18 **Political Survival in Pakistan**
Beyond ideology
*Anas Malik*

19 **New Cultural Identitarian Political Movements in Developing Societies**
The Bharatiya Janata party
*Sebastian Schwecke*

20 **Sufism and Saint Veneration in Contemporary Bangladesh**
The Maijbhandaris of Chittagong
*Hans Harder*

21 **New Dimensions of Politics in India**
The united progressive alliance in power
*Lawrence Saez and Gurhapal Singh*

22 **Vision and Strategy in Indian Politics**
Jawaharlal Nehru's policy choices and the designing of political institutions
*Jivanta Schoettli*

23 **Decentralization, Local Governance, and Social Wellbeing in India**
Do local governments matter?
*Rani D. Mullen*

24 **The Politics of Refugees in South Asia**
Identity, resistance, manipulation
*Navine Murshid*

25 **The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar**
Itineraries of Dalits and subalterns
*Edited by Cosimo Zene*

# The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar

## Itineraries of Dalits and subalterns

**Edited by Cosimo Zene**

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# 7 Living subalternity

## Antonio Gramsci's concept of common sense[1]

*Kate Crehan*

> 'Common sense', i.e. ... the traditional popular conception of the world – what is unimaginatively called 'instinct', although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition.
>
> (Q3§48; *SPN*: 199; *PN3*: 51)

'*Senso comune*', normally translated into English as 'common sense', is a central concept in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Here I explore the usefulness of Gramsci's concept for the mapping of the everyday realities into which subalternity translates.

For Gramsci, a committed revolutionary, common sense is a crucial terrain on which the struggle to bring into being effective counter-hegemonic narratives – narratives with the power to supplant existing hegemonic narratives – is waged. But what exactly is common sense for Gramsci? One problem for those, like myself, who read Gramsci in English, is that the English term 'common sense' is not a simple equivalent to *senso comune*. *Senso comune* is a more neutral term which lacks the generally positive connotations of the English 'common sense'; *senso comune* refers simply to beliefs and opinions supposedly shared by the mass of the population. Given the lack of a better translation, and its accepted usage in the Gramsci literature, I use the term 'common sense', but the reader should bear in mind that Gramsci's *senso comune* is not 'common sense' as this is normally understood in English.

As an anthropologist, I am struck by the way Gramsci's concept of common sense both does similar work to the anthropological concept of culture (a concept which has reached out far beyond its anthropological roots) and at the same time is significantly different. It is similar in that part of what common sense represents for Gramsci is the conception of the world into which we are born; we are born into common sense, just as we are born into a culture. We all begin, Gramsci writes, with 'a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world' (Q11§12; *SPN*: 323). But while the anthropological tradition has primarily been concerned with describing cultures, Gramsci's primary concern is how

individuals and groups can escape or transcend common sense's narrow horizons. To begin such an escape it is necessary

> to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality.
>
> (Q11§12; *SPN*: 323–4)

It should be noted that Gramsci sees common sense as taking many forms: 'there is not just one common sense'; common sense is always 'a collective noun' (Q11§12; *SPN*: 325). And it is not only subalterns whose conception of the world Gramsci sees as defined by common sense: we all inhabit some form of common sense. The limited horizons of common sense are, however, a particular problem for subalterns, subject as they are to the hegemonic narratives of dominant groups.

Gramsci's concept of common sense is closely linked to his concept of culture, and if we want to understand what common sense is for Gramsci, it is instructive to contrast his notion of culture with the anthropological notion of culture (culture, that is, understood as a particular way of life[2]). A good place to begin is with the history of the term 'culture', since it is in that history[3] that certain underlying assumptions, which continue to inform how culture is commonly understood, have their roots.

## Culture, nationalism, and community

The anthropological view of humankind as comprised of a diversity of *cultures*, each with its own way of life, has its origin in Romanticism and nineteenth-century narratives of nationalism. At the heart of these narratives is the claim that a nation represents a specific 'people' born of a specific territory to which, by virtue of this special kind of belonging, they have an inalienable right. Actual nation-states may be quite recent creations, in historical terms, and their boundaries may in reality be far from fixed, but nations themselves – those imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson termed them, that underpin the concept of the nation-state – seem almost to inhabit a realm outside time. They both 'loom out of an immemorial past' and 'glide into a limitless future' (Anderson 2006: 11–12). This assumption of a fixity and permanence rooted in 'tradition' is inextricably entwined with the anthropological concept of culture. And, in line with this way of imagining cultures, there has been a tendency for history to be seen as something that happens to cultures, rather than cultures being seen themselves as the ever shifting products of history.

An important strand in the broader discourse of nineteenth-century nationalism, as Anderson's use of the term community indicates, is a fundamental opposition between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. And this dichotomy has left



its legacy in the anthropological understanding of culture. The opposition was first formalized by Ferdinand Tönnies in his enormously influential *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887). Tönnies defines *Gemeinschaft* as an authentic, usually relatively small, *community*, woven together by ties of kinship, and often a common religious affiliation, into a tight-knit web of moral cohesion. *Gesellschaften*, by contrast, are the impersonal, conflict-ridden, and essentially artificial, *associations* characteristic of the modern industrial world. The allure of an often very vaguely defined notion of community remains powerful. Tellingly, unlike other terms of social organization, such as 'state' or 'society', 'community' is a term that seems, as Raymond Williams noted, 'never to be used unfavourably' (Williams 1983: 76).

Let me be clear here: I am not suggesting that contemporary anthropologists think of the cultural worlds they study in the Romantic terms of nineteenth-century nationalism. My point is simply that the notion of culture remains marked by its emergence within this context and that the anthropological concept of culture continues to be haunted by the ghost of the enduringly traditional, and the pervasive warm glow of *gemeinschaft*.

In line with its stress on the nature of the ties binding social groups together, the anthropological notion of culture tends to assume, whether explicitly or implicitly, that cultures are essentially systems. In 1871, some sixteen years earlier than Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, the early British anthropologist, Edward Tylor, began his magisterial *Primitive Culture* with a definition of culture that would continue to be cited for the next century. Culture, according to Tylor, is 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (1871: 1). Anthropologists over the years have had many different understandings of the precise nature of 'that complex whole' as a theoretical entity, but the assumption that cultures are in some sense systems remains a common thread. Anthropologists today may no longer think of cultures as bounded entities, but an a priori, if often implicit, assumption that the different elements of a culture, while sometimes conflictual and contradictory, nevertheless constitute some kind of system tends to linger.

## Culture and common sense in Gramsci

Gramsci (whose concern with culture stems from roots quite other than those of anthropology) offers us a very different notion of culture; one that completely rejects the assumption that cultures are systems. The origins of the anthropological project can be traced to an expanding Europe's confrontation with new and unfamiliar worlds – a confrontation bound up with a determination to dominate these new worlds – it also reflected, however, the would-be dominators' awareness that if they were to be successful they needed to understand those with whom they were now having to deal. Understanding these unfamiliar 'others' demanded that they be seen not simply through the prism of the observers' categories, but through their own. Colonial anthropologists may not have always

lived up to this ideal, but whatever their faults, they tended to be more interested in understanding and preserving the 'cultures' they studied than in transforming them – one reason why colonial administrators often found the work of anthropologists of little practical use.

Gramsci, however, was not an anthropologist, but a political activist committed to the revolutionary transformation of his society; and for him such transformation necessarily involves not simply the seizing of state power, but radical cultural change. Cultural change is necessary because the realities of power bring into being specific cultures of subalternity with their associated common sense; subalterns come to see the hierarchies of the world they inhabit as inevitable and inescapable. They may not like their subordination, but they cannot see how things could possibly be other than as they are. Any revolutionary transformation both brings about, and depends on, the transformation of the common sense at the heart of subaltern culture. There is no simple recipe, however, for achieving this transformation; it is a complex historical process in which there needs to be an active dialogue between intellectuals and non-intellectuals. For Gramsci, those who live the harsh realities of subalternity, however capable they may be of everyday resistance, cannot by themselves come up with the coherent, effective counter-narratives necessary to overcome the existing hegemony. But intellectuals too cannot devise these narratives unaided. Intellectuals need to be educated by the subaltern. Only a genuine dialogue between intellectuals and non-intellectuals can produce the effective counter-hegemonic narratives necessary for the emergence of an effective political force, a 'historical bloc', capable of transforming society. As Gramsci writes,

> If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and ruled, leaders [*dirigenti*] and led, and can the shared life be realised which alone is a social force – with the creation of the 'historical bloc'.
>
> (Q11§67; *SPN*: 418)

To be effective, revolutionaries need narratives that both arise out of the concerns of the subaltern and make sense in their cultural world. And this means it is crucial for progressive intellectuals to pay attention to the common sense which is so basic to subaltern understandings of reality.

Gramsci was a Marxist, and for him, as for Marx, the ultimate shaping forces in human history are basic economic structures, and it is their systematic and persistent inequalities that give rise to distinct classes. But while he sees cultures as fundamentally shaped by economic forces, Gramsci is no crude economic determinist. He recalls, for instance (Q13§18; *SPN*: 162), Engels' caution that, 'According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this' (Marx and Engels 1975: 394, emphasis in original).



One way of characterizing Gramsci's approach to culture is by thinking of 'culture' as how the realities of class are lived.[4] We all of us come to consciousness as members of specific cultural worlds at specific historical moments, and we tend to experience the particular 'realities' of our cultural world as fixed and unalterable, no more than simple reflections of the way the world is. Such realities as disparities of wealth and power, for instance, may be thought of as the manifestation of the laws of economics or of divine will, and they may be celebrated or railed against, but to those whose everyday reality they are, they appear unchangeable. Only a fool or a madman would even try. The emblematic figure here is Don Quixote charging windmills. Gramsci uses the notion of common sense to capture the solidity and apparent 'naturalness' cultures have in the eyes of those who inhabit them – windmills are windmills and it is useless to fight them.

The extent to which, in any given instance, a particular 'culture' or 'traditional popular conception of the world' (to quote Gramsci's definition of common sense from my epigraph), may indeed constitute some form of whole is, for Gramsci, an empirical question which can be answered only by careful empirical study. What he rejects completely is any assumption, explicit or implicit, that culture or common sense are, as it were, by definition some form of system. And it is this rejection that helps make common sense such a potentially useful concept for the mapping of the lived realities of subaltern worlds. To begin to explain why, I want to look briefly at another way of naming the taken-for-granted in everyday life, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. While habitus is undoubtedly a powerful and useful concept, there are also ways in which it is problematic. It is problematic, for instance, if what we want to map is social change, in part, I would argue, precisely because of an inherent assumption that what it names are essentially systems. Teasing out why this is problematic can help demonstrate the potential usefulness of the far more open concept of common sense.

## Habitus

The concept of habitus was introduced into sociology by Marcel Mauss in his essay 'Techniques of the body', but it is Bourdieu's somewhat different formulation that has been most widely embraced by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and other social theorists. Although Bourdieu would come to define himself as a sociologist, he began his intellectual career as an anthropologist and, as he notes in 'A reply to some objections' (first presented in the mid-1980s), most of his theoretical concepts, including habitus, had their origin in his early anthropological fieldwork among the Kabyles in Algeria. 'Notions that I developed gradually, such as the notion of habitus, came from the desire to recall that beside the express, explicit norm, or the rational calculation, there are other principles that generate practices' (Bourdieu 1990a: 76). His explication of habitus

in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* can be seen as rooted in the very anthropological project of attempting to understand the structuring mechanisms shaping a way of life (in this case that of the Kabyles), which those who live it, simply live, without apparently having any need to be consciously aware of these mechanisms. Habitus provides for Bourdieu a way of naming the all-important, but submerged, mechanisms orchestrating how the members of a given group go about their daily lives. He defines it as follows:

> The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representation which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to obtain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.
>
> (Bourdieu 1977: 72, emphasis in original)

Note here how habitus is defined as comprising *systems* of dispositions. I shall come back to this point.

For Bourdieu, the term 'disposition' captures the crucial but unarticulated knowledge that in the course of socialization has embedded itself not only in patterns of thought, but in the very bodies of individuals. The term 'disposition', Bourdieu argues, 'seems particularly suited to express what is covered by the concept of habitus'. First, because it conveys the idea of 'the *result of an organizing action*, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure'. Second, 'it also designates a *way of being*, a *habitual state* (especially of the body)' (Bourdieu 1977: 214, emphasis in original). This acknowledgement of the power of embodied knowledge as largely unmediated by language and simply lived, is one of the strengths of habitus as a theoretical concept.

The dispositions of habitus, concerned as they are with 'ways of being', 'habitual states' embedded deep within the subjectivity of individuals, necessarily stress the fixity of certain ways of being. It is not coincidental, I would argue, that it was Bourdieu's Kabyle fieldwork that gave rise to the concept of habitus. As Bourdieu describes in *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (an account of his intellectual formation written at the end of his life and published in 2008), his fieldwork was carried out in the 1950s in extraordinarily difficult circumstances at a time when the Algerians were engaged in an often brutal liberation struggle against the French colonial state. Nonetheless the account of the Kabyles in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* – which builds its theoretical schemas on the basis of Bourdieu's Kabyle data – portrays a people locked into a traditional pastoralist life. Bourdieu's well known essay on the Kabyle house (first published in French in 1970; a slightly modified version was published in 1980, available in



English in Bourdieu 1990b: 271–83) provides a similar picture of an unchanging peasant way of life; one in which each dwelling is constructed according to the same strict rules which determine the arrangement of every inch of living space, down to the storage of even the smallest item of household equipment. Within the world of the Kabyles, according to this account, any deviation, however minor, is quite literally unthinkable. It is perhaps not surprising that a man so fiercely opposed to French colonialism and so deeply sympathetic to the Algerians fighting for their independence should stress the autonomy of Kabyle culture and its profound difference from the culture of the French colonizers. Something that is not apparent from Bourdieu's account of the Kabyles is that the Kabylia was in fact a hotbed of Algerian nationalist struggle.[5]

It is important to emphasize that while habitus may focus on fixity, Bourdieu does not see it as rigid and unchanging; in certain respects it is highly flexible. As a system of dispositions guiding behaviour, this system of 'lasting, transposable dispositions' is continually having to adapt to specific, and in a sense, unique circumstances: '[I]ntegrating past experiences, [this system] functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitively diversified tasks' (Bourdieu 1977: 83, emphasis in original). Nonetheless this flexibility has its limits. We can see habitus as something like a language that, while allowing its speakers to come up with an infinite number of different utterances, maintains an essentially unchanging grammatical structure. But what about more fundamental change? How is it possible for this 'system of dispositions', woven into the very being of individuals, to change in fundamental ways? And since human history is a story of transformations, in certain circumstances this must happen.

Significantly, for Bourdieu, the seeds of change lie not within habitus itself, but in the dialectical relationship between a specific habitus and objective events that demand a response beyond that of the given habitus:

> *collective action* (e.g. revolutionary action) is constituted in the dialectical relationship between, on the one hand, a *habitus*, understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions ..., and on the other hand, an *objective event* which exerts its action of conditional stimulation calling for or demanding a determinate response.... [This stimulation is conditional because it only acts on] those who are disposed to constitute it as such because they are endowed with a determinate type of dispositions (which are amenable to reduplication and reinforcement by the 'awakening of class consciousness', that is, by the direct or indirect possession of a discourse capable of securing symbolic mastery of the practically mastered principles of the class habitus).
>
> (Bourdieu 1977: 82–3, emphasis in original)

Habitus, it would seem, does not contain within itself the potential for transformation; there needs to be, as it were, another habitus waiting in the wings ready to displace the existing one and take its place on the stage.

As a theoretical concept, therefore, habitus provides a powerful account of how and why cultures persist through time, reproducing themselves from generation to generation, but it does not tell us much about the dynamics of change. This is in part, I would argue, because of Bourdieu's insistence on the systematic character of habitus. As he writes in one of the passages quoted above, habitus refers to '*systems* of durable, transposable dispositions, *structured structures* predisposed to function as *structuring structures*, that is, as *principles of the generation and structuring* of practices and representation...' (Bourdieu 1977: 72, emphasis added to show systematic character). Given habitus's systematic character, it makes sense that any fundamental transformation involves the shift of one habitus to another, and that the potential for change comes not from within habitus itself, but from external events.

Habitus provides a persuasive account of the power of the taken-for-granted substructure of embodied and other forms of knowledge that play such an important role in the shaping of day-to-day life. If we want, however, to understand not only why things stay the same, but why they sometimes change, Gramsci's notion of common sense, I suggest, offers a more fruitful approach.

## Culture, common sense, and history

Common sense for Gramsci, far from being any kind of system, is a heterogeneous jumble:

> Common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space.... [It] takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and [inconsistent[6]], in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is.
>
> (Q11§13; *SPN*: 419)

As a result, 'Common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one likes' (Q11§13; *SPN*: 422). There *may* be systematic elements within the confusion of common sense, but they cannot be assumed to exist a priori.

A central focus of Gramsci's *Notebooks* is the dynamics of historical change. How and why has social transformation occurred, or not occurred, in the past; how might it be brought about in the future? And for Gramsci, common sense plays a key role; it helps both to maintain and reproduce existing power regimes, and contains within its confusion seeds of transformation.

I noted above how Gramsci uses the notion of common sense to capture the solidity and apparent 'naturalness' cultures have in the eyes of those who inhabit them. Gramsci's common sense, however, has none of the fixity of Bourdieu's habitus. Neither does Gramsci ever oppose common sense to history in the way that anthropology has sometimes opposed culture and history. It is true that there has been much fruitful collaboration between anthropologists and historians in



recent years, and many contemporary anthropologists do deeply historical work, yet within the discipline a sense that history is something that happens *to* cultures has not been completely banished. Marshall Sahlins, for one, continues to be a fierce defender of the distinction between history and culture, as in his 2004 collection of essays, *Apologies to Thucydides*.

The heterogeneous jumble of common sense is for Gramsci the product of history. It is an assemblage of disparate beliefs and opinions that have come together over time. Inherently unstable, it is continually changing in piecemeal ways and cannot be defined by whatever systematic elements it may contain. As with the material debris that gradually accumulates in any area of human habitation, new ideas are continually drifting down to join the existing agglomerate of common sense. Some may only remain there momentarily, others for somewhat longer, while some manage to embed themselves in seemingly more secure ways.

In any given time and place common sense provides a disparate bundle of taken-for-granted understandings of how the world is, and these understandings constitute the basic landscape within which individuals are socialized and that they use to chart their individual life courses. The analyst's task, like that of the archaeologist, is to sort through this mass of beliefs and opinions: identifying the very different elements it contains and the social realities to which they are linked, exploring just whose common sense they are (men's, women's, poor people's, the better off, the more educated, the less educated, the old, the young, and so on), and mapping out the linkages between the different elements. As with material strata, there are reasons why some elements persist and some do not, but the forces acting to consolidate or destroy are multiple and the results of their interactions are always unpredictable. Understanding this process in a given time and place requires empirical analysis of how particular elements of common sense are disseminated, and how they are lived; for instance, the mechanisms through which specific individuals do, or do not, internalize them: What does it mean to internalize them? To what extent do the different elements hang together? Do individuals pick and choose between them? Do they accept given elements in certain contexts, while rejecting them in others? None of this can be known a priori; it requires careful investigation.

What Gramsci's concept of common sense offers, I would argue, is a way of thinking about the texture of everyday life that encompasses its givenness: how it is both constitutive of our subjectivity and confronts us as an external and solid reality, but that also acknowledges its contradictions, fluidity, and flexibility. Continually modified by how actual people in actual places live it, its enduring fixity is an illusion. This is a concept from which the ghost of the bounded culture, existing outside history, has genuinely been exorcized.

## Common sense and good sense

Gramsci devoted many pages of his notebooks to the question of how we might discover, or recover, how subalterns – those who leave so few traces in the official record – see the world. Fundamental social change, as he saw it, necessarily

involved the radical transformation of common sense. If such change were to be achieved, it was crucial that progressive political activists neither simply celebrated nor condemned the world of common sense; rather, they needed to understand it in all its contradictory complexity. Gramsci's approach here – his refusal either to romanticize or demonize popular culture, and his insistence that what is claimed as 'tradition' must always be rigorously scrutinized and unpacked – is free of any notion of the traditional, authentic *gemeinschaft*.

Gramsci's careful, analytical attitude to common sense is illustrated by his scathing assessment of one of the leading Italian intellectuals of his time, Giovanni Gentile. Gentile had claimed that philosophy could be thought of

> as a great effort accomplished by reflective thought to gain critical certainty of the truths of common sense and of the naive consciousness, of those truths of which it can be said that every man feels them naturally and which constitute the solid structure of the mentality he requires for everyday life,
>
> (quoted in Q11§13; *SPN*: 422)

For Gramsci this was simply 'yet another example of the disordered crudity of Gentile's thought'. Honing in on Gentile's formulation: 'the truths of common sense', Gramsci asks:

> And what does a 'truth of common sense' mean? Gentile's philosophy, for example, is utterly contrary to common sense, whether one understands thereby the naïve philosophy of the people, which revolts against any form of subjectivist idealism, or whether one understands it to be good sense and a contemptuous attitude to the abstruseness, ingenuities and obscurity of certain forms of scientific and philosophical exposition.
>
> (Q11§13; *SPN*: 422–3)

For Gramsci, precisely because it is not any kind of systematic whole, the messy conglomerate that is common sense needs to be teased apart and its separate elements analysed. Only if this is done can progressive activists build on the 'good sense' it contains. Gramsci elaborates on this concept of 'good sense' in several Notes, writing in one:

> In what exactly does the merit of what is normally termed 'common sense' or 'good sense' consist? Not just in the fact that, if only implicitly, common sense applies the principle of causality, but in the much more limited fact that in a whole range of judgments common sense identifies the exact cause, simple and to hand, and does not let itself be distracted by fancy quibbles and pseudo-profound, pseudoscientific metaphysical mumbo-jumbo.
>
> (Q10(2)§48i; *SPN*: 348)

In another note he reflects on the 'good sense' to be found in certain popular expressions, such as being 'philosophical' about something. This expression,



while it may contain 'an implicit invitation to resignation and patience', can also be seen as an 'invitation to people to reflect and to realise fully that whatever happens is basically rational and must be confronted as such'. This appeal to use reason rather than blind emotion is 'the part of [common sense] which can be called "good sense" and which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent' (Q11§12; *SPN*: 328). In sum, good sense, for Gramsci, comprises the elements within common sense that reflect rational, critical thought, however naïve and raw a form this may take.

It is important to stress that whatever else it may be for Gramsci, common sense is never 'false consciousness'. The bringing into being of new, genuinely counter-hegemonic narratives – a crucial part of any social transformation – has to start with the world inhabited by the mass of the population. And that world is the world of common sense: 'the starting point must always be that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude and which has to be made ideologically coherent' (Q11§13; *SPN*: 421). As this comment makes clear, while Gramsci insists on common sense's chaotic and incoherent character – and incoherence is always negative for Gramsci – he is far from simply negative. Rather, he sees common sense as a multi-stranded, entwined knot of, on the one hand, clear-sightedness – which, like the little boy in the story, is not fooled by the sophistry of the Emperor's tailors – but, on the other, blinkered short-sightedness clinging defensively to the comfortable and familiar. Common sense is both 'crudely neophobe and conservative' (Q11§13; *SPN*: 423), and represents the raw beginnings of a genuinely counter-hegemonic narrative:

> Is it possible that a 'formally' new conception can present itself in a guise other than the crude, unsophisticated version of the populace? And yet the historian, with the benefit of all necessary perspective, manages to establish and to understand the fact that the beginnings of a new world, rough and jagged though they always are, are better than the passing away of the world in its death-throes and the swan-song that it produces.
>
> (Q11§12; *SPN*: 342–3)

As this passage indicates, for Gramsci, the task facing serious revolutionaries was the transformation of popular culture; in no way was he a disinterested, 'objective' observer. His often critical approach to popular culture comes through very clearly in his observations on folklore. The original nineteenth-century collectors of folk tales, such as the Grimm brothers, tended to see these tales, and folklore in general, as an embodiment of the authentic and ancient nation; Gramsci did not. Folklore was important to study for Gramsci because of the traces of oppositional worldviews it contained. By definition, subalterns tend to leave few traces in the official historical record; any evidence of subaltern narratives, however fragmentary, is therefore valuable. Folklore should be studied because it represents:

> a 'conception of the world and life' implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part

> implicit, mechanical and objective) to 'official' conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process.... This conception of the world is not elaborated and systematic because, by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development. It is, rather, ... a confused agglomerate of fragments of all the conceptions of the world and of life that have succeeded one another in history. In fact, it is only in folklore that one finds surviving evidence, adulterated and mutilated, of the majority of these conceptions.
>
> (Q27§1; *SCW*: 189)

It is clear that Gramsci's concern is with how understanding history better can help progressive forces bring about fundamental change, not with the celebration or preservation of 'authentic cultures'. Indeed, throughout the *Prison Notebooks* we find Gramsci combining a deep interest in folklore and popular culture with an uncompromisingly critical stance towards it: subalterns, he insists, need to transcend the cultures that have formed them. At the beginning of this chapter I quoted a passage from a note where Gramsci stresses the importance of transcending the culture into which we have been born. The savage indictment of the rural world into which he himself was born which leads up to that passage is a good example of just how scathing he could be about the parochialism of Italian rural culture. Gramsci asks:

> [I]s it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world (and this can be one's village or province; it can have its origins in the parish and the 'intellectual activity' of the local priest or ageing patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old woman who has inherited the lore of the witches or the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity and inability to act)? Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality?
>
> (Q11§12; *SPN*: 323–4)

Gramsci's palpable disdain here for rural society is likely to discomfort both anthropologists, a hallmark of whose discipline has long been an empathetic identification with those studied, and social historians raised on E.P. Thompson's strictures against the 'condescension of posterity' towards 'the poor stockinger,



the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott' (Thompson 1968: 13). We should remember, however, that Gramsci's overriding concern was always with how the fundamental inequalities of his society might be transformed. Such transformation, in his view, demanded that subalterns transcend their subalternity and begin to 'take an active part in the creation of the history of the world', and this required that they reject the hidebound and conservative societies that produced and reproduced a culture of subalternity.

In this chapter I have tried to show how Gramsci's concept of common sense offers a potentially fruitful approach to any theorist interested in mapping the lived realities of subalternity. Even those who reject Gramsci's essentially progressivist understanding of history, I would argue, can still benefit from his profoundly empirical approach to the mapping of the common sense assumptions and narratives subalterns use to make sense of their world. Unlike Gentile, who knows in advance 'the truths of common sense' (Gramsci 1971: 422, quoted above), Gramsci is always aware of the myriad forms 'common sense' can assume. As a theoretical concept, Gramsci's common sense provides us with a way of approaching the raw data of subaltern conceptions of the world that encourages us to pay careful attention to their contradictory and shifting complexity. Unlike traditional anthropological notions of culture or Bourdieu's habitus, common sense does not assume that the assemblages that make up common sense constitute any kind of system. Rather, common sense is, as Gramsci puts it in one of the formulations quoted above, 'a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one likes' (Q11§13; *SPN*: 422). This is also a concept quite free of the roseate *gemeinschaft* glow that still tends to radiate from the notion of culture.

## Notes

1 A version of this chapter appeared in the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 16 (2), 2011, pp. 273–87, as 'Gramsci's concept of common sense: a useful concept for anthropologists?' I am grateful for permission to publish this amended version here.
2 Raymond Williams, in his invaluable *Keywords* (1983), maps out the complicated history of the term 'culture' and the different ways it has come to be used. My focus in this chapter, however, is on culture understood as a way of life, one of the three main meanings Williams identifies.
3 Crehan (2002) discusses this at greater length.
4 Crehan (2002) examines Gramsci's general notion of culture in more detail.
5 See, for instance, McDougall (2008: 88).
6 Gramsci writes '*inconsequente*', which Hoare and Nowell Smith translate here as 'inconsequential'. 'Inconsistent' would be a better translation in this context. I am grateful to Frank Rosengarten for drawing my attention to this mistranslation.