

Common Sense or Good Sense? Ethnomathematics and the Prospects for a Gramscian Politics of Adults' Mathematics Education

Diana Coben
Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK

Abstract

This paper looks at Antonio Gramsci's concepts of 'common sense' and 'good sense' in relation to adults learning mathematics, focussing particularly on issues around ethnomathematics, and explores the prospects for a Gramscian politics of adults mathematics education.

Introduction

Mathematical knowledge is socially powerful: it enjoys high prestige and being 'mathematically knowledgeable' is often treated as an indicator of general intelligence, as evidenced by the widespread use of mathematics in entry tests for employment and employment training; mathematics is precise, rigorous, a powerful discipline in its own right. Common sense, by contrast, is regarded - or rather, it is often disregarded - as a low-level, practical, 'everyday' phenomenon, hardly noticed, except when its absence is suddenly revealed in the actions of an otherwise apparently intelligent, capable adult. What then is the connection between mathematics and common sense and where does Gramsci come into the picture?

For me, the connection between mathematics and common sense has long been a source of interest. As an adult numeracy tutor in the 1970s and 1980s I was aware that there seemed to be a strong connection in students' minds between those elements of mathematics they felt comfortable with and what they called common sense and my later research, with Gillian Thumpston, on adults' mathematics life histories, bore this out (Coben and Thumpston 1995; 1996). We found that some adults consistently undervalued the mathematics they could do, dismissing it as 'just common sense', while regarding as mathematics only that which they could not do. Mathematics was thus effectively rendered invisible, a phenomenon also noted by Mary Harris (1997).

And Gramsci? Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire figure as 'radical heroes' in my research into political theory in relation to adult education (Coben1998) and I became intrigued by the possibility that the concept of 'common sense' developed by Gramsci in his prison notebooks (Gramsci 1971) and his distinction between

'common sense' and 'good sense'¹, might shed light on adults' learning and practice of mathematics. I began to explore aspects of the complex relationship between adults' mathematical knowledge and understandings and conceptions of common sense (Coben 1997). Some recent research has engaged with notions of common sense in relation to mathematics and mathematics education (viz. Keitel et al., eds, 1996). On the whole, however, common sense has not been the subject of a great deal of research in relation specifically to adults' mathematics learning. This is strange when one considers that, in the West, at least, common sense is one of the features that distinguishes an adult from a child, in that adults are expected to demonstrate common sense whereas children are regarded as in need of adult care and protection at least partly because, paradoxically, they are not expected to have what is also called 'the sense they were born with'.

In this paper I want to focus on Gramsci's concepts and their relevance to current debates around ethnomathematics. What are his concepts of 'common sense' and 'good sense' and what distinction does he draw between them?

Gramsci's concepts of 'common sense' and 'good sense'

Common sense

For Gramsci, common sense comprises the 'diffuse, uncoordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment' (Gramsci 1971:330n). It contains 'a healthy nucleus of good sense' which, he argues, 'deserves to be made more unitary and coherent' (Gramsci 1971:328). Gramsci states that:

Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. At those times when a homogeneous social group is brought into being, there comes into being also, in opposition to common sense, a homogeneous - in other words coherent and systematic - philosophy. (Gramsci 1971:419)

He emphasises the chaotic and contradictory nature of 'common sense', describing it as 'a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything one likes' (Gramsci 1971:422). It is 'an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept'. Nonetheless, although it is 'crudely neophobe and conservative' (Gramsci 1971:423), it contains truths.

Gramsci insists that both 'common sense' and 'good sense' are historically and socially situated: 'Every social stratum has its own 'common sense' and its own 'good sense', which are basically the most widespread conception of life and of man' (Gramsci 1971:326, n5).

Good sense

For Gramsci, 'good sense' is exemplified by the 'philosophy of praxis' (a term he uses throughout the notebooks for Marxism, partly as camouflage to deceive the prison censor). 'Good sense' is analogous to 'philosophy', in that it is inherently coherent and critical. As he says, 'Philosophy is criticism and the superseding of religion and 'common sense'. In this sense it coincides with 'good' as opposed to 'common' sense (Gramsci 1971:326). Good sense is thus an 'intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense and become, if only within narrow limits, a critical conception' (Gramsci 1971:333). In order for 'common sense' to be renewed, i.e., to become 'good sense', one must start with

a philosophy which already enjoys, or could enjoy, a certain diffusion, because it is connected to and implicit in practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a renewed common sense possessing the coherence and sinew of individual philosophies. But this can only happen if the demands of cultural contact with the 'simple' are continually felt. (Gramsci 1971:330n)

Good sense, for Gramsci, may be created out of common sense through an educative Marxist politics. This process does not entail 'introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity' (Gramsci 1971:331). So how do Gramsci's concepts of 'common sense' and 'good sense' relate to issues in adults' mathematics education, and in particular, to ethnomathematics?

Ethnomathematics

Ethnomathematics² seems to me to offer several parallels to Gramsci's concepts. Ethnomathematics problematizes dichotomies between different 'knowledges', formal and informal, academic and popular, and questions the allocation of power to preferred forms of knowledge, in ways that find parallels in Gramsci's concepts. Gramsci's broad conception of culture encompasses mathematics as a cultural phenomenon, a core conception for ethnomathematicians. Gramsci, crucially, regarded common sense as something to be worked with and transcended rather than rejected. This implies an educative process rooted in, and respectful of, people's lived experience. It is the nature of people's experience in relation to mathematics that Gillian Thumpston and I sought to explore in our mathematics life history research, and the exploration of the nature of people's mathematical experience lies at the heart of the ethnomathematics enterprise.

Thus far, it seems that a Gramscian and an ethnomathematics approach may have significant elements of congruency, at least in terms of method and approach, though not necessarily in terms of political purpose. Gramsci was, after all, a major figure in twentieth century Marxism; I am not suggesting that all ethnomathematicians share his political perspective and commitment. Ethnomathematics is a diverse movement, bringing together researchers with different political perspectives, as is evident in Arthur B. Powell's and Marilyn

Frankenstein's edited collection, *Ethnomathematics* (Powell and Frankenstein, eds, 1997). Such diversity is not only historically inevitable in these postmodern times but probably also essential for the intellectual health of the movement. Instead of a shared political commitment, it seems to me there is in ethnomathematics a shared ethical commitment: most ethnomathematicians would presumably echo Ubiratan D'Ambrosio's humanitarian concern with 'an ethics of respect, solidarity, and cooperation' (D'Ambrosio 1997:xx).

But there is another problem in assuming congruency between a Gramscian conception of good sense and common sense and ethnomathematics, and it is a problem which strikes at the heart of the ethnomathematics project, as I understand it. This is the question of whether Gramsci's distinction between good sense and common sense is predicated on an irredeemably hierarchical conception of knowledge, as Gelsa Knijnik has argued (Knijnik1996).

To an extent, this must remain an open question, since the distinction between good sense and common sense is not fully worked out in the prison notebooks. Certainly, it may be interpreted as a distinction between true and counterfeit knowledge; between order (unified knowledge), and chaos (fragmented knowledge); between higher and lower forms of knowledge. If so, it would seem perverse and irrational to prefer the counterfeit to the true, to celebrate people's inchoate lived experience and practice of mathematics, whether effective and accurate in mathematical terms or not. In educational terms, such a view of common sense would imply that it should be rejected in favour of academic rigour. If ethnomathematics were aligned with common sense conceived in this way, that would be to relegate ethnomathematics to the status of a non-academic practice and an anti-science theory, connotations which it already holds for many observers, as D'Ambrosio points out (D'Ambrosio 1997:xxi). It would also be to align Gramsci's concept of good sense, in this context, with academic mathematics, privileging what Gramsci would call the 'traditional intellectual' and the traditional intellectual's knowledge over the simple. It would be tantamount to accusing Gramsci of educational conservatism (as Harold Entwistle does in his 1979 book) and acknowledging that ethnomathematics sacrifices concern about issues of accuracy and effectiveness in mathematics on the altar of a sentimental relativism.

I believe to make such an alignment would be to misread Gramsci and to distort ethnomathematics. On the question of misreading Gramsci, as I argue in my book, *Radical Heroes*,

Gramsci's distinction between good sense and common sense is both epistemological and sociological: both a distinction between different forms of knowledge and a distinction between the 'knowledges' characteristic of different social groups. But the distinctions are not mutually exclusive in either case. In epistemological terms, common sense includes elements of good sense. In sociological terms, good sense is not the preserve of an elite, and common sense is common to us all. (Coben1998:213-4)

Gramsci problematizes both common sense and good sense. He makes a conceptual rather than an empirical distinction between common sense and good sense, since the categories are not mutually exclusive.

On the question of distorting ethnomathematics, I defer to D'Ambrosio (1997:xx-xxi) who insists that ethnomathematics is 'an holistic and transdisciplinary view of knowledge', 'a research program', 'a comparative study of the techniques, modes, arts, and styles of explaining, understanding, learning about, and coping with the reality in different natural and cultural environments' and 'an analysis of the generation of knowledge, of its social organisation, and of its diffusion'. If it is all these things, then the question is not whether ethnomathematics should be equated with a Gramscian conception of mathematical 'common sense' but instead how ethnomathematics might contribute to our understanding of common sense and good sense and deepen and enrich our conception of mathematics and our commitment to radical democratic principles of adult mathematics education.

If mathematics life histories research tells us that adults tend to dismiss the mathematics they can do as 'just common sense', and if ethnomathematics helps us to engage with adults' chaotic, fragmented 'common sense' in an educational context, and to understand better the relationship between adult students' - and our own - 'common sense' and 'good sense', then we have the beginnings of some fruitful lines of research and practice in adult mathematics education. We have the possibility of research into 'adult numeracy' that makes better sense of adults' mathematical strengths as well as their weaknesses and we have the prospect of more effective and socially and politically sensitive practice in adults' mathematics education. In terms of the development of a radical, democratic politics of adults learning mathematics, it seems to make 'good sense' to start with adults' 'common sense'.

Notes

This is an edited version of a paper presented at the first international conference of Mathematics Education and Society (MEAS1), at Nottingham University, UK, in September 1998.

1. I explore Gramsci's concepts of 'common sense' and 'good sense' in greater depth in my book, *Radical Heroes* (Coben 1998) and especially in my chapter in a forthcoming book on Gramsci and education in preparation under the auspices of the International Gramsci Society (IGS). For details of IGS, contact the International Gramsci Society, Secretary: Joseph A. Buttigieg, Department of English, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556, USA.
2. This section draws on a paper I presented at the International Study Group on the Relations between History and Pedagogy of Mathematics and the International Study Group on Ethnomathematics Conference in Honor of the 65th Birthday of Ubiratan D'Ambrosio, in Baltimore, USA, 6 January 1998.

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