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Heikkinen, Vesa

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Experts, Citizens, and the Politics of Common Sense

Vesa Heikkinen[1]

Abstract

From climate change to digitalisation, from pandemics to political polarization, many globally felt phenomena create unprecedented needs for scientific solutions and technical expertise in decision-making. However, despite the undeniable importance of expert knowledge in a complex world, this chapter argues that for democratic institutions to function, the plurality of particular viewpoints which arise in the concrete life of citizens must be given its due share in political activity. Taking its cue and inspiration from such political philosophers as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Michael Oakeshott, this chapter attempts to outline a spectrum of 'common sense', or a sphere of practical, non-scientific knowledge as opposed to technical, scientific knowledge. Moreover, the chapter problematizes the power of expert specialization by arguing that overt reliance on experts in modern society may unduly favour the latter sort of knowledge – that is, abstract, technical knowledge – at the expense of practical, or concrete, knowledge. Finally, taking this notion a step further, the chapter suggests that technical knowledge, being based on the idea of scientific progress, may lead decision-makers to inadvertently favour reform, as opposed to preservation, as a course of political action.

Keywords: Experts, Democracy, Populism, Governance, Citizenship, Accountability

Introduction

During the 2016 Brexit campaign, the British Secretary of State for Justice Michael Gove asserted that 'the people in this country have had enough of experts'. Appearing on television as part of the Leave campaign, the Justice Secretary refused to name economists who were in favour of Brexit, adding later that he did not ask the people to trust him in the matter of leaving the EU, but to trust themselves.[2]

While this essay makes no attempt to analyse Brexit as such from any perspective, Gove's words may serve as a way of introduction to the theoretical matter this chapter pursues, namely the distinction between a political society ruled by citizens, and a political society relying on experts and their knowledge in specific fields. Is the claim 'this country has had enough of experts' merely an outburst of lowbrow anti-intellectualism – which, of course, is a mode of communication that has a long history of its own – or could such a statement have some merit for the purposes of understanding the political realm and its various, often non-rational currents? The fact that this latter possibility is raised here is surely enough to give away the leaning of the present work towards a tentative 'yes' answer.

Furthermore, keeping Gove's rhetoric in mind for now, we may posit a further question: if the people are indeed right not to trust him, but should instead trust themselves, what is it that they ultimately place their trust on? Merely 'themselves' is arguably inadequate,

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[2] On a program on the Sky News network on 3.6.2016, Gove was interviewed by Faisal Islam concerning Brexit. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGtJk7MA, accessed 18.11.2020. See also Henry Mance, 'Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove,' *Financial Times* on 3.6.2016. https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c#axzz4G50gEbvD, accessed 30.11.2020.

as this could mean either personal background, expertise, or pure prejudice, to name a few examples. The aim of this essay is to outline the answer that they should trust themselves as citizens, i.e. as they are in their role as part of a commonwealth, giving rise to something that we may call 'common sense'. This further requires that citizenship be not understood merely as a legal status, but in the more specific sense of a 'public mode of being'.[3] From the nature of public activity as rational plurality this essay will take its cue to argue that common sense has an important role in Western political history, however difficult its precise nature may be to pinpoint.

The next step will be to problematize technical, or expert-driven political rule on behalf of common sense. As a whole, this essay will consider the dichotomy of 'citizens or experts' from two fairly broad perspectives. The first has to do with the question of the nature of politics as such, and consequently with the manner in which citizens or experts should be seen as political participants by nature deserving to influence political decision-making in a republican/democratic form of government. The second perspective problematizes the power of experts by arguing that overt reliance on experts in modern society may unduly favour a specific sort of knowledge – that is, abstract, technical knowledge – at the expense of practical, or concrete, knowledge. Furthermore, taking the second perspective a step further, I will suggest that technical knowledge, being based on the idea of scientific progress, may lead decision-makers to inadvertently favour reform, as opposed to preservation, as their course of political action. As a whole, the arguments in this chapter are largely inspired by, and owe a great deal to, such eminent 20th century thinkers as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Michael Oakeshott.

Background: From Antiquity to Modernity

The Ancients and common sense

As we begin to ponder the required elements in a political decision-making process, we first turn, in a cursory way, towards the ancients, notably Plato and Aristotle. In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, the author has the protagonist Socrates discuss the nature of virtuousness with the title character Protagoras, the old and respected sophist.

The underlying main theme in *Protagoras* is the question whether or not virtue is something that can be taught. Is the virtuous man, or the virtuous citizen, fundamentally to be seen as a trained expert, much in the way of engineers and doctors? Or is there virtue inherently in people as such, perhaps existing somewhat in the manner of 'common sense', in the usual meaning of the word?[4]

[3] In Europe and elsewhere, this 'public mode of being' seems to be quite missing, evoking, at best, some ideas of commonly visible media-activity. However, because of the sheer magnitude of their consequences, the various rejections facing the EU in national referenda may be seen as outcries towards this now lost public relevance. Brexit was certainly not the first instance of this tendency, and in 2005, Herman van Gunsteren argued that the rejection of the proposed constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands marked a sort of birth of true European Citizenship – a citizenship that contrary to technocratic wishes did not want the proposed form of integration. See Herman van Gunsteren, 'The Birth of the European Citizen out of the Dutch No Vote', *European constitutional law review*, 1, 2005, 406.

[4] It is worth remarking that both the Finnish and Swedish concepts of 'common sense' (*maalaisjärki* and *bondförnuft*) literally denote 'rural reason', aptly pointing back to earlier agrarian societies with less differentiated fields of expertise. As I will show in greater detail below, common sense, in its ancient meaning, can be traced to Aristotle, who held the view that human sense apparatus, in addition to the regular perceptive senses like seeing and hearing, also required a common sense (*sensus communis / koine aisthēsis*), which made it possible for the soul to understand visual and auditory stimuli intelligibly

Socrates observes that in the Athenian communal gatherings in the *agora*, speaking about societal matters is most often restricted. For example, when deciding where to build a bridge, not everyone is allowed to speak, but rather those who possess expert knowledge of bridges: the engineers. Similarly, when discussing questions pertaining to seafaring, other speakers are silenced but the sailors are allowed to speak. In other words, the ones trusted to give sound advice are the experts. Nonetheless, when general political matters are addressed, i.e. those requiring justice and wisdom, similar restrictions are not observed, but rather, every citizen is given a chance to speak their mind. Socrates draws the conclusion that there exists a general sphere of political activity in which expert training does not exist, but rather, everyone is an expert.[5]

This conclusion may have some merit, at least insofar as human beings as such are by nature social or political animals. Not everyone knows how to build bridges or pilot ships, but everyone holds at least some knowledge of what it is to live in a community, and to be an individual necessarily connected to others. This necessary connectedness might function as a fundamental basis for citizenship, thereby serving as the common ground on which general political discussion may be established.[6]

The understanding of human beings as social animals was further developed and laid out by Aristotle. In his view, the human being is the animal that possesses *logos*, the capability of speech and rationality. Taking into account this dual meaning, one could make the distinction that insofar as human beings speak inward, to themselves, they are a rational animal; and insofar as they speak outward, to other human beings, they are a social animal. Hence, it could be argued that the political animal is born once a human being accomplishes both the former and the latter.[7]

However, in practical life the capability of inner speech, of being in concord with oneself, may well be a necessary prerequisite of sound political action. This, at least, is the interpretation advanced by Dana Villa in his book *Socratic Citizenship*, in which he offers Socrates as a model for a proper citizen.

Relying on Hannah Arendt, Villa argues that thoughtful solitude, our being alone with ourselves (the private sphere of thinking), is what provides us with our basic, and in many ways most important understanding of human plurality, ethical relationships, and, indeed, friendship itself. The relationship each individual establishes with his or her partner in

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together, as otherwise they would be incompatible with each other, having nothing in common. A further interpretation, mentioned by Leo Strauss, is common sense as the sensible decorum into which people slowly grow through their upbringing, and by virtue of which one can immediately 'sense' an untactful remark or a rude suggestion. See Strauss, *On Political Philosophy: Responding to the Challenge of Positivism and Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2018), 66.

[5] Plato, *Protagoras*, 319b-e.

[6] 'At least every sane adult possesses political knowledge to some degree. Everyone knows something of taxes, police, law, jails, war, peace, armistice. Everyone knows that the aim of war is victory, that war demands the supreme sacrifice and many other deprivations, that bravery deserves praise and cowardice deserves blame. Everyone knows that buying a shirt, as distinguished from casting a vote, is not in itself a political action.' Leo Strauss, *What is political philosophy?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 14. Of course, we might today question whether the behaviors of consumption have not actually acquired a (fabricated) dimension of political meaning themselves, even sometimes surpassing traditional political action itself. I refer here to various manners of ethical consumption, voluntary payments for flying etc.

[7] 'Living together with others begins with living together with oneself.' See Hannah Arendt, 'Philosophy and politics', *Social Research*, 2004, 71(3), 439.

thought serves as the basis for the kind of relationships he or she establishes with others, including both friends and other citizens.[8]

Socrates, who of course defined himself as the 'ultimate non-expert', claiming that he knew only that he knew nothing, not even the way to the marketplace, is a peculiar and interesting model for citizenship. This is not least due to the fact that he has generally been described as an unyielding nonconformist, a barely tolerated 'gadfly', who disturbed the normal proceedings in the Athenian public, and was ultimately sentenced to death.[9]

In Villa's view, it was precisely Socrates's human wisdom, especially in recognizing that human beings do not possess any craft-like knowledge when it comes to the 'most important things', which defined him as a model citizen. As can be seen in his *Apology*, as well as in the *Protagoras*, Plato had Socrates stand in contradistinction to the sophists and their rhetorical stance as the 'moral expert'.[10] As outlined in many of Plato's dialogues, under Socrates' skepticism, the claims to moral expertise of statesmen and citizens alike are repeatedly revealed as having their basis in mere opinion.[11]

Modernity, positivism, and expert knowledge

In his seminal essay *Rationalism in Politics*,[12] Michael Oakeshott traced the modern form of rationalism to scientific knowledge, and more importantly, to the view that this kind of knowledge is the solely acceptable form of knowledge. Consisting of technical expertise, this form of knowledge can readily be taught and transferred. Against this form of knowledge, Oakeshott set what he called practical knowledge: understanding accrued through participation and concretely lived experience.[13]

The practical form of knowledge, as non-expert and non-scientific knowledge, surely lost some of its general appeal after Copernicus and the emergence of a mechanistic world-view in modernity. From Francis Bacon onwards, the project of the 17th century was to find the suitable technique through which infallible rules of discovery could be established. This technique, which was to be abstract, universal, and transferable through instruction, began with a 'purge of the mind' from private and particular experiences.[14] By contrast, the characterizing fact of classical political philosophy was its direct relation to actual political life, as well as its use of 'normal', non-technical language.[15] The beginning of modernity marks the beginning of an era where expert knowledge began to be seen specifically as the kind of knowledge which has no connection to concrete, or 'common-sensical' knowledge – the practical experience of the citizen, for example.[16]

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[8] Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 263.
[9] Strauss, *What is political philosophy?,* 33.
[10] Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 304.
[11] Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 15, 18; In Socrates's account, the test failed by Athenian statesmen was whether or not their rule had contributed to the moral improvement of the citizens. What they had managed to do was flatter the people, thus making them even more 'wild'.
[12] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays – New and Expanded Edition* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991)
[13] Oakeshott's example is a cook book: mere technical knowledge, no matter how accurately recorded, cannot make anyone a good chef, unless he or she has had sufficient actual experience with the practice of cooking. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, 12–13.
[14] Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, 19–21.
[15] Strauss, *What is Political philosophy*, 78.
[16] At this juncture it may be useful to provide a short note on terminology; this essay draws from several sources, many of them eminent thinkers who have written of the issues that this article wishes to pursue. In order to avoid distorting their meaning, I have mostly held on to the terms used in original sources. This means, however, that the reader is faced with several synonymous or nearly-synonymous terms. On

The Enlightenment marked a further triumph in the development of technical knowledge.[17] Expert rule, or technocracy, was subsequently proposed by Auguste Comte, the founder of 19th century positivism, or 'social physics'. In his view, all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge. For Comte, science was the third, and final stage of human understanding, being preceded first by theological and then by metaphysical explanations of reality.[18] Having assumed the inevitable evolution of philosophical thought, he predicted a world ruled by scientists, whom he, in the early 19th century, still called by the old name of *philosophers*.[19] In the new scientific order, human beings would be guided by a small elite devoted to philosophical understanding. This, strangely enough, sounds somewhat similar to Plato's *Republic*, where the perfectly just society is seen as depending on the fortuitous rulership of philosopher kings, resting on an elite of guardians.[20]

However, far from being the contemplative philosopher kings envisioned by Plato, Comte's philosophers of the future were devoted to an overall view according to which there are six fundamental sciences: mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and sociology.[21] These sciences, developing in a kind of evolutionary movement, laid the ground for a growing division of labor in society, which in turn created the specialization of functions which gave birth to what Martin Loughlin calls the functionalist style in public law.[22] Comte's positive philosophers thus consisted of technocrats, namely, modern scientific experts.[23]

All in all, the gradual shift towards expert government has been explained by way of the rising requirements of specialization of the arts that were traditionally akin to politics: statesmanship, warfare, and the judiciary. These are, in Max Weber's terms, organs for the maintenance of a legitimate monopoly on violence.[24] Historically, the development of military technology laid the ground for the creation of professional military officers, just as the requirements of judicial expertise created the professional lawyer in earlier history.[25] In the United States, the Civil Service Reform of 1883 turned the state into a professional bureaucracy.[26] Two important points should be noted in this regard, at least.

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one hand, there are words like practical, concrete, particular, common-sensical, which represent one view of political knowledge; and on the other, words like technical, scientific, abstract, universal represent the opposing view. It is here impossible to reconcile the meanings of these words into a single, coherent system, and therefore the terms used are chosen based on the original source and the context.

[17] See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), 309-313.

[18] Martin Loughlin, *Public Law and Political Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992), 107.

[19] Strauss, *On Political Philosophy*, 27.

[20] Strauss, *On Political Philosophy*, 21.

[21] Loughlin, *Public Law and Political Theory*, 107.

[22] Loughlin, *Public Law and Political Theory*, 105.

[23] We cannot at this juncture analyze the further evolution of positivistic thinking after Comte. Suffice it to say that unlike later *logical positivism*, the positivism of Comte still retained the old notion that value propositions are indeed meaningful, and therefore did not adhere to the fact-value –distinction of later social science. (Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 18). This is in contrast to the logical positivists, who roughly held that any meaningful statement must be based on empirical observation, a requirement that value judgments lack. See Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 58–61.

[24] Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 80.

[25] The courts are the original form of governmental expertise. They represent a delegation of authority to specialists or expert judges. The latter's task is operating within a set of conventionally imposed restrictions (involving the elimination of conflicts of interest, among other things) to produce technical 'justice', according to rules of law which the judges are better qualified than ordinary people to determine. Stephen P. Turner, *Liberal Democracy 3.0: Civil society in an Age of Experts* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 11.

[26] Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 84.

First, the creation of a salaried bureaucracy more or less equated the career in politics and administration with any other professional vocation adopted out of necessity for making a living. Second, education – or more precisely, the academic/scientific education required for the career in state administration – made the holding of the office itself unpolitical. The neutral application of law or science prevents the essential political element of conflict from affecting the administrator, and thereby the holding of an office itself became essentially unpolitical. In effect, what had happened was the fragmentation of the sphere of prudence and common sense, a many-faceted concept which will be examined below.

Common sense – the starting point of political life

The oldest meaning of 'common sense' (*sensus communis*, or *koine aisthēsis*) denotes the Aristotelian idea of the human sense apparatus having a 'sixth sense'. This sense connects intelligibly together the other senses, which by themselves merely offer stimuli that have nothing in common – auditory stimuli being impossible to reduce to visual stimuli and so on.[27]

However, another meaning of common sense, closer to its current meaning, is one alluded to by Kant, for example.[28] This conception of *sensus communis* denotes the shared understanding of a multitude of people. In effect, it retains the problem confronted by the old meaning: how to find a common ground through which a plurality of heterogeneous elements can be bound together.[29] In other words, the physiological explanation of the senses became useful also for theorizing the 'political sense' of human beings.

Interpretations as to the origin of common sense are varied. Here, two rudimentary starting points are offered: 1) the sensual, and 2) non-rational common sense. What they have in common is a kind of challenge posed to the abstract and technical form of reason as the sole basis for valid knowledge.[30] The first interpretation criticizes the abstract 'cogito' in favour of a concrete, worldly sense-experience, while the second criticizes it in favour of a symbolic, or intuitive knowledge, which exists beyond discursive reason or language.

The sensual origin of common sense

In a brief outline, it is important to first look at the emergence of *sensus communis* in a physical, concrete context. In a physical public space, like the ancient forum, viewers cannot occupy exactly the same position – A cannot stand where B is standing and so on.

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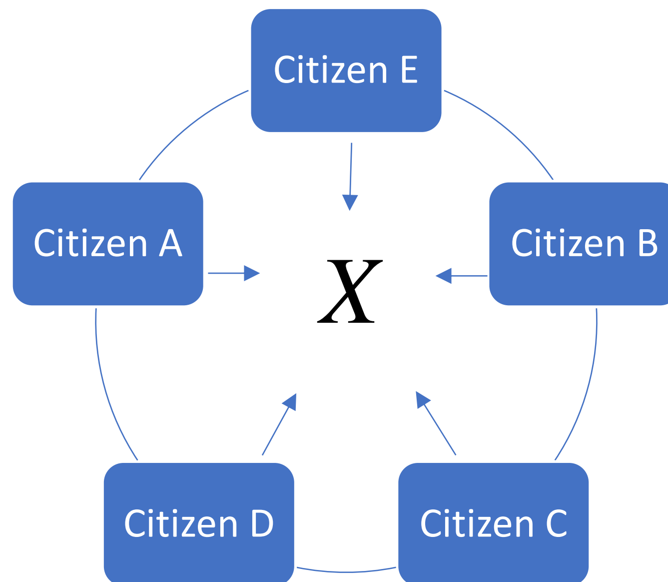
[27] According to Francisco Suárez, one of the tasks of *sensus communis* is to compare different kinds of sensitive qualities. Vision, for instance, cannot distinguish between the color red and a loud noise. Neither can the faculty of hearing. This is the task of common sense. See Cees Leijenhorst, 'Suárez on self-awareness', in Benjamin Hill & Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), *The Philosophy of Francisco Suárez* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 139. See also: Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, 645b10.

[28] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing Co., 1987), p. 159-164; Par. 40: 'On Taste as a kind of *Sensus Communis*.'

[29] Itay Snir, 'Bringing plurality together: Common sense, thinking and philosophy in Arendt' *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 2015, 53(3), 362.

[30] Strauss, interpreting Plato's *Republic*, offers the following remarks: 'What Plato implies can be stated as follows: We are in the midst of things. We cannot begin with a clean slate, using only perfectly clear and distinct concepts. We cannot begin at the beginning, but we must try to ascend to the beginning. In other words, in dealing with human things, at any rate, we are in an entirely different situation than the mathematicians are, who do begin and may begin at the beginning. We cannot do that.' Strauss, *On Political Philosophy*, 85.

Therefore, even when standing side by side, the view they have of a common object (a triumphal procession, an ancestral monument, etc.) cannot be exactly the same. The full multitude of human beings physically present in a public space then comes to the closest approximation of plurality. Everybody watches the victorious general in the middle, everybody sees him from a slightly different angle. On the opposite side of the forum, C may raise his or her eyes and watch A. He or she then sees someone seeing the procession from an opposite angle. This is the recognition of an opposite view. For Arendt, being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everyone sees and hears from a different position.[31]



A simple illustration of a plurality. In a physical sense, X stands for the common object of sense perception, giving rise to something which may be called 'common sense' of a plurality. In a metaphorical sense, X denotes the symbolic center of the commonwealth (what the Romans called with the malleable concept of *Res Publica*).

In public activities, where everyone involved is present in person, the understanding of one's position as a part of the whole arises naturally. In a metaphorical sense, this position means that, having left the public space, a citizen still retains an understanding of his or her position as a part of the whole. In modernity, however, notably as a result of scientific positivism, the predominant view of reality became detached from ordinary senses, and instead a mediated world of telescopes and externalized viewpoint rose to hold sway.[32] Yet, the fruitful use of telescopes in one pursuit and microscopes in another does not fully exhaust meaningful human perspectives. Nor does it entitle one to deny that there are things which may be seen as they are only if they are seen with the naked eye or, more precisely, if they are seen in the perspective of the citizen, as distinguished from the perspective of the scientific observer.[33]

What emerged due to the gradual externalization of viewpoints is a process of *alienation*. As a result, people lose both the physical meaning of common sense – of sensing the same

[31] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 57–58.
[32] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 278, 290-291.
[33] Strauss, *What is political philosophy*?, 25.

things from differing viewpoints – and the political meaning of it.[34] As a result, the opposite of sense – namely nonsense, 'idiocy', or 'stupidity', arises.[35] The loss of common meanings leads individuals to ascribe meanings to things in an arbitrary, 'anything goes' fashion, in which idiosyncratic whims and private prejudices set the tone, and in which any truth brought into the marketplace of opinion is treated as just another opinion.[36]

To state the previous remarks somewhat differently, the actual position of each person is his or her substantial particularity, the concrete life-world which he or she inhabits. That must be the starting point for any political activity, even if it is not the end of it. While the universal and abstract law may be seen as the only legitimate goal by some (especially by those who have a strong interest in global justice), their focus on universal abstractions, and their neglecting of their own position, will lead them eventually to neglect the position of anyone else as well (Citizen A who methodically subordinates his/her own particularity to abstractions will eventually deny legitimate particularity to Citizen B, and so on).[37] The result is that the recognition of actual difference among human beings, i.e. plurality, is lost. No multiplicity of viewpoints is possible, only the uniform repetition – or denial – of an abstract, universal formula.[38]

From this perspective, one of the difficulties we face today with very large-scale global phenomena is that they, as such, cannot be commonly sensed. The effects of climate change, for example, appear sporadically (although in an increasing fashion), and regionally in various ways, but as a member of my community I can scarcely experience climate change with my fellow humans in the manner I can experience a single thunderstorm. Because events in the modern world appear to us in an increasingly mediated form, through newspapers, television and especially the Internet, a common sense that arises in a physical plurality rarely becomes apparent. Rather, everyone reads and reacts as an isolated individual, being together with nothing except the media device.[39]

A further example of a major crisis that for many people has been alienated from sensual experience is the post-2015 immigration crisis in Europe. The broad media coverage and political upheaval which gave birth to considerable polarization in the political sphere

[34] 'Whenever people are cut off from their fellow creatures, they are condemned to idiocy, in the etymological sense of the term (from the Greek *idios*: "confined to oneself"), as are people who cannot envisage that universes other than their own exist and who are therefore incapable of arriving at a consensual representation of a world where we could each have a place.' Supiot, *Homo Juridicus*, viii.
[35] Snir, 'Bringing plurality together', 371. Furthermore, Arendt argues that 'no matter how far [the scientists'] theories leave common-sense experience and common-sense reasoning behind, they must finally come back to some form of it or lose all sense of realness in the object of their investigation'. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 56. In other words, even when science reveals mistakes in the everyday view of the world, and tries to understand the world in a different way from that in which most people usually perceive it, it must maintain some sort of affinity to common sense in order to be meaningful. See Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 55–57.
[36] Snir, 'Bringing plurality together', 377.
[37] Real plurality requires that individuals have a right to their particularity. In this instance, Arendt's and Hegel's thought run along somewhat similar lines. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, Par. 152–155.
[38] Arguably, many of the tensions in contemporary politics between 'liberals' and 'populists' arise in this manner. Such incredibly complex issues as immigration tend to slide into utter abstractions, black and white questions of one universal norm, which must then be either accepted or rejected, which in turn creates political divisions. See also, Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976), 171.
[39] See Vincent F. Hendricks and Mads Vestergaard, *Reality Lost – Markets of Attention, Misinformation and Manipulation* (Cham: Springer Open, 2019).

meant that, at least in many Northern countries, much of the crisis manifested itself in an indirect, mediated fashion. This is not to say that the crisis was non-existent, or invisible to everyone, but that for a large majority of Europeans the crisis was something they read about in the papers.

Finally, and most importantly, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the question of mediated knowledge and common sense becomes more salient than ever. In order to not lose sight of other important aspects of this question, we shall postpone commenting on the pandemic until the final section of this essay. Needless to say, the bombardment of different statistics, projections, views, opinions, and information-pieces concerning the pandemic from various sources (both scientifically valid and otherwise) has put remarkable stress on the everyday lives of everyone, ordinary citizens included.

The non-rational origin of common sense

In order to delve deeper into the composition of *sensus communis*, we will have to relinquish, paradoxically enough, the normally 'common-sensical' world, and look towards the symbolic, the unconscious, and the intuitive. In short, this approach holds that it is not mere habituation to an environment in a rational manner that embeds an individual in a community or group. Fairly recently, Chantal Mouffe lamented in *For a left Populism* the frequent rejection of Freudian analysis among left wing scholars and argued that the individual human mind necessarily includes areas which are not conscious. In her view, the incapability of many left-wing scholars to properly appreciate the manifold structure of the human mind is due to their clutching on to the rationalistic, transparent ego of what we could here call the *homo economicus*.[40]

In the symbolic, or metaphorical space, the *sensus communis* may be based on the mythical or symbolic tradition of a community, which, if we follow Weber's account, may in turn be the outcome of a charismatic leader establishing that tradition. As Edward Shils puts it succinctly:

> Society has a center. There is a central zone in the structure of society […] The central zone is not, as such, a spatially located phenomenon. It almost always has a more or less definite location within the bounded territory in which the society lives. Its centrality has, however, nothing to do with geometry and little with geography. The center, or the central zone, is a phenomenon of the realm of values and beliefs. It is the center of the order of symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society […] The center is also a phenomenon of the realm of action. It is a structure of activities, of roles and persons, within the network of institutions. It is in these roles that the values and beliefs which are central are embodied and propounded.[41]

The importance of symbols, beliefs, and subconscious elements in political life are thus one manner of approaching the composition of common sense. This approach is characteristic of (late) modernity and owes a great deal to both Rousseau (with the doctrine of the original state of nature lost in modern society), and Freud, who gave birth to an entirely new field of study with his psychoanalytical theories. For both Rousseau and Freud, the human mind is always ill at ease in society, this uneasiness being the force behind the irrational, or subconscious elements in political life.[42]

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[40] Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London; Verso, 2018), 42.
[41] Quoted in Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, 'Introduction', in Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), xxx.
[42] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 359, 446.

Before modernity, however, there existed both in the classical Greek philosophy and the medieval scholastic tradition a doctrine according to which *ratio*, or *logos*, is not the only, nor the highest aspect of human reason. Rather, the Greek idea of *Nous*, which scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas called *intellectus*, was considered even higher, inasmuch as it denoted, as it were, an area of comprehension already beyond the sphere allotted to the human being.[43] Whereas *ratio* denoted the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions, *intellectus* consisted of an intuitive form of understanding. Much like the unmediated manner of sense perception, *intellectus* perceives (or even *receives*) the truth in the way a viewer perceives a landscape. For the scholastics, the full human reason consisted of both *ratio* and *intellectus* working in unison, with discursive thought being accompanied and impregnated by an effortless awareness, the contemplative vision of the *intellectus*, which is not actively seeking or calculating, but remains rather passive or receptive.[44]

Certainly, the intuitive mode of reason seems suspicious to scientific thought and methodology, as it veers close to what is usually understood as the sphere of religious thinking. Indeed, theological thought (or outright mystical vision) is hardly to be looked upon as a solution to political problems.[45] Nevertheless, the intuitive form of human reasoning is an interesting, and probably under-appreciated area of inquiry when it comes to understanding the non-rational mechanisms of human political activity.

This is especially important if we consider the fact that *ratio* is the exclusive area of reason which can be expressed by speech. Indeed, as Arendt repeatedly points out, the Greek word *logos* meant both rationality and speech.[46] Both Plato and Aristotle considered the dialogical thought process – the one based on speech – to be the way to prepare the soul and lead the mind to a beholding of truth beyond discursive thought and beyond speech. The goal is the truth which is *arrheton*, incapable of being communicated through words.[47]

The aspect of human reason which exists beyond language has repercussions for the understanding of both the individual and the community. Just as a single human being cannot be exhaustively defined by the use of words, so it is with the whole of human community.[48] The indescribable element – whether of sensual or non-rational origin – will have to be taken into account. As will be mentioned below, this is not least due to the fact that law, in contradistinction to the arts, does not owe its efficacy to technical reason at all or only to a degree.[49]

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[43] Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1952), 10.

[44] Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, 9.

[45] For one historical depiction of the failed combination of contemplative mysticism and political life, see Aldous Huxley, *Grey Eminence: A Study in Religion and Politics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1942).

[46] See e.g. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 27.

[47] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 291.

[48] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 181. The indefinable character of human personality comes easily across when one attempts to use words to describe or define oneself fully – no matter how many hours one talks, a human person can scarcely give an exhaustive definition of what he or she is as a totality. Furthermore, a human society is composed of the multitude of concrete (yet largely indefinable) individuals partaking in it. If this is so, it is similarly impossible to define exhaustively the total essence of a community, or its common good. Josef Pieper, *An Anthology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 65. Relatedly, for the indefinability of the Roman concept of *Res Publica*, see Louise Hodgson, *Res Publica and the Roman Republic: 'Without Body or Form'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[49] Legislation, while being an art (*techne*) in some sense, is also the highest form of practical reason – or prudence – which has as its sphere the whole human good, including the 'common sense' understanding

After this outline of 'common sense' as an essential part of political knowledge, and in opposition to a view that turns this knowledge into a prerogative of the specialists only, we will now proceed to argue that whichever of the two interpretations finds itself predominant in a society, this will correspond to a tendency of that society to favour, or appreciate, either conservation or reform respectively.

Political action – Change vs. preservation

What is politics? Certainly, politics has something to do with deciding on common matters. The process of political decision-making as well as the institutions involved may however vary greatly from time to time. In the times of Aristotle and the Greek polis, the arena of political action was larger than today in the sense that it was esteemed much higher in the ranking of human activities, but simultaneously much smaller in the sense that the size of the polity was considerably more limited.

When examining politics, a simple starting point, outlined by Strauss, is as follows: All political activity aims at either preservation or change – preservation insofar as one wants to keep that which is good lest it deteriorate, change insofar as one wants to bring about something better than the status quo. Both alternatives presuppose some notion of what is good.[50] Furthermore, neither alternative is, as such, preferable to the other, since the decision between preservation and change depends on an observation of the particular situation at hand, as well as the observation of the goal to be pursued.[51]

Now, the argument here is that technocratic knowledge is by nature field-specific and technical, as opposed to the common-sensical or practical kind of knowledge. Moreover, being based on the modern idea of science as an infinite progress, the predominant role of this kind of knowledge may unduly lead to changes, or reforms, when used in laying out political plans. This is because this knowledge is possessed by trained scientific functionaries, who rely in this role on a specific detachment from the common-sensical, or concretely lived everyday world. [52]

Already in the early modern period, starting with Francis Bacon and continuing during the Enlightenment, the nature of knowledge was equated with the knowledge characteristic of modern science. From this assumption, as mentioned above, it follows that the most knowledgeable people are the scientists. Science, in turn, is something that can be taught, usually at an institution devoted to higher education, e.g. a university. Furthermore, science is the pursuit of understanding, and by the time of Comte, the inventor of 'social physics', this understanding was of the 'how', not of the 'why' or 'whither'.[53] This pursuit is by nature unending, as it has no theoretical limit.[54]

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of political things. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 22–25. See also: Aristotle, *Politics*, 1268b22–1269a24.

[50] Strauss, *What is Political philosophy?,* 10.

[51] This is also, in Strauss's view, the reason why political thought as such cannot be value-free, as held by modern positivistic social science. The notion of what is good or preferable is always implicit in any stance, whether towards change or preservation.

[52] For simplicity's sake, no distinction between merely giving expert advice and using actual political power is made here. Also, the actual motives of experts can of course be various, but this question is also left open.

[53] See e.g. Alain Supiot, *Homo Juridicus* (London: Verso, 2017), 6.

[54] 'When the experience of constant correction in scientific research is generalized, it leads into the curious "better and better," "truer and truer," that is, into the boundlessness of progress with its inherent admission that *the* good and *the* true are unattainable.' Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1978), 54–55.

Accordingly, scientific knowledge is constantly changing, evolving into a higher form. Old mistakes are corrected, and new hypotheses tested, after which their application to real life can begin. An expert is someone who has received proper instruction in his or her field, and then proceeds to offer his or her services to society. In light of the fact that their field of knowledge, namely, scientific understanding, is constantly changing, experts will potentially favour change when giving counsel in societal matters – if only to prove their ability as scientists, up to date with their (ever changing) field.

In his essay *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott gives an accurate description of the sort of approach we are discussing, through his portrayal of an expert (whom he calls the Rationalist):

> The conduct of affairs, for the Rationalist, is a matter of solving problems, and in this no man can hope to be successful whose reason has become inflexible by surrender to habit or is clouded by the fumes of tradition. In this activity the character which the Rationalist claims for himself is the character of the engineer, whose mind (it is supposed) is controlled throughout by the appropriate technique and whose first step is to dismiss from his attention everything not directly related to his specific intentions. This assimilation of politics to engineering is, indeed, what may be called the myth of rationalist politics. And it is, of course, a recurring theme in the literature of Rationalism. The politics it inspires may be called the politics of the felt need; for the Rationalist, politics are always charged with the feeling of the moment. He waits upon circumstance to provide him with his problems but rejects its aid in their solution. That anything should be allowed to stand between a society and the satisfaction of the felt needs of each moment in its history must appear to the Rationalist a piece of mysticism and nonsense. And his politics are, in fact, the rational solution of those practical conundrums which the recognition of the sovereignty of the felt need perpetually creates in the life of a society. Thus, political life is resolved into a succession of crises, each to be surmounted by the application of 'reason'. Each generation, indeed, each administration, should see unrolled before it the blank sheet of infinite possibility. And if by chance this tabula rasa has been defaced by the irrational scribblings of tradition-ridden ancestors, then the first task of the Rationalist must be to scrub it clean; as Voltaire remarked, the only way to have good laws is to burn all existing laws and to start afresh.[55]

At least in Nordic countries, law is generally regarded as a branch of science, having its own ‘scientific’ standards of excellence; the speed at which changes are expected to happen very much affects law and legislation. Alongside the constant problems arising from too haphazard legislative proposals, this tendency touches questions concerning the very nature of law.

Human beings inhabit a world that is constantly changing, both due to the laws of nature and to human activities. The purpose of law is, to take a somewhat Hobbesian view, to impose order on that world, thereby making it possible for people to live a rationally planned existence, free of constant strife against chaotic elements. From this perspective, the purpose of legal experts is to sustain and develop the legal order, with a view towards

[55] Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 9–10.

the sustenance of this orderly existence, which, at the end, is the thing that allows human beings to act freely.[56]

However, as already mentioned, the currently prevalent culture regarding experts often seems to emphasize, and overvalue, change rather than order and preservation. This means that experts are called to offer their services in responding to changes, most often by giving advice on how to reform society to correspond to the new circumstances. While this may indeed be the necessary role that experts must play, the overt emphasis on the necessity and inevitability of these changes may undermine the role of law as a stable order (not to speak of the obstacles necessity creates for the classical idea of *free* political action).[57]

As regards law, societies in our time invest considerable devotion and resources to facilitate innovation (which of course brings about eventual *change* of some sort) in practically all spheres of life. For us, it should be striking, then, to read of the explicit skepticism with which Aristotle considers the value of innovation, and more precisely, the issue of whether innovation in legal matters should be rewarded. In the second book of the *Politics*, Aristotle examines the proposals for a good society made by the city-planner Hippodamus. Hippodamus's plan relies, rather simply, on triads, or tripartite divisions, and includes the notion of rewarding those who come up with new ideas beneficial for the city.

Aristotle is against the suggestion. According to Strauss, Aristotle's problem with it concerns the fact that Hippodamus has not paid sufficient attention to the difference between arts and law, or to the possible tension between the need for political stability and what one might call technological change.[58]

While legislation can itself be considered an art (*techne*), and often the very highest form of art, it does not share the characteristic of endless refinement and infinite progression of technology. Instead, still remaining in the Aristotelian vein, law owes its efficacy, meaning its power of being obeyed, mostly to custom and custom comes into being only through a long time. Unlike arts, law does not owe its efficacy to reason as such, but rather its purpose is to restrain the passions so that reason may eventually come about.[59] The educational function of law, which is still sometimes mentioned in our times, requires stability due to the fact that education is a slow process. During this process, passion-bred opinions must be counteracted by the traditional and myth-based status of the law.[60] The stability of law rests then essentially on the human understanding of law as a mutually

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[56] Law as a prerequisite of freedom is certainly a topic which would require to be discussed at great length, but for the purposes of the present chapter it may be sufficient to posit the following: In terms of the negative liberty famously outlined by Isaiah Berlin and traced by him to Hobbes especially, the freedom provided by law consists of the ensured absence of undue constraints, while in terms of positive freedom law provides the actualization of inner human purposes. See Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969)

[57] A political situation is one to which there is no *necessary* response. See Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 71.

[58] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 22. Indeed, in our modern parlance this wariness towards innovation is usually called a *conservative* stance. As Oakeshott defined it in his essay *On being conservative*, to be conservative 'is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.' Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays,* 408–409.

[59] Again, this is why legislation requires prudence, which in turn is not bound to any specialized fields of expertise. Strauss, *The City and Man*, 22–25.

[60] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 22.

binding order, and on the understanding of this order as primarily affecting the many changes that inevitably take place in the world, both for an individual and a society.[61] In short, law is meant to make human behavior mutually sustainable in a changing environment, and this necessarily requires curtailment, not reinforcement, of these changes.

Examples of changes we face today are, to name a few, those brought by global pandemics, digitalisation, transnational governance, artificial intelligence, ruptures in the labour market, various other economic changes, and climate change. In many cases, there is no question that something needs to be done, if only to maintain our planet's liveability for future generations. This task, however, may precisely conceal the greatly varying nature of these contemporary phenomena, along with the fact that, often, the suitable response may in fact be preservation, rather than reform.

What is to be done about experts, then? Should they be excluded from political decision-making, just because they possess knowledge of some specialized field? Certainly not, and this would be quite absurd especially in countries where a large majority of people are well educated – or trained, as the case may be. The crucial distinction here is the role of experts *qua* experts versus the role of experts *qua* citizens (who may well possess expert knowledge in some area).[62] To overstate the distinction somewhat: in the first case, experts are mere functionaries, consultants in executing some task specified by the employer, who, after getting paid for their efforts, go home and ask no questions. In the second case, experts are gentlemen (or gentlewomen), citizens who have a notion of their position as part of the whole, and whose viewpoint is not limited to their specific field of expertise, nor to the task specified by the client.

This sort of distinction of course rests on the modern separation of civil society and state (or of the human participants therein: *bourgeois* and *citoyen*). Around the time of Comte, Hegel defined the realm of *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* as 'the economy', which caters to persons seeking the satisfaction of various contingent wants, needs, and desires. This differs from *Staat* or 'the State', which refers to relationships of authority exercised by some individuals over others not by virtue of market transactions, but through the right of sufficient reason. Civil society is thus inhabited by human beings in their role as *Bürger*, who engage in competitive struggles on the marketplace. By contrast, the state is the realm of the human being as *Citizen*, who is related to others by certain shared ethical understandings and mutual recognition.[63]

The latter, political realm is a specific realm free from necessity, where actual plurality may thrive. Therefore, citizens in an overtly technocratic polity, being robbed of their chances to influence political life, will grow disinclined towards politics, lose their capacity to tolerate different viewpoints, and often turn their eyes towards a different

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[61] A policy or law is settled with a certain purpose in view. For a policy to serve this purpose, it must actually be implemented in the relevant practical choices of the individuals on whose action its actualization depends. Adopting a policy makes little sense unless it is accompanied with a reasonable expectation that the relevant future behavior of individual citizens will follow it as a standard framework for their choices. See Juha-Pekka Rentto, *Match or Mismarriage – a study on ontological realism and law* (Helsinki: Ius Gentium Ry, 1992), 149.

[62] Oakeshott observed that in contemporary politics, scientists *as such* (the chemist, the physicist, the economist or the psychologist) are commonly admitted to be heard, but he maintains that although the knowledge involved in the practice of science is always more than technical knowledge, what it has to offer to politics is never more than a technique. See Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 27. Cf. Socrates's observations in Plato's *Protagoras,* (319b–e) which we mentioned earlier.

[63] Steven B. Smith, *Hegel's critique of Liberalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 105.

arena. In most cases, this arena is the social sphere, the ever-expanding marketplace of work and consumption, or, alternatively, politics devoid of plurality altogether.

The recently observed prominence of populist politics is here something to be viewed against the backdrop of technocratic rule in modern polities. Populism is of course the age-old method of appealing to people through the occlusion and rejection of societal plurality. 'We are the people' is certainly an effective rallying cry against the enemy, but it simultaneously relies on the enemy for sustenance, as 'the people' in this rhetorical formulation are only a unity as long as it is perceived against the enemy. The fact that 'the people' in themselves may in actuality be far from a homogenous group is then something that populism (as such) cannot properly address.[64]

Nonetheless, populism, perhaps also the variety represented by Michael Gove's comments, may also be characterized by both left-wing and right-wing tendencies and organizations which reject the TINA (There Is No Alternative) logic of 'responsible' politics in a world of global economic competition and inter-dependence.[65] In this sense, populism may be seen as a legitimate protest against technocratic global governance, and as a demand to reacquire the voice that citizens in a republican form of government need in order to cultivate their virtue. If 'the people' (lower case) is a heap of individual humans exercising their *bare life*, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, then the best possible function of populism is to raise them to a state of political self-understanding as 'the People' (upper case), thereby giving form to what was previously a formless heap.[66]

Technocracy, in short, can lead to the fragmentation of political society, utilizing experts on an ad hoc basis as proponents and executors of given tasks. Once again, the experts are there purely as paid workers, in their role as functionaries who could in principle be replaced by any other similarly trained person. They may be citizens, but they do not work in that role.[67] In fact, even in the case of a citizen as such entering the public sphere, the tendency today is to encourage the detachment from his or her moral or particular convictions and experiences – i.e. non-technical knowledge – due to the fear that these could endanger the 'neutrality' of political discourse.[68]

The genuine expertise of the bridge-building engineer and the seafaring sailor is not in question. They are certainly better than laypeople in their own fields. The matter is merely that by relieving citizens of their capability to influence – or even rule over – public matters, they are left in the position of mere children and are thus unable to cultivate the inherent social capability that resides in them. In the moment that the prudential skills of citizens and elected officials are thwarted in favour of expert governance, democracy is changed into a technocracy. According to Strauss, the confusion which sometimes arises in public discussions is due to the fact that *democratic politics* is often understood to mean *democratic goals* – common welfare, etc. – but these goals alone do not make a real

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[64] Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 38.
[65] Wolfgang Streeck, 'The return of the repressed', *New Left Review*, 2017, 104, p. 5.
[66] Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End – Notes of Politics* (Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
[67] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 24. Experts are specialists who may well use their skills artfully, but their concern nevertheless remains within the field of their specialist knowledge. The citizen, in contradistinction to the expert, is not a specialist as such in any particular field or partial good, but rather, the focus of his or her activity as citizen is prudence.
[68] Michael J. Sandel, 'Populism, Liberalism, and Democracy', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2018, 44(4), pp. 357–358. On the relation of technocracy with meritocracy, see also Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's become of the Common Good?* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2020).

democracy. In the words of Strauss: 'When you say: I want the greatest public welfare regardless by what means, then you can also resurrect Henry VIII.'[69]

My argument so far of course rests on the Aristotelian tradition and could be contested in favour of many alternative goals. This, however, would entail the risk of losing the republican form of government. If the *Res Publica* is shielded from common eyes, dissected into pieces of scientific specialization with the focus on economic competition, and then handled as a matter of top-down managerialism, little is left to the ordinary person but to delve deeper into an essentially unpolitical life. At the same time, merely technical knowledge makes even the managers themselves ill-prepared to resist the flattery of the demagogue and the lies of the dictator.[70]

Conclusion

According to Strauss, all political action aims, as we have seen, at either preservation or change. If this is so, the prevailing attitudes towards either of them may be seen to shape an existing political culture as either conservative or progressive – if change is stressed, the culture is progressive, if preservation, the culture is conservative. This distinction, however, is not very helpful in our times, as 'progress' has become almost synonymous with 'the good' after the beginning of modernity.[71]

Indeed, the faith in the progression of society towards ever better forms is something that was absent in Plato and Aristotle, the founding fathers of political philosophy. Theirs was an Athens undergoing a slow decay and demise, and it was only at the advent of Christianity that the first view of history as a progression towards an ever brighter future started to emerge in the West.[72] This vision was subsequently enhanced by Enlightenment philosophy, and later by the wonders of industrialized commodity production.[73] Criticism has obviously followed. In the 1970s, Daniel Bell wrote in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*: 'A society given over entirely to innovation, in the joyful acceptance of change, has in fact institutionalized the avant-garde and charged it, perhaps to its own eventual dismay, with constantly turning up something new. In effect, "culture" has been given a blank check, and its primacy in generating social change has been firmly acknowledged.'[74]

In our day, this faith in progress lives strongly on.[75] In addition, the old political controversies of the 1970s have long been regarded as obsolete, and our attention has moved to the seemingly endless sequence of reforms necessitated by labour market incentives, public service privatisation, digitalisation, government transparency, and so forth.[76] The age of information makes it indeed difficult to deny that great changes are happening, and that the duty of enlightened, knowledgeable people is to help society, in whatever way they can, to adapt to the brave new world. At the same time, those who seek the remnants of republican 'common sense' through reading scholars like Arendt

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[69] Leo Strauss, Seminar on Cicero, Spring 1959, lecture transcript, page 57, available at https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/cicero-spring-1959/, accessed 19.11.2020.
[70] Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 38.
[71] Leo Strauss, 'Progress or Return? The contemporary crisis', *Modern Judaism*, 1981, 1(1), p. 17.
[72] Supiot, *Homo Juridicus*, xiii.
[73] Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 63–68.
[74] Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 35.
[75] Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 145.
[76] Streeck, 'Return of the Repressed', 6; See also Sandel, 'Populism, Liberalism, and Democracy', 353–359.

and Strauss, are often faced with the notion that political philosophy has long since lost its credibility in our world.[77]

In this vein, this essay has sought to outline an interpretation of 'common sense' as a sphere of practical, non-scientific knowledge as opposed to technical, or scientific knowledge. Furthermore, it has explored a view according to which contemporary society seems to be biased towards the latter form of knowledge at the expense of the former. As far as political activity is concerned, this has two distinct effects: on the one hand, to diminish the importance of practical experience; on the other, to potentially lead to reform being always seen as the default political course of action, thereby holding any attempt at preservation as either selfishly motivated clutching to privileges or ignorant foot-dragging. The reasons behind these effects are surely numerous, ranging from the economic radicalism of the bourgeoisie and the ethos of the 'untrammeled self' in the modern era to more or less well-founded views regarding undeniable changes in the human world.[78] The reason emphasized in this essay is the role of experts in decision making, along with the tendency of technical knowledge to distort a concrete and common-sensical world into an alienated and fragmented political world.

Concerning the question of technical, expert-possessed knowledge on the one hand, and practical, common sense knowledge on the other, the globally felt COVID-19 pandemic provides an ongoing arena both for expert-driven technical solutions and the practical experience of citizens with each of them giving rise to such a variety of opinions that enumerating them is here impossible. However, in terms of the argument presented in this chapter, the problem can indeed be described.

First, we can agree that every single person inhabits some kind of substantially existing world. This includes simply the particularities of the concrete, everyday life, along with the actual human relationships that anyone has (*that* home, *those* streets, *that* office, *that* father, *that* friend and so on). Second, we can agree that in addition to this substantial world, there exists the immense world of abstract information, which we receive in an indirect, or mediated form, through the press, television or the Internet. To what extent should a person adjust his or her behaviour in the concrete everyday world after receiving information through the media is a question of individual prudence, and indeed, of common sense. Prudence is, in this manner of speaking, the virtue which reconciles the concrete with the abstract.

In the case of the virus, as in other cases which occur in some specific time and space, this reconciliation takes place between the abstract threat and the concrete life. Supposing, for the sake of example, that the latter appears virus-free, the task at hand is then to take heed of the abstract threat, and adjust one's behaviour to the extent that the threat seems substantial. While it would be a failure of prudence to deny the necessity of preventive measures, or – as some conspiracy theorists unavoidably end up doing – the existence of the virus altogether, it would also be a failure of prudence to deny the possibility of the virus-free, concretely experienced world as well.

To this, a critic may object that even if one does not have personal experience of the virus, it is selfish, short-sighted and irresponsible to wait until the danger is at one's own doorstep before reacting with all of one's capacities. But the counter-response to this is that to let go of the substantial reality of actually lived existence would be to let go of our only anchor connecting us to 'sense', or 'non-idiocy'.[79] For someone who always

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[77] Strauss, *What is political philosophy?*, 17.
[78] Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 16–18.
[79] Supiot, *Homo Juridicus*, viii.

prioritizes the mediated world of abstract information as the only scientific, i.e. trustworthy, grounds for acceptable behaviour has lost the sole position to fall back to in case the mediated world becomes hostile, frightening, or incomprehensible. Arguably, this is behind much of the human misery indirectly caused by the pandemic and the ongoing flux of news, updates and body-counts that we are exposed to.

Obviously, the invisible nature of a virus makes it impossible to fall back to some commonly shared sense perception that the virus is absent. As a result, the real fear in a case like this arises because we cannot see if our neighbour has contracted the virus or not. Once again, however, the counter-argument is that even if the virus itself is invisible, the concrete world of lived experience provides whatever sense of normalcy a citizen can have, and that to let go of that is to start subjugating all particular situations to the mere possibility of an invisible threat. In such a situation, the technically-driven 'politics of felt need' (as Oakeshott put it), becomes the only game in town. The driving force, by consequence, becomes a (mis-)perceived necessity, which in turn is incompatible with the plurality and the free deliberation inherent in political activity.[80] In short, in such situations human beings are reduced to the level of a herd animal, losing their capacity for thoughtful activity.[81]

Finally, looking back to our attempts in this essay to define the meaning of 'common sense', we can finally say that its full definition has remained elusive to us. Indeed, if there is an element in human political life that truly is *arrheton*, beyond words, it would be futile to even try to sum it up in an essay comprised solely of words. Nevertheless, the mere acknowledgment of the necessity of the concrete viewpoint of the citizen – the view which Strauss, Arendt and Oakeshott held as being the starting point, if not the end, of classical political philosophy – should at least serve as a counterweight against the technocratic trajectory of technical specialization and political fragmentation. It should also serve as a legitimating principle for the unique particular position that each of us occupy, and which grounds us to the actual world that we share with others. In this view, and contrary to what proponents of expert knowledge such as Bacon and Comte claim, the final answer to the problems of human society is not to 'purge minds' of all particularity. Rather, it is to accept the particular as the only substantial starting point for plurality, so as to preserve a society which tolerates human difference and understands the value of concrete, lived experience, in political activity and elsewhere.

[80] Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 71.
[81] Phillip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt – Politics, History and Citizenship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 114–115.

Appendix: An *Essai* in conjectural history

*Suppose a person finds oneself stranded on an island beyond civilization, joined by others with a similar fate. An understanding of togetherness, of community, naturally arises. The people form a village, first of, say, a circle of tents around a tree, each facing towards the center. The tent is the private space, opening towards the public. What each individual must do, in order for the community to survive in a dangerous and unpredictable environment, is to maintain his or her private space while keeping an eye towards the public, in case something that pertains to the communal interest takes place. It may be said at this point that the individual, insofar as he or she keeps an eye towards the public, towards the entirety of the community (*res publica*), is a citizen of sorts.*

As the village lives on, tents are replaced by houses and the number of people increases. Private space expands and starts to include a multitude of activities pertaining to family, work and leisure. The window or the front door still remains the portal through which the individual keeps an eye on the public, and through which he or she takes part in common decisions, i.e. politics. At some point, however, the expansion of private activities and private space reaches a point when the individuals can scarcely see the window anymore – they are deep in the realm of the private, almost as in a cave, and when they feel the natural impulse to keep an eye on the public, to exercise their citizenship, they no longer know where to look. They have lost sight of the village tree, of the common interest and only remember these things through stories. They may find other windows that face out of the private space, but the village tree is gone, and the core of common interest is lost. As this happens to all individuals in the community, they may each find windows through which to look, but seldom do many people see the same thing. And when they do, they tend to act in accordance with the mechanisms that they have successfully utilized in the private space, the mechanisms of self-interest and the pursuit of property. Thus, the sense of community slowly erodes, and the rules governing public behavior take on increasingly privatized forms.

Another possibility is that the feeling of community may be rekindled through common myths and sense of belonging. When the village expands, and houses become too numerous to all fit around the village tree, and later, when the village turns into a city, and a nation, which can no longer be seen in its entirety even when standing on a hill, and the physical representative of communality has to be replaced by a fictional one. From there on, the res publica *relies on its representation through symbols and institutions. The nation state, with its flag and constitution, is an example. As time goes on, other variants may emerge to compete for the position of* res publica*, and each stands or falls according to its ability to direct the citizen's eyes towards itself in recognition.*

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