# Common sense vs. Good sense

Fighting Eurosceptic myths in their own terms

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Heinrich Böll Stiftung capacity building week How to debunk the myths of Euroscepticism (13 October 2015)

### Some observations you may recognise

- "Why should I pay my taxes so that immigrants can use our public services for free?"
- "We just keep giving money to the Greeks and they just keep spending it.
   This has to stop!"
- "What right do the Eurocrats in Brussels have to decide how we live our lives? Who elected them?"
- "I work hard and pay my way while the government is subsidising thousands of immigrants to live a life of luxury on benefits."
- "Muslims just have different values from the rest of us. If we want to defend our way of life, we need to curtail Islam in this country."

#### Antonio Gramsci on common sense



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- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Marxist philosopher, foundational figure for post-war social/critical theory
- Ideologies express themselves as the natural order of things, rather than as they truly are: contingent power constructs
- Common sense: the views of "ordinary" Europeans, as opposed to the elite – liberal, cosmopolitan, affluent, pro-European
- Imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist government –
  inter-war Europeans beguiled by the contemporary
  "common sense" of far-Right collectivism

## Progressives and common sense

- Postmodern progressive politics ("green social liberalism") relies on intellectual nuance; it recoils from common-sense constructions about immigrants, the welfare state, development aid, the EU...
- Progressives seem ever on the wrong side of majoritarian common sense, and the new radical Right seems increasingly to embody it
- We can see this in electoral terms: traditional social-democratic parties are being pulled apart between white-collar liberals and blue-collar (or "nocollar") voters attracted to Eurosceptic and populist parties
- Should European progressives continue to eschew common sense politics, or seek to reclaim it?

#### Stuart Hall on common sense



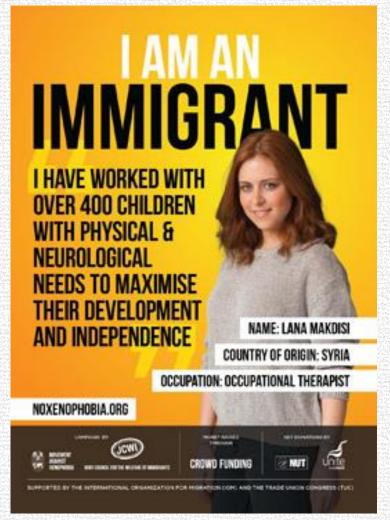
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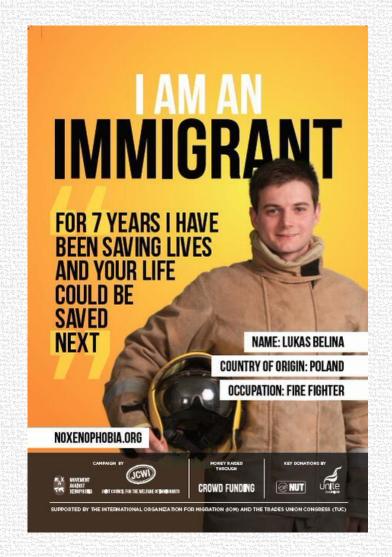
- British-Caribbean founder of British cultural studies, first to use the term "Thatcherism" in the 1980s
- Adopted Gramsci's theory of common sense, but emphasised its progressive potential for rooting politics in citizens' everyday experiences
- According to Gramsci, common sense also contains aspects of genuine/objective/progressive good sense
- Both common and good sense can be moulded and changed: most people's views are "a patchwork of received ideas not yet reconciled into a coherent perspective"

## Key lesson: Facts are not enough

- The public sphere is not an ideal, neutral space for the exchange of views and arguments; it is permeated by ideology
- Progressives may have the facts on their side, but the radical Right now presents an emotive common sense which appeals to many European citizens far more than precise analysis
- A popular progressive politics can only emerge again by fighting common sense with good sense – a pro-European politics rooted in the experiences of ordinary people, not the minutiae of policy debates
- A contemporary example from Britain: #iamanimmigrant

# #iamanimmigrant





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