

Reconsidering Common Sense: Vico and Education

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At the institutional level, government policy dominates public schooling. As such, there are certain themes that we can isolate as common to the operation of schools. This essay isolates the common theme of neoliberalism, which is embedded in policy and, therefore, influential to practice in schools. The extent to which neoliberal maxims operate as the assumptions of educational policy points to the great success neoliberal ideologues and the institutions that house them have had in the recent past. The notion of schools and their personnel as embodiments of the market is so deeply entrenched in the text of current policy and in the practices of testing and pedagogical techniques that its metaphoricity has become banal and has cemented into a sort of onto–teleological truism. Why does a person go to school? In order to get a good job. What is the purpose of schools in our society? To train our future workforce. In response to this relatively recent conception of schooling, one that stretches well beyond United States borders, a cottage industry of sorts has arisen that emphasizes the use of critical analysis to combat what its proponents view as the harmful effects of neoliberalism in education. Authors of this strain are quick to point out the faulty reasoning behind the analogy of markets and schools. For instance, to understand education as a commodity to be delivered to student–consumers forecloses other, more important relationships that teachers can foster with students, such as establishing a community of fellow contributors to the processes of education and citizenship.

This large body of research has catalogued the multifarious instances in recent public schooling programs and reforms that collaborate to establish the commonsense link between schooling and becoming a worker in the globally competitive marketplace, and this research concludes that this link is primarily an effort to privatize public schools.¹ Michael Apple, for example, explores the global influence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in education through descriptions of policy and practice in the United Kingdom and Australia.² Kenneth Saltman researches projects in the United States such as Renaissance 2010, Edison Schools, Inc., and the charter school movement in post-Katrina New Orleans.³ Both authors indicate in their work that the measure of success is the degree to which neoliberalism transforms common sense for this ideology. Additionally, Philip Kovacs and Deron Boyles document the well-funded philanthropic institutions and policy think tanks that serve as vehicles for the reformation of common sense by neoliberalism and neoconservatism.⁴ Foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and others, along with think tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute, and the Cato Institute fund projects and mass publications espousing a neoliberal agenda for schooling policies and procedures.

While the authors mentioned here identify the link between common sense and ideology and the avenues ideology utilizes in order to enter into common sense,

namely think tanks and philanthropic institutions, few scholars have focused at any length on common sense as a site of *meaning production* that dually upholds and potentially subverts dominant ideological agendas. With this in mind, I examine the role of common sense as a site in which there exists content for disrupting the neoliberal dominance currently held in educational policy and practice. Generally, I do not argue that common sense is merely a clearinghouse for dominant ideology. Instead, drawing on the work of Giambattista Vico, I argue for common sense as a contentious arena, which those of us engaged in critiquing ideology must take seriously if we are to successfully challenge the assumptions that currently inform educational policy and practice.⁵

Common sense is a topic that has generated very different conclusions regarding its status in education. Reviewing the work of Frederick Hess, Kevin Kumashiro, and Michael Apple, who directly engage with the topic of common sense, I provide a picture of the disparate, conflicting, and ultimately unsatisfying ways in which scholars address common sense in education today.⁶ I render from the work of these authors three very different notions of common sense, respectively: a market-oriented version (Hess), to a version intended merely as a foil to social justice (Kumashiro), and a concept that, while provocative, remains undeveloped (Apple). After addressing these three models summarily, I argue that common sense is a helpful concept for the work of ideology critics, but these critics must consider it more closely than what exists in the research at present if the criticism is to be useful. In fact, too facile an engagement with the topic of common sense, in particular as exhibited by Hess and Kumashiro, fails to consider the socially constructed, and therefore highly contingent, characteristics that comprise it, thereby essentializing common sense as necessarily good, in the case of Hess, or as necessarily bad, in the case of Kumashiro.⁷

Common sense, as understood by Hess, is a kind of god-term used to argue for commonsense school reform,⁸ which he contrasts with what he calls status quo school reform. Citing international rankings, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores, and employer concerns over the basic skills of graduates, Hess directs his criticism against “a cloistered world where conviction long ago displaced competence.”⁹ In other words, status quo reformers maintain ideals over abilities. He characterizes this idealistic group as one that looks at factors outside of schools, for example, poverty, health, and social inequality, and argues that these issues belong outside of the school building, and, therefore, outside our consideration. While these things are important, Hess claims that the role of the school is to teach basic skills: whether such skills lead to greater equality among citizens is tangential to the essential role of schools. Linking these problems to common sense, he states, “common sense dictates that if schools do their half well, it is more than enough to ensure that every high school graduate is... literate and numerate and equipped with the basic knowledge and skills needed to open the doors of opportunity.”¹⁰ Of pertinence here is his use of common sense to refer to his desired type of reform. Commonsense reform “promotes a culture of competence,” and behavioristically stresses “that an effective education system rewards success

[and] punishes failure,” ensuring “that schools are focused on educating our children.”¹¹ Broadly speaking, Hess conceptualizes common sense independent of outside reference. He packages his agenda for school reform and applies the label of common sense to it without consideration of what others have said about common sense. Moreover, common sense straightforwardly is a conceptual container for “good” reform, that is, commonsense reform is necessarily good reform. However, we can isolate a market-oriented theme that Hess associates with common sense through his reliance on examples that link standardized testing and teacher assessment to the binary of failure/punishment and success/reward. Common sense, for Hess, is characterized by market-driven educational reform that provides “opportunities” for students in the labor force.¹²

Consideration of Hess’s work speaks to the larger point of understanding the particularity of common sense. Common sense is historically contingent and, therefore, dynamic and changing, otherwise neoliberalism would have no role in its current manifestation. This point is helpful to remember when considering Kumashiro’s use of common sense as something antithetical to social justice, and, therefore, inimical to what he terms anti-oppressive education.

Kumashiro sets up a binary between common sense and anti-oppressive education, going so far as to title his book *Against Common Sense*. He understands common sense as maintaining the status quo.¹³ He argues, “[c]ommon and commonsensical notions of ‘real’ or ‘good’ teaching do not involve challenging oppression and can actually help to perpetuate rather than change the oppressive status quo of schools and society.”¹⁴ Certainly we can place this in direct critique of Hess. Common sense, for Kumashiro, is at different times associated with tradition, comfort, the status quo, practice (as opposed to theory), oppression, standards, and normalcy. He encourages teacher educators to imbue their classes with critical reflection to counter what he considers the commonsensical notions of education that oppress students and teachers by relegating them to the margins. Common sense for Kumashiro takes the form of some ossified set of beliefs that privilege a particular oppressing group, who seek to maintain the power structure inherent to the status quo. What this “thin” interpretation fails to address are the ways in which common sense is a dynamic, incomplete, and contingent arena in which subjects at all levels and from a wide range of backgrounds engage in its transient formation.

While I am sympathetic to the goal of anti-oppressive education and largely in agreement with the tenor of Kumashiro’s work, his vehicle of arguing “against common sense” entails at least two negative consequences. First, it neglects the contingency of common sense: without contingency, common sense is not only nonsensical — that is, common sense would be the same for the Ancient world as it is for contemporary society (which it clearly is not) — but also, and perhaps more importantly, essentialized, or noncontingent, common sense is impervious to criticism and reinvention. Such a facile rendering of common sense precludes consideration of its protean qualities. In an educational context, this means that, to their detriment, teachers deliver and students receive a specific common sense, which stems from a particular ideological agenda. Absent from this context is the

ability of teachers and students to interrogate common sense with the goal of transforming its content in ways that address contemporary sociopolitical issues within their communities in meaningful ways. In brief, if common sense is not contingent, there is no possibility for broad-based change. Second, and in direct relation to the first consequence, to position oneself against common sense fails to acknowledge the resources it provides for pedagogical interaction. Students enter the classroom well informed by common sense derived from a number of relationships, both personal and institutional. Moreover, teachers who deride common sense in their classroom discredit much of their students' prior participation in myriad sociocultural contexts, that is, the contexts in which ideological structures (re)construct common sense. Said differently, to dismiss common sense dismisses a significant part of what goes into forming the world-views of students and teachers.

I glean a more nuanced, though underdeveloped, understanding of common sense from Apple's work that critiques neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Apple continually addresses common sense as something that the power bloc of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and middle-class managerial techniques has already transformed and, subsequently, as something that must be rebuilt in its counter-hegemonic form. He calls for "the fundamental interruption of common sense" not to work against common sense as such but to create a "counter-hegemonic common sense."¹⁵ Furthermore, Apple's reference always maintains the presence of common sense in its historically contingent formation. He associates common sense with "'plain speaking' and speaking in a language that 'everyone can understand,'"¹⁶ which is a particularly rhetorical way of construing it. Unfortunately, Apple does not persist in examining common sense, arguably because it is only a marginal point in relation to his critique of the dominance of the political Right. Additionally, he cites the current "return to 'traditionalism' [as having] delegitimated more critical models of teaching and learning."¹⁷ Extending this claim, common sense in its current formation is particularly resistant to purely critical analyses due to its affinity to "plain speaking." In a specifically United Statesian context, general sentiments of anti-intellectualism make a predominantly critical stance even less fruitful for exacting educational reform. This is not to discount the valuable contributions of critical theory and pedagogy to rethinking possibilities for schooling, but, at the least, it provides some direction when questioning why policymakers repeatedly marginalize or ignore its claims.

I now turn to Vico's work regarding common sense and education in order to provide a possible framework that avoids the pitfalls of both Hess and Kumashiro with their dichotomy of common sense as either the god or devil term, respectively. Additionally, the following reading of Vico pursues and further develops the concept of common sense where Apple's mention of it leaves off.

Vico's notion of common sense emerges from a wide range of historical sources. According to Thora Bayer, his notion draws upon the works of Aristotle, the Stoics (for example, Seneca, Cicero, Juvenal, and Aurelius), Descartes, Reid, and Shaftesbury.¹⁸ John Schaeffer identifies Vico's common sense as a culmination of the history of Western rhetoric up through the Renaissance in order to critique the

bourgeoning Enlightenment project of his time.¹⁹ Clearly, we are not dealing with a simplistic notion of common sense. However, when considering his definition, we may think otherwise. In his *New Science*, Vico defines common sense as “judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race.” Prior to this definition, he claims that common sense is what determines choice, and immediately after claims that it will yield a “new art of criticism.”²⁰ If common sense is the determinant of choice, then Apple’s claim that traditionalism has deligitimated criticality becomes all the more important in consideration of the critical stance against common sense that authors such as Kumashiro take. Specifically, if choice derives from common sense, arguments against common sense negate the grounds for choice, rendering other, more critical possibilities “nonsensical.” Subsequently, common sense generally wins out over more critical approaches, which begins to make sense of Vico’s insistence that his understanding of common sense leads to a new art of criticism.²¹

Bayer gives a brief genealogy of Vico’s definition of common sense, which she divides according to Ancient and modern sources. Vico, she claims, draws on Aristotle’s use of *aisthesis koine* in *De Anima*. For both Aristotle and Vico, common sense “derives” from sensation. Vico’s emphasis on the different social organizations, class, and the like finds its corollary in the Stoic *koinonoomosune* (public spirit or common sensibility) by focusing on the bonds of relationship between people, rather than the individualism found in Aristotle and later in Descartes. Additionally, the mention of judgment is what links Vico’s notion to Descartes’s *bon sens*. However, due to the lack of reflection, Vico’s common sense is qualitatively different from rationality, particularly in the form of the isolated Cartesian individual. This difference is an important piece of Vico’s larger project of critiquing Cartesianism in its ontological assumptions, because Descartes understood *bon sens* as a faculty belonging to all humans that guarantees an essentialized notion of rationality within the individual.²² Educational critics of the contemporary effects of Enlightenment thinking, particularly of the success of the rational, private individual who is assumed as the fundamental unit of operation for neoliberalism, gain from Vico not only a critique of such a position, but also a different view of common sense from which to operate.²³ Important to such a position, however, is the way in which Vico links common sense to education.

In Vico’s earlier work *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, he addresses the topic of common sense and the neglect it has suffered at the hands of Cartesian education that presumes *bon sens*, that is, the rational individual, as the basis for curriculum.²⁴ Instead, Vico offers a curriculum that begins with common sense. He claims that the Cartesian “approach is distinctly harmful, since training in common sense is essential to the education of adolescents, so that that faculty should be developed as early as possible.”²⁵ Recalling his use of common sense from *The New Science*, Vichian education places an emphasis on examining the prereflective judgments that are held at all levels of social organization, and this emphasis is present for the duration of one’s education. However, this examination is not predominantly a critical one. Instead, it is an education that encourages familiarity with the judgments

of one's community. The danger of overlooking these judgments has several consequences. As Vico says, "our young men, because of their training, which is focused on these [Cartesian] studies, are unable to engage in the life of the community, to conduct themselves with sufficient wisdom and prudence; nor can they infuse into their speech a familiarity with human psychology or permeate their utterances with passion."²⁶ First, and most generally, the absence of common sense removes students from their community, essentially privatizing them. Second, they are taught to act in a context that is largely irrelevant to the community of which they are a member. Third, they are brought up to speak a language that can neither identify with, much less persuade, their people. This threefold consequence of an education neglectful of common sense is highly problematic when juxtaposed with the sorts of democratic citizenship critical pedagogy envisions, and, worse still, such a consequence represents a leitmotif of the effects that educational policies and practices have on students today.

A possible complication to the project of this essay arises in the following question: Given the isolation that an education without common sense produces, what do we do when that isolation has become so prevalent as to become common sense? Asked differently, if the education of the self-interested individual of neoliberalism (whose heritage includes the Cartesian rational subject up through the rational individual of Enlightenment thought) is the prereflective judgment on which current policy and practice are based, how does encouraging common sense education avoid reinforcing the very dominance of neoliberalism in common sense?

An important feature of Vico's common sense is its protean, historically contextual character out of which arises the social institutions and actions that distinguish one social organization from another.²⁷ As such, common sense is always susceptible to interruption, redirection, and change. It is in this sense that we can consider Vico's notion of common sense and its role in education as potentially both disruptive of the practices that manifest as neoliberal education as well as productive of alternative worldviews that address the uneven and arbitrary distribution of sociopolitical privilege. This disruption and production is one way of conceiving what Apple calls "counter-hegemonic common sense." The point here is not to critique common sense wholesale — that is, the point is not only to disrupt common sense, but also to establish within common sense a productive series of claims, narratives, and subsequent actions in the role of prereflective judgments. On Vico's view, the way we go about this is through educating youth in the type of common sense their community upholds. Counter-hegemony arises out of both the experience and awareness of community members' dissatisfaction with their role in what is taken as common sense. Here critical modes of addressing such dissatisfaction are quite helpful. However, rather than attacking neoliberalism in education from the outset and marginalizing one's own status as an educator, a common sense educator acknowledges the prereflective status neoliberalism already has in education and teaches in a manner that brings awareness to the contexts that arise out of our current (re)productions of common sense, that is, for example, from our hegemonic political, economic, pedagogical, scientific, and social ideological

apparatuses. Keeping in mind the change that common sense continually undergoes, teaching in this way is in one sense historical, showing that the link between education and the free market is relatively recent. In another sense, it is rhetorical, examining the persuasive texts of neoliberalism, for example, *A Nation at Risk*, in terms of the community demands it addresses. In still another sense, it is political, engaging students with community life in ways that are both sympathetic to the contingent emergence of common sense in its current form and critical to the shortfalls and exigencies overlooked in its expression.

In the final analysis, a Vichian theory of common sense in education offers a number of conceptual benefits that are unavailable to the more thinly developed theories described previously. In contrast to Hess's and Kumashiro's use of common sense as essentially good or bad, respectively, Vico's theory portrays common sense in its sociocultural complexity. Common sense, then, is a highly contingent and perpetually contested space for various institutional and personal demands. Rendered thusly, the further development of Apple's suggestion for a counter-hegemonic common sense holds greater urgency and provides a more specific framework with which pedagogues may engage.

Following upon a more thorough consideration of common sense, scholars interested in the critical analysis of neoliberalism's effects on educational policy and practice should consider new questions regarding the ways in which we can map common sense, or counter-hegemonic common sense. Critics already draw readily from examples of common sense assumptions from education policy, and to a certain degree these examples already have a body of literature, though a great deal of it utilizes a predominantly critical lens with little regard to the ways in which such policy comes into dominance initially and what advantages and disadvantages it provides over former constructions of common sense. Examples from educational practice, from pedagogy to administration, are more difficult to locate in research, but they remain crucial to mapping common sense in that they reveal the practical, active embodiment of how prereflective judgment operates in the school. Moreover, thoroughgoing philosophical considerations of common sense produce frameworks for educational policies, and the praxis arising from them, contingent upon historically situated communities and the successes and failures of those communities to address their demands.

1. Some examples of research that critically examines the influence of neoliberalism on education include Michael Apple, "Creating Difference: Neo-Liberalism, Neo-Conservatism and the Politics of Educational Reform," *Educational Policy* 18, no. 1 (2004): 12–44; Deron Boyles, *American Education and Corporations: The Free Market Goes to Schools* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998); Pauline Lipman, "Cracking Down: Chicago School Policy and the Regulation of Black and Latino Youth," in *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools*, eds. Kenneth Saltman and David Gabbard (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003); James D. Marshall, "Foucault and Neo-Liberalism: Biopower and Busno-Power," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1995*, http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/eps/PES-Yearbook/95_docs/marshall.html; and Kenneth Saltman, "Schooling in Disaster Capitalism: How the Political Right Is Using Disaster to Privatize Public Schooling," in *The Corporate Assault on Youth: Commercialism, Exploitation, and the End of Innocence*, ed. Deron Boyles (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2008).

2. Apple, "Creating Difference."
3. Saltman, "Schooling in Disaster Capitalism."
4. Philip Kovacs and Deron Boyles, "Institutes, Foundations and Think Tanks: Neoconservative Influences on U.S. Public Schools," *Public Resistance* 1, no.1 (2005), <http://web.mac.com/publicresistance/iWeb/1.1/1.1-5%20Kovacs.html>.
5. By using Vico's notion of common sense as a point of departure and given the brevity of the essay, I do not address the multiple uses of common sense in Western philosophy that have followed Vico's analysis. Illustrative of the broad field in which common sense is a significant, if not central, category for analysis, the following sources, though not exhaustive, will provide some indication of how theoretically important common sense is in the history of Western philosophy. See, for example, Thomas Reid and Derek R. Brookes, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense: A Critical Edition*, v. 2 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2nd ed., ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1993); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1952); *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000); John Dewey, "Common Sense and Science: Their Respective Frames of Reference," *Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 8 (1948): 197–208; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1975).
6. Frederick M. Hess, "Common Sense School Reform," *American Experiment Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2004): 16–44; Kevin K. Kumashiro, *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning toward Social Justice* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004); and Apple, "Creating Difference."
7. Clifford Geertz does an excellent job of establishing from an anthropological standpoint the contingency of common sense across cultures. In particular, consider his comparison of the different treatment of hermaphrodites within the cultures of the United States, the Navajo, and the Pokot. See Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 73–93.
8. A god-term is defined by Kenneth Burke as "the universal title or all inclusive epithet to which any less generalized terms would be related as parts to whole." Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 73.
9. Hess, "Common Sense School Reform," 16.
10. Ibid., 19.
11. Ibid., 26, 29.
12. Hess does claim that his approach is not "a zealous appeal to some mythic notion of the market" ("Common Sense School Reform," 26), yet he is clearly relying on the neoliberal notion that success is measurable, through testing, and that a system of rewards and punishment should be exacted on the basis of that measure.
13. While beyond the scope of this essay, the relationship between the status quo and common sense deserves further inquiry in light of its presence in both Hess and Kumashiro.
14. Kumashiro, "Against Common Sense," 1.
15. Apple, "Creating Difference," 14, 13, and 40.
16. Ibid., 17–18.
17. Ibid., 25.
18. Thora Ilin Bayer, "Vico's Principle of Sensus Communis and Forensic Eloquence," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 83, no. 3 (2008): 1131–156.
19. John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990).
20. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), paragraph 142, 141, and 143 respectively.
21. While Vico was primarily concerned with a philosophy of history in his *New Science*, and the new art of criticism was an historical criticism, I contend that the link of common sense to education that Vico

makes in his earlier works, which I describe subsequently, maintains the relationship between common sense, choice, and this new art of criticism.

22. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method; Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1998).

23. Given over half a century of academia's theoretical critique of the Cartesian individual through the understanding of the subject, an anti-essential common sense is long overdue, if not commonsensical, so to speak.

24. Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, trans. Elio Gianturco (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

25. Ibid., 13.

26. Ibid., 33–34.

27. This is detailed in Vico's *New Science* and is further analyzed by Leon Pompa in his *Vico: A Study of the New Science*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1975). See in particular 27–41.