

Common-Sense as the Necessary-Impossible Condition of the Political (abstract)

This paper addresses the issue of "the common" via the concept of common-sense, that is – the supposition that the same preconceptions and prejudgments underlie the perceptions and activities of all members of a political community. The discussion presents the way the concept of common-sense generates an image of a unified community; analyses the function of this image in the justification of political regimes; and then questions the claim that sense can be common and examines the implications of the problematization of common-sense on the understanding of political activity.

In the first part of the paper I argue that the idea of common-sense is a presupposition that underlies western philosophy and politics from ancient Greece to contemporary analytic philosophy: it implies a stable field of shared meanings at work in everyday practice and linguistic activity, thus generating an image of a unified, homogeneous community, in which the same presuppositions condition the perceptions and activities of all, educated and laymen alike. This image contains an egalitarian and anti-hierarchical potential, which puts it at the heart of the democratic objection to political privileges. Nevertheless, by creating the façade of unity it neutralizes and legitimizes the various mechanisms of power and domination that characterize every regime.

In the second part I examine the concept of common-sense from a critical perspective. Using arguments borrowed from Derrida and Deleuze I claim that the image of a unified community is problematic: ordinary language and daily practices cannot function as transparent means of communication and constitute for every entity a clear sustainable meaning. This leads to the conclusion that common-sense is not only culturally dependant, but is never really that comprehensive sphere of understandable meanings it is taken to be – things are never really in-common in the social sphere. Communication, to be sure, is not impossible, but no meaning is ever fully communicated and shared by all.

The deconstruction of common-sense criticizes the conditions of possibility of every claim for justification by a regime of power. But given the need of every political action to appear and make sense in public, does it not follow that common-sense is a precondition of every such action as well? Has the possibility of political action not been destroyed along with the justification for the political order? Not necessarily. In the last part of the paper I argue that for political action to appear in a public space and attain meanings in this sphere, its meanings do not have to be stable nor shared by all. Every activity might become a political event that problematizes and changes relations of power even when every person ascribes a different meaning to it. Even a collective activity can be executed by people who do not fully understand each other, and do not make the same sense of what they do. This implies the always open character of the political, that is – that political activities, or political aspects of activities, can be found everywhere. Common-sense, therefore, is the necessary-impossible condition of the political.