

Common sense vs. Good sense

Fighting Eurosceptic myths in their own terms

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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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- 20th 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 “no-collar”) 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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