

Common sense: A feature of cultures of science

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Cultures of Science
2025, Vol. 8(2) 87–94
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DOI: 10.1177/20966083251333890
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The English edition of *China Daily* on 13 September 2017 had a story (page 12) sponsored by the State Forestry Administration, which ran a campaign against desertification: The Songhe villager, Shi Shuzhu (with photo) of Minqin County, Gansu Province, describes the collective effort to build a 9-kilometre long ‘green wall’ to keep the desert out, declaring that ‘respecting science and technology for its useful new methods is something I have learned from long periods of struggling with sandstorms’. Whether this is an authentic citation or not, the story is about respect for the authority of science because it is solving an existential problem in the Songhe village. This respect is not granted for the beauty and elegance of mathematical models provided, for the Greater Glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, as it was known in Latin), for the Honour of Allah, the prosperity or greatness of the nation, or the productivity of researchers in delivering high-quality research papers. The sole basis of respect for science is the capacity of science to solve existential everyday problems. This utility is not a scientific criterion. The ‘green wall’ does not care about its utility; utility is at most one of many expectations brought into consideration by human common sense (CS). With this special issue of *Cultures of Science*, we want to stimulate research into CS as a feature of past and present cultures of science. For this purpose, it will be useful to clarify first the different aspects of CS.

1. Scientific culture and science culture

The culture of science can be contrasted with scientific culture (Bauer, 2015). Scientific culture deals with the circumstances of producing science, its

ethos, its funding situation, the working conditions of researchers and how this forms a dynamic system. Science culture refers to science-in-society—the ecosystem of science that looks to science for help and a sense of common ground.

Since the scientific revolution in early modern Europe in the 16th/17th century, the questions of who in society pays attention to and supports scientific endeavours and of what images of ‘science’ underpin such support have been a concern of historians and scientists alike (Cohen, 1994). With the term ‘science culture’, we refer to the societal base of science; that is, CS that grants, stalls or withholds epistemic authority to or from science.

2. The term ‘common sense’

The English dictionary (Collins, accessed online, 17 September 2023) defines CS as follows: ‘Common sense is your natural ability to make good judgments and to behave in a practical and sensible way.’ Sentences and phrases such as ‘use your common sense’, or ‘she always had a lot of common sense’, or ‘a commonsense approach’ show how embedded the term is in the language. The adjective ‘commonsensical’ refers to being inspired by or displaying sound, practical sense. Synonyms of CS are *good sense*, *wit*, *wisdom*, *sound judgement*, *level-headedness* and *practicality*;

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antonyms are *stupidity, impracticality, ineptness, foolishness, insanity, irrationality* and *unreasonableness*.

The term ‘common sense’ emerged in the second half of the 18th century, and its usage increased in the 19th century and has stayed at a higher level ever since, with some fluctuations. For example, its usage dipped in the late 19th century, rose in the first half of the 20th century, dipped again in the 1970s and rose again ever since. These fluctuations in usage might be a cultural indicator of periods when CS is in or out of the public discourse.

In his *Studies of Words*, Lewis (1960: 146ff) distinguishes four usages of CS. Usage 1 CS refers to the ‘elementary mental outfit of a normal man’. Distinct from this is usage 2 CS, which is seen as a virtue including courtesy, respect for ritual and sympathy that one acquires in interaction with fellow humans. It is what children acquire in the community with their peers. Usage 3 CS is the residue of universal human experience and includes pains and pleasures, gains and losses, birth and death, and comedy and tragedy. Public speakers universally appeal to these commonplaces. Finally, usage 4 CS refers to memory, imagination and wit. As the arbiter of the five senses, it turns punctual sensations into coherent experiences or ‘appreciation’.

Lewis also points out that the attribute ‘common’ is ambivalent: it means low, ordinary and vulgar on the one hand; alternatively, it refers to a human patrimony that is universally accessible and ubiquitous. This ‘universal’ is also the voice of nature in which good is separated from evil, as in natural justice or the natural law traditions. Thus, the word is used both disparagingly and to refer to a higher faculty, the lack of which would be considered stupid or even pathological. Many languages use different words to capture this ambivalence. For example, in French or Danish, *sens commun* or *snusfornuft* connote a negative meaning, and *le bon sens* or *sund fornuft* connote a positive meaning. The Chinese use a single translation, *changshi*, with two characters ‘常识’ (traditional form 常識) (see Li, 2022).

3. The three technical concepts of CS

In the European tradition, CS is also a concept that attracted scholarly and historical reflections. Three such idea streams are worth distinguishing.

The first concept is rather old, tracing to the axial times of Aristotle (4th century BCE) and his notion of the sixth sense refining and synthesizing the five external senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste). The Greek *koine aisthesis* became Latin *sensus communis* and thus the modern English ‘the common sense’ (with a definite article, ‘the’). Aristotle referred to a mental capacity that brings the five senses into concert along multi-sensory features such as roughness, shape or magnitude. I can see and hear a large moving object. The senses are separable only in physiology and sensation; in perception, they are inseparable. First the heart, later the brain, was the physical organ of this integration. While there remain textual difficulties in reconstructing the key functions of CS, Aristotelian philosophy returns in modern discussions of neural integration and consciousness (Gregoric, 2007: 209ff), and also in notions of a higher mental function that integrates different kinds of intelligence that are social, intuitive and rapidly effective.

While attempts to locate ‘the sixth sense’ have been abandoned, it survives as a joke about people with ‘special abilities’ for fortune-telling, and the scientific problem of ‘cross-modal binding’ of sensory integration persists. How do we come from a faint sound (‘miao-miao’), the vision of a moving shape and a fluffy touch to recognize a ‘cat’, even before we say the word ‘cat’? If it purrs like a cat, walks like a cat, feels like a cat ... it must be a cat. This transition from sensory patterns to perceiving tokens of kinds (a cat) remains a philosophical puzzle (Siegel, 2012). Artificial intelligence has become good at pattern recognition when trained on massive data, but even here we do not know exactly how this is achieved with layers of neural networks.

The second concept of CS is usually traced to writers of the Scottish Enlightenment in the 18th century. Some writers searching for certainty engaged in a polemic debate that steered a middle way between scepticism (we cannot know anything) and dogmatism (we only know for certain what is logically demonstrated). They defended CS (without an article) that refers to everyday reasoning and a stock of widely available knowledge. This self-evident knowledge does not need formal deduction and is widely accessible in pre-reflective experience. To access this knowledge, no expertise beyond being

human and primary socialization is needed. This ‘mental dictionary’ is also not bound by any specific language but finds expression in the vernacular.

This tradition of CS provides lists of pre-reflective beliefs that are beyond doubt. The goal is to show that ways of thinking that are inconsistent with these basic beliefs are most likely erroneous. Thomas Reid (1710–1796) stated that ‘there are certain principles ... which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give reasons for them ... the principles of Common Sense’ (cited in Rosenfeld, 2011: 72). A paradox might arise: by listing these items, they are no longer taken for granted because their self-evidence is subject to scrutiny: is the list incomplete or overextended? This CS reasoning often carries the connotation of working below capacity in the mode of a ‘cognitive miser’. On the other hand, the tradition of CS philosophy of mind (associated with names such as Aristotle, Reid, Moore, Ryle, Wittgenstein, Austin, Grice, Searle et al.) offers a distinct approach of a) rejecting central Cartesian assumptions on methodology, and b) championing lay people, when they come into conflict with philosophers and scientists (Boulter, 2007).

CS first and second is an individual capacity, though widely distributed. Thirdly, CS is also the social sense of community, in German *Gemeinsinn* or *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* (we-feeling, moral community). Here, the stress is on the human capacity to relate to fellow others and the common good; CS is a moral programme. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), another writer of the Enlightenment age (Pompa, 1990: 27ff) in Naples, Italy, developed the argument in his ‘new science’. With the axiomatic style of, but against the dogmas of logical rationality, he defended rhetorical reasoning based on symbols and historical narratives that build a moral community and rituals around solving basic social problems.

CS is a condition of possibilities to solve existential social problems: authority of hierarchy (religion), sex and birth (kinship) and death (funerals). CS creates universal institutions that, in solving these problems variously, support changing attitudes with belief, judgement and ritual. The moral community is not the outcome of abstract reasoning but of

joint attention and joint outlook, not least through storytelling and culture. CS is ‘judgement without reflection’—a post-perceptual but pre-reflective reasoning (Schaeffer, 2004) that binds people into conventions and traditions as a basis for interaction among equals.

The rhetorical concept here is the ‘common ground’ (in Greek *doxa*) of beliefs and opinions that can be invoked. There is no need to spell out what is taken for granted, as certain arguments resonate and achieve persuasive effect. *Doxa* is ‘those opinions ... which are accepted by everyone or by the majority or by the wise ... or by the most notable and reputable of them’ (Aristotle, in Barnes, 1984: 167). This CS is bound by the community of speaker—listeners who gather in conversation and dialogue. It is the crisis of common ground, both nationally and internationally, that deeply worries contemporary assessments of CS. The causes are political fragmentation (Assmann and Assmann, 2024), and science modelling itself entirely on the triumph of modern physics must take the blame (Stengers, 2020).

Historically, this moral CS is vested in events in which people cultivate a sense of belonging and take counsel on how to behave. There seems to be a line from axial times of Greek city states, Buddhist councils, church councils, to modern town hall meetings—the ‘third places’ that are neither work nor family, where people deliberate, relate to authorities and reach a common understanding (Gadamer, 1960). This procedural CS of the public sphere is becoming a method in ‘deliberative opinion polling’ (Fishkin, 2011): a cross-section of lay people is invited to examine controversial topics such as ‘nuclear waste deposits’, ‘genetically modified crops’ or ‘artificial intelligence in medical diagnosis’. Thus, informed public opinion is an improvement on prejudice, rumours and straw polling; it enhances decision-making and adds legitimacy to responsive government.

4. Science versus CS

The key problem arising from this is the differences and tensions between science and CS. Before we go there, we need to consider some cognate concepts that are often contrasted with science.

4.1 Historical mentality—pointing to the *longue durée*

A cognate concept of CS is what French historians call ‘mentality’. Le Goff (1999: 174ff) analysed the language that monks used in the 13th century to create ideal models of place and time, money and social structures, against which the reality of life could be judged. He analysed the vocabulary in texts produced by these social movements to show how these ideals worked and how they were different from modern meanings. Bloch (1948) analysed the psychological basis of technological progress in early modernity. He identified the revaluation of manual labour among elites, and the re-imagining of innovation as enhancing rather than disrupting the established order. Basic assumptions had to shift so that people could believe in a better future. Thus, mentality marks the emerging mental differences between the ancient and the modern worlds. The problem arises in how to distinguish mentalities. Rather than telling a story of trajectories from myth and magic to modern science, or from pre-logical to logical thinking, Lloyd (1990) suggests that mentalities should be compared as styles of discourse, as sets of plausible proofs and arguments in context. Mentalities differ in terms of what is considered believable or unbelievable and can be considered established facts or not. Different mentalities recognize overlapping sets of proofs and arguments and therefore exhibit historical continuities and contrasts. With this idea, we gain the notion that CS is changing, but the speed is slow, without clear breaks, and in *longue durée* cycles of centuries.

4.2 Everyday knowledge—highlighting local context and diversity

Another cognate of CS is everyday knowledge concerning practical problems that is locally adapted to specific circumstances and traditionally handed down by imitation and from teacher to student. In a sense, it is ‘natural’ and not designed by systematic inquiry. There have been various attempts to contrast everyday knowledge with scientific knowledge using a set of criteria. Some authors highlight the functional strength of knowledge, such as being practical under time pressure, focusing on concrete ego-involvement

to avoid blame, and on diagnosis by similarity and rationalizations in hindsight (Wagner and Hayes, 2005). Philosophers of science provide criteria that demarcate science from other knowledge practices and their weaknesses. Hoyningen-Huene (2013) offers nine criteria of demarcation: description, explanation, prediction, defence of aspirations, critical discourse, empirical networks, the ideal of completeness, genesis of new knowledge, and representation of knowledge. Scientific research differs from everyday observations in any combination of these. The overarching deficiency of CS is that it is not systematic, but no scientific field excels everyday practice on all criteria, and only some of these criteria qualify any particular science. Overall, science is close to normal experience on some criteria; hence the contrast between science and everyday knowledge is always only partial. This demarcation of the everyday world and science leaves us with the problem of how we can live in two worlds and whether we have to choose. Ryle (1960) illustrates the need for tolerance with an analogy. Specifically, one can describe a library by accounting for the buying and selling of library books in stock, or by describing the reading and judging of the books’ content. Both may be done well or badly, that is, covering the library material completely or incompletely but under incompatible framing, and neither says anything about the other. And to consider the accountant’s story as being more valid because they might use numbers is not really justified. It appears that there are two empirical libraries, one for the accountant and one for the reader, and we need to appreciate them for what they offer. The attribute ‘everyday’ points to the diversity and complementarity of such pragmatic contexts.

4.3 Lifeworld—pointing to lost human common ground

Another cognate of CS is the lifeworld—a concept introduced by the philosopher Edmund Husserl in the 1920s. He does not stress a contrast to science, but the loss of awareness and the neglect of roots. Science, and even formal mathematics, is grounded in practical concerns of the ‘natural attitude’ (e.g., geometry initially solves problems of measuring territories and sorting property). But everyday concerns

get displaced and neglected by the trick of formalization; mathematical abstractions create this distance effect from everyday life. Thus, we end up with an idealization of the world in the quantitative and mathematical format of modern science, which we then narrate back as the ‘real world’. This becomes a worrying ‘iconodulance’ when the model gets confused with the reality. Monological idealization of the world has many historical advantages, but forgetting its basis in the universal structure of a dialogical lifeworld will undermine, alienate or consume its foundations like a parasite in its host, and end in crisis (Moran, 2012). Habermas (1987: 286ff) calls this problem the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’ when monological instrumental rationality displaces dialogical reasoning. Being forgetful of the lifeworld means that CS is displaced by specialized, idealized and formalized knowledge even in everyday life. Modernity is then defined by the higher and thus more dominant ratio of specialized knowledge to residual CS in the stock of knowledge. The difficulties arise when this ratio becomes too large and CS is spread too thin; then society loses the common ground that is guaranteed by CS and slides into crisis (Luckmann, 1987). The term ‘lifeworld’ highlights the potential self-misunderstanding of specialist knowledge.

5. Vertical gap or horizontal continuity?

The relations between science and CS are commonly analysed as one of three possibilities and variations of the following:

- Science involves counter-intuitive, logical thinking, and is therefore superior to CS (vertical hierarchy with rupture).
- Science is little more than elaborated CS (continuity, horizontal).
- We must suspend judgement and study both science and CS to gain clarity about their different uses, and retain, not eliminate, CS.

In this latter mode, Lynch (1993) does not find any difference in living, working and account-giving in and outside the scientific laboratory. When people

put on white coats at the lab, they are still performing skills and not abandoning the mundane everyday world. The claim that they do so is at best boundary work to accumulate privileges for science. Science is thus only discursively dignified as a superior performance of knowledge production, which, incidentally, is or is not shared CS.

CS is many things to many people. For a discussion in *Cultures of Science*, CS is contested territory. I see at least three different attitudes manifesting themselves in the research (see also Bauer, 2009). These attitudes are as follows.

All too often, CS leads to an exercise of *debunking superstitions* and other popular beliefs. Here, science culture is a worry because it is the place of superstitions, disinformation, half-knowledge, misunderstanding, complete and utter ignorance, mumbo-jumbo, and virulent memes and rumours that give rise to anti-science (Holton, 1993). Many scientists identify with this attitude and expect journals like *Cultures of Science* to identify false beliefs, debunk them, deconstruct them, and profile sociodemographic and psychological variables for better control. The debunking agenda is itself a modernist obsession (see Mackay, 1841), not only of the Western Enlightenment. It continues to be important because false ideas and fake facts create complacency and harm people, and denying climate change is only one affected issue among many.

CS is thus a focus of intellectual outrage and the *target of interventions*. For many people, the term ‘science culture’ is neither a social-psychological nor a historical phenomenon, but a commitment to activism to enhance science literacy, design perception in support of new technology, recruit young people into STEM careers, and increase engagement with science among segments of society. These strategic interventions have actors, target groups, tools, ideas, contexts, effects and unintended consequences. Research must show how interventions can be more effective and more efficient, but also how they misfire.

However, CS is also a *resource* of inspiration and legitimacy; it is not the problem. Rather, the misunderstanding, loss, neglect and forgetting of CS might be the problem. CS is an asset, the cultural capital of traditions, local knowledge, and values that need care and respect because people’s lifeworlds are at stake.

Here, research has in the past and shall in the future chart how this resource becomes manifest in public controversies. In the local and global controversies over water fluoridation, nuclear power, IQ testing, global warming, evolutionary biology, genetically modified crops, cloning, artificial intelligence and so on, CS manifests itself as civic epistemology and social representations, situated recalcitrance and resistance towards exclusive scientific expertise. The technocratic temptation to see public concerns only as vested interests or irrational anxiety is always strong among elites. But it is risky to dismiss CS *a priori* as false in the face of real ignorance and uncertainty. Many techno-scientific developments are intrinsically uncertain, working at the frontiers of ignorance, saturated with imagination where reality still needs to be defined and measured. Here, CS in the form of public opinion remains an asset and must be mobilized into debates; the future starts with the debate.

Research into cultures of science has and will follow the *governance of science* with analytical and empirical studies of public deliberation in its many formats and functions, be they controversies, consensus conferences, attitude surveys or deliberative opinion polling. Therefore, research into science communication and science-in-society, through the idea of cultures of science, contributes to the history of science by seeking answers to the question: how does CS enable and constrain the production of knowledge? Following Sammut and Bauer's (2021) systematic treatment of the processes of 'soft power' or social influence, we might reformulate the question: how do cultures of science seek to assimilate and end up accommodating CS?

CS compares unfavourably with skilled expert knowledge. Modern society has many experts. It seems that CS can fall short, but one cannot excel in it. It is the expert that goes beyond CS with 10,000 hours of training in any task, physical or mental (Ericson, 2016). Therefore, we can be diverted or blocked from CS, which can leave us with a sense of nostalgia, an urgency to appeal to and to regain it. We find this regret in everyday discourse. Here are two examples.

Robin Lane Fox is an eminent historian of the ancient world who also comments weekly in a newspaper gardening column. In the article 'Grow your

own expertise' (*Financial Times*, 9 May 2015), Fox commented: 'how many great naturalists and plant breeders succeeded without any formal training by simply reading, travelling and using common sense'. He clearly seeks to encourage readers to garden as they wish and ignore experts who might try to discourage gardening among those without formal training.

A different regret is reported in the news article 'An extremist hostage taking in Sydney' (*London Evening Standard*, 16 December 2014). A lawyer is quoted as saying '... Monis [the terrorist] has an ideology just so strong and so powerful that it clouds his vision for common sense and objectiveness'. Here, it is not formal training, but an obsession with dogma and identification that detracts from CS. It seems that both dogmatic power and excessive solidarity of us-and-them are the enemies of CS (Lindenberg, 1987).

6. Summary and conclusion

In this paper, I wanted to stimulate research into cultures of science, past and present. However, to move along this path, I needed to clarify the concept of CS. This section lists several considerations for analysing CS.

Firstly, both the scientific culture of the laboratory and the science culture of daily life are locations for finding CS, but we expect more of it in the latter. CS is also an English term in everyday use. Appearing in the 18th century, it refers to elementary mental capacities of normal functioning; it captures the respect for social rituals that arise from universal human experiences of pleasure and pain, birth and death, and comedy and tragedy. Finally, 'common' is ambivalent, of universal but also of lower and ordinary quality. This suggests a careful examination of how the word is translated in different languages.

Secondly, we reviewed three technical concepts. The CS of Aristotle integrates the five senses into a synthesis. The Enlightenment idea of self-evident and pre-reflective knowledge finds certainty without formal demonstration. Finally, CS means the moral community of mutual respect that guarantees the rhetorical common ground (*doxa*) of plausible arguments in public deliberations that lead towards a

common understanding of changing world circumstances.

Furthermore, we need to recognize cognate terms, as follows: ‘mentality’ highlights *longue durée* and slow-motion change; ‘everyday knowledge’ stresses the context of local and traditional diversity; ‘life-world’ points to everyday foundations, which, when forgotten, render science prone to a legitimization crisis.

Finally, CS is contrasted with science. Here, we find hierarchy and rupture, continuity and elaboration, or functional comparison. The dominant approach assumes a rupture and tasks science communicators with debunking popular superstitions and producing propaganda against misinformation. This is mostly unsuccessful, misleading and risky, and must not be the only function of communication. CS is foundational and inspirational; it anchors and accommodates new knowledge in the moral universe, that for our Songhe villager above is marked by struggles against recurring sandstorms.

With these four considerations at hand, future research seems to be in a better position to examine, compare and appreciate CS as a core feature of modern science cultures around the globe.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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