Cultures of Science

Special topic: Common sense

Preface: A special issue on common sense

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The reader might rightly ask for a word on the origin of this special issue of *Cultures of Science*. The topic of 'common sense' (CS) arose from an international workshop organized in September 2017 in Beijing by the then newly founded NAIS (National Academy of Innovation Strategy). As part of the developments, this very journal, *Cultures of Science*, was about to be launched, and the aim of the workshop was to explore future topics and issues that the journal seeks to address.

One of these topics is CS and its paradoxical relationship with science. The workshop participants had just returned from an excursion to Dunhuang at the edge of the desert in Gansu Province, where they had a guided visit to the extraordinary and marvellously restored Mogao Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. Deeply impressed by this relic of the Chinese past, they were more than ready to engage in scholarly reflections. During the workshop, scholars from China, Europe and North America reflected on CS and cognate concepts and discussed empirical observations in a series of papers.

The seminar explored how Eastern and Western traditions have dealt with different forms of knowledge, some more dignified and scholarly, some more popular but resilient. In exploring topics for our inquiries, we raised the following questions regarding the problem of CS:

1. How is the term 'common sense' translated from Latin, Greek, English, German or French into Chinese, Japanese or Korean, or vice versa? How easy is this translation?
2. How do people refer to CS, however translated, in everyday speech, and what functions does this reference have in social interaction and public discourse?
3. Is there a tradition of studying CS knowledge about health, plants, stars and the universe, society, the body, the mind and human moral characteristics—so-called 'folk knowledge'? What can we say about such studies?
4. How does scientific inquiry relate to these cultural stocks of knowledge? What are the risks of dismissing them as 'irrelevant', 'superstitious' or 'noxious'?
5. What are the differences and commonalities in the understanding of CS in the Eastern and Western scholarship traditions?
6. Is CS considered a universal form of knowledge or locally particular?

Earlier, in 2014, some of the participants had formed an interdisciplinary discussion group with a focus on CS, starting with a London workshop, sponsored by the LSE Research Committee, titled 'Reconsidering Common Sense' (RICOS). In subsequent years, with very little funding, the RICOS group moved between European locations and

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explored topics, including the brain, health, politics, rhetoric, techno-science and artificial intelligence (AI), in relation to CS. Participants represented many fields of inquiry, including linguistics, psychology, law, sociology, philosophy, political science and computer science.

The discussion on AI and CS was published as a book (Bauer and Schiele, 2024), and our discussions around science and CS have finally matured and are presented in this special issue. We hope this will stimulate further analyses and future debates on the cultures of science.

Preview of this issue

Three Chinese contributions from the workshop have already been published in this journal; readers are invited to consult these directly; six further contributions round up this project.

Li (2022) offers an analysis of 'Changshi', the usual Chinese translation of 'common sense'. Explaining the constitution of the two characters '常识' (traditional form '常識') in the context of both historical and modern Chinese writing, Li points to two meanings: general knowledge of facts and rules, long observed and still valid, and the principles inherent in these.

Hu (2024) follows a recent controversy about Pu'er tea in China, in which scientific opinion and public opinion diverged. Considering these as two different epistemic perspectives allows us to account for the variations in attention, problem definition and judgement criteria in the debate. Communication between scientists and lay people needs to respect these perspectival paradoxes.

Liu and Chu (2022) explore the meaning of 'Changshi' through the history of the elementary school curriculum in China's mainland. The term was used in 1922 to sell textbooks that cover the topics of both Society and Nature. After 1949, 'Changshi' continued to feature among courses taught until phased out in the education reform of 2001. However, this was not the case in Hong Kong, where such courses remain on offer. Thus, for education, 'Changshi' historically served as a term of convenience that broadly covers both Society and Nature and competes with progressive specialization. The term continues to resonate with scholars who seek to balance STEM, social sciences and humanities in their educational philosophy.

This present special issue includes six additional papers to complete this project. Two pieces are English translations of the German and French originals and contain elaborate arguments that are regaining currency and deserve a more global audience.

By way of introduction, **Martin W Bauer** (London, UK, Guest Editor) explores why and how the concept of CS contributes to the study of cultures of science with a comparative and global perspective. This requires an examination of the translations and ambivalence of the word. We also need to be aware of three key theoretical ideas of CS (integrated perception, self-evident universal knowledge and prereflexive moral community) and should consider cognate concepts such as mentality, everyday knowledge and the lifeworld when fostering these discussions and empirical research on cultures of science.

Hermann Lübbe (Zurich, Switzerland; German original 1987) argues that modern science has lost the 'scandal value' it once had. Science no longer creates a world view that competes with religion. This normalization of science brings neutrality and is enhanced by intensified science communication that focuses on the practical relevance of research rather than on theoretical curiosity that disturbs religious concerns. At the same time, the specialization, speed of innovation and political significance of science displace the symbolically integrative CS. Without this integrative capacity of a common ground, this leads to an acceptance crisis of innovations, mistrust in expertise and ambivalent attitudes towards progress. To compensate, intensified museal recycling of scientific 'relics' seeks to reconstitute the evaporating common ground with the accelerated curation of technical artefacts on display.

Bernard Schiele (Montreal, Canada; French original 1984) offers a theoretical argument in a longer text that is required for this task. He discusses how the vertical and horizontal gaps between science and CS — the epistemic rupture between scientific and natural knowledge — as was discussed in France, can be bridged with a dialogical concept of social representation. This now classical argument presents the conceptual ideas and elements that are needed to study the late-modern cultures of science empirically.

Ivana Marková (Stirling, UK) offers an argument about epistemic trust and authority. She argues that CS includes a dialogical commitment to mutual learning from one another, and for recognizing epistemic trust and the authority of truth as part of this common ground. CS recognizes that some people are more competent than others on some topics. She distinguishes a voluntary authority relation from obedience and compliance, which are based on coercion. Various social trends and failures of education have undermined this essential common ground of truth and people's trust in the authority of science.

Luke J Buhagiar (Msida, Malta), **Stavroula Tsirogianni** (Shenzhen, China) **and Gordon Sammut** (Msida, Malta) develop an argument rooted in the social representation approach. They explore social processes, arising from diverse perspectives, that potentially enable the diversity of scientific objects. The study of cultures of science will therefore explore diverse inter-objectivities. This, however, does not sacrifice objectivity to laissez-faire relativity but recognizes it as a social process of certification that is contingent on different perspectives. This argument engages with Needham's notion of a 'universal world science' as the confluence of different historical streams of science.

Finally, **Bradley Franks** (London, UK) examines the everyday mentality that is prone to conspiracy theories. The universality of conspiratorial ideation in past and present societies invites an evolutionary approach to such CS beliefs, with a focus on elite reputation. The evolutionary account suggests that before conspiracy theories are debunked, because they motivate the rejection of scientific facts or theories, we must examine their primary adaptive functionality: the capacity to recognize cues indicating hostile out-group coalitions. Conspiracy theories represent an ancestral heritage of cognitive capacity that adds a 'hypersensitive hostile coalition detection system' to basic human in-group/out-group dynamics. Conspiracy mentality elaborates moral indignation about elites who are under observation and whose reputation is for sell-out, failure, corruption and cover-up. The problem arises from a detection hypersensitivity that is prone to errors of commission (i.e., false positives); that is, most conspiracy theories are false. Culturally specific dynamics of COVID-19 conspiracies serve as illustrations.

In honour of Ivana Marková (1938–2024)

Sadly, Professor Ivana Marková passed away after a short illness at the end of 2024 in Cambridge, UK. Happy are those who have students, and Ivana Marková had many who listened. We dedicate this special issue in tribute to her memory as an eminent scholar and inspiring teacher.

Ivana Marková was born in Czechoslovakia, where she encountered political difficulties when studying medicine, so she moved into the fields of philosophy and psychology. In 1967, she emigrated to the UK, first to Cambridge and then to Scotland, where she became Professor of Psychology at the University of Stirling. She was a member of the British Academy, Maison des Sciences de L'Homme (Paris) and Academia Istropolitana (Bratislava), and a Fellow at LSE and Wolfson College, Cambridge. We also honour Ivana Marková as a founding member of RICOS, a discussion network formed in 2014 at LSE. Her contribution to this special issue is one of the last of many pieces of her printed writing in a long, productive and uncompromising career that was dedicated to a dialogical psychology as part of the social and historical sciences.

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Author biography

Martin W Bauer read psychology and economic history (Bern, Zurich, London), and is Professor of Social Psychology and Research Methodology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. A member of German National Academy of Technical Sciences (acatech) and a former editor of *Public Understanding of Science*, he investigates 'common sense' in a comparative perspective and in relation to science and new technologies. His international network MACAS (mapping the cultural authority of science) coordinates research and analyses of social attitudes, public discourse and qualitative inquiries into techno-science developments. His recent publications include: *The Psychology of Social Influence: Modes and Modalities of Shifting Common Sense* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), *The Cultural Authority of Science: Comparing across Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas* (Routledge, 2019) and *Atoms, Bytes and Genes: Public Resistance and Techno-Scientific Responses* (Routledge, 2015).