism, and, finally, strife. This included the disputations and word-bound culture of Scholasticism, the perennial target of natural philosophers from Bacon onward. In the early eighteenth century, Whigs and Tories alike pontificated against what Nicholas Amhurst called the “syllogistical hocus-pocus,” “learned gibberish,” and “ethico-logico-physico-metaphysico-theological drama” still taught at the great universities and then called for common sense to take their place.<sup>35</sup> In the decades that immediately followed the revolutionary settlement, the ordinary sense of the ordinary man in ordinary circumstances was envisioned as a respectable, trustworthy, and superior standard for judgment in such seemingly disparate arenas as religion, ethics, aesthetic taste, judicial discretion, and politics,<sup>36</sup> as well as a tool in the creation of a noncombative common culture. The key to the general promotion of sound thinking, as the bishop and philosopher George Berkeley put it right after the turn of the century, was “to be eternally banishing Metaphysics [*sic*], etc. and recalling Men to common Sense” (see fig. 4).<sup>37</sup> Or, as the closing lines of a more popular early eighteenth-century pamphlet on methods of avoiding arguments urged its readers, “Exert with Diligence and Fortitude the Common Use of Common Sense.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Amhurst, “*Terrae-filius*,” 180–81. Here Amhurst sounds very close to Berkeley, Shaftesbury, or, especially, Locke, for whom “native rustic Reason . . . is likelier to open a way to [knowledge], and add to the common stock of Mankind rather than any scholastick Proceeding by the strict Rules of Mode and Figure” (John Locke, *An Essay concerning Humane Understanding* [London, 1690], bk. 4, chap. 17, sec. 6). On anti-Scholastic sentiment in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, and, more specifically, the polemic against both its adversarialness and its verbal play, see Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Ithaca, NY, 2000), 160–65 and 261 n. 113; Peter Walmsley, “Dispute and Conversation: Probability and the Rhetoric of Natural Philosophy in Locke’s Essay,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54, no. 3 (July 1993): 381–94; and, esp., the notes of Charles Kerby-Miller to his edition of *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, by John Arbuthnot, Alexander Pope, et al. (1741; New York, 1966), 243–46.

<sup>36</sup> Joel C. Weinsheimer, preface to *Eighteenth-Century Hermeneutics: Philosophy of Interpretation in England from Locke to Burke* (New Haven, CT, 1993), x.

<sup>37</sup> This line is from his early notebooks of 1707–8; see Berkeley’s “Philosophical Commentaries,” Notebook, A 751, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London, 1948), 91. In his *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous in opposition to Sceptics and Atheists* (1713; repr., Cleveland, 1963), Berkeley’s character Philonous similarly and famously refers to enlightenment as requiring a “revolt from metaphysical notions to the plain dictates of nature and common sense” (50).

<sup>38</sup> J. L. of Lynn Regis, *The Principles of a Rationalist, Digested into stated Articles, containing the Laws of Reason, and the Elements of Religion, Morals, and Politicks: Together with the Whole Art of Reducing all disputable Cases to Self-Evident Propo-*



*Erget aquas vis sursum eadem flectit que deorsum.*

FIG. 4.—*Third Dialogue Vignette*, in George Berkeley, *Dialogues entre Hylas et Philonous* (1713; Amsterdam, 1750), 175. Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, call no. EC7 B4554 Eh750g. This illustration of a dialogue before a vertical fountain is intended to represent the movement of thought from skepticism to common sense (in this case, the common sense of the philosophy of immaterialism). The passage that accompanies the engraved illustration reads: “You see, Hylas, the water of yonder fountain, how it is forced upward, in a round column, to a certain height; at which it breaks and falls back into the basin from whence it rose: its ascent as well as descent, proceeding from the same uniform law or principle of *gravitation*. Just so, the same principles which at first view lead to *scepticism*, pursued to a certain point, bring men back to common sense.”

The burgeoning London periodical press assumed the lion’s share of this responsibility. More precisely, the publicists of the Whig Establishment took on a twofold task: to define what counted as common sense (along with good taste) in terms of style, method, and content and then to communicate this version of common sense to a substantial “sensible,” literate, urban public. The aim was to construct the audience and then the universal culture of gentlemanliness and moderate reasonableness that the term seemed to suggest was already naturally in existence.

The project began with the rise of the serial publication in the second half

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*sitions . . . Being A Practical Method of Teaching the Use of Common Sense, as the First Principle of all Knowledge, and an effectual Way to prevent the Arbitrary Imposition of Ignorance and Error in Religion and Politicks, and the Introduction and Support of Tyranny and Slavery* (London, 1721), 30.

of the seventeenth century. But the phenomenally successful early Augustan periodical *The Spectator* (1711–12) soon set the standard. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, the paper's editors, repeatedly celebrated good sense as commensurate with good breeding and men of sense for their capacity for friendship and conversation. Readers could turn to the journal to discover where good or plain or common sense—defined variably as “right reason, and what all men should consent to” or as the “capacity of judging right”—could be found.<sup>39</sup> They could also learn where it was in short supply. The list of those who frequently violated its dictates included women, contemporary playwrights, humorists, those of no fortune (the poor), those possessing too much (ostentatious, libertine aristocrats), pedantic scholars who argued against their own sense experience, and zealots of all kinds, whether Catholics or skeptical atheists. These precepts were conveyed in a casual, antiacademic style, in which the imaginary editor, Mr. Spectator, called upon his readers' common sense and engaged them in a simulated epistolary conversation, deferring to their judgments as well as passing on his own in their name. In this, *The Spectator's* editors seem to have borrowed a page from Shaftesbury, who made similar use of the form and quotidian style of letters, dialogues, and conversations, eschewing the more figurative, showy language then associated with the wordsmith, the pedant, or, just as often, the Frenchman. Their common aim was to suggest engagement in a community endeavor. But for the editors of *The Spectator*, it was also to incubate a specific value within the journal's wide audience. Readers, Addison pronounced, “can improve their Stock of Sense” through reading better books and engaging in conversation with men of judgment.<sup>40</sup> It was only a matter of willpower and of exposure to the right influences. With wit and morality bolstering one another, *The Spectator* was explicitly calculated “to diffuse good Sense through the Bulk of a People.”<sup>41</sup>

Yet it almost goes without saying that by “a People” Addison and Steele did not really mean all people and that by “common sense” the two editors did not have in mind the truly common. Certainly *The Spectator* contains appreciations of the basic values of the unlearned and of the songs and fables that convey these values. Such examples helped the editors to make the case for the fundamental similarity of human nature everywhere: “It is impossible that any thing should be universally tasted and approved by a Multitude, tho' they are only the Rabble of a Nation, which hath not in it some peculiar Aptness to please and gratify the Mind of Man.”<sup>42</sup> But it is also clear that neither the

<sup>39</sup> *The Spectator*, no. 259 (December 27, 1711); 2:508; and no. 156 (August 29, 1711); 2:112.

<sup>40</sup> *The Spectator*, no. 62 (May 11, 1711); 1:269.

<sup>41</sup> *The Spectator*, no. 124 (July 23, 1711); 1:508.

<sup>42</sup> *The Spectator*, no. 70 (May 21, 1711); 1:297.

source nor the audience for *The Spectator*'s common sense extended to all classes of people. Women, like aristocrats, were expected to have less of it, though they might well benefit from the paper's lessons. The rural and urban poor were expected to have little and were clearly outside the journal's intended readership. When common sense was touted in this paper, it was not intended to be taken as a celebration either of commoner culture or of the common understanding, with its implications of prejudice, superstition, ignorance, and crudity. As Samuel Johnson pointed out slightly later, in this discussion it remained essential to distinguish between opinions that are true because widely acknowledged (which he called cant) and opinions that are widely acknowledged because they are true (which he called true sense).<sup>43</sup> Even if it were not as dependent on learning and leisure as formal reasoning, common sense, like taste, was fashioned in the early eighteenth century as a virtue of the relatively cultivated and the at least moderately well-off.

Addison and Steele, like Shaftesbury, saw themselves as forming the taste, manners, and beliefs of an increasingly cohesive, if expanded, elite. This elite was synonymous with the paper's gentlemen and gentlewomen readers, or what one literary critic calls more fully "a polite public of reasonable, decent, tasteful, virtuous people of the combined middling and upper classes."<sup>44</sup> Through language, rather than law or more formal codes of exclusion and coercion, *The Spectator* assumed the task of establishing the cognitive authority of this segment of the population and making its values and culture and consumption habits, again as defined by the editors, as normative as was possible. Simultaneously, the journal worked to delegitimize other stances and beliefs, including key elements of both folk culture and contemporary philosophy, as not only unlearned, superstitious, or antiquated but also nonsensical and outside the boundaries of real-world common sense. It was not always easy, of course, to decide what observations fell on which side of the fence. But common sense, as portrayed in *The Spectator*, helped to establish these distinctions as to what was acceptable or unacceptable in language and understanding and to promote a kind of self-censoring within the "polite" classes, even as it suggested a truly inclusive culture.

Other journals, building on a successful formula, followed suit both in England and on the Continent. In keeping with its title, the Whiggish biweekly *The Free Thinker* (1718–21), for example, proposed to treat all subjects,

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Piper, *Common Courtesy*, 187 n. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Erin Mackie, *Market à la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in "The Tatler" and "The Spectator"* (Baltimore, 1997), 21. For an attempt to analyze the components of this audience more precisely, see Bond's introduction to *The Spectator*. On the depiction of common life and the treatment of readers, see also Michael G. Ketcham, *Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance, and Form in the Spectator Papers* (Athens, GA, 1985).



including religion and politics, without restraint and “in the most intelligible Language.” But lest it seem to be straying into skepticism, this paper promised always to do so “in accordance with Principles of Truth and Vertue [*sic*], and the plain Notions of Common Sense.” The editors ultimately defined a lofty goal: to rescue the public from enthusiasms, superstitions, “partialities,” and false authorities, that is, “to restore the deluded part of mankind to the use of reason and common sense” in pursuit of a reasonable culture to which all elites could reflexively subscribe.<sup>45</sup>

In effect, print culture as a whole was given this normative role in the Augustan age. Theorists of literature and the arts insisted that poetry and plays and other cultural products had less a duty to advance new views than, didactically, “to represent the common Sense of Mankind in more strong, more beautiful, or more uncommon Lights.”<sup>46</sup> Common sense provided a foundation for taste, a set of critical rules against which violations, such as excessive imagination or innovation or obscurity, could be measured and censored and with which conformity could be expected and praised.<sup>47</sup> Even guides to conduct or “how to” books took up a similar aim. That was to illustrate and inculcate this same “good sense”—frequently described as the most important form of wisdom—among readers who, tautologically, already considered themselves not “Blockheads, Mechanics, and Perverse Tempers” but rather “men [or women] of sense.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *The Free-Thinker; or, Essays of Wit and Humour* [ed. Hugh Boulter, Richard West, Gilbert Burnet, Henry Stephens, and Ambrose Philips], nos. 1–350 (March 24, 1718–July 28, 1721), no. 105 (March 23, 1718 [1719]), and no. 58 (October 10, 1718); quotations are from the 3rd ed. (3 vols. [London, 1740]), 2:237, 10. The three-volume second edition had the title *The Free-Thinker; or, Essays on ignorance, superstition, bigotry, enthusiasm, craft, etc: intermixed with several pieces of wit and humour: design'd to restore the deluded part of mankind to the use of reason and common sense* (London, 1733). Clearly, the editors hoped to turn a term (“free thought”) that had been associated pejoratively with atheism into an extension of British liberty, the dangers of which could be mitigated by reliance on common sense.

<sup>46</sup> *The Spectator*, no. 253 (December 20, 1711); 2:484.

<sup>47</sup> The roots of this kind of criticism can be traced back to Thomas Rymer’s *Tragedies of the Last Age: Consider’d and examin’d* (London, 1677), in which the author insisted that art must correspond to “the common sense of all ages,” as well as the rules of the ancients, in order to please. But as the literary scholar Francis Gallaway long ago pointed out in an essay entitled “Common Sense” (in *Reason, Rule, and Revolt in English Classicism* [New York, 1940], 49–65), criticism rooted in assessments of reasonableness, probability, decorum, and ultimately common sense remained an established feature of Augustan literary criticism.

<sup>48</sup> Mr. Savage, *The Art of Prudence; or, a Companion for a Man of Sense. Written Originally in Spanish by that Celebrated Author, Balthazar Gracian*, 2nd ed. (London, 1705); see, esp., “Maxim LX: Good Sense,” 64–65. Based on the diary (1715–16) of the Whig jurist Dudley Ryder, the historian Philip Carter claims in *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society: Britain, 1660–1800* (Harlow, 2001) that “good sense”



As such, common sense soon joined the panoply of values, including virtue, liberty, sociability, patriotism, and moderation, that suggested both national distinctiveness and national pride in the wake of the Glorious Revolution. Common sense became one of those key traits that distinguished the English from the (impractical, verbose, obfuscating, and pretentious) French—and consequently helped foster a growing allegiance to an exalted idea of the English nation.<sup>49</sup> Here, in the widespread cultivation of common sense, one could point not only to the greatness of the English people, with their taste for modesty in all realms, but also to a notable achievement on the road to civilization.

The culture of common sense was, at its roots, clearly a Latitudinarian and a Whig creation, a reaction against perceived excesses of all kinds rooted in the culture of the late seventeenth century. The playwright and Whig apologist Thomas Shadwell, who replaced the Catholic John Dryden as poet laureate in 1689 after years of banishment from the stage, self-servingly insisted that it was only with the ascent of William and Mary that “a Liberty of speaking Common Sence [*sic*], which tho’ not long since forbidden, is now grown current.”<sup>50</sup> But by the beginning of the reign of George I, a taste for common sense had become generalized to the extent that embracing a practically minded epistemology, rooted in certain basic shared assumptions derived from ordinary experience, had become the common sense of the combined middle and upper classes of the day.<sup>51</sup> As one London paper put it a decade

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was seen as a specifically manly attribute in this period (168–69). But similar ideals were promulgated in contemporaneous advice books for women, in which women were—as in *The Spectator*—continually implored to cultivate their good sense over other, more suspect values; for example, Lady Mary Lee Chudleigh announces in her introductory address “To the Reader” in *Essays Upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse* (London, [1710]) that “my whole design is . . . to persuade my Sex to improve their Understandings, to prefer Wisdom before Beauty, good Sense before Wealth, and the Sovereignty of their Passions before the Empire of the World.”

<sup>49</sup> On the development of the idea of patriotism or love of the public good, see Peter N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion, and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1994), 95–96. On the particular role of anti-French sentiment in the construction of eighteenth-century British patriotism, the classic text is Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1701–1837* (New Haven, CT, 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Shadwell, “Dedication to Charles, Earl of Dorset and Middlesex [Shadwell’s patron],” preceding *Bury-Fair* [1689], in *The Complete Works of Thomas Shadwell*, ed. Montague Summers, 5 vols. (London, 1927), 4:294. For more on this theme, see also the play’s prologue, in which Shadwell repeats that “Common Sence was all cry’d down, And Noise and Nonsense swagger’d thro’ the Town” but insists that now “Common Sence has won the day” (4:296–97).

<sup>51</sup> Markku Peltonen issues a similar warning about assuming that politeness remained (if it ever was) an exclusively Whig preoccupation; see his “Politeness and Whiggism, 1688–1732,” *Historical Journal* 48, no. 2 (2005): 391–414.

later, “Happiness in life depends more upon it than upon any other Sense whatsoever.”<sup>52</sup> No wonder the anonymous author of a fiendishly clever 1769 novel called *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense* insisted that the eponymous main character (Common Sense), after centuries of frustrating and peripatetic work trying to cure the delusions of popes, emperors, and kings, had finally, in the England of Georges I and II, and especially among “the middling People,” found a satisfying home.<sup>53</sup> Already by the beginning of the 1720s, good old English common sense—and eventually British common sense—had become a firmly established national value, destined to be celebrated for the rest of the century.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, thanks to foreign and native observers alike, this myth of the English as wise in a prosaic sort of way, plain in style, and devoted to their common sense perspective as well as to their liberty, endured into the twentieth century. When G. M. Trevelyan famously declared just before World War II that the Glorious Revolution might better be known as “the Sensible Revolution” for the role it had played in creating

<sup>52</sup> “Of Common Sense,” *Applebee’s Journal* (March 11, 1732), reprinted in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 2 (March 1732): 647. Again one hears echoes of *The Spectator*, where praise is lavished on “Notions that fall in with the common Reason of Mankind, that are comfortable to the Sense of all Ages, and all Nations, not to mention their tendency for promoting the happiness of Societies, or of particular Persons” (*The Spectator*, no. 185 [October 2, 1711]; 2:230).

<sup>53</sup> [Herbert Lawrence], *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense: An Historical Allegory*, 2 vols. (London, 1769), 2:113. The idea of writing an allegorical history of Common Sense and his family may well have been derived in part from *The Spectator* (no. 35 [April 10, 1711]; 2:145–58), in which Addison offers a genealogy for both Good Sense personified, a descendent of Truth, and for Nonsense personified, a descendant of Falsehood. As will be shown in the next section of this article, this trope was used repeatedly in subsequent decades, from Fielding’s *Pasquin* to John Lindsay’s brief *The Happy Interview; or, Long look’d for, found out at last. A Plain Narrative; giving an Account, how Common-Sense, Having withdrawn himself, in Disgust, from the Public View, was, after the indefatigable Search and Enquiries of his Friend Plain Honesty, Found out, in his Retirement, under the Direction of Truth* (London, 1756).

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., John Wilkes, *The North Briton makes his appeal to the good sense, and to the candour of the English nation* ([London, 1763]); Anon., *An Appeal to the Good Sense of the Inhabitants of Great Britain concerning their religious rights and privileges* (London, 1770); Anon., *Plain Facts, submitted to the Common Sense of the People of England* (London, 1785); Anon., *British Common Sense; or, Reflections on the present state of the British Nation* (London, 1791); Philodemus [pseud.], *An Appeal to the Common Sense of the British People on the subjects of sedition and revolution* (London, 1793); and John Stewart, *Good Sense: Addressed to the British Nation, as their pre-eminent and peculiar characteristic, in the present awful crisis, or war of social existence* (London, 1794). For a sample foreign reference to “that truly English attribute, good common sense,” see Oloff Napea, *Letters from London: Observations of a Russian, during a Residence in England of Ten Months* (London, 1816), 28, quoted in Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650–1850* (Oxford, 2000), 75.

this characteristic trait, he was only giving credence to a Whiggish cliché established in the wake of 1688.<sup>55</sup>

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The making of common sense into an epistemological ideal suitable to govern a stable, practically minded, yet civil libertarian society is, however, only part of the story of the birth of modern common sense. The rest has to do with the partisan and often acrimonious contest over its appropriate referents and legitimate spokesmen that soon followed. So attractive was common sense as an ally that it rather quickly became something worthy of fighting over.

Now as practitioners of *Begriffsgeschichte* have repeatedly demonstrated, concepts can generally be said to have become successful precisely when they begin to provoke opposing definitions and to generate unintended uses.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, some terms—"art" and "fascism" are classic examples—serve an important function not despite but precisely because of their being contested; they become pivots for important arguments.<sup>57</sup> But common sense is, in this regard, an odd case. For we are dealing with a term that, by definition, signifies a realm closed to variant interpretations and beyond debate. And once common sense became a rhetorical weapon in the arsenal of multiple, conflicting constituencies, all of whom claimed to represent only what was obvious and common to all mankind, it not only fostered a new form of political deception (since it could not actually be any of the things claimed on its behalf). It seems also to have exacerbated the difficulties involved in arriving at just such a consensual or "common" sense in practice. Paradoxically, the growing popularity of common sense as both an idea and a slogan produced a competition to define and embody it that, in turn, ultimately helped legitimate disagreement, dissent, and even full-blown opposition as estab-

<sup>55</sup> G. M. Trevelyan, *The English Revolution, 1688–1689* (London, 1938), 7. For a more recent reassessment of this particular conception of the Glorious Revolution, see John Morrill, "The Sensible Revolution," in *The Anglo-Dutch Moment: Essays on the Glorious Revolution and Its World Impact*, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge, 1991), 73–104.

<sup>56</sup> See Melvin Richter, "Le concept de despotisme et l'abus des mots," *Dix-huitième siècle*, no. 34 (2002), 373–88; and Reinhardt Koselleck, "A Response to Comments on the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*," in *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on "Begriffsgeschichte"*, ed. Hartmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter (Washington, DC, 1996), esp. 64–65.

<sup>57</sup> The classic text here is W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 56, no. 167 (1955–56). See, too, Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts," *Ethics* 84 (October 1973): 1–9; and Jeremy Waldron, "Vagueness in Law and Language: Some Philosophical Issues," *California Law Review*, no. 82 (1994), 509–40.

lished elements of modern political culture. This twist in the story is all the more remarkable in that it occurred at a moment generally thought to mark the final demise of the explosive, ideological squabbles associated with the past century's wars of religion and the emergence of extraordinary social and political stability and even consensus. Here, our focus becomes the years stretching from the late 1710s to the conclusion of the 1730s, or the middle of the reign of the first two Georges. For during these years, common sense went from being a means to stem the tide of conflict to a spur to new forms of it.

The so-called Bangorian controversy of 1716–18 constituted the first serious crisis in the idea of a single Whig-derived common sense. The bishop of Bangor, Benjamin Hoadly, was already a controversial figure, despised by Tory sympathizers for his politics and by High Churchmen for his theology, when he published a particularly strongly worded refutation of conservative, nonjuror Anglican thought in the spring of 1716. Entitled *A Preservative Against the Principles and Practices of the Nonjurors both in Church and State* and subtitled *An Appeal to the Consciences and Common Sense of the Christian Laity*, this pamphlet set in motion a controversy that was only exacerbated the following year by Hoadly's contentious sermon "The Nature of the Kingdom or Church of Christ." Central to the debate Hoadly provoked was the question of the source of truth, both at the level of institutions and at the level of human psychology. Among the many controversial positions that the notorious bishop staked out, none was more provocative than his suggestion that the essence of Christianity lay in the unrestricted rights of individual conscience—or, to put it differently—that the judgments of the individual mind superseded the authority of that church's divinely ordained clergy. The politically protected bishop, with his Latitudinarian and Lockean leanings, seemed to be arguing a radical line directly contrary to Anglican orthodoxy. But Hoadly insisted in *A Preservative* that he had built his case upon the most secure and elemental and unambiguous of foundations: "some few Common Uncontested Principles of Civil Government" and "the plain and express Declarations of the Gospel itself." He also appealed directly to the common sense of the laity, rather than to other clerics, in his own defense, promising his audience to "lend you to such Principles and Maxims, as will be found True in themselves; and easily applied to every Difficulty upon these Subjects, which is now, or may be, from time to time, thrown your way."<sup>58</sup>

His appeals and subsequent clarifications notwithstanding, Hoadly unleashed a firestorm of opposition in the form of literally hundreds of pamphlets, sermons,

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Hoadly, *A Preservative Against the Principles and Practices of the Nonjurors both in Church and State; or, an Appeal to the Consciences and Common Sense of the Christian Laity* (London, 1716), 99, 2. For a good summary of this text and the controversy it provoked, see Gerald R. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1964), 194–200.

and even poems. Self-declared “laymen of conscience and common sense,” as well as High Churchmen all across Britain, responded that they were anything but in agreement as to where common sense lay when it came to the nature of the authority of the church over its members.<sup>59</sup> The notion of common sense offered a prop to both sides in the controversy. Its use by writers as opposed as William Law and Thomas Pyle suggests its authority in matters of religion was now beyond challenge; common sense was “what the Laity may justly pretend to,” and “heresy” was just as possible against this human attribute as it was against God, Religion, and “the Nature of Things.”<sup>60</sup> But the nature of what common sense dictated, like the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, proved much harder to determine. In effect, the Bangorian controversy, as it came to be known, laid bare early in the reign of George I a set of religious and political problems that would continue to plague English society and, subsequently, other societies that adopted the idea of common sense as an objective, communally approved epistemological authority. How were its contours to be effectively determined? Who within the body politic could rightfully speak on its behalf? Finally, what should be done when divergent versions of common sense presented themselves as equally legitimate?

These questions remained unsettled in the 1720s. The real test for the idea

<sup>59</sup> Among the vast number of printed responses both critical of and defensive of Hoadly that address his appeal to the common sense of the laity, see Joseph Smith, *Some Considerations Humbly Offer'd to the Lord Bp. of Bangor, On His Lordship's Preservative against the Principles and Practices of the Non-Jurors; or, A modest Review of his Appeal to the Consciences, and Common Sense of the Christian Laity* (London, 1717); A Layman of Conscience and Common Sense [pseud.], *A Letter to Dr. Snape, Occasion'd by his Letter to the Bishop of Bangor. Wherein The Doctor is Answer'd and Expos'd, Paragraph by Paragraph* (London, 1717), and *The New British Inquisition; or, The racking of Mr. Pillonniere, to extort a confession of Jesuitism from him* (London, 1718); William Hendley, *An Appeal to the Consciences and Common Sense of the Christian Laity, whether the Bishop of Bangor in his Preservative, etc. Hath not given up the Rights of the Church, and the Powers of the Christian Priesthood* (London, 1717); Anon., *The Uninterrupted Succession of the Ecclesiastical Mission Asserted; and the Appeal (in the Preservative against the Principles and Practices of the Nonjuror, etc.) to the Consciences and Common Sense of the Christian Laity, Discuss'd* (London, 1717); Thomas Pyle, *A Second Vindication of the Lord Bishop of Bangor: wherein Mr. Law's Notions of Benediction, Absolution, and Church-Communion, are proved to be destructive of the whole Christian Religion, and contrary to Common Sense* (London, 1718); and the long, scathing poem of Nicholas Amhurst, *Protestant Popery; or, The Convocation* (London, 1718), in which “the Layman's common Sense appeal” makes an appearance. Note, too, the title of a contemporaneous compilation on the subject: *The Sense of the People Upon the Dispute between the Bishop of Bangor on the One Part; and Dr. Snape, the Bishop of Carlisle, and Dr. Kennet on the Other* (London, 1717). Many of these titles are listed in “An Account of all the Considerable Pamphlets that have been published on either side in the present controversy,” in *The Works of Benjamin Hoadly*, 3 vols. (London, 1773), 2:381–401.

<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Some Considerations*, 1; and Pyle, *Second Vindication*, 55.

of a single English common sense as the foundation for modern social and political life did not come until in the mid-1730s, when the focus of public strife had largely shifted from religion to ministerial corruption. This was the decade that saw the resurgence of the so-called Country Opposition, that much-analyzed loose alliance of discontented Whigs and conservative, Tory-sympathizing country gentry, among whose ranks were many of the great writers and intellects of the age.<sup>61</sup> Central to the strategy of these diverse critics of the present regime was the appropriation of “common sense,” along with “patriotism,” “public spirit,” “liberty,” and a small number of other exalted slogans of the dominant, post-1688 political culture, to new effect.<sup>62</sup> Opposition propagandists hoped to use these high-minded and already widely accepted terms to craft an alternative “country” or “patriot” ideology that would unite this unstable coalition of disaffected parties as the true protectors of the revolutionary settlement and the defenders of the common good. The leaders of this opposition movement also sought in the notion of common sense a way to legitimize their merciless criticism of George II’s de facto prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole, and of the corruption of the present government, or “Robinocracy,” as anything but a conflict between differing opinions or a demonstration of true political dissent.

References to common sense, and particularly to its current scarcity, began making appearances in Opposition essays and verse early in the new century.<sup>63</sup> It was, however, a hit play of 1736, which the French philosophe Claude Adrien Helvétius remembered years later as a meditation about the nature of *bon sens*, that cemented the connection between the political stance and this term.<sup>64</sup> That year, the witty and well-connected young playwright Henry

<sup>61</sup> For contrasting views on the membership of the Country Opposition and its role in breaking down or exacerbating old party rivalries in the 1720s and 1730s, see Archibald S. Foord, *His Majesty’s Opposition, 1714–1830* (Oxford, 1964); Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party, 1714–60* (Cambridge, 1982); and J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics during the Ancien Régime*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>62</sup> On the importance of considering “constellations” of commonplace political terms as sites of struggle and, consequently, “an integral element of political conflict,” see Richard Ashcraft, “The Language of Political Conflict in Restoration Literature,” in *Politics as Reflected in Literature*, ed. Richard Ashcraft and Alan Roper (Los Angeles, 1989), 12, 15.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., John Gay’s “Fable IX: The Jackal, Leopard, and other Beasts. To a Modern Politician” (1728), which begins: “I grant Corruption sways Mankind, / That Int’rest too perverts the Mind, / That Bribes have blinded common Sense, / Foil’d Reason, Truth and Eloquence; / I grant you too, our present Crimes / Can equal those of Former Times. / Against plain Facts shall I engage, / To vindicate our righteous Age?” (*Fables: Second Series* [1738], in *The Poetical Works of John Gay*, ed. G. C. Faber [London, 1926]), 293.

<sup>64</sup> Claude Adrien Helvétius, in a long note in *De l’homme, de ses facultés intellec-*



Fielding (who had begun his literary career writing flattering verses in praise of George II) dazzled London audiences with a new farce full of topical references. Called *Pasquin*, this parodic entertainment was composed in haste and acted by what appears to have been a barely competent cast assembled for the purpose at the Haymarket Theatre. Nevertheless, it became the most successful theatrical performance of the decade—and a key moment in the history of common sense.

*Pasquin* dramatizes the rehearsals of two different plays-within-a-play. The first, billed as a comedy, pokes fun at the corruption of contemporary elections, in which bribery ran rampant. The second, ostensibly a tragedy and entitled “The Life and Death of Common Sense,” portrays the invasion and triumph of a foreign force named Queen Ignorance, who, with her local acolytes—Law, Physick, and Firebrand, the priest—finally succeeds in murdering Queen Common Sense (see figs. 5 and 6).

Neither rehearsal’s contents were as pointed and overtly partisan as much of Fielding’s subsequent writing for the stage or the anonymous essays that he was producing simultaneously for the leading Opposition journal, *The Craftsman*. On the surface, the play offended all parties with equal verve; the actor reciting the prologue to *Pasquin* declared the author willing “without Fear and Favor . . . [to] maul” Whig and Tory, Court and Country alike.<sup>65</sup> But both the choice of topics and the accumulation of small innuendos in this satire made Fielding’s ultimately partisan intentions clear. Corruption in all forms, and especially that of elections, was already a standard Opposition theme at the time of *Pasquin*’s arrival on the stage. Furthermore, the allegorical battle

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*tuelles et de son éducation*, 2 vols. (London [The Hague], 1773), retells the story of an English play whose title he gives in French as “La Reine de Bon Sens.” Clearly Helvétius had in mind one act of Fielding’s *Pasquin*. But Helvétius used the play to illustrate a precept that would have been alien to Fielding: that all religion “prohibits men from using their reason and makes them brute, unhappy, and cruel at the same time” (see vol. 2, sec. vii, n. B).

<sup>65</sup> Fielding, *Pasquin*, prologue to act 1. See the edition of *Pasquin* edited by O. M. Brack, William Kupersmith, and Curt A. Zimansky (Iowa City, IA, 1973), 5. All further citations to *Pasquin* will be to this edition. On the connotations of this play, see, too, the varied readings of Jean Ducrocq, *Le théâtre de Fielding, 1728–1737, et ses prolongements dans l’oeuvre romantique* ([Paris], 1975), 332–78; Bertrand A. Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits: The Relation of Politics to Literature, 1722–1742* (Lincoln, NE, 1976), 150–53; Robert D. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre, 1728–1737* (Oxford, 1988), 209–13; Martin C. Battestin, with Ruth R. Battestin, *Henry Fielding: A Life* (London, 1989), 192–99; and Ronald Paulson, *The Life of Henry Fielding: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 2000), 61–65. Battestin links Fielding’s political sympathies to the Boy Patriots (i.e., George Lyttelton and Lord Ches-terfield) and his religious sympathies to Hoadly’s moralizing Christianity at the time of the writing of this play; others see less firm commitments.







FIG. 6.—*The Author's Benefit, Pasquin* (April 1736), a theater ticket, possibly designed by William Hogarth. © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum. Depicted here is the scene from act 5 of *Pasquin* in which Queen Common Sense is stabbed by Firebrand and Queen Ignorance is crowned as monarch surrounded by her main allies, including performing dogs.

within the theater, Fielding's play ends with the invocation of a "topsy turvey" world to come, where "the Powers of Common-Sense are all destroy'd" and "Physick shall kill, and Law enslave the World."<sup>67</sup> Moreover, in case the implications of such lines were not entirely clear, Fielding resorted here, as in many of his works, to external commentators. Fictitious playwrights, prompters, critics, and generic men of good sense watch the plays-within-a-play and, in the tradition of the Cynic Lucian, frequently question the customs on view so as to expose what runs counter to true common sense.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Fielding, *Pasquin*, act 5, 49. The trope of common sense having been chased from the London stage by pantomimes, puppet shows, foreign songs, and other "absurdities" was already familiar in theatrical criticism in the 1730s. See, e.g., "Common Sense; stray'd from the Theatres," *The Prompter*, no. 13; reprinted in *Gentleman's Magazine* 4 (December 1734): 693.

<sup>68</sup> Paulson, *Life of Fielding*, 46, 63.

Indeed, the political potential of *Pasquin*, and, by extension, the idea of common sense, as a vehicle of the Opposition, was made manifest by Fielding himself in numerous sly ways. Witness the double entendres that helped advertise the play on the occasion of a benefit performance in April 1736: "N.B. As Mr. Fustian is the first Poet that ever cared to own, that he brought Ignorance upon the Stage, he hopes all her Friends will excuse his calling in particular upon them, and favour him with their Company along with the Circle of Friends of Common Sense, which he hopes will be the Foundation of a Coalition of Parties."<sup>69</sup> It is in the same spirit that the ghost of Queen Common Sense promises in the closing scene of the play that she will continue into the distant future to "haunt" those responsible for her murder—that is, the triumphant army of ignorance headed by experts in medicine, religion, and law and their deluded followers.

Taking these hints literally, two of Fielding's close friends, the twenty-seven-year-old "Boy Patriot" George Lyttelton and the renowned statesman and recently established Opposition leader Philip Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, decided in the early months of 1737 to launch (and bankroll) a new political journal that would adopt this cause. They would break through old divides in order to line up diverse parties behind them. And they would fight the chief emblems of the reign of Ignorance. First, they sought the editorial assistance of the well-known Irish Catholic journalist Charles Molloy. Then, permanently inflating the value of an old, ostensibly antipolitical word, they named this newspaper directly after Fielding's example: *Common Sense*.<sup>70</sup>

Ideologically, *Common Sense*, or, *The Englishman's Journal* betrayed none of the subtleties or indirection of Fielding's *Pasquin*. The weekly paper aimed to pick up precisely where *The Craftsman* and *The Weekly Journal* (better known as *Mist's* and then *Fog's*) left off. Alongside discussion of manners and taste in the style of Addison and Steele, *Common Sense* became a witty vehicle for the propagation of the new doctrine of the Opposition. In the late 1730s, the most obvious source of this platform was certainly Lord Bolingbroke, whose *A Dissertation Upon Parties*, first printed serially in *The Crafts-*

<sup>69</sup> Advertisement for an April 1736 benefit performance of *Pasquin*, for the actor James Lacy, quoted in Thomas R. Cleary, *Henry Fielding: Political Writer* (Waterloo, ON, 1984), 88.

<sup>70</sup> *Common Sense; or, The Englishman's Journal*, nos. 1–354 (February 5, 1737–November 16, 1743). From November 1737 until June 1739, as a result of a fight involving printers, two versions of the paper appeared: one called *Old Common Sense* and another, more important, one that kept the name *Common Sense*. On the founding of the journal and its possible connection to the Old Pretender, James III, and Jacobitism, as well as Opposition Whigs, see George Hilton Jones, "The Jacobites, Charles Molloy, and *Common Sense*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 4 (April 1953): 144–47; Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits*, 156–59; and Vincent J. Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737* (Madison, WI, 1984), 92–93.

man, introduced most of the key themes that *Common Sense* and other Opposition journals would develop in the later part of the decade. These included the limited prerogative of the Crown; the danger of party labels; and the need for moral regeneration—not least the subordination of private interest to concern with the common good and the nation—in a time of rampant corruption.<sup>71</sup> But we should not overlook the important influence of Lyttelton himself, whose immensely popular *Letters from a Persian in England to his Friend at Ispahan* of 1735 borrowed Montesquieu's trope of the rational foreign observer considering the absurdities of contemporary European (in this case, English) life as a means to advance the moral themes of Bolingbroke. Lyttelton combined the language of patriotism with his own Whiggish brand of anticlericalism.<sup>72</sup> In eleven witty letters, Lyttelton extended the famous story of the Troglodytes to allegorize the demise of practicality, public-mindedness, simplicity, and easy comprehensibility in all domains of English life, from religion to philosophy to politics to law to language itself. The situation had become so desperate in recent times that, according to Lyttelton, the justice system had spawned multiple, incompatible layers of courts, and now very few Englishmen had either the stamina or the funds to make it to the last stage in the process, namely, the court of "common sense."<sup>73</sup>

This image played a larger role in *Common Sense* than simply providing the terms for a title. In some issues of this paper, common sense was incarnated as a literary character, similar to Fielding's Queen Common Sense or, earlier, Mr. Spectator, who commented on the issues of the day in a manner consistent with his main personality trait. At other times, common sense was imagined as a commodity, one more bit player in an expanding commercial culture

<sup>71</sup> Lord Bolingbroke [Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke], *A Dissertation Upon Parties: in several letters to Caleb d'Anvers, Esq.* [pseudonym for Nicholas Amhurst] (London, 1735), originally published in *The Craftsman* between October 1733 and December 1734. On Bolingbroke and the theory and discourse of the Opposition in the era of Walpole, see Quentin Skinner, "The Principles and Practice of Opposition: The Case of Bolingbroke v. Walpole," in *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society, in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (London, 1974), 93–128; H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1977); J. A. W. Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property: The Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Kingston, ON, 1983); J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), 215–310; and, more recently, Alexander Pettit, *Illusory Consensus: Bolingbroke and the Polemical Response to Walpole, 1730–1737* (Newark, DE, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> On the Whig dissident political ideology of Lyttelton and his circle, see Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth, 1725–1742* (Oxford, 1994), esp. 34.

<sup>73</sup> George Lyttelton, *Letters from a Persian in England to his Friend at Ispahan*, 2nd ed. (London, 1735), 40.



offered for purchase on “very cheap and easy Terms.”<sup>74</sup> Most often, though, common sense functioned metaphorically in *Common Sense* as a special tribunal run by a hypothetical jury of everyone in the nation. In this independent and impartial court, the conduct and opinions of any or all people, whether kings or cobblers or authors or ladies (though expectations for them were, again, low), could be held up and measured. All departures from the norm—as defined by the editors—could then be pointed out as injustices, or follies, or evils, or falsehoods, or even sins.<sup>75</sup> Here, in the pages of this newspaper, one would find the final court of appeals that, according to Lyttelton in his *Letters from a Persian*, had almost ceased to exist in English society. As his collaborator, Lord Chesterfield, explained in the first issue, “the Design of my Paper, is to take in all Subjects whatsoever, and try them by the Standard of Common Sense. I shall erect a Kind of Tribunal, for the ‘Crimina lœsi Sensus Communis,’ or the Pleas of Common Sense. . . . The Cause of Common Sense shall be pleaded in Common Sense.”<sup>76</sup>

Chesterfield insisted upon the deep English roots of this quasi-legal tradition: “Our constitution is founded upon common sense itself, and every Deviation from one is a Violation of the other.”<sup>77</sup> Common law, too—that ancient body of legal ideas—was frequently mentioned as a close relation of common sense; both, after all, required the populace to regulate its behavior through constant submission to tacit, uncontestable rules. But, like Fielding, Chesterfield despaired that this ancient standard called common sense had, along with “common honesty,” been largely abandoned in the present. Articulating what was to become a constant theme of Opposition writing into the 1740s, the editors never failed to remind their readers that common sense has “for some years, been under a Sort of Proscription from Courts and Ministerial

<sup>74</sup> *Common Sense*, no. 8 (March 26, 1737), 2.

<sup>75</sup> Precedent for the idea of common sense as a tribunal can be found in such Civil War texts as Anon., *The Plain Case of the Common-Weal Neer the Desperate Gulf of the Common-Woe. Stated and Exhibited, to the People and high Court of Parliament . . . Also, the Oath to the Parliament extricated, and the Case Resolved to Common Sense* (London, 1648 [1649]). On the function of this judicial trope later in the eighteenth century around the better-studied notion of public opinion, see J. A. W. Gunn, “Public Spirit to Public Opinion,” in *Beyond Liberty and Property*, 260–315; and, for comparison, Mona Ozouf, “Public Opinion at the End of the Old Regime,” *Journal of Modern History* 60 (September 1988): S1–S21. The idea of opinion as “queen of the world” has an even longer lineage, dating at least from the sixteenth century in England.

<sup>76</sup> “Common Sense,” *Common Sense*, no. 1 (February 5, 1737), 1, reprinted in *The Letters and Works of Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. Lord Mahon, 5 vols. (Philadelphia, 1892), 5:126. The epigraph for this opening essay was Juvenal’s “Rarus enim fermè sensus communis” or “Nothing so rare as common sense.”

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

Employments,” not to mention foreign policy.<sup>78</sup> Or, as Chesterfield put it in his introductory essay, the authority evoked in the title of his journal had “met with great discouragement in the noble science of politics; our chief professors having thought themselves much above those obvious rules that had been followed by our ancestors and that lay open to vulgar understandings.”<sup>79</sup> With this paper, he continued in his mock-serious tone, it was hoped that the “fashion” for common sense, at least among the political classes, could become common again.

Whether or not *Common Sense* brought about any kind of widespread epistemological or social changes in the England in which it circulated, the journal was, at least for a few years, a commercial and political success. The employment of common sense—defined facetiously in that first issue as “that Rule by which Men judge of other Peoples [*sic*] Actions, than direct their own; the plain Result of right Reason admitted by all, and practiced by few” and, later on, by the “vulgar Expression of knowing what’s what”—was, from a rhetorical point of view, a stroke of genius.<sup>80</sup> The trick lay in its two faces.

On the one hand, the trope of the common sense tribunal served as a highly effective vehicle for attacking Walpole and his associates, including the king, in the increasingly nasty skirmish between Court and Country that took place in the late 1730s. In the middle of that decade, after the controversy over whether or not a general excise tax on wine and tobacco constituted a threat to British liberty had simmered down, the issue of Spanish depredations, or privateering on open seas, took its symbolic place. Soon the adequacy (or inadequacy) of Britain’s negotiations with Spain and what they spelled for both British freedom and British commerce became the key issue dividing the Opposition from the Whig Establishment.<sup>81</sup> *Common Sense*, among other

<sup>78</sup> “A Letter from Common Honesty to Common Sense,” *Common Sense*, no. 87 (September 30, 1738), reprinted in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 8 (October 1738): 527, and reprinted again later, with the same title, as a separate pamphlet (Boston, c. 1756). In a subsequent issue of *Common Sense* (no. 96 [December 2, 1738]), Common Sense replies to Common Honesty, with the former urging the latter to go seek employment in France, the home of Economy, instead. An earlier issue (no. 45 [December 10, 1737]) describes their common foe, Nonsense, having extensive sway in this “polite nation” at present, not least in the Pulpit, the Playhouse, and the Court.

<sup>79</sup> “Common Sense,” *Common Sense*, no. 1 (February 5, 1737).

<sup>80</sup> *Common Sense*, no. 1 (February 5, 1737), and no. 14 (May 7, 1737). The later definition is provided by a character named “Age and Experience.” At another juncture (*Common Sense*, no. 66 [May 6, 1738]), common sense is again defined, this time to argue that common sense is better explained as “a kind of negative Wisdom, which every Man has when he does not expose his Follies” than as “the plain Rule of Action.”

<sup>81</sup> On the issue of Spanish depredations and its significance in the eventual fall of Walpole, see Jeremy Black, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of Walpole* (Edinburgh, 1985); and Philip Woodfine, *Britannia’s Glories: The Walpole Ministry and the 1739 War with Spain* (Rochester, NY, 1998).



journals, took the lead both in inflaming public opinion in support of war with Spain and in using the issue to further the attack on Walpole, an effort that lasted until his resignation four years later. What is important to notice from our perspective is that *Common Sense* assigned to its much-vaunted guiding principle an almost entirely subversive role, using it humorously to undermine ministerial and clerical authority at every turn. The most notorious example was the allegorical satire known as “The Dream of the Golden Rump.”<sup>82</sup> But in almost every issue, common sense functioned as a means to place the Court and its supporters outside the legitimate and commonly accepted boundaries of social, political, and moral life, to reduce them, in short, to the nonsensical in the eyes of a broad public.

That this technique was effective can be demonstrated by the degree of government hostility that the journal provoked. The impact of the newspaper’s use of common sense as a political weapon can also be measured by its imitators, who seized upon the form’s commercial as well as polemical potential. When Fielding (an occasional anonymous contributor to his friends’ publication) began to edit his own paper, *The Champion*, in 1739, his fictional alter ego, the wonderfully named Captain Hercules Vinegar, fashioned himself a satirical guardian of common sense and once again made use of the court model to try cases that fell outside of the established “law,” including vanity, folly, and abuses of the English language.<sup>83</sup> Ballads, almanacs, and satirical prints borrowing themes from *Common Sense*, including the story of the Golden Rump, followed suit (see fig. 7). By the end of the decade, the Opposition had made considerable headway in attaching the value of common sense to one highly partisan side in a whole series of interrelated oppositions. Common sense seemed increasingly to belong to the country (rather than the city, with its morally depraved ways), to “real” drama (rather than the commercial theater of puppet shows and pantomimes, which were symptomatic of a declining public taste), and, above all, to the Patriot platform and Opposition (rather than the corrupt Court culture surrounding Walpole, George II, and their minions).

<sup>82</sup> On the widely circulated print based on this allegory, see Paul Langford, *Walpole and the Robinocracy* (Cambridge, 1986), 130–31. For the original description of the ceremony, see *Common Sense*, no. 7 (March 19, 1737), and no. 8 (March 26, 1737). Explaining the tone of the journal, the author of the preface (“Printer to the Reader”) in the first collected edition (*Common Sense; or, The Englishman’s Journal. Being a Collection of Letters, Political, Humorous, and Moral, publish’d weekly under that title, for the first year*, 2 vols. [London, 1738–39]) noted in a typically witty manner that it had been contrived in part “to divert the Publick, at the Expense of those who have long been diverting themselves at the Expense of the Publick” (1:vi).

<sup>83</sup> See *The Champion; or, British Mercury*, nos. 1–63 (November 15, 1739–April 8, 1740), continued as *The Champion; or, Evening Advertiser* (April 1740–1743), but without Fielding’s participation.



FIG. 7.—*The Festival of the Golden Rump*. “Designed by the Author of Common Sense. Published According to Act of Parliament 1737.” © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum. This anonymous engraving was based upon a satire that first appeared in *Common Sense*, no. 7 (March 19, 1737). In this famously nasty image, Queen Caroline injects a magic calming potion into the “rump” of her husband, George II, while Walpole, holding a magician’s wand, supervises the proceedings.

But, on the other hand, the success of the common sense tribunal as an organ of pointed political critique lay in its architects’ insistence that it was something else entirely. Shaftesbury had controversially proposed in both his famous *Letter on Enthusiasm* and its companion essay, “*Sensus Communis*,” that irony and ridicule should be encouraged in the context of free speech for the important role they could play in remedying vice and disarming “superstition and melancholy delusion,” that is, in exposing the gap between what accords with the *sensus communis* and what actually exists.<sup>84</sup> Many Augustan commentators took this to mean that ridicule, rather than being simply a means to generate laughter at another’s expense, was a technique for arriving at truth. What made it effective was the shared human capacity to see what is readily apparent once rhetorical smoke screens and faulty reasoning have been

<sup>84</sup> Shaftesbury, “*Sensus Communis*,” in *Characteristicks of Men*, 59.

brushed aside.<sup>85</sup> Thus the editors of *Common Sense*, at the same time as they were using satire, parody, scandalous allegation, and other forms of humor and raillery to further their own partisan cause, could convincingly declare themselves champions of a disinterested common sense, that old scourge of faction, party, or private enthusiasm. Moreover, they could celebrate their frequent recourse to scurrility as but a means to achieve principled, nonpartisan, even antipolitical aims. The real purpose of their journal, the editors explained in the opening issue, was to “rebuke Vice, correct Errors, reform Abuses and shame Folly and Prejudice, without Regard to any Thing but Common Sense, which . . . implies common Decency too.”<sup>86</sup> In the context of Bolingbroke’s insistence that the choice before the British people was not between two parties (Whig versus Tory) but, rather, between liberty and slavery, to have said otherwise would have discredited the paper’s creators from the start. In the hands of the Opposition, common sense could be touted as simply a tool of moral and cultural regulation. It became a means of exposing the foibles, pretensions, and mystifications of the few and of restoring already-accepted and sensible community norms in a world without either effective governance or an official censorship apparatus.

Furthermore, the authority of common sense had the advantage of being, at least at the level of rhetoric, connected to ordinary people outside government circles, which is to say, the journal’s readers. Arguing from, or appealing to, common sense signaled to the desired audience that the humble, unpretentious writer of the words in question aspired to no glory for himself; he was only doing his duty, speaking in the name of an undefined People and appealing to that same People’s instinctive good sense on the People’s or the Nation’s behalf. The historian C. John Sommerville describes a critical tension in the early English newspaper trade (and in commercial media ever since) between being socially divisive enough to strengthen readers’ self-identification by contrast with other groups within the nation and being socially inclusive

<sup>85</sup> On this stance and the heated debates it provoked at the time, see esp. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire*; John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule, and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, MA, 1976); and James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia, SC, 1997), esp. 60–65. See, too, the long, thoughtful discussion of the function of ridicule in H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany* (New Haven, CT, 2005), 118–42. Reprinted in *Common Sense* (no. 16 [May 21, 1737]) is a letter, originally addressed to *The Daily Gazetteer* of May 7, 1737, in which the author supports the idea (attributed here to Pierre Bayle rather than Shaftesbury) that “Ridicule is a kind of Fiery Trial, by which Truth is most certainly discovered from Imposture.”

<sup>86</sup> *Common Sense*, no. 1 (February 5, 1737).

enough to generate sufficient sales.<sup>87</sup> And even though *Common Sense* was quite clearly aimed specifically at the gentry and “honest well meaning People of a middle Rank,” and even though the paper was in the business of supplying these classes with opinions, the central value announced in the journal’s title aided its authors’ efforts to suggest the contrary<sup>88</sup>—that is, the claim that they were really articulating the otherwise inaudible “sense of the people” as a whole or even the mythic vox populi.<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, the cynical and nascent “protesting” populism of the journal not only helped the Opposition to make a case against the ministerial party’s comparative disregard for the public welfare.<sup>90</sup> It also led the paper’s editors to portray the extra-Parliamentary nation as an alternative source of legitimacy, with a right to challenge the actions of its representatives, as long as it did so in support of the moral and commonsensical, which was to say Opposition, cause. Combing through *Common Sense*, one is struck by occasionally radical claims as to the authority of the public, and its sense, in the political arena. Significantly, the question of expanding the franchise or democratization does not emerge. The point is primarily one of principle. One

<sup>87</sup> C. John Sommerville, *The News Revolution in England: The Cultural Dynamics of Daily Information* (New York, 1996), 155.

<sup>88</sup> “To Mr. Common Sense,” *Common Sense*, no. 16 (March 22, 1740), reprinted in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 10 (March 1740): 132. As Benjamin Norton Defoe’s *A New English Dictionary* of 1737 makes clear, “common” continued to hold the double meaning of “that which belongs to all alike” and “ordinary.”

<sup>89</sup> On the trope of the “sense of the people” or the “sense of the nation,” see J. A. W. Gunn, “Court Whiggery—Justifying Innovation,” in Schochet, *Politics, Politeness and Patriotism*, 125–56; and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995). As Gunn points out, this trope (rather than opinion, with its longstanding suggestions of variability and divisibility) was employed by both Court and Country in this period; but there was substantial disagreement about how it should be determined and how much impact it should have, and for strategic reasons the Opposition frequently took a more populist stance. On the much longer idea of a vox populi, see George Boas, *Vox Populi: Essays in the History of an Idea* (Baltimore, 1969).

<sup>90</sup> The term “protesting” populism is borrowed from Pierre-André Taguieff, (*L’illusion populiste: De l’archaïque au médiatique* [Paris, 2002]), who uses it to distinguish the kind of populism discussed above, with its characteristic critique of the illegitimacy of elites and their “plots,” calls for greater democratization, and exaltation of the instinctive wisdom of the people, from a later, more xenophobic “identity” populism. Among other works that try to provide a catalog of the chief features of populism as a political style that crosses various ideologies and eras, see G. Ionescu and Ernst Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meanings and Natural Characteristics* (London, 1969); Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York, 1981), and “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2–16; and Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, 2000). The focus in this literature is obviously on more recent examples, but I am claiming that we can see the roots of modern political populism in early eighteenth-century England.

contributor asks rhetorically, “If the electors of England should declare to you [the Parliament], you shall not make laws for us, we will do it ourselves: will any man say they may not do it?”<sup>91</sup> On another occasion, a quote appears from the Leveler Richard Overton’s *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens* (1646) to the effect that “we [the people] are principals, and you [the men of Parliament] our agents.”<sup>92</sup> The message here is that the people, rather than having abrogated all their power to their representatives, retained the ability to make judgments, and even occasionally to act upon them, when their collective common sense was, by those elected to represent them, sufficiently affronted. In fact, with its firm roots in the real, commonsensical world, the judgment of ordinary people, and even women, was often superior to that of the people’s social and intellectual betters. Here was an old theme in the literature celebrating common sense—the defense of the people, based on their natural instinct for knowing and saying what’s what—turned toward newly political ends.<sup>93</sup> As the editor of *Common Sense* put it in one of many discussions of British policy toward Spain, using a classic “common sense” example: “A Parliament may vote, that black is white. It may be so; but black will be black still, in Spite of all the Votes in the World. . . . [The great Assembly of the Nation] will not give a Sanction to Madness and Folly.”<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> *Common Sense*, no. 142 (October 20, 1739). This statement is briefly discussed in H. T. Dickinson, “Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole,” in *Britain in the Age of Walpole*, ed. Jeremy Black (London, 1984): 57.

<sup>92</sup> *Common Sense*, no. 141 (October 13, 1739), quoted in M. M. Goldsmith, “Faction Detected: Ideological Consequences of Robert Walpole’s Decline and Fall,” *History* 64 (1979): 7.

<sup>93</sup> The editors of *Common Sense*, in between laying out “certain plain Rules of Common Sense, which I strictly charge and require all Persons to observe” regarding proper comportment dependent on gender, age, rank, and station in life (no. 4 [February 26, 1737]), frequently throw out comments to the effect that whatever good sense is left in the nation is now to be found mainly among women (no. 58 [March 11, 1737]) or that “I have observed it [common sense] in a Cobbler, and lamented the Neglect of it in a Statesman” (no. 33 [May 6, 1738]). The roots of such claims are everywhere evident in the late seventeenth century; see, for example, Thomas Rymer’s celebration of women over the learned in the judging of literature—“And certainly there is not requir’d much Learning, or that a man must be some Aristotle, and Doctor of Subtilties, to form a right judgment in this particular; common sense suffices; and rarely have I known the Women-judges mistake in these points, when they have the patience to think, and (left to their own heads) they decide with their own sense” (in *Tragedies of the Last Age*, 18)—or Thomas Sprat’s preference for the “language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits, or Scholars” (in *The History of the Royal-Society of London*, 113). It is the intent of such comments that draws my attention here.

<sup>94</sup> *Common Sense*, no. 108 (February 24, 1739), reprinted in Anon., *The National Dispute; or, the History of the Convention Treaty: Containing the Substance of All the Proceedings, Debates, Pamphlets, Journals, Daily, and other Papers, published both*



Finally, while this paper (like all its competitors) was busy attempting to politicize the consciousness of its London readers for financial and political gain, it could also use the notion of common sense to claim to be engaged in the project of restraining all kinds of political power. The editors could argue that they were protecting the public, through instruction, against government actions—or inactions—that were not in the collective interest.<sup>95</sup> *Common Sense* went so far as to take on the mantle of guardian of British liberty, trumpeting its freedom to proselytize in the name of common sense as a means to guard against all other forms of oppression, whether institutional or moral.

The problem with this extravagant polemic was that it left the ministerial forces in a bind. Walpole paid journalists and bankrolled leading newspapers to counter what he saw as seditious and even treasonous propaganda. He also pushed the Theatrical Licensing Act of 1737 through Parliament, in part in response to the success of *Pasquin* (which, of course, only increased the sense of the potency of Fielding's critique).<sup>96</sup> But liberty of the press had become sacrosanct in Britain by the first half of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the Opposition papers, including *Common Sense*, were already eager to exploit any hint that the Court, in its lack of commitment to liberty, was interested in extending the licensing system or otherwise suppressing its foes simply for speaking too freely.<sup>97</sup> In between its attacks on everything from the

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*for and against the late Convention . . . Shewing the true Sense of the Nation, concerning the same* (London, 1739), 238), a pamphlet that claims to be impartial and simply dedicated to helping each reader make up his or her own mind.

<sup>95</sup> On newspapers' efforts to monitor the state on behalf of the nation as both cause and consequence of the widening political awareness among ordinary people in the first decades of the eighteenth century, see Wilson, *Sense of the People*, esp. 12, 31, 41–42.

<sup>96</sup> On the Licensing Act of 1737, which closed all theaters except those with royal patents and subjected all dramatic productions to government approval, see Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737*. For evidence of the growing sense of the political effects (if not intentions) of *Pasquin*, see the dream vision in *The Champion* (May 13, 1740), in which a contributor imagined coming across the corpse of Walpole, whose heart had been pierced by "a small Arrow or Dart, whose Mucro or Point was very sharp, and had been dip'd in Gall, and on the Feathers or Beard thereof, was wrote the Word, Pasquin" (quoted in Battestin, *Henry Fielding*, 199). However, as Liesenfeld makes clear, the Licensing Act was actually as much a response to changing political pressures as it was to developments on the theatrical front.

<sup>97</sup> Fielding, for example, contributed two pseudonymous essays to *Common Sense*, one a letter from "Pasquin" defending satire and protesting the Licensing Act (no. 16 [May 21, 1737]) and the other a letter from "Mum Budget" on the wisdom of silence at present (no. 67 [May 13, 1738]); both are reproduced in *New Essays by Henry Fielding*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Charlottesville, VA, 1989). See, too, the generic comments on *Common Sense* itself being "frequently persecuted for speaking too freely of Men in Power," in [Charles Lesley], *Mum: A Political Ballad for the Present Times* (Edinburgh, 1740), 4.



comportment of pretentious wives to the follies of Methodism, there was always space in *Common Sense* for an eloquent defense of freedom of expression and religion. Thus, beyond attempting to hinder distribution networks and putting other kinds of financial pressure on the journals of the Opposition, Walpole and his minions were left trying to ward off the effects of offensive words by putting forth alternative ones.<sup>98</sup> Common sense proved a special challenge.

As in so many such fights in earlier decades, the Whig Establishment set about responding in its own pamphlets, essays, verses, and newspapers, some established solely for the purpose of reversing *Common Sense*, and most heavily subsidized by the government. Apologists for the ministerial party sputtered with indignation in short-lived publications such as *The Nonsense of Common Sense*, as well as in the pages of the key government journals. Other London newspapers duly reported on this war over the appropriation and possession of common sense, more than happy to sell papers by stirring up or stoking controversies of this sort. The highly popular *Gentleman's Magazine*, in particular, chronicled all developments in the battle to stake a legitimate claim to the concept while simultaneously engaging in a particularly heated, satirical campaign of its own in a three-way fight against *London Magazine* and *Common Sense*.<sup>99</sup> The 1730s were, in retrospect, full of such trumped-up struggles over publications, authorship, and control of terms.

But in this instance, the frustration of the proministerial writers is especially palpable. At least at the level of language, the Opposition, and particularly *Common Sense* with its trademark rallying cry, seemed in the late 1730s to be winning the battle. Walpole's supporters clearly felt robbed.<sup>100</sup> As a commentator in *Gentleman's Magazine* put it in 1739, the upstart journal was to be dreaded precisely for its title, "behind which he [the author] has the Art of sheltering himself in perfect Security. He defeats his Enemies by calling them

<sup>98</sup> On newspapers in the age of Walpole, see Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1987); Robert Harris, *National Politics and the London Press in the 1740s* (Oxford, 1993); and, esp., Michael Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press* (London, 1987). For a specific example of government harassment, see the December 1737 issue of *Gentleman's Magazine*, which reprints a confiscated issue of *Old Common Sense* (no. 45 [December 10, 1737]) and describes the government's arrest of its printer under the heading "Of a Remarkable Tryal for a Libel."

<sup>99</sup> On Edward Cave's hugely popular *Gentleman's Magazine; or, Monthly Intelligencer*, which published abstracts from all the other leading London papers on topics ranging from instructions in gardening to "disputes in politics and learning," see C. Lennart Carlson, *The First Magazine: A History of the "Gentleman's Magazine"* (Providence, RI, 1938).

<sup>100</sup> According to J. M. Coetzee in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago, 1996), outrage on the part of writers generally stems from the "experience or premonition of being robbed of power," and particularly the power to apply names (3).

*Enemies of Common Sense*, and silences the strongest Objections and the clearest Reasonings, by assuring his Readers that *they are contrary to Common Sense*. I must confess . . . that I remember but two Instances of a Genius able to use a few Syllables to such great and so various Purposes.”<sup>101</sup>

No one writing on behalf of Walpole and the ministerial cause was about to declare common sense unimportant; part of the anger of the Court Whigs certainly stemmed from the fact that they too accepted the idea of common sense as both a method of ascertaining truth that involved stripping things down to their most basic, self-evident parts, much like what contemporary scientists called “analysis,” and an autonomous, legitimate epistemic authority. Additionally, no one wanted to debunk the idea that there was indeed a single English common sense, or *doxa*, that had only to be correctly identified as such and acted upon. True plurality was not an option. In the end, all commentators—no matter how partisan—were invested in maintaining a pose of neutrality or impartiality, of exclusive interest in truth and moral virtue and public-mindedness (in contrast to the self-interest of their opponents).<sup>102</sup> This was especially true of female polemicists, who ran an even greater risk of looking eager for personal gain or glory. Yet all proministerial writers, male or female, had still to find a way to combat the version of common sense promulgated by the cleverly named *Common Sense*. The problem had a practical dimension. It also had a metaphysical one, since it required grappling with some of the most perplexing questions left over from the religious and scientific battles of the past century, including how to account for variance and multiplicity of interpretations and how to arrive at clear, plain, incontrovertible truth even when subjects exceeded rational demonstration.

One basic strategy of counterattack was established early on in the skirmish by Lord Hervey, one of Walpole’s closest allies and most eloquent defenders, in his anonymous *A Letter to the Author of Common-Sense*, published in the spring of 1737. That was to approach the problem at the level of meaning—or, more precisely, sense. Hervey’s starting tack was to unmask common sense, as used by Lyttelton and Chesterfield and their associates, as an example of what Locke had famously called, in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, an “abuse of words.” With the stated aim “to shew the Publick how little your paper [*Common Sense*] deserv’d its Title,” Hervey downplayed questions of

<sup>101</sup> *Gentleman’s Magazine* 9 (March 1739): 112.

<sup>102</sup> Compare John Brewer’s brief comments in *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989), 228–30, on the appeal in this period of the idea of “universal knowledge” and “public knowledge” even among those dedicated to the most private, selective, and partial agendas. On the insistence on impartiality and national interest as hallmarks of partisan discourse and party culture in this era, see, too, Mark Knights’s interesting remarks in *Representation and Misrepresentation*.

policy and content and instead went after the newspaper's "dogmatical Manner" and faulty and deceitful use of terms, not least that of common sense itself.<sup>103</sup> Hervey's next step was then, like most of his allies in this partisan fight, to apply a dose of what the present-day political philosopher Jacques Rancière calls "language medicine."<sup>104</sup> Hervey tried to shift the balance of power by rectifying the meaning of the words in question, or, as we might say now, realigning signs and their referents. The phrase "common sense," it was agreed, needed first to be given back its former, or "true," signification, its common sense. It had to be shown, one critic observed, that the tag "What says Common Sense?" refers not to "the impudent impotent Libel, that so improperly, and immodestly, assumes that Name, but real Common Sense."<sup>105</sup> The remedy then depended on describing what had been passing as common sense as, in fact, its antithesis, relabeling, in Hervey's words, "your poor sickly Common-Sense" as, first, "Common-Place" and, finally, "Uncommon Nonsense."<sup>106</sup> When, six months later, another prominent supporter of Walpole (and Fielding's second cousin), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, began her own occasional essay journal solely to combat the writing of Lyttelton, Chesterfield, and their colleagues, she echoed this point, calling her journal *The Nonsense of Common Sense* to show up all the "vulgar Errors" that now went under the exalted name of common sense and restore to "these poor words" the meanings they had had just last Christmas.<sup>107</sup>

This approach had been tried before. Responses to the Opposition were, in the 1730s, full of charges of the "Misrepresentation of Persons and Things" and expositions of the effects of such abuses, including the confusing of public debate.<sup>108</sup> Readers were warned that disloyal writers

<sup>103</sup> [John Hervey, Baron Hervey of Ickworth], *A Letter to the Author of Common-Sense; or, The Englishman's Journal of Saturday, April 16* (London, 1737), 8, 27–28.

<sup>104</sup> Jacques Rancière, preface to *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, 1999), x.

<sup>105</sup> *The Country Correspondent. Being, a letter from a Country Gentleman to a Friend in Town. In Which is contained, a Short Reply to Mr. Common Sense, occasioned by his Paper of Saturday April 7, 1739*, no. 1 (London, 1739), 4.

<sup>106</sup> [Hervey], *A Letter*, 10.

<sup>107</sup> [Lady Mary Wortley Montagu], *The Nonsense of Common Sense* [nos. 1–9 (December 16, 1737–March 14, 1738)], ed. Robert Halsband (Evanston, IL, 1947), no. 2 (January 17, 1738), 7–8, and no. 1 (December 16, 1737), 1.

<sup>108</sup> *London Journal*, no. 784 (July 6, 1734). On the language politics of this era in England, see the brief remarks in Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property*, 309–11; and Ihalainen, *The Discourse on Political Pluralism*, 80–85. Both scholars draw attention to an ongoing Whig discourse about the Opposition's abuse of language; see, e.g., *The Universal Spectator*, no. 526, reprinted in *Gentlemen's Magazine* (January 1735); *The Old Whig*, no. 20 (July 24, 1735); and *London Journal*, esp. no. 750 (November 10, 1733), in which the problem of misleading words confusing what should be separate and dividing what should be united is the focus. But see, too, the similar charges of

were using “patriotism” to mean “opposition” and “opposition” to mean “faction” or “party” or “self-interest,” regularly turning the established significations of words topsy-turvy and against inherited sense. Commentators often fixed on the abuse of words as a way to explain both accidental and deliberate variance—and to discredit all alternatives to the status quo. The message here was that the fight in question could not be a rational disagreement between two equally well-meaning parties. It could not simply be a matter of politics. Rather, it was a misunderstanding or misconstruction stemming from the imprecise and malleable nature of words, or the deluded or dishonest use of them.<sup>109</sup> Ultimately, then, this was a problem that had to be combated on exactly that level in order to restore a unitary sense to common sense.

For many commentators, including Lady Montagu, the problem was not, however, exclusively one of language and sense. The reason for the mistaken conception of common sense at the core of the newspaper *Common Sense* lay with the spokesmen themselves—or the social context in which such sense had become common. Montagu took the approach that the Opposition’s error in explaining common sense derived also from the segment of the population whose sense was being described. Perhaps, she suggested, the problems of language in *Common Sense* simply stemmed from the fact that the editors meant “Sense of the common People,” as “they [the editors] appear possessed of the way of Thinking that used to be peculiar to the lowest of that Class.”<sup>110</sup> That could explain the indecency

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linguistic abuse leveled in the other direction by *The Craftsman*, no. 405 (April 6, 1734), and by *Common Sense*, no. 24 (July 26, 1737), and no. 86 (September 23, 1738), where Locke’s warnings about words as arbitrary signs are evoked as the prelude to an offer to provide “true” definitions “under the Patronage of Common Sense.” More generally, on the development of the idea of party conflict as a linguistic struggle that threatened common language, see Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 214–16 and 274–98.

<sup>109</sup> On the difference between misunderstanding or misconstruction and true disagreement, defined as “a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying,” see, again, Rancière, *Disagreement*, x. For Rancière, “what makes politics an object of scandal [then, as now, one might add] is that it is that activity which has the rationality of disagreement as its very own rationality” (xii). On the effects of similar ideas about language in France in the eighteenth century, see Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Politics of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA, 2001).

<sup>110</sup> [Montagu], *The Nonsense of Common Sense*, no. 7 (February 14, 1738), 30. She continues with the claim that recent issues of *Common Sense* seem to be “wrote by the very Inspiration of Gin, and calculated for the Amusement of all the blind Allies in and about Holborn, Fleet-Ditch, and the Seven Dials [all disreputable London neighbor-

and scurrility of the paper's wit or what was sometimes called the "low" style. The vulgarity of all that was truly common was a frequent theme among prominsty respondents, such as Thomas Newcomb, who insisted in his attack on the journal that "what'er is common we despise."<sup>111</sup>

Other commentators, though, took the opposite approach in sociological terms. The danger lay not in the editors' populism or appeal to a "Mob-Sense"; it was their desire to speak only for themselves and their private interests and passions. Writing as Marforio (Pasquin's traditional counterpart), another anonymous pamphleteer argued that it was a mistake to see Opposition journals, such as *Common Sense*, as speaking "the Sense, not only of the Heads of the Party, but of the People in general," as was frequently claimed. On the contrary, "no Man can be so weak as to think that a People of Good Sense, such as the English are, will ever be laughed into an Opposition to the Government."<sup>112</sup> Usually, the authors of *Common Sense* were exposed in the proministerial press as spokesmen for special interests or for factions that were only hiding behind the idea of common sense because of its connotations of impartial wisdom and popular sentiment. A contributor to the government's chief organ, *The Daily Gazetteer*, insisted that the editor of *Common Sense* was nothing more than an "Imposter that had set himself up as an Advocate for the People." In fact, he and his colleagues were a dangerous mixture of "Libertines, Atheists, Scotch Presbyterian Jacobites, Romish Priests and Irish Papists" in des-

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hoods]." Such comments echo William Pitt's earlier complaints in the *London Journal* that the sense that accords with the Whig-Patriot position is better described as "Mob-Sense" and that "the [real] Sense of the Nation hath already been shown to be with the Court, if by sense is understood the Opinions of those who have any Knowledge of Publick Affairs" ("Thoughts on the Independency and Wealth of the Parliament, and the Sense of the Nation," *London Journal*, no. 784 [July 6, 1734], 1). Indeed, Pitt elaborates a few weeks later: "The same People, encouraged by proper Authority, and having Reverend Divines and venerable Judges on their Side, would believe in Witches, as well as in Patriots, and attest the Story of Devils riding on Broomsticks through the Air, as strongly as they attest the Falsehoods which are retail'd to them every Week in the publick Papers" ("The Sense of the People further considered; and the Craftsman's Manner of Answering his Adversaries," *London Journal*, no. 787 [July 27, 1734], 1).

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Newcomb, *A Miscellaneous Collection of Original Poems, Consisting of Epistles, Translations, etc. Written chiefly on Political and Moral Subjects* (London, 1740), 34.

<sup>112</sup> Marforio [pseud.], *An Historical View of the Principles, Characters, Persons, etc. of the Political Writers of Great Britain*, ed. Robert Haig (London, 1740; repr. Los Angeles, 1958), 10, 23.

perate need of exposure and censure.<sup>113</sup> Others claimed the editors had even more petty drives; they were simply angry because they were not “in Place,” and this had led them to try to unsettle the regime with the backing of “disappointed Jacobites, mingled with wild Republicans.”<sup>114</sup> Most also blamed base concerns, the fact that the marketplace required down-on-their-luck authors to prostitute themselves by writing trash. As if accusing its journalistic opponents of being emissaries of the pope were not enough, *The Daily Gazetteer* continued with further guesses as to their true identities: “Fellows that have beggar’d themselves with their Debaucheries in their Youth, and are obliged to turn Hackney Writers to support themselves in their Age.”<sup>115</sup> Even Lady Montagu decried the fact that there was no money to be made on a “moral Paper,” that there existed at present what would later be called a kind of censorship of the market.<sup>116</sup> And if malice and greed and other passions and interests were not sufficient to generate mistaken ideas, the journalist’s last resort was to cry madness, that is, the inability on the part of Opposition writers to determine wherein true common sense lay.<sup>117</sup>

Clearly, these writers hoped that exposure of deceitful language and deceptive motives—the failure of sense and then of true commonality—would stem the popular advance of the Opposition. In case this tactic proved insufficient, proministerial hacks also peddled apocalyptic forecasts of the political and moral outcome should Lyttelton’s, Fielding’s and other dissidents’ distorted vision of common sense prevail.<sup>118</sup> But, in truth,

<sup>113</sup> Letter to *The Daily Gazetteer*, no. 148 (March 25, 1740); reprinted in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 10 (March 1740): 133–34.

<sup>114</sup> *The Country Correspondent*, 11.

<sup>115</sup> Letter to *The Daily Gazetteer*, no. 148 (March 25, 1740); reprinted in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 10 (March 1740): 133–34.

<sup>116</sup> [Montagu], *The Nonsense of Common Sense*, no. 5 (January 17, 1738), 21. Opposition writers were assumed to be uniquely dependent on the market (writers for the government were generally paid regular pensions or salaries and, in the case of Hervey, could even be promoted to the peerage for their labors). This meant that Opposition writers could also be tarred for their material as well as for their political inspiration. But, in fact, this was always a false dichotomy; proministerial writers also often tried to tailor their writing to the market, on occasion switching sides for the commercial and patronage possibilities it afforded (as did Fielding), and Opposition writers often depended on wealthy patrons outside government or even on the Court buying their silence. On this subject, see J. A. Downie, “Walpole, ‘the Poet’s Foe,’” in Black, *Britain in the Age of Walpole*, 171–88.

<sup>117</sup> *The Country Correspondent*, 8.

<sup>118</sup> See, e.g., *A Dialogue on One Thousand Seven Hundred and Thirty-Eight: Together with a prophetic postscript as to one thousand seven hundred and thirty-nine* ([London, 1738], 6–7), whose anonymous author prophesied the disaster sure to befall England if the Opposition wits succeeded in their campaign: “Adieu then Virtue! Sense and Truth, good night! / . . . Religion soon to Scepticism shall yield, / Which op’ning



none of these counterarguments found much traction at the end of the 1730s. Disagreements about how common sense should be determined perpetuated divisiveness, to the benefit of an opposition that, on the surface, was only for liberty, unity, and the common good. When a two-volume collection of the first issues of *Common Sense* was printed in 1738–39, the printer smugly congratulated the people of England on the fact that “all the Wit and Good Sense should have appeared on the Side of Liberty” even though government writers had tried their best “to be arch and merry on the Side of Corruption.”<sup>119</sup> Even if the Opposition saw few concrete victories in Parliament during these years, public opinion seemed increasingly to be moving to its side, especially in the case of the nation’s policy toward Spain. For a jingoistic and “patriotic” press successfully inflamed readers to see the situation in life-or-death terms—to the extent that public protest eventually played a critical role in forcing war with Spain in October 1739, which, in turn, helped precipitate the fall of Walpole only a few years later.<sup>120</sup> Common sense had become a weapon in the development of an increasingly established extra-Parliamentary, protesting political culture.

The problem was so acute that an anonymous proministerial author felt compelled to publish, in the heat of the battle over Spanish depredations, a full-blown philosophical discourse entitled *Common Sense: Its Nature and Use. With the Manner of bringing all disputable Cases in Common Life, to a Trial and Final Dete[r]mination by it*, with a postscript that read almost as an afterthought: *Applied to the Spanish Affair*. The point of this tract was not only to unmask (one more time) the appeal to common sense put forth by the newspaper of that name as a deception and an affront to readers’ understanding, particularly where Spanish policy was concerned. It was also—more unusually—to explore “what Common Sense really is”

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to wild Wits their wish’d-for-Field, / Our ancient Constitution, sacred Laws, / And all that Wisdom’s Approbation draws, / Shall be wip’d out—and in their stead be writ / The worthy Whims of Wou’d-be-Statesman’s Wit” (quoted in Battestin, *Henry Fielding*, 248).

<sup>119</sup> “Printer to the Reader” (1738) in *Common Sense; or, The Englishman’s Journal. Being a Collection of Letters, Political, Humorous, and Moral, publish’d weekly under that title, for the first year*, 2 vols. (London, 1738–39), 1:vi.

<sup>120</sup> Edmund Burke famously declared this skirmish with Spain the first and only war of the century that began as a result of popular pressure. This claim has subsequently been disputed, but there is no doubt that popular political agitation grew around this issue in the late 1730s; see Dickinson, “Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole”; Nicholas Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), esp. 56–61; and Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 140–65.

so that those ignorantly and innocently led astray could begin to make “common use” of it.<sup>121</sup>

The author of this obscure pamphlet went on to offer one of the era’s most extensive definitions of this exalted principle. As he explained it,

[Common sense] is not only that by which we keep ourselves from falling into Fire and Water, and chuse [*sic*] a Piece of Bread to eat, rather than a Piece of Wood; but I also mean that general Perception or Sensation of Things which is common to all Men. That is the Perception of the Distinction between Wood and Bread, which makes it appear to one Man as it does to another, and here only it is that we can come at a true View of any Case. Particular Men may be biass’d or blinded by Interest, Passions, Appetites, or Humours, which often are opposite, and contradictory, and may be as various as there are Men, or Sets of Men, debating the Matter; but when the Case is refer’d to this General or Common Sense of the whole World, the Partialities of particular Mens [*sic*] Interests and Humours are not at all in the Question.<sup>122</sup>

In case this did not settle the matter, he tried again, later in the pamphlet, to define common sense more technically as “that passive Sensation or Perception, by which Things, and their Relation to one another appear to the Mind in their uncloath’d Simplicity, their natural Consonance or Dissonance, their Equality or Inequality, and true Distinctions.”<sup>123</sup> Some men might, in his example, like gentian in wine, some not; but all agree that its taste and color are very different from salt and sugar and that salt and sugar are different from each other. It is from this innate ability to make such distinctions, he insisted, that men, despite their various ratiocinations and opinions and despite their differences in behavior, speech,

<sup>121</sup> Anon., *Common Sense: Its Nature and Use. With the Manner of bringing all disputable Cases in Common Life, to a Trial and Final Dete[r]mination by it. Applied to the Spanish Affair* (London, 1738), 8; the second part of this pamphlet had previously been printed in the *The Daily Gazetteer* of November 21, 1737. The two parts of this pamphlet, in turn, occasioned a reply in which an Opposition writer accused the author of the controversial pamphlet of sinning against his much-vaunted common sense on the title page by calling “Spanish depredations” simply “the Spanish Affair” and offered his own common sense proverb: “If a Man does not wear a Lyon’s Skin, every Ass will piss upon him.” Mr. F-R-N, *A Letter Address’d to Every honest Man in Britain . . . With proper Remarks on a Pamphlet lately published for the Service of the Plunderers of the Subjects of Great Britain* (London, 1738), 3–4.

<sup>122</sup> Anon., *Common Sense: Its Nature and Use*, 8. One reason common sense is rarely defined, according to Guenancia and Sylvestre, the editors of *Le sens commun: Theories et pratiques*, is that it tends to be a reactive claim focused on perceived violations of its tenets in moments of perceived crisis. When all is going well, there is generally no need to spell out what constitutes common sense in a positive manner or what its essential ingredients are.

<sup>123</sup> Anon., *Common Sense: Its Nature and Use*, 19.

levels of education, and amounts of reading in civil law and politics, are ultimately able to “see Things in the same Manner.”<sup>124</sup>

This writer’s message, following closely on the moral lessons of *The Spectator* a few decades earlier, amounted to the claim that a failure to listen to and heed common sense judgments lay at the heart of most mistakes in human understanding. All men possessed this kind of basic sense. They had only to learn to ignore their passions and interests and remain unaffected by deceivers throwing dust in their eyes and telling them two different things were the same in order for problems in multiple realms to be effectively solved. But then, finally, the author of this tract articulated his own, obviously partial and partisan version of the “Sentence of universal Common Sense” regarding the highly contested “Spanish Affair.” How could he have done otherwise? Common sense had become, at once, an eighteenth-century cultural ideal dependent upon the idea of natural broad-based agreement about certain fundamental truths and a commonplace polemical tool in a bitterly fought political contest.

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Between 1700 and 1740, in other words, an odd kind of transformation had occurred with an ancient psychological category at its center. The process began in reaction to a perceived crisis of legitimacy in both epistemology and public life. Within a ruling class anxious for security and order, and yet also determined to insulate people from the pressure to conform ideologically lest such a move threaten the peace further, the notion of common sense had come to seem a baseline upon which a nonconflictual, even if not totally consensual, social and moral order could be erected. And sure enough, something like a general agreement about the value of common sense helped provide a foundation for the astonishing Whig oligarchy and elite social solidarity that grew up in England in the first few decades of the eighteenth century.

But so successful was this rhetorical invention that it simultaneously created just the opposite of what it promised: a mechanism for producing and even intensifying ideological strife within the context of this increasingly stable political order. Because it sounded objective and indisputable, because it drew on the power of the community as a whole, and, above all, because it had already become a widely accepted epistemic and moral authority, common sense turned out to be a formidable weapon of protest and dissent and a key element in the *de facto* creation of legitimate opposition. It effectively disguised the contest between multiple points of view that it actually helped to stoke. Moreover, public arguments over the

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

ownership and nature of common sense, at the same time as they reinforced its standing as an indisputable Establishment value, set the stage for a series of claims that would ultimately undermine other Establishment values. These claims included the position that the vox populi (even as defined by elites) could be an alternative source of legitimacy and the position that there is sometimes good sense in challenging the way things currently are.

This is precisely what occurred as the eighteenth century wore on. Let me conclude with two divergent examples. First, consider the so-called Common Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid and the group of Scottish Protestant intellectuals that clustered around him in Aberdeen in the 1750s and 1760s. The aim of these clerics and professors, who openly acknowledged their debt to Shaftesbury's writings half a century earlier, was to check what they saw as the great danger of the age: a philosophical skepticism (in this case, David Hume's) that left moral and epistemological truths seemingly up for grabs and, in Reid's words, threw "piety, patriotism, friendship, parental affection, and private virtue" all into doubt.<sup>125</sup> In the inward light of common sense, Reid and his fellow members of the Wise Club found a new starting point for the study of human nature. They claimed to have located a way to prove, with what they saw as irresistible certainty, the existence of a beneficent God from whom all moral principles emanated. But with the argument that in the realm of common sense "the Learned and the Unlearned, the Philosopher and the day labourer are upon a level," this essentially conservative philosophical movement also laid the groundwork for a communitarian theory of knowledge rooted in the value of the shared beliefs of ordinary people.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, Scottish Common Sense philosophy seemed to

<sup>125</sup> Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Timothy Duggan (Edinburgh, 1764; repr., Chicago, 1970), 95. On Reid's ideas, a good starting point is Terence Cuneo and René Van Woudenberg, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (Cambridge, 1984), esp. Nicholas Wolterstorff's essay, "Reid on Common Sense," 77–100. On the "Common Sense" school more generally, the classic work remains S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford, 1960). On the context for the development of this philosophical movement, see Stephen A. Conrad, *Citizenship and Common Sense: The Problem of Authority in the Social Background and Social Philosophy of the Wise Club of Aberdeen* (New York, 1987); Roger L. Emerson, *Professors, Patronage and Politics: The Aberdeen Universities in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1992); Peter J. Diamond, *Common Sense and Improvement: Thomas Reid as Social Theorist* (New York, 1998); and Jeffrey M. Suderman, *Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: George Campbell in the Eighteenth Century* (Montreal and Kingston, 2002).

<sup>126</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* [Edinburgh, 1785], in *The Works of Thomas Reid*, ed. Sir William Hamilton, 6th ed. (Bristol, 1994), 428. On this point, see also James Oswald, *An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion*,

legitimize appeals to the unschooled judgment, or even instinct, of the common man or woman against all forms of entrenched power and authority, including that of kings, clerics, lords, and thinkers of the past.

But then consider, conversely, the uses of *bon sens* made in a treatise of the same name by the baron d'Holbach, the wealthy Parisian philosophe and host, less than a decade after Reid. Holbach can hardly be termed a populist in the Scottish sense. His *bon sens*, with its explicit distance from any reference to the common, might have been a universal capacity, available even to the unschooled; but Holbach, like many of his contemporaries, deemed it poorly distributed, except among the sensible savages of eighteenth-century fiction and the unencumbered, enlightened few, such as himself. Given the "ignorance, credulity, negligence, and sottishness of the common people," as he put it, "neither general tradition nor the unanimous consent of all men could place any injunction upon truth."<sup>127</sup> Instead, Holbach, following a long tradition of Continental francophone radicals beginning with Shaftesbury's close contemporary and friend, the Huguenot refugee philosopher Pierre Bayle, found in this concept an extraordinarily subversive tool for challenging the status quo. This was especially true when it came to religious matters. For the baron de Lahontan, Nicolas Gueudeville, the marquis d'Argens, and other Frenchmen writing in intellectual or personal exile in Holland in the first half of the eighteenth century, *bon sens*—understood less as the ability to grasp commonly agreed-upon principles than to recognize what in current thinking is contradictory, hypocritical, or absurd—had become a rallying cry for radical deism and sexual libertinism.<sup>128</sup> Finally, in the hands of Holbach and his small

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2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1766–1772); and James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (Dublin, 1778). Central to Kant's subsequent critique of common sense philosophy was its "appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed, while the popular charlatan glories and boasts in it" (Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, ed. Lewis White Beck [Indianapolis, 1950], 7).

<sup>127</sup> [Paul Henri Thiry, baron d'Holbach], *Le bon sens, ou Idées naturelles opposées aux idées surnaturelles* (London [Amsterdam], 1772), chap. 104. On Holbach's epistemology and, specifically, his choice to argue from *bon sens*, see Alain Sandrier, *Le style philosophique du baron d'Holbach: Conditions et contraintes du prosélytisme athée en France dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 2004). On the social and cultural context in which Holbach's atheism developed, see Alan Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton, NJ, 1976).

<sup>128</sup> On this cultural and intellectual milieu, see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001), esp. chap. 31, "French Refugee Deists in Exile"; see also Pierre Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jesus-Christ, Contrain-les d'entrer*, in *Oeuvres diverses* (The Hague, 1727); Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce, baron de Lahontan, *Dialogues curieux entre l'auteur et un sauvage de bon sens qui a voyagé*, in *Suite de voyage de*

circle of literary friends who gathered in his Parisian salon or who helped spirit his copious works to the Protestant north for publication in the 1760s and early 1770s, good or common sense proved useful in proselytizing the French public in support of extreme materialism, atheism, and a purely secular moral code. Even enlightened deists were dismayed. In the radical Continental Enlightenment, common sense came to stand for a technique of revealing biases, prejudices, common pieties, and parochialisms for what they were. It also implied a commitment to doing so in terms that were, as the commentator Louis de Bachaumont put it regarding Holbach's *Le bon sens* of 1772, "within the understanding of everyone: women, children, and the most ignorant and stupid people; and for this reason it is to be feared. . . . It will proselytize many and will be more dangerous than learned treatises on the same subject."<sup>129</sup> In retrospect, the development of a plainspoken, common sense defense of popular political participation, or democracy, was a logical, even if totally unanticipated, next step.

Sure enough, in 1776, in the revolutionary tracts of the ex-corset-maker and immigrant Quaker polemicist Thomas Paine, these dual strands of common sense thinking—conservative but collective, individualist and elite but ideologically radical—came together to novel effect. Paine's great accomplishment in his sensational pamphlet *Common Sense* was not only to force a change in public opinion about the question of American independence. It was also to forge a lasting link between common sense, in all its complexity, and democratic-republican governing. First, this newcomer to American shores painted himself as one of the crowd, a man capable of articulating Americans' common experiences and point of view in the commonest and simplest of terms. This might be called basic populism. But then, Paine turned around and, again relying on common sense as both rationale and name for his sensibility, challenged every one of the basic assumptions and habits of thought governing colonial political life, calling upon the average man to "enlarge his views upon the present day" and to see how he had consented in his own oppression by perpetuating what were only parochial prejudices and prepossessions.<sup>130</sup> His supporters and challengers alike would henceforth do

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*l'Amérique* (The Hague, 1703 [see also the 2nd ed., published in The Hague in 1705 and revised by the ex-monk and libertine Nicolas Gueudeville]); and Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, *La philosophie du bon sens, ou Réflexions philosophiques sur l'incertitude des connaissances humaines, à l'usage des cavaliers et du beau sexe* (London [The Hague], 1737).

<sup>129</sup> [Louis Petit de Bachaumont], *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France, depuis MDCCLXII jusqu'à nos jours*, 36 vols. (London, 1783–88), 6:218 (November 3, 1772).

<sup>130</sup> [Thomas Paine], *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America*



the same, while simultaneously insisting on the “plain truth” and self-evidence of everything that they had to say. The same pattern would hold a decade and a half later, when revolution broke out in France, too. Advocates as well as opponents found in good or common sense a seemingly impartial, popular, and communitarian form of authority that was to prove very useful in the establishment of a new kind of partisan and explicitly contentious political culture.

In other words, out of the peculiar tensions of England’s postrevolutionary experiment with liberalism, and out of subsequent and opposing enlightened philosophical trends, emerged an epistemic tool that, in the hands of Paine and other late eighteenth-century revolutionaries and even counterrevolutionaries in Philadelphia, London, Geneva, and Paris, became instrumental in the crafting of what we now know as democratic governance. As far back as the start of the eighteenth century, common sense offered the possibility of a modest, consensual common ground upon which public debate among “sensible” people could henceforth take place. This idea was to become critical to the redemptive face of democratic politics, which insists upon the wisdom of the unified popular voice in terms of both content and style. But soon thereafter, common sense also became a language through which protest against, and eventually the radical unmasking of, established values, including those most central to the culture of Old Regime Europe, could be effected. It turned into a means to stir up conflict while seeming to do the opposite, an antipolitical political instrument that would become central to the emergence of the pragmatic face of democracy, too.

And stealthily, in the process, the value of common sense became part of a new orthodoxy, or what we might call democratic common sense, to the degree that we now hardly notice the contradictory purposes to which this abstraction has lent its authority. For over the last two hundred years, common sense has been used within various democratic frameworks both to encourage a truly popular politics and to cover up the demagoguery of elites, to justify

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(Philadelphia, 1776; repr. New York, 1995), 21. On the circumstances that led to the writing of the pamphlet, see John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (New York, 1995), 83–137. Regarding both the ideas and the rhetoric of this text, including the function of common sense in it, there is a voluminous literature; see, esp., Bernard Bailyn, “The Most Uncommon Pamphlet of the Revolution: *Common Sense*” (1973), in *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York, 1990); Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (Oxford, 1976); David A. Wilson, *Paine and Cobbett: The Transatlantic Connection* (Kingston and Montreal, 1988), esp. 34–64; Edward Larkin, *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2005); and Louise Marcil-Lacoste, “Thomas Paine: Un sens commun révolutionnaire,” *Études françaises* 25, no. 203 (1989): 55–68.

universalizing human-rights initiatives and to maintain an exclusionary status quo, to foster outsider challenges to dominant norms and to suppress unpopular points of view in favor of whatever counts as the unspoken consensus position. It is difficult to say whether Arendt was more right or wrong in asserting the ultimate worth of common sense to both the construction and the maintenance of a healthy, pluralistic democracy. What is clear from the present account is only that our full understanding of the development of modern democracy requires seeing its relationship to common sense as historically contingent and frequently paradoxical, not merely as commonsensical.