

H-Net Reviews

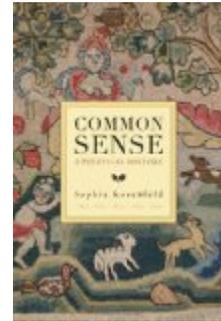
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sophia A. Rosenfeld. *Common Sense: A Political History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 368 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05781-4.

Reviewed by Linda Wendling (North Carolina Central School of Law and North Carolina State)

Published on H-Law (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Ethan Zadoff



Isn't It Ironic? The Radical Use of the Conventional Wisdom Known as Common Sense

In a brilliant sweep, Sophia A. Rosenfeld clarifies the misconceptions of *Common Sense* (1776) as springing fully grown like Athena from the head of Zeus from our deified Thomas Paine and the Founding Fathers. This is a common historio-cultural perception unique to Americans who disdain history before 1776. Indeed, there is no ordinary path of the usage of the term “common sense” throughout European and American history. Rosenfeld explores the unconventional ideas supported by the appeal to what should be familiar and incontrovertible. The constant juxtapositioning of the ordinary and the extraordinary definitions make for an interesting and jarring read. Ironically, radicals use the appeal to *Common Sense* to reverse the status quo and restore the “natural” state of politics.

Irony is not the only literary device applicable to the history of such a critical idea; circular logic also pervades the description of the necessity of its implementation in early American politics. Common sense was at the same time the basis for the theory of government by all of the people’s will—the communally held set of beliefs and experiences—and the method of persuading the people that it was indeed their will to create such a government; “common sense is employed as both a mode of persuasion and a proposed solution” (p. 168). If the mode of proposed government was so easily perceived as the commonsensical way of conduct, then why was it not already implemented? Why was the most obvious solution to civil accord not already in play? In response, Rosenfeld writes that “these principles had been threat-

ened often enough in history that they needed now to be documented, in written form, for the people’s future protection” (p. 169). Doubly ironic is the use of common sense in the French Revolution, hot on the heels of our colonial uprising. Across the Atlantic, common sense’s primary job was to bolster “a self-conscious defense of the pre-revolutionary status quo, the very world that revolutionaries were eager to leave behind” (p. 181). This undeniable shift in meaning clearly underscores Rosenfeld’s core thesis about the uncommon nature of this historical concept and its instability and unpredictable usages in political thought.

Throughout its life, common sense has had to walk the fine line between good judgment and educated wisdom. The authority for a new form of government was based on power deriving from the people and their common sense in acknowledging that this was indeed the proper and finest means of governing a new independent nation. But it was not actually a system of common rule: “as the historian Edmund Morgan pithily notes, the success of the concept of popular sovereignty in eighteenth-century America was less the result of popular demand than ‘a question of some of the few enlisting the many against the rest of the few’” (pp. 169-170). This may very well sum up the entire course of the term’s political history. It really depended on who seized the idea to use it first and of course, the winners are the ones who write the history of its superiority over other defeated forms. The idea of common sense has much more power than the implementation of it; after all, “there re-

main[s] an important difference between power derived from the people in the abstract and power actually seated in the people” (p. 175). And as history attests, the opposition, the radicals, the minority, will resurrect it to challenge the current regime. Its roots have little relevance to its utility. “Of course, this mode of politicking, in which native smarts matter more than expertise or formal education and simplicity is prized over complexity, now exists independently of its sources.... It has fueled efforts at national union and local, grassroots initiatives alike. But this mutability exists only because faith in an indisputable, plainspoken, popular common sense, along with an accompanying egalitarian impulse, remains unmistakably linked to the idea of democracy as it initially took root in North America” (pp. 178-179).

Rosenfeld makes her points clearly despite the circumlocutions of the phrase she seeks to define. Even the great Immanuel Kant had to acknowledge the ironic nature of the phrase. “Common,” having two definitions—that which is base or vulgar and that which is a judgment held by most of the population—must be reconciled with the idea that each individual seeks a personal higher meaning from experiences. At the same time, we as individuals make our highly subjective and emotional judgment based on our common sense, and we also become “unusually aware of our links to others, for we necessarily compare our own judgments with the (conjectural); ‘collective reason’ of humanity as a whole” (p. 223). In this way, we can forge a community based on collective acceptance of what is the proper way to govern ourselves. The irony continues, however, once we remember that historically, common sense was used to combat the current state of communal organization. Is it apropos that a dramatist and poet (Friedrich Schiller, not a political theorist) explained this irony of the triumph of the individual, which then renders a “harmony and equality to society as a whole and produces the triumph of common sense” (p. 225)? Of course, poetically just, this concept

was only applicable to a “tiny, rarified portion of the population” (p. 226).

Ever the contrarian, “common sense” did not emerge in the way that philosophers thought that it would, as the “backbone of a new social order” based on noble, egalitarian principles accepted by all because they came to it by their own internal sense of reason. It was pushed in the opposite direction. “It would be adopted by a wide variety of different political constituencies armed with mutually exclusive agendas and vocabularies” (p. 227). In her final chapter, “The Fate of Common Sense in the Modern World,” Rosenfeld brilliantly exposes the wide-ranging ironic usages of common sense in more modern contexts from slavery to the world wars. The rise of ideological thinking via totalitarian, communist regimes negated the ability of individuals to judge anything for themselves and therefore the death knell of common sense rang loudly. And therefore the reader can make sense of Rosenfeld’s heavy reliance on Hannah Arendt’s theories in that she believed that common sense has a “high rank in the hierarchy of political qualities.” Indeed, the basis of modern governments depend on “a noncoercive but vital form of social glue suitable to a pluralist and talkative world. True common sense, Arendt insists, can be produced only in the context of a robust public sphere.... In other words, common sense is simultaneously a means and an end, the ground on which true democracy forms and the product that true democracy creates” (p. 252).

What this book makes clear is the constant state of flux that the definition of “common sense” has experienced (and indeed still does) throughout history. Belonging to the masses but used by reactionary forces as their exclusive weapon, common sense has not held a common definition nor common master. Rosenfeld has sparked the imagination of those whose interest lies in the history of ideas and their mutability over time despite their presumptive cohesiveness in popular political culture.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: Linda Wendling. Review of Rosenfeld, Sophia A., *Common Sense: A Political History*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33539>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.