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Tom Paine's Common Sense and Ours

Sophia Rosenfeld

HOW was one to respond in early 1776 to Thomas Paine's startling new political pamphlet *Common Sense*? Most commentators weighed Paine's political recommendations, exploring their feasibility, their morality, and their potential consequences. Many contemporaries also speculated about the then-unknown author's personal qualities. His origins, personality, and motives, his associates, and even the sources of his style of expression all became grounds for praise or derision. And more than a few writers found themselves, albeit largely for rhetorical effect, taking up a question of epistemology and asking in what way, precisely, Paine's ideas amounted to "common sense." As the author of one hostile response, *The True Merits of a Late Treatise*, pointed out, it was not even clear whether the bard of common sense had meant to imply with this phrase "that his Opinion is the Common Sense of all *America*, or that all those who do not think with him are destitute of Common Sense." Had Paine, in other words, evoked in his own defense a set of commonplace, collectively held assumptions, the quotidian wisdom of a preexisting community of everyday people (in this case, Americans)? Or had he referred to a basic human faculty that allowed individuals to make elemental judgments about ordinary matters in the first place, judgments that sometimes aligned themselves with conventional wisdom but just as often did not?¹

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¹ *The True Merits of a Late Treatise, printed in America, Intituled, Common Sense, Clearly pointed out. Addressed to the Inhabitants of America. By a late Member of the Continental Congress, a Native of a Republican State* (London, 1776), 2. Thomas Randolph Adams attributes this pamphlet to Henry Middleton of South Carolina. See Adams, *The American Controversy: A Bibliographical Study of the British Pamphlets*

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Either way, according to the anonymous author of *The True Merits of a Late Treatise*, Paine was entirely mistaken in his claim of representativeness; *Common Sense* did not live up to its name no matter how one interpreted it. Yet the angry writer of this inflammatory response was also clearly onto something about Paine's working methods. With hindsight, we can now see that the success of Paine's brief polemic lay in good measure in his potentially paradoxical suggestion that the political theory laid out in *Common Sense* encapsulated both meanings of this then-fashionable phrase at once. At the opening of what would soon become the American Revolution, Paine found a way to make compatible within one text two previously distinct and in many ways antithetical Enlightenment uses of both the expression and the concept of common sense. In the process he certainly proved his ability as a writer of effective propaganda. But more to the point, Paine's efforts to employ common sense as a key form of evidence in the realm of political decision making also mark a crucial moment in the history of the conceptualization and usage of the idea itself. As critics such as the "late Member of the Continental Congress" who wrote *The True Merits of a Late Treatise* understood, Paine had somehow managed to link a loosely defined and mundane but increasingly valued standard of truth to a revolutionary form of politics. From our vantage point, understanding the sources and consequences of Paine's achievement constitutes a first step toward constructing something unexpected: a political history of common sense.

Common sense is not generally considered a historical artifact of any kind. Quite the opposite: in modern parlance, it refers to a special realm of perception and judgment that seems to exist outside history or any contingency, including politics.² To conjure up common sense is to indicate that something is self-evidently true, that it requires no further reflection or analysis on anyone's part. Its conclusions barely need to be stated as such, except possibly with a preceding "of course." Moreover these conclusions are understood to be so readily apparent (at least to all sensible people) that they hold across manifold divisions in the social fabric and across the vagaries of time and locale.

about the American Disputes, 1764–1783 (Providence, R.I., 1980), 1: 416. A. Owen Aldridge quotes this same passage from *The True Merits of a Late Treatise*, which he believes to be the work of another South Carolinian, John Rutledge, to make the case for Thomas Paine's common sense as an example of the latter of the two kinds of common sense that I lay out in this paragraph. See Aldridge, *Thomas Paine's American Ideology* (Newark, Del., 1984), 206. I want instead to stress how Paine works to equate his claims with both kinds of common sense at once, even if these two positions can seem antithetical.

² For a contemporary statement of this position, see Nicholas Rescher, *Common-Sense: A New Look at an Old Philosophical Tradition* (Milwaukee, Wis., 2005).

And yet, despite what the phrase suggests about its own transhistoricity, universality, and even banality, the construct we have come to know today as common sense has a specific history and a tumultuous one at that. As anthropologists and historians of mentalities have frequently pointed out, most assumptions deemed self-evident by their propagators turn out, on inspection, to be highly culturally specific. This list includes the idea of common sense itself. In fact the history of common sense—as a cognitive faculty, as a set of basic ideas, even as a rhetorical form—has been interwoven with politics at every turn. Its rise as an important epistemic authority began in the context not only of the decline of Aristotelian understandings of sense perception (including the synthetic work of the *sensus communis*) but also of the crisis in traditional forms of legitimation characteristic of late-seventeenth-century European religious and political life.³ From this moment onward, common sense, with its foundations in the basic mental abilities of common people, functioned alternately to bolster or to supersede more conventional sources of legitimation or evidence, including the Bible, law, history, custom, reason, and scholastic logic. Eventually, it became closely bound to the revolutionary democratic movements that began on both sides of the Atlantic in the second half of the eighteenth century. If its ascendance has not been fully noticed, it is only because common sense, during the last three hundred years, has grown so ubiquitous as a reference point, and so absolute in its pretensions to authority, that deference to it now sounds, frankly, commonsensical.

This situation is what brings the focus back to Paine. To break through the current commonsense understanding of common sense, the

³ The key text for anthropologists and historians of *mentalité* is Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," *Antioch Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 5–26, repr. in Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), 73–93. I borrow the phrase "epistemic authority" from Don Herzog, who explores the question of "what sorts of epistemic norms ought to enjoy the stamp of communal authority" in nineteenth-century Britain. See Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), 532. For a theoretical account of how social crises throw commonsense practices or assumptions into question, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1977). As Bourdieu points out, only in moments of crisis does one typically feel compelled to defend the existing common sense, or *doxa*, against its enemies or to elaborate claims for a new common sense and what it might entail. Either way one is simultaneously also compelled to recognize that the position being defended is, in fact, neither natural nor universally accepted. There is an extensive literature on the crisis in standards for truth that occurred in the seventeenth century. See Paul Hazard's classic *La crise de la conscience européenne (1680–1715)*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1935), as well as more recent works ranging from Henry G. van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630–1690* (The Hague, 1963), to Brendan Dooley, *The Social History of Skepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture* (Baltimore, 1999).

historian must take on the odd role of an idea's antagonist.⁴ He or she has not just to uncover the obscure traces of a frequently tacit historical common sense going back through the centuries. The historian also needs to reconsider one of the most famous turning points in the history of modern democratic culture: the appearance of a startling case for American independence and republican governance that harnessed itself directly to this idea. Any effort to historicize a reluctantly historical common sense eventually and inevitably has to come to terms with Paine's contribution in the form of *Common Sense*.

The basic story of this pamphlet is so well known that it hardly bears repeating. It has, during the last 230 or so years, become something of a historical cliché. In January 1776, nine months after the first skirmishes of the Revolutionary War, debate on the streets of the main colonial cities of North America was not yet focused on breaking free from the British. Fear, combined with residual loyalty and affection for the mother country, mostly ruled out this kind of thinking. But behind closed doors, and within radical circles such as those frequented by the bankrupt ex-staymaker and émigré known familiarly as Tom Paine, the conversation about independence had already begun. After arriving penniless in Philadelphia in late 1774, Paine had spent the better part of his first year in the New World writing essays for the *Pennsylvania Magazine* under such noms de plume as "Vox Populi" and "Justice, and Humanity"; hobnobbing with Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and other colonial radicals; and growing increasingly enraged at British responses to colonial discontent. Finally, with the backing of some of his influential new friends in Philadelphia, Paine began drafting a small pamphlet in which he set out to convert the large reading public in the colonies not only to the cause of independence but also to the even more extreme idea that a self-governed, unified America should be a republic without king or nobility. When the first edition of this revolutionary call to arms appeared on colonial bookstalls that January 1776, it came with a title suggestive of one of the immigrant author's chief forms of evidence. That, of course, was common sense.⁵

⁴ On the relationship between common sense and the social sciences, including history, see Frits van Holthoon and David R. Olson, eds., *Common Sense: The Foundations for Social Science* (Lanham, Md., 1987); Pierre Guenancia and Jean-Pierre Sylvestre, eds., *Le sens commun: Théories et pratiques* (Dijon, France, 2004).

⁵ On the circumstances of Paine's writing of *Common Sense* and its influence on the American Revolution, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); Bailyn, "The Most Uncommon Pamphlet of the Revolution: Common Sense," *American Heritage* 25, no. 1 (December 1973): 36–41, 91–93, repr. as Bailyn, "Thomas Paine: 'Prepare in Time an Asylum for Mankind,'" *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York, 1990), 67–84; Isaac Kramnick, introd. to Thomas Paine,

Paine's claim that his anonymous pamphlet had "the greatest sale that any performance ever had since the use of letters" may have been somewhat self-serving. But *Common Sense* was a publishing phenomenon even by modern standards, selling—Paine claimed—more than one hundred thousand copies in the first year alone. "Common Sense for eighteen pence" became one of the great sales pitches of the late eighteenth century. John Penn, a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, reported after a trip south in the spring of 1776 that he "heard nothing praised in the Course of his Journey, but Common sense and Independence. That this was the Cry, throughout Virginia."⁶

In effect Paine's success was twofold. By most accounts what Paine produced with his slim, cheaply printed pamphlet was an abrupt and massive shift in opinion up and down the Atlantic colonies. Soon after the appearance of *Common Sense*, according to standard histories, national

Common Sense (London, 1976), 7–59; Jack P. Greene, "Paine, America, and the Modernization of Political Consciousness," *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 73–92; Kramnick, "Tom Paine: Radical Democrat," *Democracy: A Journal of Political Renewal and Radical Change* 1, no. 1 (January 1981): 127–38, repr. in Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), 133–60; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 2005). In a less scholarly mode, see Scott Liell, *46 Pages: Thomas Paine, Common Sense, and the Turning Point to American Independence* (Philadelphia, 2003). See also the most recent Paine biographies, Jack Fruchtman Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (New York, 1994), 59–79; John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (Boston, 1995), 83–137.

⁶ Thomas Paine to Henry Laurens, Jan. 14, 1779, in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York, 1945), 2: 1160–65 ("greatest sale," 2: 1163); Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997), 33 ("eighteen pence"); John Adams to James Warren, Apr. 20, 1776, in Paul H. Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789* (Washington, D.C., 1976–79), 3: 558–60 ("heard nothing praised," 3: 558). For a reassessment of Paine's own claims about the phenomenal sales of his pamphlet, see Trish Loughran, "Virtual Nation: Local and National Cultures of Print in the Early United States" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000), 41–46. See also Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York, 2007). More than one hundred thousand copies is the standard figure, though Loughran argues that it is certainly too high and more likely a maximum of seventy-five thousand copies were printed and distributed, most of them in Philadelphia and other cities to the north (ibid.). Thomas P. Slaughter concurs with her new estimates in his introd. to *Common Sense and Related Writings by Thomas Paine* (Boston, 2001), 29–30. On the multiple editions and translations, see Richard Gimbel, *Thomas Paine: A Bibliographical Checklist of Common Sense with an Account of Its Publication* (New Haven, Conn., 1956); Loughran, "Virtual Nation," 67–70. A similar ambiguity about the nature of the enthusiasm for common sense—Is the writer referring to common sense the faculty? A particular set of tenets? Or the pamphlet of that name?—can be found in many written responses of the moment. Another example is Samuel Adams's contemporaneous comment "that Common Sense, prevails among the people." See Adams to Samuel Cooper, Apr. 30, 1776, in Harry Alonzo Cushing, ed., *The Writings of Samuel Adams* (New York, 1907), 3: 281–85 (quotation, 3: 282).

independence and republicanism came to seem not only viable but also essential, and did so to a public that ran the gamut from New England ministers to Philadelphia artisans and tradesmen. This change of heart then altered the direction of the struggle between Britain and its North American colonies, forcing the recently formed Continental Congress then meeting in Paine's adopted hometown of Philadelphia to move toward declaring independence the following summer. Thus Paine set the stage, or so the story generally goes, for a revolution that would produce an independent New World democracy to be called the United States of America.

This founding mythology has been partly cast in doubt of late by those skeptical about the effectiveness of the early American Republic of Letters in general, and Paine as author more specifically, in fostering what became the American Revolution. This article will, however, take up a second, if closely related, issue: the sources and consequences of Paine's decision to call on this invisible entity "common sense" as the rationale and name for the new political sensibility that he hoped to foster. Paine did not actually use the expression much in his pathbreaking pamphlet. He employed it only three times apart from the title, which was supplied, according to Rush, by the doctor himself, who had nixed Paine's own, more straightforward suggestion of "Plain Truth." It was, though, the ostensibly modest yet semantically slippery notion of common sense that lay at the heart of Paine's textual sleight of hand. It was also central to the pamphlet's reception. With a fashionable and multi-valent claim to common sense being on his side, Paine was able to transform himself from a marginal, foreign writer for hire into a legitimate spokesman for an amorphous American public. Then he was able to persuade a large number of his new compatriots that they actually desired something—a change in governance and a change in their own national identities—contrary to what they thought they wanted. Paine's combination of two seemingly antithetical enlightened uses of common sense made this miracle (as one contemporary commentator referred to the effects of Paine's pamphlet) possible.⁷ Indeed the fixing of a paradoxical

⁷ Trish Loughran concedes that *Common Sense* left in its wake "a temporary and uneven aura of consensus," but she doubts the agency of a single pamphlet, deeming the standard tale about this pamphlet part of an American mythology about the role of print in the early Republic that cannot be empirically verified. See Loughran, "Virtual Nation," 33. Edward Larkin is less skeptical about the effects of the pamphlet yet depicts Thomas Paine as a critic of the existing early American Republic of Letters as much as a beneficiary of it. See Larkin, *Paine and the Literature of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2005). In contrast Harvey J. Kaye insists on the transformative power of Paine's prose in political and social terms. See Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (New York, 2005). In a letter Benjamin Rush narrated the story of how he had met Paine at Robert Aitken's bookshop, persuaded Paine to

conception of common sense to a democratic vision of politics as authoritative cause and effect must be counted as one of Paine's chief legacies.

Common Sense thus demands to be treated as an event unto itself, a key intervention in the histories both of its chief form of evidence and, ultimately, of democracy as it was first formulated in the American context. The fascination lies in how they became intertwined. Two related questions are at the heart of this pursuit.

The first concerns origins. What was the genesis of the distinctively heterodox form of common sense on display in this colonial best seller? This query pulls the investigation back into the pluralistic culture of the Enlightenment, opening up a question whose answer should make the reader wary of any easy assumptions about the eighteenth century as the age of triumphant reason. Grappling with the multiple strands of commonsense thinking on display in *Common Sense* requires looking in two directions. Paine's investment in a particular kind of quasi-populist political argument can be partially illuminated by considering the parallels with a contemporaneous attempt on the part of a small group of Scottish thinkers to root a moral philosophy in a universal human attribute that they called common sense. But one also needs to look to the European continent to make out the links between Paine and an alternative attachment to something called *bon sens* (good sense) that could be employed precisely to shake up the ethical, religious, and even political status quo.

The second line of inquiry, then, is about the effects of this lineage. What were the consequences of Paine's insistence on the support of a multivalent common sense not only for his immediate cause but also for the new political culture that took root in this early stage of the age of revolutions? Or, more speculatively, how did Paine's use of this particular epistemic authority set the stage for the modern marriage between

write something that might change the "public mind" about American independence, and then, along with Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams, read the manuscript in draft form. As Rush told it, when it came time to settle on a title, "Mr. Paine proposed to call it 'Plain Truth.' I objected to it and suggested the title of 'Common Sense.' This was instantly adopted, and nothing now remained but to find a printer who had boldness enough to publish it." See Rush to James Cheetham, July 17, 1809, in L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton, N.J., 1951), 2: 1007–9 (quotations, 2: 1008). See also the similar, though not identical, account in George W. Corner, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His "Travels Through Life" together with his Commonplace Book for 1789–1813* (Princeton, N.J., 1948), 113–15. Plain truth can be distinguished from common sense in that the former simply indicates the author is telling things as they are, without embellishment or disguise; the latter, by contrast, has a more fluid meaning and carries potentially more philosophical weight. In the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, Feb. 6, 1776, a writer from Maryland claimed that Paine had "done wonders and worked miracles" with *Common Sense*. See Moses Coit Tyler, *The Literary History of the American Revolution, 1763–1783* (New York, 1966), 1: 472.

common sense and democracy in all its contradictions? This question pushes us forward into the political ferment of the revolutionary years and finally propels the discussion, at least theoretically, toward the present. What concerns us is the dualism that seems to have been—and remained—a constant in all conversations since the mid-eighteenth century about common sense and that has, by now, become largely invisible because it is so thoroughly embedded in what is sometimes called “democratic common sense.”⁸

Scholars do not often explore the intellectual roots of Thomas Paine’s take on common sense. Paine was not, after all, a man of deep learning, formal or otherwise, though he certainly picked up a lot in the way of current ideas in the newspapers and public houses of London and then Philadelphia. He always claimed, in keeping with his self-identification as the embodiment of common sense, to have read little before taking up a pen himself.⁹ Moreover common sense has always seemed in many

⁸ For the argument that political theorists must begin by recognizing the set of fundamental, implicit assumptions or “common sense convictions” held by citizens of modern democracies, see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 25–28 (quotation, 28); Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, 1993), esp. 14. Nicholas Tampio calls this Rawlsian category “democratic common sense” in Tampio, “Rawls and the Kantian Ethos,” *Polity* 39, no. 1 (January 2007): 79–102, esp. 87–89 (quotation, 88). The approach that I am suggesting has obvious parallels with what Ian Hacking calls “historical ontology” and Bruce Mazlish calls “philosophical history”; that is, the attempt to reconstruct historically specific answers to large philosophical questions about the nature of modern social forms and the seemingly ahistorical abstractions that govern them, including conceptions of knowledge and cognition. See Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Mazlish, *The Uncertain Sciences* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 10.

⁹ The work of Louise Marcil-Lacoste is unusual in its emphasis on the link between common sense and revolutionary thought. See Marcil-Lacoste, *Paine et Rousseau: Sens commun et révolution* (Montreal, Quebec, 1989); Marcil-Lacoste, “Thomas Paine: Un sens commun révolutionnaire,” *Études françaises* 25, no. 203 (Autumn 1989): 55–68. Thomas Paine’s self-professed lack of formal schooling or reading in political theory has not stopped a long battle over which books he may have read or which ideas he may have picked up in conversation in the years just preceding the publication of *Common Sense*. See for example Caroline Robbins, “The Lifelong Education of Thomas Paine (1737–1809): Some Reflections upon his Acquaintance among Books,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 127 (June 1983): 135–42. At the heart of this debate, not surprisingly given the focus of much American revolutionary historiography in recent decades, is the question of Paine’s relationship to John Locke, on the one hand, and classic republican theory and the Real Whig tradition, on the other. For examples of the Lockean argument, see Aldridge, *Thomas Paine’s American Ideology*, esp. 107–36; Larkin, *Paine and the Literature of Revolution*. On Paine’s debts to various republican traditions, in addition to classic works by Bernard Bailyn and Eric Foner (see footnote 5), see Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: The Social and Political Thought* (Boston, 1989); David Wootton, “Introduction: The Republican Tradition: From Commonwealth to Common Sense,” in *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649–1776*, ed. Wootton

ways a commonsensical reference point, one that transcends the need for research and analysis of the sort in which scholars are typically invested.

Even omitting Paine's own contribution, however, we might well note that the 1700s, and particularly the early 1770s, were one of the great ages of thinking about common sense and its meaning and function. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, this concept became a staple ingredient of polemical writing of all sorts. The formulaic evocation of "a reverence for our great Creator, principles of humanity, and the dictates of common sense" at the opening of *A Declaration By The Representatives of the United Colonies of North America*, published just six months before Paine's famous pamphlet, is typical in this regard. "Appealing to it [common sense] as an oracle when no rational justification for one's position can be advanced," noted German philosopher Immanuel Kant with annoyance a few years later, constituted "one of the subtile discoveries of modern times." Furthermore, alongside the decline of Aristotelian understandings of common sense as an internal sense responsible for synthesizing the other five senses, the meaning of the phrase had been expanding during the preceding one hundred years as well. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the English phrase "common sense" could be used to mean, at once, a basic ability to form clear perceptions and make elementary judgments about everyday matters; the conventional wisdom born of those common judgments and shared by all sensible people; and, in more limited cases, a social sense or sense of the public good derived from the experience of judging in common. A similar multiplicity of meanings had attached itself to common sense's cognates in French, Dutch, and German lands. And as dissatisfaction mounted from multiple quarters about an older culture of deductive logic and dispute as a means to sure knowledge, common sense was increasingly analyzed, explained, and championed as a modest yet potentially effective stopgap against the terrifying possibility that there was no single truth to be found and social conflict was the inevitable fate of humans. In advice manuals, newspapers, novels, religious tracts, and popular philosophy from central Europe to the New World, common sense was variously but repeatedly proposed in the eighteenth century as a foundation for rendering

(Stanford, Calif., 1994), 1–41, esp. 26–41. Wootton stresses Paine's connection to the utilitarianism of Cesare Beccaria and Joseph Priestley as well. It is worth noting that Paine's religious background and beliefs pose similar problems for recent interpreters of *Common Sense*. As for Paine's own position, he states in a note in *Rights of Man, Part Second*, "I saw an opportunity, in which I thought I could do some good, and I followed exactly what my heart dictated. I neither read books, nor studied other people's opinions." See Foner, *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1: 406 n. 29.

certain basic ideas—whatever they might be—widely accepted and secure.¹⁰

It is therefore possible to read Paine against the backdrop of concurrent commonsense discourses without insisting on the precise books that he owned or read. Some scholars have started down this path. Those few commentators who have chosen to explore Paine's recourse to the idea of common sense have tended to argue—generally out of a larger desire to separate Paine from Lockean liberalism in the now-exhausted fight over republicanism—that one hears strong echoes of the most famous contemporaneous discourse to draw on this idea, one that was all around him on both sides of the Atlantic in the mid- to late eighteenth century. That is the long strain of antiskeptical British thought that began with the 3d Earl of Shaftesbury and culminated, in precisely the era of the American Revolution, in the philosophical claims of Thomas Reid and

¹⁰ [John Dickinson], *A Declaration By The Representatives of the United Colonies of North America, Now Met In General Congress At Philadelphia, Setting forth the Causes and Necessity of their taking up Arms* (Philadelphia, 1775), 2 ("reverence for our great Creator"); Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge, 2001), 215 ("Appealing to it"). On the meaning and function of common sense in England in the first decades of the eighteenth century, see Sophia Rosenfeld, "Before Democracy: The Production and Uses of Common Sense," *Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 1 (March 2008): 1–54. The era's most important (though not most imitated) reinterpretation of the meaning of common sense was put forth in [Anthony Ashley Cooper], 3d Earl of Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour. In a Letter to a Friend* (London, 1709). There is a less-developed literature on the significance of common sense in non-Anglophone lands, though many equivalents for common sense were used in different European languages in the eighteenth century. See Helga Körver, "Common Sense: Die Entwicklung eines englischen Schlüsselwortes und seine Bedeutung für die englische Geistesgeschichte vornehmlich zur Zeit des Klassizismus und der Romantik" (Ph.D. diss., University of Bonn, Germany, 1967). Further examples of the celebration of common sense as a source of truth range from 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 Propositions . . . 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), to [Adrien-Quentin Buée], *Nouveau dictionnaire, pour servir à l'intelligence des termes mis en vogue par la Révolution; dédié aux amis de la religion, du roi et du sens commun* (Paris, 1792), in which common sense is exalted as a means to restore the status quo and end the revolutionary struggle. As the anonymous author (Herbert Lawrence) of *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense: An Historical Allegory* (London, 1769) noted, his main character, Common Sense, had only begun to find himself widely consulted and respected in recent times. I am currently engaged in a study of the meaning and effects of this recourse to common sense across the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

the other northeastern Scottish professors and ministers who made up the so-called Common Sense philosophical school.¹¹

All kinds of evidence, however selective and partial, can be marshaled to support the idea of Scottish Common Sense philosophy as the primary source for Paine's understanding of the concept. At the most literal, biographical level, it is worth noting that Paine, during the months he was engaged in writing his diatribe for the common sense of independence and republican governance, remained an employee of Robert Aitken, a bookseller and publisher of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Aitken was himself a recent arrival from Aberdeen, Scotland, the home of Reid and the other key members of the Wise Club, or Philosophical Society of Aberdeen, where the chief tenets of Common Sense philosophy had taken form. Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia physician and Presbyterian republican who nurtured Paine's project and subsequently took credit for the switch from "Plain Truth" to *Common Sense*, also spent formative years in Scotland undertaking medical training in Edinburgh, as well as in Paris and Philadelphia, and steeping himself in Scottish thought at that time. Rush's vested interest in the subject of common sense, and specifically in Reid's claims, prompted Rush, years later, to compose his own reflective essay titled simply "Thoughts on Common Sense" and to include the subject in his medical teachings.¹²

¹¹ For efforts to link Thomas Paine to Scottish moral sense and/or Common Sense philosophy, see for example Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (Cambridge, 1982), 103, 289 n. 27; Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, Calif., 1993), 45; Jack Fruchtman Jr., *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature* (Baltimore, 1993), 20–22, as well as the writings of Louise Marcil-Lacoste (see footnote 9). On the Common Sense school more generally, the classic work remains S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford, 1960). A more recent summary is Heiner F. Klemme, "Scepticism and Common Sense," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge, 2003), 117–35. For more contextualized accounts of this 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, Scotland, 1992); Peter J. Diamond, *Common Sense and Improvement: Thomas Reid as Social Theorist* (Frankfurt, Germany, 1998). On the influence of Scottish thought in America, especially Philadelphia, in the 1760s and 1770s, see Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J., 1990).

¹² See Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts on Common Sense," 1791, in Michael Meranze, ed., *Essays Literary, Moral and Philosophical* (Schenectady, N.Y., 1988), 146–50; Eric T. Carlson, Jeffrey L. Wollock, and Patricia S. Noel, eds., *Benjamin Rush's Lectures on the Mind* (Philadelphia, 1981), 515–22 ("Of Genius, Intuition, and Common Sense"), esp. 519–20, which is a condensation of the earlier essay. On Rush's relationships to Presbyterianism and dissenting politics as well as his education in Edinburgh and elsewhere, see Donald J. D'Elia, *Benjamin Rush: Philosopher*

But more generally, and without insisting on any specific chain of individual conduits or intellectual influences, one can identify several hallmarks of this extensive British commonsense philosophical and literary tradition within Paine's own text. The first reference to common sense in *Common Sense* opens chapter 3, "Thoughts on the Present State of the American Affairs," where the topic of the fate of the American colonies is first broached. "In the following pages," Paine states, "I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense."¹³

What did Paine mean? Common sense is here clearly intended to signify, following mid-eighteenth-century British usage, a basic, instinctive, immediate, and irrefutable form of perception and judgment natural to all humans. It also means the basic axioms derived from this universally shared human capacity. But more to the point, Paine's tripartite pairing suggests that common sense constituted, for Paine as for his Scottish contemporaries, a critical source of incontrovertible and self-evident knowledge; the best kind of evidence of all.

The commonsense faculty was, for Reid, the source of what he called—in an effort to combat the skepticism of David Hume and to keep the mind related to the external world—"certain principles . . . which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them." For Paine, as for Reid and his best-known popularizer, James Beattie, these principles were so surely true that they could not be refuted or even discussed without falling into absurdities and contradictions. Though judgment could be perverted by other forces, Reid and Beattie conceded, these precepts were unique in that they were equally impossible to prove and impossible to disbelieve. Beattie placed on this list elemental mathematical assumptions ("things equal to one and the same thing are equal to one another" and "a whole is greater than a part") and basic judgments about the world derived from ordinary sense experience ("the sun will rise today"). He also included core ontological assumptions ("there is a god" and "I exist") and even certain simply moral principles ("ingratitude ought to be punished").¹⁴ Because they were naturally perceived and

of the American Revolution, in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, new ser., 64, no. 5 (September 1974): 1–113; esp. 9–57; Meranze, introd. to *Essays Literary, Moral and Philosophical*, i–xxx. For a focus on Rush's early years, see David Freeman Hawke, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1971).

¹³ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (New York, 1995), 21 (quotation). This modern edition reproduces Paine, *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America*, 2d ed., printed in Philadelphia by Benjamin Towne for William Bradford in February 1776.

¹⁴ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park, Pa., 1997), 33 ("certain

reinforced in speech and action, such shared assumptions functioned as the building blocks for a kind of conventional wisdom that was often tacit or implied within a community. But in times of crisis, these primary truths could be brought to light as a bulwark against the social and moral failures of the modern world, such as those caused by (in Beattie's opinion) rampant commercialism, licentiousness, and irreligion. With this introductory reference to common sense, Paine clearly wanted to suggest that his basic perceptions and principles would operate in a similar fashion: as foundations on which to build shared and unassailable communal understandings, only in this case in a time of perceived political crisis.

In addition Paine's common sense, in conjunction with "simple facts" and "plain arguments," was intended to signal his commitment to a straightforward, unambiguous, even naked style of expression that was faithful to the elemental quality of these perceptions and the principles derived from them. Here, one could claim, was also a variant of Reid's attachment to the ordinary, everyday language in which common sense manifested itself as well as to the English "plain style" associated with the Royal Academy and with certain kinds of Protestant preaching in

principles"); James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth: In Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*, 8th ed. (London, [1853]), 56 ("things equal"), 19 ("there is a god"). Reid offers the following summary of the function of common sense in his conclusion to his 1764 treatise:

every operation of the senses, in its very nature, implies judgment or belief, as well as simple apprehension . . . They [such judgments and beliefs, including belief in our own existence, in the existence of material objects, and in the reliability of our faculties] serve to direct us in the common affairs of life, where our reasoning faculty would leave us in the dark. They are a part of our constitution, and all the discoveries of our reason are grounded upon them. They make up what is called *the common sense of mankind*; and what is manifestly contrary to any of those first principles, is what we call *absurd*.

See Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, 215. On Reid's ideas, a good starting point is Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (Cambridge, 2004), esp. Nicholas Wolterstorff's essay, "Reid on Common Sense," *ibid.*, 77–100. Reid's philosophy of the mind was expanded and popularized in subsequent works such as James Oswald, *An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion* (Edinburgh, 1766); Beattie, *An Essay On The Nature and Immutability of Truth* (Edinburgh, 1770); [Oswald], *An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion. Volume Second* (Edinburgh, 1772). See also the most important hostile refutation, Joseph Priestley, *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, Dr. Beattie's Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion* (London, 1774).

the previous century.¹⁵ Except in this instance, too, Paine was determined to apply one of common sense's chief qualities in support of a political platform rather than an abstract moral philosophy.

Indeed, as many previous commentators have demonstrated, it was this effort to present his political positions, no matter how unconventional and hyperbolic in reality, as simple in form, obvious in content, and consequently universal and indisputable in effect, that constituted the most distinctive aspect of Paine's pamphlet.¹⁶ In his defense Paine made no use of logical expositions or carefully reasoned arguments or even suggested that his opinions were open to debate. He equally avoided relying on specialized knowledge or references to history or political theory to justify his claims. Rather, in language that was by turns unadorned, satirical, prophetic, metaphoric, and violently indignant (though never scholarly or dryly logical), Paine crafted a polemical manifesto that presented itself as an exposition of that which was, or should have been, entirely self-evident to all based simply on their experiences in the world.

From the beginning Paine continually reminds his readers that the opinions on offer in *Common Sense* are nothing more than "plain truth" presented "in plain terms." Often the analogy is to Scripture, which, in his telling, is also "direct and positive . . . [and] admit[s] of no equivocal construction." Other times the example is "the simple voice of nature"

¹⁵ See, in addition to the discussion of language in Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* and Beattie's *Essay on Nature and Immutability* [1853] (in which he touts "a plainness and perspicuity of expression" [xxv]), the work of their close associate George Campbell, who developed the antirhetorical thrust of the new commonsense logic and rhetoric of the mid-eighteenth century. See Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London, 1776). On the emergence of "plain style" and the denigration of rhetoric in British (including Scottish) thought in this era, the classic work remains Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton, N.J., 1971). See also Adam Portkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994).

¹⁶ Among the many studies of Thomas Paine's distinctive logical and rhetorical style, see Evelyn J. Hinz, "The 'Reasonable' Style of Tom Paine," *Queen's Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 231–41; Bruce Woodcock, "Writing the Revolution: Aspects of Thomas Paine's Prose," *Prose Studies* 15, no. 2 (August 1992): 171–86; Robert A. Ferguson, "The Commonalities of *Common Sense*," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 57, no. 3 (July 2000): 465–504; Larkin, *Paine and the Literature of Revolution*, esp. 60–67, where Paine's style is helpfully contrasted with that of Benjamin Franklin. Olivia Smith has much of interest to say about the language of Paine's later *Rights of Man*. See Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford, 1984), 35–67. Jane Hodson insists on the distinction between what Paine says about language and the way he actually uses language. See Hodson, *Language and Revolution in Burke, Wollstonecraft, Paine, and Godwin* (Aldershot, Eng., 2007), 115–48. David A. Wilson also discusses the relevance of the plain style tradition for Paine. See Wilson, *Paine and Cobbett: The Transatlantic Connection* (Kingston, Ontario, 1988), esp. 20–29.

that indicates instinctively what is right, much as it does for Reid or Beattie.¹⁷ Again and again Paine denounces complexity in reasoning or expression as evidence of falsity or manipulation. In contrast simplicity and plainness are equated with indisputable truth.

Then, when it comes to argumentation, Paine turns his energy toward making his pamphlet a case study in the application of commonsense judgment and principles alike to current events. In the second half of the pamphlet, this strategy entails nothing more than insisting on the moral and financial benefits to be derived from his doctrine of national separation; common sense is primarily a form of sensibleness and prudence. But in the opening sections, Paine tries, by adage, injunction, prescriptive maxim, or concrete analogy with the natural, physical world, to turn political calculation into a matter of simply applying the precepts of common sense to social processes and power relationships. His goal is to introduce the first principles that make the need for separation from Britain and especially republican governance across the American expanse obvious and sure.

Many of the most famous lines in the pamphlet are designed to illuminate the political truths that can be derived from universally recognized elementary principles. Sometimes they are stated in the affirmative. "Youth is the seed-time of good habits," Paine notes casually, "as well in nations as in individuals." Or, in regard to the English Constitution, it is a "principle in nature, which no art can overturn, viz. that the more simple any thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered" and "the greater weight will always carry up the less." Yet equally, his dicta illustrate what, following nature, cannot be true for politics either without violating or upending a fundamental commonsense principle. On maintaining ties with Britain: "There is something absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island." Here the principle that small things should not rule bigger ones proves universal and irrefutable whether in nature or in social life; continents are necessarily bigger than islands, and larger things naturally govern smaller ones. Similarly, against hereditary monarchy, he remarks: "In point of right and good order, it is something very ridiculous, that a youth of twenty-one (which hath often happened) shall say to several millions of people, older and wiser than himself, I forbid this or that act of yours to be law." To argue the opposite or to assert anything contrary to such claims would, according to Paine, simply be "repugnant to . . . the universal order of things."¹⁸

¹⁷ Paine, *Common Sense* [1995], 8, 16, 14, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51, 4, 7, 31, 34, 30.

Here Paine sounds much like Beattie, who noted that it is impossible to say that “a man sees with the soles of his feet” or “a part is greater than a whole” precisely because to do so would be to contradict common sense. Throughout *Common Sense* all propositions contrary to that which Paine calls self-evident are labeled, if not ridiculous or absurd, unnatural, useless, childish, farcical, or a kind of folly. With these expressions of moral and epistemological indignation, Paine tries to obviate the need for further debate (“the period of debate is closed,” he notes at one point) or even further demonstration, though he is obviously also inviting counterresponses through the very act of publication. From the opening distinction between society and government to Paine’s numerous folksy adages, politics is here reduced to seeing things for what they are and naming them accordingly, or “know[ing], as we say, *white from black*, and *chalk from cheese* . . . and that *a mountain is bigger than a mole hill*,” as one earlier eighteenth-century English commentator on common sense put it.¹⁹ Paine may be offering one unsubstantiated opinion after another, but he frames them all, both rhetorically and conceptually, as obvious extensions of similarly indisputable and self-evident principles about size, quantity, power, or prudence.

Yet this approach is not all that seemingly links Paine to the mid-eighteenth-century epistemology of Aberdeen. Reid’s defense of what “every man understands by the principles of his nature,” including his claim that, in the realm of commonsense judgment, “the philosopher . . . has no prerogative above the illiterate, or even above the savage,” sets the stage, in Paine’s usage, for a kind of politics of class resentment as well. Following Reid and Beattie, tributes to the instinctive perceptions, unschooled logic, and plain style of what Reid called “plain sensible men” could be used against all those of elevated or privileged status whose actions and language no longer seemed governed by a recognizable common sense. This tactic was effectively appropriated by Paine. With his plebeian syntax and vocabulary redolent alternately of popular sermons and the popular press, his constant references to the elemental foundations of his ideas, and his strident disdain for both hierarchy and rhetoric (despite his own mastery of the latter), Paine introduces a modern kind of populism into the debate about the future of the American colonies. He repeatedly tries to distance himself from philosophers, aristocrats, clerics, and past thinkers by claiming that their obfuscating, pompous language displaces common sense (a subject he had already

¹⁹ Beattie, *Essay on Nature and Immutability* [1853], 24 (“man sees”); Paine, *Common Sense* [1995], 21 (“period of debate”); Nicholas Amhurst, “*Terra-filius*”; Or, *The Secret History of the University of Oxford, 1721; 1726*, ed. William E. Rivers (Newark, Del., 2004), 178 (“know[ing]”).

broached in an earlier article titled "Reflections on Titles" that he had written under the pseudonym "Vox Populi"). Then, with debatable sincerity, he paints himself, the Quaker English writer, not as an outsider but as one of the crowd. In his telling he is a man capable of seeing and articulating ordinary Americans' collective experience and point of view from within. This stance is a function less of geography than of a shared and mutually reinforcing class and epistemological position. His intended readers are people like himself, which is simply to say, all ordinary, clear-sighted colonists who, by virtue of experience rather than wealth or formal learning, can recognize truths that are universally accessible and already largely self-evident. In numerous ways, including his preference for the collective pronoun "we" (for example, "Wherefore; what is it that we want? Why is it that we hesitate?"), Paine suggests that it is his mission to speak simultaneously from and to this burgeoning popular commonsense community, linking it to independence and republicanism, the two causes of the day.²⁰

Indeed, though common sense did not yet belong to any one faction in the debate about Britain's relations with her colonies in January 1776, it had already acquired these antielitist connotations. Consider the two political pamphlets on the American problem that made substantial use

²⁰ Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, 1764, in William Hamilton, ed., *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 7th ed. (Edinburgh, 1872), 1: 117 ("every man understands"), 1: 112 ("plain sensible men"); Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 1785, *ibid.*, 1: 438 ("philosopher . . . has no prerogative"); Paine, *Common Sense* [1995], 50 ("Wherefore"). See also Reid's comments to the effect that, in the realm of common sense, "the learned and the unlearned, the philosopher and the day-labourer, are upon a level," though he qualifies this claim with the clause "when they are not misled by some bias, or taught to renounce their understanding from some mistaken religious principle" (Reid, *Essays on Intellectual Powers of Man*, 1: 438). Paine's populism is already on display in comments such as "When I reflect on the pompous titles bestowed on unworthy men, I feel an indignity that instructs me to despise the absurdity. The *Honorable* plunderer of his country, or the *Right Honorable* murderer of mankind, create such a contrast of ideas as exhibit a monster rather than a man . . . This sacrifice of common sense is the certain badge which distinguishes slavery from freedom." See Vox Populi [Paine], "Reflections on Titles," in Foner, *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2: 33. Paine's insider/outsider status is another source of current debate in the Paine literature. Trish Loughran suggests that Paine's outsider status was actually one of his great advantages; he saw North America as a distinct geographic unit and North Americans as a unified people because he was not bound by local loyalties like most other revolutionary polemicists. See Loughran, "Virtual Nation." Edward Larkin, in contrast and like many commentators before him, suggests that Paine's great achievement was to imagine and craft a nonexclusionary public sphere and to open up politics to people like himself, including artisans and middling sorts. See Larkin, *Paine and the Literature of Revolution*. I am sympathetic to this latter position, but I do not think class can be separated from epistemology insofar as Paine's inclusiveness depended as much on shared ways of seeing and talking about the world as it did on shared occupational status or financial worth.

of the idea prior to Paine. The unnamed author of the procolonist *A Defence of the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress* explicitly draws his argument from “common sense and experience” rather than a more highfalutin source. He then deems merchants, a “class of men distinguished for liberality both of sentiment and manners,” far better qualified to comment on public business than “the college clown and bigot.” This latter category includes “the lettered pensioner [Samuel Johnson, the author of *Taxation no Tyranny*], with the refined sentiment and language of his brother beef-eaters.” Once again it is the man of the world—and not the fancy pedant—who embodies the position and language of common sense, and this worldly common sense turns out to be uniquely suited to the realm of political decision making. The plain-spoken British merchant-conversationalist in Jonas Hanway’s pro-British *Common Sense: In Nine Conferences, between A British Merchant and A Candid Merchant of America* also insists that one can learn far more about the truth and coherence of things from the “useful knowledge” and “common sense” born of the “honest simplicity” of the hosier or the blacksmith than one possibly could from the “learned disputant” with “fine-spun reasonings,” “crooked pride,” and motives to misrepresentation. Moreover the commoner’s common sense, declares the merchant mouthpiece for the author, is not overmatched by taking on “the glory and interests of a mighty nation.”²¹

Common sense had, in sum, assumed consensual and potentially populist significance in philosophy as well as political rhetoric prior to the appearance of Paine’s pamphlet. It is but a short stretch to see Paine building on this set of associations, alongside his own experiences of British and American urban life, to establish a communitarian and democratic foundation for an as-yet-to-be-realized political culture. As Robert A. Ferguson aptly puts it, “The pamphlet celebrates an orchestrated solidarity of the right-minded in a new type of participatory republic” (which might explain why there is no mention of anything as divisive as voting or even differences of opinion).²² Paine uses an antiskeptical

²¹ Author of *Regulus, A Defence of the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress, in reply to Taxation No Tyranny . . . To which are added, General Remarks on the Leading Principles of that work . . . and A Short Chain of Deductions from One Clear Position of Common Sense and Experience* (London, [1775]), 8 (“common sense and experience”), 10 (“lettered pensioner”); Jonas Hanway, *Common Sense: In Nine Conferences, between A British Merchant and A Candid Merchant of America*, in their private capacities as friends; tracing the several causes of the present contests between the mother country and her American subjects . . . (London, 1775), 71 (“useful knowledge”). *Defence of the Resolutions* was written in response to [Samuel Johnson], *Taxation no Tyranny; An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress* (London, 1775).

²² Ferguson, *WMQ* 57: 472.

commonsense tradition of rhetoric and philosophy to help foster an imagined community of sensible, common (in class terms) people ready to establish a new kind of political order firmly grounded in their common (in the sense of universally shared) perceptions, judgments, and assumptions.

Yet there is something, as expected, very partial about this genealogy. It seems only to get at one aspect of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and indeed of common sense itself. What is so striking about this political pamphlet is ultimately how Paine manages to use such appeals to popular sentiment and popular language to argue against the dominant assumptions, or *doxa*, of his moment and place. At the end of the day, Thomas Reid and his fellow moderate Presbyterian academics and ministers evoked common sense as a potentially equalizing but essentially conservative device, a bulwark against a fashionable skepticism and perceived moral decline, much as the 3d Earl of Shaftesbury and then Joseph Addison had done at the start of the eighteenth century and liberal Anglican divines had done as far back as the seventeenth century. By and large common sense was employed to defend the legitimacy of views about right and wrong and true and false that were, among British elites, already widely accepted. In contrast, we see in Paine just the opposite: common sense used in the service of a radical, even iconoclastic agenda, with the author positioning himself as the forward-looking, antiestablishment agitator. Common sense became a weapon to be deployed against the sense that was, in the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world, actually common, whether in numerical or class terms.

The very first lines of *Common Sense* make this desire clear. The essay opens with a declaration that almost nothing the author has to say accords with reigning or customary opinion: "Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not *yet* sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of thinking a thing *wrong*, gives it a superficial appearance of being *right*, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom." Quickly it becomes evident that the purpose of commonsense thinking is, for Paine, precisely to cut through this fog of habit, convention, and "inattention" that normally passes for commonsense language and belief to reveal the naked reality beneath. The sentence that follows that first reference to "simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense" indicates that the reader is expected to employ his basic, innate sense of truth and goodness to shatter his own complacent, status quo assumptions. He is to "divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves" so as to "generously enlarge his views beyond the

present day.” The two subsequent references to common sense continue this theme. The case for independence must be examined “on the principles of nature and common sense” rather than according to habit, tradition, or the obfuscating rhetoric of those currently invested with authority. In the end, “common sense,” meaning the faculty rather than the set of basic assumptions typically resulting from the collective use of this faculty, “will tell us, that the power which hath endeavored to subdue us, is of all others, the most improper to defend us.”²³

Indeed the main body of the text, far from being an apology for the status quo or even a plan for reform, is a scathing and often satirical attack on that which Paine’s readers generally took for granted because of misplaced faith in the rightness of history and of language. He makes this case in the name of humans’ underused capacity for instinctively detecting error and duplicity either in actions or in the words used to describe them. With common sense as his ally, Paine upends many of the most basic assumptions, habits of thought, and even expressions governing colonial political life, including the intuitive understanding his readers had of themselves as British subjects. Key concepts, beginning with monarchy, are revealed as products of nothing more than tradition and fear. Vital words in the current conversation, such as “*mother country*,” turn out to be misnomers or empty terms, “jesuitically adopted” by the powerful as a means to bolster their authority and devoid of any meaning beyond their sound, especially when applied to the place known as England. Biblical stories are frequently turned on their head as Paine makes them mean the opposite of what they generally do. Even the idea of continuity is obliterated with a specious folksy analogy: “We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty.”²⁴ Under the rubric of common sense, Paine makes natural what had been almost unthinkable before and unnatural, even laughable, what had seemed obvious.

Paine’s common sense thus breaks company with that of the Scots in the most fundamental of ways. Like the Common Sense philosophers of Aberdeen, Paine clearly paints common sense as a universal faculty and true commonsense principles as outside the vicissitudes of history. For Paine, though, what goes by the name of common sense at any given moment is rarely transhistorical or universal in terms of its contents; the dictates of true common sense are only widely adopted, or even revealed over time, as mass prejudice, misinformation, and inequity recede. As he

²³ Paine, *Common Sense* [1995], [xxvii], 48, 21, 23.

²⁴ Ibid., 24 (“*mother country*”), 23 (“We may as well”). On Paine’s use of the Bible, see Slaughter, *Common Sense and Related Writings*, 35.

explains, what may “appear strange and difficult” at one moment becomes “familiar and agreeable” at another. Furthermore Paine’s common sense is ultimately rooted neither in mass behavior, nor in common usage, nor in general consent. For all his false modesty in promising “nothing more” than simple facts and for all his devotion to the pronoun “we,” Paine also positions himself as an individual at odds with the dominant political culture, and as a prophetic individual at that. Paine clearly sees what others cannot (yet) see. And he takes his job to be jolting his readers’ sense not only of space (in terms of relations with Britain) but also of time and progress. Rather than an end unto itself, shock is a device, a means of catapulting his readers and new countrymen out of the fog of prejudice and habit. For Paine seems to believe that once average Americans have been “expose[d]” to what Paine himself has already seen (including all the ways they have contributed to their own delusions and resulting oppression), they will be ready to go out and change the course of history in keeping with a new common sense. Or, as Paine puts it, “begin the world over again.”²⁵ In *Common Sense*, common sense also becomes an arm of revolution.

With Paine’s polemic, then, we see common sense function not only as a foundation for certain knowledge but also as a way to undermine what passes for unassailable fact in the present. We see common sense as the corollary of ordinary, commonplace language and simultaneously as a means to cut through the filter of words, especially those that serve to obfuscate or disguise reality. We see common sense as the voice of the people as a whole and as the voice of the clear-sighted, prophetic individual who intuitively grasps what the people should be able to grasp but cannot alone. And we see common sense mean not only what is common in the here and now but also what is antithetical to the common until some later moment in time.

Here, too, the historian can look for precedents to a long British tradition of radical politics, satirical literature, and Protestant dissent (as scholars certainly have done in the past). But Benjamin Rush, in his 1791 essay on common sense, turns readers’ attention in a wholly contrary—and unexpected—direction: toward the words of late-seventeenth-century French Protestant skeptic Pierre Bayle. In defense of his own debunking

²⁵ Paine, *Common Sense* [1995], 56, 21, 34, 65. On Paine’s approach to time, see Bernard Vincent, *The Transatlantic Republican: Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions* (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2005). For an exposition of Paine’s use of the language of commonality to disguise the fact that he has positioned himself as epistemologically outside the community he constructs, see Edward H. Davidson and William J. Scheick, “Authority in Paine’s *Common Sense* and *Crisis Papers*,” *Studies in the Humanities* 18, no. 2 (December 1991): 124–34. On Paine and shock, see Wilson, *Paine and Cobbett*, 55.

of common sense as generally no more than collective error, Rush writes: "Mankind are governed, says Mr. Bayle, by their prejudice, and not by their principles." Otherwise, Rush notes (with the American War of Independence firmly behind him), it is impossible to explain the variety of views that now pass for self-evident around the world, that, for example, "it is contrary to common sense to speak or write in favour of republicanism, in several European countries; and it is equally contrary to it to speak or write in favour of monarchy, in the United States of America." Or similarly, "The common sense of the planters in Jamaica, is in favour of the commerce and slavery of the Africans. In Pennsylvania, reason, humanity and common sense, have universally declared against them."²⁶ Only within some utopian state in which knowledge has been perfected and universalized will truth and common sense routinely coincide. For now he insists they are largely antithetical. Contrary to Reid's claims, muses the Pennsylvania doctor, those who will change history for the better, like Galileo or William Harvey, have no choice but to set themselves in opposition to the reigning notions of their time and place and to attempt, against the odds, to institute a different *doxa* in the future.

Again there is no concrete evidence that Paine, or even Rush, ever read Bayle's work, though Bayle was certainly well known to contemporary readers in Philadelphia as well as London and Edinburgh.²⁷ Clearly, too, Rush's understanding of common sense continued to evolve over the course of his political and medical career. But Rush's appropriation of Bayle brings to light the dualism that ran more generally through eighteenth-century discussions of common sense, especially since this dualism came to fruition at the same moment as Paine's revolutionary outburst. To this end it is worth noticing Rush's single reference to Bayle and considering an alternative path by which common sense worked its way into the nexus of epistemological and political change that underlay the transition to democracy in the northern Atlantic world. In this second schema, Bayle—the exiled Huguenot skeptic—assumes a larger role than Reid or his fellow philosophers and club members in Aberdeen.

²⁶ Rush, "Thoughts on Common Sense," in Meranze, *Essays Literary, Moral and Philosophical*, 150, 147.

²⁷ See for example *A Catalogue of the Books, Belonging to the Library Company of Philadelphia . . .* (Philadelphia, 1789), in which works by Pierre Bayle are listed alongside those of all the Scottish figures mentioned earlier. In fact Bayle's *Dictionnaire* is already mentioned as among the library's holdings in *Laws of the Library Company of Philadelphia. Made, in Pursuance of their Charter, at a General Meeting, held in the Library, on the Third Day of May, 1742* (Philadelphia, 1746).

For at the same time as one can point to continuities between a Scottish antiskeptical tradition and the commonsense reasoning and style of the young Paine, one can see other parallels by looking in a different direction. That is toward an almost antithetical (and considerably less cohesive) Continental Enlightenment trajectory that took the French cognate *bon sens*—literally, good sense—as a key concept. This style of philosophizing also saw its apogee in the 1770s.

Well before Paine's era, two dimensions of common sense came into conflict on the European continent: a common sense associated, whether as a process or as a set of results, with the customary knowledge of the collectivity, and a common sense linked to challenges to the status quo. On the one hand, custom, derived from common usage, continued well into the eighteenth century to hold sway as a source of precepts by which to operate in almost every realm. From inheritance to religion to language, those practices that had tacit but seemingly universal consent often enjoyed the full authority of the law. On the other hand, wherever one looks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and especially in France, one also sees suspicion of others and ultimately little faith in either the existence of common sentiments or their value. This suspicion was evident in proverbs, a notoriously disenchanted set of convictions. What many traditional French proverbs emphasize are all the places common sense is not found (which may tell us more about how these sayings were formed and transmitted than about anything else). The maxims of elites were also marked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by a strong cynicism about the existence of any widely agreed-on set of dictates commensurate with good sense. Consider the Duke of La Rochefoucauld's well-known maxim: "We seldom allow any Men to have good Sense, who are not of our own Opinion." Alongside official French and more generally European reverence for a shared, customary realm, one finds a long, parallel strand of distrust of all that is popular, habitual, or a product of supposed universal consent, especially in the search for certainty or sure truth.²⁸ One of the key weapons that the

²⁸ Duke of Rochefoucauld [sic], *Moral Maxims and Reflections. In IV Parts. Written in French by the Duke of Rochefoucauld. Now made in English*, 2d ed. (London, 1706), 150 (maxim no. 24, quotation). The original reads "Nous ne trouvons guère de gens de bon sens, que ceux qui sont de notre avis." See La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes, suivie des Réflexions diverses*, ed. Jacques Truchet, 5th ed. (1678; repr., Paris, 1967), 83 (maxim no. 347). On the uses and content of proverbs, see James Obelkevich, "Proverbs and Social History," in *The Social History of Language*, ed. Peter Burke and Roy Porter (Cambridge, 1987), 43–72. More specifically, see [Jean-Yves] Dournon, *Le dictionnaire des proverbes et dictons de France* (Paris, 1986). Among those traditionally assumed to lack common sense were the rich and mighty, savants with their heads in the clouds, the young, the crazy, and women. For a synthetic account of the negative valuation of popular opinion in early modern French

thinkers in this second tradition suggested for cutting through this fog of widely accepted prejudices and untruths was a concept called good sense.

The roots of the use of *bon sens* against *sens commun* (two concepts that were defined synonymously in early modern French dictionaries and often used interchangeably in practice, though the latter was actually less common) go back to the erudite skeptics of the early-seventeenth-century court, Pierre Charron and François de La Mothe Le Vayer in particular, and, in a more limited form, to René Descartes. For aristocratic La Mothe Le Vayer, the author of an essay called *Opuscule ou petit traité sceptique, sur cette commune façon de parler "n'avoir pas le sens-commun"* and a critic of all that went by the name common sense, "there are no opinions more assuredly false than the most universally believed."²⁹ The whole purpose of philosophy was to demystify collective prejudices that too great familiarity had erroneously imposed as unquestionable truths. Good sense was useful less for establishing new truths than for revealing and disassembling false ones. Good sense—in the sense of critical reason and derision—promised to aid the skeptics in their ultimate goal of holding up paradox, or propositions contrary to received opinion, to the *doxa*.

But it was in Bayle's Holland—or what Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens, called "the land of good sense and liberty" and the equally peripatetic Paine praised in *Common Sense* for its avoidance of monarchy and war—that the utilitarian function of *bon sens* really came to the fore. There, from the close of the seventeenth well into the eighteenth century, heterodox émigré thinkers, Catholic as well as Protestant in terms of their own origins, found a new use for the idea of *bon sens*.

thought, see J. A. W. Gunn, *Queen of the World: Opinion in the Public Life of France from the Renaissance to the Revolution* (Oxford, 1995), esp. 96–97. On a parallel strain of distrust of the *consensus gentium* in early Enlightenment thought, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford, 2006), esp. 71–85.

²⁹ François de La Mothe Le Vayer, *Opuscule ou petit traité sceptique, sur cette commune façon de parler "n'avoir pas le sens-commun,"* 1622, in *Oeuvres de François de La Mothe Le Vayer* (Paris, 1654), 2: 368 (quotation; all French translations in this article are my own). On this text, see also Sylvia Giocanti, "La perte du sens commun dans l'œuvre de La Mothe Le Vayer," in *Libertinage et philosophie au XVIIe siècle*, ed. Antony McKenna and Pierre-François Moreau (Saint-Étienne, France, 1996), 27–51. *Le bon sens* and *le sens commun* are defined identically as "the insight and reasonable intelligence with which any number of people are born" in P[ierre] Richelet, *Dictionnaire François, contenant les mots et les choses . . .* (Geneva, Switzerland, 1680), 2: 361. One hundred years later, Jean-François Féraud still gives these two phrases as synonyms of one another in Féraud, *Dictionnaire critique, de la langue française* (Marseilles, France, 1788), 3: 548.

They redefined the concept in practice to mean the capacity, common to all regardless of educational, economic, gender, and status differences, to recognize absurdities, contradictions, pretensions, and biases in what exists. And they used the idea of this capacity, subversively and often humorously, against the most entrenched commonplaces of the day, whether theological, metaphysical, moral (especially when it came to sexual behavior), or, eventually, political. For the Rotterdam Huguenot Bayle, no claim or text was too sacred or sure to be off limits for scrutiny. What mattered, he suggested (despite some disclaimers to the contrary) in his *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jesus-Christ, Contrain-les d'entrer*, was exposing what was “manifestly opposed to good sense, natural light, to the general principles of reason, in a word, to the primitive, original rule of the discernment of the true and the false, the good and the bad,” which was to say, “absurd,” in all forms of dogma and all products of common consent, whether sacred, scholarly, or popular. This move did not, then, as it would for Reid and his disciples fifty years later, represent an effort to turn the philosopher into a spokesman for the ordinary perceptions of ordinary people; to that extent, the influence of individual aristocratic iconoclasts such as La Mothe Le Vayer held. But from Bayle to Louis Armand, Baron de Lahontan, to the Marquis d'Argens, not to mention a host of unknown writers of unpublished clandestine manuscripts, the author operating at the margins of French culture became, in the course of the first half of the eighteenth century, an advocate for a new value. That value was the universal capacity to pierce through the prejudicial common sense of the day and the misleading language that corresponded to it.³⁰ The individual reader

³⁰ See Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens, *Mémoires de M. le Marquis d'Argens*, 2d ed. (London, 1737), 308 (“land of good sense”), as well as numerous similar comments about the *bon sens* of the Dutch in D'Argens, *Lettres juives, ou correspondance, philosophique, historique, et critique, entre un Juif voyageur à Paris et ses correspondans en divers endroits*, 6 vols. (The Hague, 1736–37); Pierre Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jesus-Christ, Contrain-les d'entrer*, in *Oeuvres diverses* (1686; repr., The Hague, 1727), 371 (“manifestly opposed”). Thomas Paine never explicitly links common sense with Holland, but he notes in *Common Sense* that “Holland, without a king, hath enjoyed more peace for the last century than any of the monarchical governments of Europe” (Paine, *Common Sense* [1995], 9). On Holland as a context for radical philosophizing in this era, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001). For examples of radical uses of *bon sens* among writers at work in Holland in the eighteenth century, see [Louis Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron de Lahontan], *Dialogues curieux entre l'auteur et un sauvage de bon sens qui a voyage, in Suite de voyage de l'Amérique* (The Hague, 1703), as well as the second edition (The Hague, 1705), heavily revised most likely by ex-monk and libertine Nicolas Gueudeville; [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* (The Hague, 1737); [Henri-Joseph DuLaurens], *L'Arrétin; ou, La débauche de*

was encouraged, often by means of the kind of humor generated by turning the status quo on its head, to become a quasi philosopher himself (or frequently herself), using this generic capacity for good sense to think, though not necessarily act, autonomously and against the grain.

At the start of the eighteenth century, humanist theologian François Fénelon had answered his own question—"What is common sense [*sens commun*]?"—by explaining it was that which, when proposed, results in laughter. Ask a four-year-old child, Fénelon demands, if the table in his room can walk by itself and if it can play like him; the child will begin laughing. Or ask an "uncivilized laborer" if the trees in his field are his friends or if his cows give him advice on domestic affairs. He will respond that you are mocking him because, says Fénelon, such impertinent questions constitute an affront even to the most ignorant farmer and the simplest child. They violate his common sense, that sense which "prevents all examination, which renders the examination of certain questions actually ridiculous, which determines that, despite oneself, one laughs instead of examining, which reduces man to being unable to doubt, no matter what effort he makes to put himself in a state of doubt," that sense "which reveals at first glance and which immediately discovers the evidence or absurdity of a question." It is this sense that, Fénelon continues, makes certain first notions, including the existence of God, obvious to all. Reid and Beattie (who were familiar with much French thought of this era) would not have substantially disagreed. But the Marquis d'Argens, in his best-selling *Philosophie du bon-sens*, comes close to saying that *bon sens* works in exactly the opposite way. Only the five basic senses are trustworthy. The boundaries between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, the acceptable and the unacceptable, fluctuate constantly. It is laughter that should keep us, philosophically, on our toes, unsure of anything that seems to be self-evidently true but that cannot be seen, including perhaps even God.³¹

l'esprit en fait de bon sens (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1772). These writers occupy very different positions from one another on matters of religion and metaphysics, but the idea of an intellectual genealogy is supported by the Marquis d'Argens, who collaborated with Frederick the Great in republishing Bayle's *Dictionnaire* in 1767 and who, in the introduction, called Bayle's celebrated text "the breviary of good sense" for the way that it helped form judgment that began from doubt. See Frederick II, King of Prussia, and the Marquis d'Argens, *Extrait du Dictionnaire historique et critique de Bayle, divisé en deux volumes avec un préface, nouvelle édition augmentée* (Berlin, 1767), iii.

³¹ [François de Salignac de La Mothe] Fénelon, *Traité de l'existence de Dieu*, ed. Jean-Louis Dumas (Paris, 1990), 114 (quotations). On the philosophical uses of laughter in the eighteenth century, and particularly its relationship to common sense, see Antoine de Baecque, *Les éclats du rire: La culture des rieurs au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2000).

Thus by the time Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, tried in an anonymous, clandestine account of the revelations of good sense, *Le Bon-sens, ou Idées naturelles opposées aux idées surnaturelles*, to reach a popular European audience with an attack on its most deep-seated values, including faith in the divine, the phrase had already become a radical buzzword with skeptical overtones, a potential corrective to the folly of human reason and pride. It had also become an obvious ideological weapon in the fight against established authority of all kinds. It did not matter that the Baron d'Holbach was actually using the concept to stand for a new kind of certainty. His treatises were correctly understood, by friend and foe alike, as essentially destructive and destabilizing in intent. In his pages, all that had been taken for granted, down to the very word used for the divine, was being undone and in a witty language accessible to all. As he explained his operating principle in another of his anonymously published tracts of this era, "the more a thing is absurd in the eyes of human reason, the more it is suited to divine reason or Religion." Even more than his predecessors who had made their lives (and not simply completed their schooling and published their works) in Holland, the Baron d'Holbach had revealed the polemical nature of any claim to speak for good sense, a value that was supposed to work against polemics and, by extension, conflict of any kind. As the Baron d'Holbach's most ardent critics pointed out—and now we are squarely back in the era of Paine—it was becoming ever harder to determine for certain, as the author of one counter-Holbachian screed put it despairingly, "which side is Good Sense on?"³²

The point, though, is not to choose one of these influential common-sense trajectories over the other. That would be a nearly impossible as well as futile task, in part because the two trajectories could easily be shown to be neither as intellectually coherent nor as separate from each other as they have been presented. Rather these two opposing sketches are offered as a way to highlight Thomas Paine's act of synthesis. The success of Paine as a polemicist can partly be attributed to his bringing together the individualist with the collective, and the conservative with

³² See [Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach], *Théologie portative, ou Dictionnaire abrégé de la religion chrétienne* (1767; repr., London, 1768), 44–45 ("more a thing," 45); *L'Anti-bon-sens ou l'auteur de l'ouvrage intitulé le bon-sens, convaincu d'outrager le bon-sens et la saine raison, à toutes les pages* (Liège, Belgium, 1779), xxxiv ("which side"). Most of the Baron d'Holbach's principal texts, including his *Le Bon-sens, ou Idées naturelles opposées aux idées surnaturelles* (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1772) and his earlier *Système de la nature; ou, Des loix du monde physique et du monde moral* (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1770), occasioned a good number of hostile responses, mainly from Catholic apologists, such as the anonymous author of *L'Anti-bon-sens*.

the subversive, strains of commonsense—or sometimes good sense (*bon sens*)—thinking and expression current in eighteenth-century Europe.³³ Paine managed simultaneously to embody the common sense of the everyman and to undercut that same sense, to present a case for popular sovereignty based on majority sentiment and to trumpet his own ability to see clearly what had not dawned on most other people, to speak in the people's name about their present-day grievances and then to lead the way to a better future that they had not anticipated. Here was British common sense, with its pseudopopulist consensualism, and a radical Continental *bon sens*, with its elite attack on the status of all presumed universal truths, melded into a polemical tour de force, an argument for a scarcely tested form of government.

And even as Paine's own reputation faltered, this doubleness on display in 1776 endured. *Common Sense*, in other words, had a demonstrable influence on the political history of common sense. Paine's paradoxical rhetoric helped foster two seemingly opposed, yet mutually reinforcing, aspects of the nascent democratic culture of the revolutionary age.

At least initially, Paine's rhetorical conceit of populist commonality and indisputability was strikingly successful in shaping early American political ideals as well as early American ways of talking about them. Whether Paine's little pamphlet actually changed minds overnight, it was certainly mythologized as such almost immediately by Paine himself (who quickly ceased to be anonymous and gave himself the patronymic Common Sense) and by sympathetic commentators both famous and obscure. Contemporary accounts are full of suggestions of sudden, mass conversion. Edmund Randolph of Virginia, for example, claimed "the public sentiment, which a few weeks before had shuddered at the tremendous obstacles with which independence was environed, overleaped every barrier [on the appearance of *Common Sense*]." George Washington, too, described the pamphlet as "working a powerful change there in the Minds of many Men." Here, literally, was evidence of a "revolution in men's minds," a dramatic transformation in people's way of thinking that was presumed to lead to parallel revolutions in the social and institutional spheres, so beloved by eighteenth-century theorists of historical progress.³⁴

³³ Robert A. Ferguson emphasizes the "conflict of alternatives" and the "manic-depressive quality" of Thomas Paine's claims. See Ferguson, *WMQ* 57: 468, 467. There is an important distinction here. I am interested less in highlighting Paine's oxymoronic claims than in the dualist structure of argumentation undergirding the whole text as a result of Paine's dependency on the notion of common sense.

³⁴ Edmund Randolph, *History of Virginia*, ed. Arthur H. Shaffer (Charlottesville, Va., 1970), 233–34 ("public sentiment"); George Washington to Joseph Reed, Apr. 1, 1776, in W. W. Abbot et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary Series*

But Paine did not always get credit for his foresight. Many early commentators suggested that the immigrant polemicist, rather than acting as a prophet or producer of miracles (the traditional opposite of common sense), had succeeded by conjuring up the resentments and longings that American colonists had simply not realized they already felt. Their residual prejudices just had to be vanquished for their true feelings to be revealed. Typical was the reaction of a Connecticut man: "In declaring your own, you have declared the sentiments of Millions: Your production may justly be compared to a land-flood that sweeps all before it. We were blind, but on reading these enlightening works the scales have fallen from our eyes."³⁵ A nationwide, antideferential, anti-historical, and ultimately democratic common sense was understood to be not only an effect but also a root cause of *Common Sense*.

The first historians of the revolutionary era, including Benjamin Rush's onetime student David Ramsay, replicated this heuristic device, eager to show that the American War of Independence, far from being a departure, was the result of continuity and consensus, the inevitable consequence of the values already shared by all Americans. "The new system was not so much forcibly imposed [in 1776] or designedly adopted, as introduced through necessity, and the imperceptible agency of a common danger, operating uniformly on the mind of the public," Ramsay explained. In Ramsay's hands, Paine's pamphlet was transformed into an instrument of this process: "In union with the feelings

(Charlottesville, Va., 1991), 4: 9–13 ("working a powerful change," 11). By the time of the appearance of the third edition of *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine's name was on the cover. Soon thereafter, in the sixteen articles that he published under the heading *The American Crisis*, Paine adopted "Common Sense" as his regular pen name, in effect identifying himself permanently not only with his pamphlet of early 1776 but also with the values contained therein. By the time the Revolution was well in progress, Paine was frequently referred to as "Old Common Sense." On Paine's publications under this pen name, see Keane, *Tom Paine*, 578–79 n. 45. On the tensions between universalizing anonymity and individuality in eighteenth-century pen names more generally, see Sophia Rosenfeld, "Citizens of Nowhere in Particular: Cosmopolitanism, Writing, and Political Engagement in Eighteenth-Century Europe," *National Identities* 4, no. 1 (March 2002): 25–43. On the importance of universal history, with its emphasis on revolutions in thought, to conceptualizations of 1776, see also Paine's own published 1782 letter to the Abbé Raynal: "Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used. We can look back on our own prejudices, as if they had been the prejudices of other people." See Foner, *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2: 211–63 (quotation, 2: 243). The Enlightenment idea of revolutions in human consciousness is discussed in Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 223–44.

³⁵ "To the Author of the Pamphlet entitled *Common Sense*," [New London] *Connecticut Gazette*, Mar. 22, 1776, [1].

and sentiments of the people, it [*Common Sense*] produced surprising effects." Almost all came to the side of independence with "surprising unanimity," and "the voice of the people," rather than a few ambitious politicians, forced the uprising's leaders to undertake a veritable revolution.³⁶

It was but a short step for early political leaders to start reproducing this description of their revolutionary political actions, beginning with the composition of the Declaration of Independence. According to Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration, far from being his own creation, was better perceived as "the common sense of the subject." In a famous letter to Henry Lee written many years later, Jefferson noted that the Declaration was intended to be simply "an expression of the American mind." Moreover, though the common sense of a broad, anonymous public was understood to be at the root of this democratic experiment, democracy was also celebrated, in theory and in practice, as an incubator of common sense in multiple realms. In the early Republic, it became a prized American value, something to be touted (despite its ostensible self-evidence) in sermons, almanacs, and collections of proverbs, sayings, and practical wisdom.³⁷ Arguably, it remains part of the ideal image of

³⁶ David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution* (Dublin, Ireland, 1793), 228, 300–301 (quotations). Compare with the account in Rush's autobiography:

Its [Paine's pamphlet's] effects were sudden and extensive upon the American mind. It was read by public men, repeated in clubs, spouted in Schools, and in one instance, delivered from the pulpit instead of a sermon by a clergyman in Connecticut. Several pamphlets were written against it, but they fell dead from the press. The controversy about independence was carried into the news papers, in which I bore a busy part. It was carried on at the same time in all the principal cities in our country. I was actuated by the double motives of the safety of my country, and a predilection to a Republican form of government which I now saw within her grasp.

See Corner, *Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, 114–15.

³⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Library Edition* (Washington, D.C., 1904), 16: 117–19 (quotations, 16: 118). On the related question of the sources of the self-evidence of the Declaration's principles, see, in addition to Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence*, 45, 51–52, 229 n. 32, the conflicting interpretations of Morton White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1978), esp. 72–78; Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, N.Y., 1978); Michael P. Zuckert, "Self-Evident Truth and the Declaration of Independence," *Review of Politics* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 319–39. Examples of postrevolutionary American appeals to common sense include Noah Webster, *The Prompter; Or, A Commentary On Common Sayings and Subjects, which are full of Common Sense, the best Sense in the World* (Hartford, Conn., 1791); David Everett, *Common Sense in Dishabille; Or, The farmer's Monitor. Containing A Variety of Familiar Essays, on Subjects Moral and Economical. To Which is Added, A Perpetual Calendar, or Economical Almanack* (Worcester, Mass., 1799). Mark A. Noll claims common sense was one of the few "authorities" that survived the Revolution intact,

modern, western democracies, which typically present themselves as rooted in human nature.

But one thing is centrally wrong with this standard picture. There is, after all, always a danger in taking claims to represent common sense too literally. Claims to speak for or to common sense always depend—as early champions of *bon sens*, including Paine, knew—on a certain level of deception. Whatever goes by this name is rarely popular in any true sociological sense, never universal or fully consensual, and generally just as abstract as the rhetorical abstractions it is designed to replace. Most of all it is always polemical, which is to say political. Far from being a statement impervious to challenge or even argument, common sense is typically reactive, something brought back to the table from which it has been displaced, something that will then demand a counterresponse. Even the Presbyterian thinkers of mid-eighteenth-century Aberdeen used the idea of common sense to partisan advantage, hoping to sway public opinion in one particular direction, especially when it came to religious questions, and away from another. The radical Continental Enlightenment forged it into a public weapon. That it sounded objective and indisputable yet popular was the source of its success as an organ of subjective, partisan, and always potentially demagogic political action. With the aid of common sense, any well-placed individual or collectivity with any particular point of view could pretend to represent the collective body's sentiments and promise an end to all disputes as a result.

Paine's own common sense was no exception. The innovative and iconoclastic Paine did not actually speak for any particular, preexisting set of commonsense tenets when he composed his pamphlet. And in practice no popular consensus about independence or democratic republican government took immediate hold either in Britain or in the American colonies after its appearance in early 1776. Even if Paine's *Common Sense*, along with the extensive commentary about it, persuaded many fence-sitters, it also produced something diametrically opposed to what the title seemed to promise. No sooner had the first edition appeared in colonial bookshops and other public places than a transatlantic mini-industry of published commentary, much of it hostile, emerged in response. The pamphlet's language, not to mention its argument, was denounced from Dublin to New York by loyalists and hostile patriots alike. John Adams predicted that *Common Sense*, with its "crude, ignorant Notion of a Government by one Assembly, will do more Mischief, in dividing the

but his own interest is exclusively in the tradition of Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid and how it merged with republicanism and evangelical Protestantism to supply the framework for American public life until the Civil War. See Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2002), 233 (quotation).

Friends of Liberty, than all the Tory Writings together.”³⁸ Furthermore, insofar as each side claimed to speak for the true, single, authentic vox populi—and rejected the similar claim of the opposition—the colonial struggle over ownership of common sense did nothing to limit a new, heightened style of ideological combat that, in turn, intensified an already partisan and increasingly polarized political contest.

No one, not even Paine’s fiercest opponents, wanted to cede the ground of common sense and say that their position was anything but self-evident and common to sensible beings. To turn to other forms of justification was henceforth to run the risk of speaking instead for self-interest, partisanship, or tradition-bound nonsense. Witness the quick appearance of pro-British, and consequently anti-Paine, diatribes such as Thomas Bull’s *Resolutions of Common Sense about Common Rights* and the anonymous *Memorial of Common-Sense*, in which common sense was reclaimed on behalf of an entirely different set of propositions.³⁹ Here the argument was that it was Paine who was the violator, abusing words, playing on public credulity, and leading the world down the garden path. Indeed common sense was used against Paine, who in effect encouraged this kind of treatment by wrapping himself for the rest of his career in the mantle of this epistemic value.

Anglican clergyman and Tory Charles Inglis, writing in the guise of “An American,” set the terms for this kind of oppositional polemic in *The True Interest of America Impartially Stated*, which appeared in February 1776, just weeks after Paine’s first edition. Inglis accused “The Englishman” (Paine) of violating common sense at every turn, of trafficking in “absurdities and falshoods,” and of writing in the tradition of “fanatic[s],” “enthusiasts,” and “visionary assertors of paradoxes, who were conscious that the common feelings of mankind must revolt against their scheme.” Here were all the clichés typically used in early-eighteenth-century British political discourse as antonyms for the prized common sense of the postrevolutionary settlement era. Then Inglis tried to expose the linguistic deceit, linked here to Catholicism, at the heart of Paine’s polemic:

³⁸ Wilson, *Paine and Cobbett*, 59.

³⁹ Thomas Bull, *Resolutions of Common Sense about Common Rights* (London, [1776]); [John Cartwright], *The Memorial of Common-Sense, Upon the Present Crisis Between Great-Britain and America* (London, 1778). Others replied in the name of, and with appeals to, related concepts. See for example *Reason. In Answer to a pamphlet entitled Common Sense* (Dublin, Ireland, 1776); Candidus [James Chalmers], *Plain Truth; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America, Containing Remarks on a Late Pamphlet, entitled Common Sense* (Philadelphia, 1776). On the history of the pamphlet’s reception, see Aldridge, *Thomas Paine’s American Ideology*, 158–215. On the functioning of the opposition more generally, at least in Paine’s Pennsylvania, see Anne M. Ousterhout, *A State Divided: Opposition in Pennsylvania to the American Revolution* (New York, 1987).

to make his pamphlet go down the better, he prefixes the title of Common Sense to i[t] by a figure in rhetoric, which is called a Catachresis, that is, in plain English, an abuse of words. Under this title, he counteracts the clearest dictates of reason, truth, and common sense. Thus have I seen a book written by a popish bigot, entitled, Mercy and Truth; or, Charity maintained; in which the author very devoutly and charitably damns all heretics.

I find no Common Sense in this pamphlet but much uncommon phrenzy. It is an outrageous insult on the common sense of Americans; an insidious attempt to poison their minds, and seduce them from their loyalty and truest interest.⁴⁰

Others took this same tack in 1776: Paine's common sense was best understood as its opposite, "a total perversion of the understanding," in the words of an opponent calling himself Rationalis. Or, it was patent "Non-Sense," in the words of someone calling himself Cato (later revealed as Philadelphian William Smith). What all these pseudonymous commentators ultimately hoped to do was to wrench the phrase back from Paine's usage and prove their own, legitimate connection to common sense. They labored to show that they instead spoke for the true sentiment of Americans (or at least "nine-tenths of the people of Pennsylvania," according to Cato). And they took pains to point out that they did so in ways that should be self-evident, though Paine had encouraged new absurdities and prejudices to take root. Inglis, for example, in an effort to prove that his own position was steeped not only in Scripture, the English Constitution, and the principles of 1688 but also in "common sense, reason and truth," could not resist employing the same kind of plainspoken, folksy, analogical reasoning that had worked so well for Paine. In defense of unity, this antagonist noted, "The remedy [separating from the mother country] is infinitely worse than the disease. It would be like cutting off a leg, because the toe happened to ache."⁴¹

⁴⁰ An American [Charles Inglis], *The True Interest of America Impartially Stated, In Certain Strictures On a Pamphlet intituled Common Sense* (Philadelphia, 1776), v–vii (quotations). Another edition, this time by "A Loyal American," also appeared in 1776 as *The Deceiver Unmasked; Or, Loyalty and Interest United: In Answer to a Pamphlet Entitled Common Sense* (New-York, 1776).

⁴¹ Rationalis, ["Another reply to Common sense"], appended to Candidus, *Plain Truth*, 68 ("total perversion of the understanding"); Cato [William Smith], "To the People of Pennsylvania. Letter IV," *Pennsylvania Ledger*, no. 62, Mar. 30, 1776, supplement [1] ("Non-Sense"); Cato [Smith], *Extract from the Second Letter to the People of Pennsylvania; being that part of it which relates to Independency*, also appended to Candidus, *Plain Truth*, 80 ("nine-tenths"), originally published as "To the People of Pennsylvania: Letter II," *Pennsylvania Ledger*, no. 60, Mar. 16, 1776, [1]; Inglis, *True Interest of America*, 27 ("reason and truth"), vi ("remedy").

Here, too, one can perhaps see the makings of a special and ritualized form of conflict particular to modern democracies. Though agreeing on the value of common sense and thus, in a sense, helping to erect and maintain the consensual ground on which political debate could henceforth take place, opponents in this conversation also used this same phrase as a means of registering dissent that, in turn, had a polarizing effect on such conversations. With their claims and counterclaims of speaking from and to common sense, commentators in the late 1770s exacerbated the difficulties involved in arriving at any common ground or common sense in practice. This pattern would remain in place from debates about slavery and suffrage in the nineteenth century, in which the authority of common sense was called on to play a significant role, to conflict around socialism in the twentieth century. The American case is also not alone. Paine's invention, the revolutionary polemic in the name of common sense, was adopted, modified, and used as much to fan the flames as to cool them in Geneva in 1777, in Latin America in 1812, and in France not just in 1789 but again in 1830 and 1848.⁴²

Gradually, the age of revolutions drew to a close in much of western Europe and the New World. In many of these locations, the basic, foundational tenets of democracy, such as the superiority of the many to the few, came to seem indisputably true and just and, finally, commonsensical to an increasingly large part of the population. But common sense has continued to operate in a dualistic mode. It has become a commonplace strategy to claim common sense in one's defense (as if politics and inter-

⁴² Nineteenth-century Spanish-language uses of Paine are discussed in Alfred Owen Aldridge, "Tom Paine in Latin-America," *Early American Literature* 3, no. 3 (Winter 1968–69): 139–47. There is no article, as far as I know, charting post-1776 French-language uses of the language or ideas in *Common Sense* toward revolutionary ends. Some examples that would bear investigating include [Étienne-Salomon Reybaz], *Appel au sens commun, ou lettre à l'auteur des Réflexions impartiales, sur un projet de conciliation* (Geneva, Switzerland, 1777), in which Paine is not directly acknowledged but common sense is used to support the *Répresentant*, or burgher, cause; [Alexandre Achard de Germane?], *Le Sens commun, no. 1er, idée général de l'Etat de la France* ([Paris, 1790]), in which the eponymous main character promises to do for the French what he has already done for the Americans, that is, restore simple truths and clear notions of good and evil destroyed by the reasoning of philosophers, orators, and journalists, foster "unity of opinions, desires, and means," and give the public a name—his name, common sense—to rally around (1); *Second cri du Sens commun, ou considérations sur la révolution française et sur les moyens de la conduire à sa véritable fin* (Paris, [1848, though composed in 1823]), in which the author seeks to continue the project that began with "a first cry of Common sense" (v) in 1776 on the western side of the Atlantic and that helped "give birth to a great Republic which, as a result of its wisdom and the faults of other states, seems destined to conquer the world" (v). Paine's own career, despite his adoption of *Common Sense* as a moniker, was defined from 1776 onward by a series of public battles. See Larkin, *Paine and the Literature of Revolution*, chap. 2; Keane, *Tom Paine*.

ests could be pushed aside) and then to make common sense an arena for an intensified political struggle. One could even argue that this dualism should be considered an identifiable and standard feature of modern democracy, right along with the exaltation of "the people." We simply do not notice anymore.

On the one hand, our faith in common sense remains linked to the communitarian conviction that the public has an essential epistemological unity, an instinctive sense of what's what in the world. This assumption makes common sense a kind of populist authority capable of undergirding consensual, unassailable, and often tacit political norms and the political community derived from them. Ideally, it functions as a common denominator for a democratic political life.⁴³ As such it also offers a space from which ordinary people and nonexperts, whether women, members of marginalized groups, or simply people of humble origins, can dare to speak to and for their fellow citizens' public concerns.

But on the other hand, common sense must also be recognized as an enduring, if now banal and often elite, political weapon. Inherent in our culture's faith in common sense is the potential for the manufactured social unity and condescension associated with different kinds of demagoguery. Rush himself noted at the close of the eighteenth century, perhaps in a veiled commentary on his former friend Paine, that when wise men "do homage" to common sense it is often "where advantages are derived from it in promoting their interest or fame."⁴⁴ Our contemporary recourse to the language of common sense also helps keep alive a tradition of controversy in which opposing sides spur conflict by insisting that they alone speak for this absolute value and then denying the validity of the other side's point of view as nothing but madness and absurdity so as, ultimately, to narrow the terms of public conversation. In the end a politics of common sense is not only an antihistorical politics but also an antipolitical politics, a politics designed to sidestep contention and rational debate. This quality is part of its enduring appeal.

⁴³ This position is closely identified with the thought of Hannah Arendt. Her most important statements on the value of common sense for democratic practice can be found in Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951); Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," *Partisan Review* 20, no. 4 (July–August 1953): 377–92; Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago, 1982).

⁴⁴ Carlson, Wollock, and Noel, *Benjamin Rush's Lectures on the Mind*, 520 (quotations). Pierre Bourdieu's influential critique of common sense as a form of power is articulated in Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, among other works. See also Robert Holton, "Bourdieu and Common Sense," in *Pierre Bourdieu: Fieldwork in Culture*, ed. Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman (Lanham, Md., 2000), 87–99. More generally, see the introd. to the special issue "Doxa and Discourse: How Common Knowledge Works," ed. Ruth Amossy and Meir Sternberg, *Poetics Today* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 369–94.

Paine, of course, cannot be held directly responsible for any of these features of modern democratic culture. Yet Paine's paradoxes—his effort to have it both ways or, to put it differently, to marry Thomas Reid and Pierre Bayle—remain at the heart of our common sense.