

Britain: Uncommon Sense - On 'The Common Sense Group' of Tory MPs

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Rowan Fortune examines the thinking of the reactionary 'The Common Sense Group' of Tory MPs.

Common Sense: Conservative Thinking for a Post-Liberal Age is the Manifesto of the most reactionary contingent of the Tory Party, gathered into the Common Sense Group. Within its Union Flag bedecked covers, the authors of this execrable booklet describe the oppressed (and anyone seeking to change the world, from Extinction Rebellion to Black Lives Matter), as extreme, subversive, ignorant, and arrogant. That is just on the first page, in John Hayes's bellicose preface.

In his own contribution to this philistine anthology, Hayes goes further. In a delightful moment of forced alliteration, he declares that the left are 'posing, posturing and positioning', (one can almost feel the spittle) in competition for victimhood, conceited and comprised of an elite who reign tyrannical over the poor, misunderstood Brexit voter, the majority, the average person who still believes in common sense despite attempts from every liberal institution to subvert their reason. Black people, trans people and women are situated in this topsy-turvy narrative as oppressors. Hayes happily indulges in victimhood and conspiracy all the while decrying others for doing so. In a typical right-wing move, the right are at once cowed and hopelessly assailed by the nebulous left, but also somehow indomitably strong and supreme.

From the first line of this preface, the Common Sense Group are concerned with authenticity. They state as much clearly: 'The Common Sense Group stands for authentic conservatism.' This concern does not end with themselves. These Tories are deeply worried about the authenticity of us Marxists, too. Gareth Bacon writes of a dangerous 'pseudo-Marxism' in his piece on 'Wokeism'. Meanwhile, in their piece on the media, James Sunderland and David Maddox mention 'a quasi-Marxist movement on the liberal left'. Bacon even helpfully defines what is different between such an inauthentic (Woke) Marxism and, presumably, the authentic kind, which he regards with the wistfulness of a lost frenemy.

'Woke' as Bacon conceives it is truly demonic. It is not surprising that it killed Marxism, since its scope is so boundless and yet its presence so hard to detect, that without presenting as a clear coherent thing it puts the entirety of western civilisation under threat. Woke is truly vast in its anarchistic and destructive ambitions (desiring the perversion of every possible society's necessary foundations), but simultaneously so heterogeneous it defies the usual expectations of an ideology whatsoever.

The 'woke' ideology, such as it is, is fragmented in nature, appears to lack this end-

destination and is perhaps more akin to desire for anarchy than to a conventional political ideology. The unifying driving force behind the 'woke' perspective is an intense hostility to western civilisation, a desire to push against established cultural norms and an attempt to distort - to the point of perversion - the generally accepted facts upon which a society is founded.

GARETH BACON MP - WHAT IS WOKEISM AND HOW IT CAN BE DEFEATED?

Marxism proper, however, is something simpler, neater. The picture of the Marxist approach is framed as a far more respectable opponent for a Tory MP. It is not, after all, unified by a perverse drive to destroy every cultural norm, but rather just a mild-mannered economic theory of the classes that seeks to champion workers. Woke ideology is said to have abandoned this quite quaint commitment, discarding the proletariat in favour of minorities, about whom authentic Marxists should be presumably indifferent.

In this sense, the 'woke' ideology is pseudo-Marxist in its approach - whereas Marxist economic theory divided the world into economic classes of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed,' in the 'woke' ideological worldview of the identity politics of the cultural and social sphere, the 'oppressed' are not the economic proletariat but the combination of minorities or those otherwise disadvantaged by the 'heteronormative cisgender white patriarchy:' BAME people, LGBT people, women etc.

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Taking this on board, it is surprising to discover that none other than Karl Marx proves to be an advocate of such an inauthentic Marxism (such are the insidious tendrils of Wokeism!). Or at least he appears to be when he wrote in an 1866 letter to François Lafargue, 'Labour in white skin cannot emancipate itself where the black skin is branded.' Perhaps it was just an off-day for Marxism's namesake? It is, after all, only a letter. But sadly the case against the pseudo- quasi- inauthentic Marxist Vladimir Lenin is much stronger. In his 1902 masterpiece, *What is to be Done?* Lenin wrote:

The Social-Democrat's ideal should not be a trade union secretary. but a tribune of the people, able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where

it takes place, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; he must be able to group all these manifestations into a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; he must be able to take advantage of every petty event in order to explain his socialistic convictions and his Social-Democratic demands to all, in order to explain to all and every the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.

Vladimir Lenin - what is to be done?

Lenin is startlingly clear about his commitment to Wokeism. For him oppression is distinguished from class (the ur-sin of the Woke), as he clearly specifies that tyranny and oppression must be opposed 'no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects'. It would seem that inauthentic Marxism has its roots throughout much of the Marxist tradition. Could it be that Bacon, Sunderland, Maddox and the other members of the Common Sense Group are the only authentic advocates of Marxism to be found? And how strange that these conservative MPs are truer to the tradition of Marx than Lenin or even Marx himself!

One can go through this book and pick out many such amusing absurdities, but it is also worthwhile highlighting the vitriol on its every page. For a group of conservative cis people, these politician philosophers are seemingly as obsessed with transgender rights as they are oddly obsessed with the wellbeing of Marxism. Bacon, for example, takes a special offense at new medical language intended to be more inclusive of trans men, repeating in mock horror a common myth that the term 'chestfeeding' will replace breastfeeding in the NHS.

In [reality](#) this word was trialled in one NHS Trust *only* for those who prefer it. The term was designed to help trans men after pregnancy who experience gender dysphoria over what they experience as feminine references to their bodies. Still, even if such a term will never be used for anybody who is not themselves a trans man (and presumably Bacon is not a trans man himself, so that he is unlikely to ever find himself confronted by the word), it undoubtedly remains an example of perverting 'the generally accepted facts upon which a society is founded' and threatening western civilisation. This civilization is apparently so fragile that it can be toppled by words, but presumably has some ineffable quality that makes it worthwhile preserving.

The contempt of this 130-page screed for the oppressed is intense. In their 'Taking Politics Out of Policing', Chris Loder and Tom Hunt weave a historical story in which the great battles against racism, misogyny and homophobia were indeed real and serious, but were also (at least insofar as it matters) won and settled in the past. Having been settled, they dismiss all claims of institutionalised discrimination of any serious type in modern Britain. In the face of well documented discrimination against the groups listed, what is the extraordinary evidence Lodger and Hunt provide for this claim?

Homosexuality was illegal and gay men and women were persecuted - now people put

pronouns in their email signatures. Women were denied the vote and the right to own property - now abortion is celebrated. Education was an option for the privileged few - now positive discrimination masquerades as 'blind applications' supposedly to avoid unconscious bias by hiding pieces of personal information and educational history.

CHRIS LODER MP AND TOM HUNT MP - taking politics out of policing

Trans pronouns, legalised abortion and blind applications is their best effort! This is presented, without pause, as sufficient to dismiss evidence of high levels of workplace [discrimination](#) against Black and South Asian Britons; a [noted](#) police culture of ignoring complaints of racism; the wage gap between men and women; the pitiful rate of [convictions](#) for rape in the UK; various problems with medical and workplace [discrimination](#) against LGBT+ people and so on and so on. However, in the context of this book it is wholly understandable that all sociological evidence can be dismissed, not even raised, since such things are certainly the output of elite, Woke intellectuals and do not even deserve a cursory engagement.

The more we read this document, the less common sense one seems to find. But if well-reasoned, well-evidenced and well-articulated arguments are not what is meant by common sense, then why is this idea evoked? The right loves appeals to intuition because social intuitions can be presented as timeless facts about human nature, rather than just a collection of ideas (some useful, many mere prejudices) handed down through history and reinforced by the social organisation of a particular time and place.

Common sense here functions as a circular self-justification, which also explains why output like this is so poorly reasoned - it is as reasoned as it is required to be. What is common sense is common sense because it is hegemonic, and what is hegemonic is hegemonic because it is common sense. It is absurd to use inclusive language for trans men even if it improves public health, simply because it is absurd to use inclusive language for trans men. No reasoning is required. Does chestfeeding sound odd to someone who has never shared the experiences of trans men? That is because it defies common sense. Does the idea of institutional racism seem improbable to someone who has never experienced it? It is clearly not common sense.

We should not underestimate the people who wrote this celebration of prejudice. These are not theoreticians, but they *do* rightly grasp their class enemies and our vulnerabilities. Why does the far right want a class reductionist left? Why has it picked up on trans rights and racial identity with such enthusiasm? Because they correctly grasp, even if pre-theoretically, that such a left will not properly challenge their conception of the world, and therefore will not challenge their power. And because they are aware that experiences that are specific to marginalised people are easy to dismiss. Racism and bigotry are the lifeblood of conservatism, they much prefer a left that wilfully leaves such things intact (and even better if a left actively contributes to such ideas).

Such Tories know that all too many on the left will agree with them about the 'generally accepted facts upon which a society is founded'. These 'facts' are often what the oppressed rightly perceive as the prejudices that blight their lives - racism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. The goal here is to pit those on the left who see the oppressed as secondary to a mechanistic class struggle (one emptied of the living, breathing workers who include the oppressed) against those selfsame workers who encounter such prejudices in their lives every day. This is why Marx and

Lenin adopted such 'Woke' ideas as taking oppression seriously; they understood that there is no united class without a simultaneous struggle against every social bigotry that divided worker into atomised worker.

The rhetoric of authenticity is instrumental. Just as common sense and facts equate to whatever the dominant ideas uphold, authenticity does not mean honesty and integrity, but 'what feels right according to prejudice'. In the same spirit as the document talks of an authentic conservatism, when someone starts talking about the 'authentic working class' they conjure the image of a white, older, male worker in a factory or coal mine. Likewise, if someone says an 'authentic woman' they almost certainly mean a white, cis, able-bodied woman. And if you met someone talking about an 'authentic Britain' they probably would not mean the Britain that was significantly shaped by migration from across the world throughout its history, encompassing colonialism and Empire.

Taken naïvely, without interrogating the rhetorical conceits that give these empty words and terms their power to sway, common sense, facts, authenticity, intuition are the playthings of a right that imagines itself as pre-ideological, even prelapsarian in its assumptions about the world. An 'Authentic Marxism' is a monster that fits the right's preferences. This is not a speculation, the most ardent champions of the most right-wing brand of conservatism in parliament have stated clearly that they wish such a Marxism to be dominant again on the left. Fortunately, 'Authentic Marxism' is not the Marxism of Marx, whose radical philosophy still terrifies the agents of capital so much that 136 years after his death, they still cannot stop lying about his ideas.

Rowan Fortune

P.S.

- Anti*capitalistresistance

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/uncommon-sense/>

- Rowan Fortune is an editor and revolutionary socialist. On their weekly blog, they write on utopian literature and imagination, why grimdark is the dystopian fiction of our time and more. They wrote *Writing Nowhere: A Beginner's Guide to Utopia*; edited the anthology of utopian short fiction *Citizens of Nowhere*; and contributed to the multi-authored *System Crash: An activist guide to making revolution*.
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