

Productivity as Common Sense: Power, Knowledge, and the Social Construction of Value

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Abstract

This paper challenges the assumption that common sense is neutral, self-evident, or devoid of power by situating it within relations of ideology and hegemony. Drawing on a 'Sociology of Knowledge' perspective, and building on insights from Antonio Gramsci and Satish Deshpande, it argues that common sense derives its power precisely from its ability to obscure its own conditions of production. Rather than being natural or universal, common sense is historically constructed and shaped by dominant social groups. The paper develops this argument through an analysis of productivity as a contemporary form of ideological common sense. It examines how media and digital discourses associated with hustle culture, circulate and normalize specific valuations of time, labour, and selfhood. In doing so, productivity emerges not merely as a descriptive category but as a normative framework that naturalizes and legitimizes hierarchies of labour. By foregrounding the discursive construction of productivity, the paper demonstrates how common sense operates as a site of power that structures both perception and practice in contemporary neoliberal contexts.

Keywords: *Common Sense, Productivity, Ideology, Hegemony, Hustle Culture, Neoliberalism, Labour Hierarchies*

Introduction

The term common sense is often introduced to our vocabulary via another individual's expression of immense frustration or surprise over something not unfolding in a manner that they saw as natural and obvious; something that was supposed to be common sense. While presenting a defense for Sociology and delinking its subject matter from common sense, Beteille observed "Common sense is not only localized...; it is also unreflective since it does not question its own origins and presuppositions, or at least does not do so deliberately and methodically"(1996, p. 2362). This unreflective characteristic of commonsense is the foundational premise of the power relations implicated in construction of common sense. There emerges the idea of an authority which is almost sacrosanct when presumptions are clubbed under the umbrella of common sense, consequently evading reflection.

Given how the disciplinary authority of Sociology is constantly questioned by equating it to common sense, Beteille happens to be only one among several sociologists who have tried to problematize common sense in order to present a defense for the scientific knowledge of their discipline. However, these endeavors have often limited themselves to only differentiating common sense from Sociology and not really dwelling deep into the power implications of common sense. This task is thus best understood via a specialized 'Sociology of Knowledge' perspective. On the same lines, one can identify pioneer endeavors problematizing common sense in key Marxist texts which would be apt to elaborate on in this discussion.

The Marxist Questions on Ideology and Hegemony

While arguing in their *German Ideology* (1846/1976) that historical change is a matter of changing ideas or consciousness, Marx and Engels provided an early insight into problematizing common sense. "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (p. 64) implies clearly that ideas interact with social activity and are active in social and political relationships. Marx and Engels thus further proceed to demonstrate how the dominant material relations are in fact ideally expressed at the ruling ideas of a time, and therefore, the ideas become sources of one's class dominance in practice. Ownership of means of material production thus translates to ownership of means of mental production as well. Further, the lack of the same implies individuals as mere subjects to the same

ideas that are produced by the ruling class which is constituted by those who have the distinction to 'think' or have consciousness by virtue of their material ownership of means of mental production.

The foundational critique set by *German Ideology* echoes in works of Marxist scholars who have explored questions of ideology and hegemony further. A Gramscian Sociology of knowledge in fact is rooted in a theory of ideology itself (Salamini, 1974). While bridging the gap between economic and political processes, Gramsci (1971) highlights the role of human consciousness which governs and alters the relations of production. This is Gramsci's interpretation of the western capitalist societies where the bourgeoisie retained their domination in forms of a hegemony erected upon secured and maintained consent of the masses. The unconscious transformation of human consciousness then, according to Gramsci, is the most efficient means of retaining bourgeoisie domination. The Bourgeois *Weltanschauung*ⁱ therefore becomes common sense knowledge as it is diffused, popularized, and absorbed by the masses.

Having placed cultural and political hegemony at the center of power relations dictating social stratification, Gramsci then invokes the "philosophy of praxis"ⁱⁱ as a path of counter hegemony. In summing Gramsci's arguments, Salamini opines that if one must develop a critical consciousness of the world that is new, an awareness of historicity in the context becomes imperative. With such a consciousness of historicity, one may then begin to question and problematize what we otherwise readily accept as common sense.

The Marxist questions on common sense can further be explored via Althusser's work on the ideological state apparatuses. In summation, Althusser argues that seemingly apolitical institutions are efficient means of propagating the dominant ideology. To elaborate this, Althusser reiterates two pressing theses. First, "an ideology always exists in an apparatus and in the practice or practices of that apparatus. This existence is material," and second, "Ideology represents individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence" (2014, p. 162). While the first thesis is largely a reiteration of Marx and Engels' pioneering critique, the second thesis here is especially important to understand common sense and requires some discussion. While discussing how the individual imagines the conditions of his existence, the aspect of common sense being unreflective is pertinent. One often takes these "imaginings" for granted,

dwelling little upon whether it is truly their own imagination of the world around them or merely a prescribed set of ideas.

The Normal, the Pathological and the Universal

Having mentioned that common sense's extreme efficiency to prevail relies on it being unreflective, it becomes imperative to discuss what contributes to one being unreflective about it. What Althusser has called the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence are seldom imaginations in the sense of them being original. The imaginations are most often tried to be aligned with 'norms' prevailing in society. One may understand common sense in this respect via Durkheim's distinction of normal and pathological social facts.

Common sense is a part of what we may understand as normal social facts in a society, that is, most integrating factors. Normal social facts denote a requisite of adherence to the status quo. On the other hand, anything suspicious of threatening disintegration in society can be understood as pathological social fact. Similarly, if one does not align their actions with what could have been common sense, they can be seen as committing something essentially pathological. However, while Durkheim being a sociologist has been careful to highlight the importance of the social type in contextualizing a social fact as normal or pathological, it is often not the case with common sense. By invoking the social type, Durkheim (2014) argues that the functionality of a normal social fact would be contextual and therefore limited to the society in which it exists. On the other hand, common sense is perceived with a certain universality.

This association with universality is what lends to the claim of common sense being "natural." This does not mean that common sense in actuality is universal, the majority of what we perceive as common sense is in fact particular to the cultural context and as Beteille has said, is "localized." However, the implicit claim of something being natural and hence universal plays extremely well in penetrating the dominant notions deep into an individual's way of seeing. The presumption that something is natural consequently constructs it as value neutral and not requiring reflection. An unfavorable value judgement is thus often made with reference to an individual who does not adhere to the seemingly common sense and in the process ends up committing the "pathological."

Hustle Culture and the Moral Economy of Productivity

Having located the roots of Common sense's critique in Marxist theory, proceeding to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) seminal work on knowledge would find common sense being problematized in a more contemporary sense. The arguments of Marx, Engels, Gramsci and Althusser have been summated by Berger and Luckman in terms of subjective meaning and objective facticity. Berger and Luckmann have combined Durkheim's emphasis on treating social facts as things with Weber's contesting focus on subjective meaning in sociology. In doing so, the sociologists found themselves grappling with the broad question of "How is it possible that subjective meanings become objective facticities?" (p. 18) The authors have explored this question over the course of their book by looking at what they have called "everyday reality." An analysis which deals with "language and knowledge in everyday life" is integral to this research. The discussion on language is especially important if one must trace the emerging common sense with reference to the idea of productivity.

With reference to Language, Berger and Luckmann summate:

Human expressivity is capable of objectivation, that is, it manifests itself in products of human activity that are available both to their producers and to other men as elements of a common world. Such objectivations serve as more or less enduring indices of the subjective processes of their producers, allowing their availability to extend beyond the face-to-face situation in which they can be directly apprehended. (2011, p. 34)

This framework is particularly useful in examining the contemporary idea of productivity. Today, productivity is not merely an economic concept, but a pervasive moral imperative embedded in everyday discourse. It is widely understood, almost instinctively, as the efficient use of time, the completion of tasks, and the continuous pursuit of self-improvement. To be productive is to be disciplined, responsible, and worthy; conversely, to be unproductive is to be wasteful or lacking. These associations appear self-evident, requiring little justification, thereby exemplifying the unreflective character of common sense.

The proliferation of what is often termed "hustle culture" demonstrates how productivity is continuously constructed and reinforced. Across digital platforms, particularly social media, one encounters an unending stream

of messages valorizing constant activity: waking early, optimizing routines, monetizing hobbies, and transforming leisure into self-investment. Phrases such as “rise and grind,” “no days off,” or “make every minute count” circulate widely, functioning as linguistic vehicles through which particular valuations of time and labour are normalized. These expressions are not neutral; they encode and reproduce a specific ideological orientation aligned with neoliberal capitalism, where the individual is held solely responsible for maximizing their own value.

Yet, as with all forms of common sense, the idea of productivity obscures the processes through which certain activities come to be valued over others. An interesting phenomenon, as such, to look at productivity is housework. Housework, still, in common sensical understanding lies far away from being conceptualized as work. In fact, it was not until theorists like Ann Oakley (1974) studied housework that much was reflected upon regarding housework. The exclusion of housework from dominant definitions of productivity reflects not its lack of value, but its location outside regimes that recognize and reward labour through visibility and exchange.

Moreover, productivity does not operate as a simple binary between productive and unproductive activities. It eventually falls in the larger hierarchy which does not only differentiate productive from non-productive but also, the more productive from less productive. Looking at the hierarchy of productivity itself is especially important to notice how it is often invoked in households where multiple family members share a physical space while connecting digitally with their respective work spaces. One makes common sensical judgements when deciding whose work is productive enough to suspend all potential disturbances? For example, the work of the male (most likely primary) bread winner of the family is likely to seem more productive than the wife who maybe juggling between housework and work from home and in the process, ends up looking less involved in a more specialized (productive) task, or the child who is a university student and not bringing income to the family. Productivity, in this manner, helps us to locate the deep infestation of common sense with the capitalistic ideals of a neoliberal economy which benefits the dominant individuals and groups everywhere.

Borrowing from the above classical frameworks, recent scholarship has further

emphasized how the discourse on productivity must be read within the realm of digital capitalism and the ongoing restructuring of labour. Platform and gig economies as well as the emergent area of digital labour become sites for analyzing the restructuration of labour and the evolving idea of productivity. In these contemporary areas of work, studies observe the boundaries between leisure and labour becoming increasingly blurred (Srnicsek, 2017; Wood et al., 2019) whereby one is consistently asked to optimize themselves even outside of formal work. Hustle culture is a key component in this cultural trend that is directly reflective of the neoliberal rationality. Individuals, then, end up internalizing the market logic by constantly holding themselves against evaluation in terms of efficiency, output and general productivity that ultimately lends to their idea of self-worth as well. Gershon (2011) reads this as neoliberalism reshaping subjectivity by compelling individuals to treat themselves as enterprises that must maximize their own values in competitive environments. In this sense, productivity becomes the thread weaving together personal conduct and broader structures of capitalist accumulation.

Social media further intensifies these hierarchies by creating aspirational standards of productivity that are detached from material realities. Influencers and entrepreneurial figures often present curated narratives of relentless efficiency, masking structural inequalities such as access to resources, time, and support systems. This produces an illusion of meritocracy, where productivity appears as an individual achievement rather than a socially conditioned possibility. The result is an emerging common sense that not only prescribes how one ought to live but also obscures the unequal conditions under which such prescriptions are made possible. In this way, productivity emerges as a key site where common sense and power intersect. What appears as a neutral and universally desirable trait is, in fact, a socially constructed category that reflects and reinforces existing hierarchies of class, gender, and labour. It's taken-for-granted status is precisely what enables it to function so effectively: by presenting itself as natural, it evades scrutiny, even as it organizes everyday life in profoundly unequal ways.

Conclusion

Productivity, when examined through a sociological lens, reveals itself not as a neutral measure of efficiency but as a form of ideological common sense that

structures how value is assigned to human activity. Its apparent universality and self-evidence are precisely what enable it to function effectively: by presenting itself as natural, it conceals the historical and social processes through which certain forms of labour come to be privileged over others. To problematize productivity as common sense is therefore to make visible the power relations it conceals. Such a move is not merely analytical but critical, as it opens up the possibility of questioning taken-for-granted hierarchies of value and recognizing alternative ways of organizing work, time, and social worth. In doing so, it reaffirms the central sociological insight that what appears most obvious often requires the most rigorous interrogation.

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- i It is a fundamental concept of German philosophy, especially epistemology and refers to a wide world perception. Additionally, it refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs forming a global description through which an individual, group or culture watches and interprets the world and interacts with it.
- ii The essence of Marxism according to Gramsci is the Weltanschauung of subaltern classes aspiring to and moving toward cultural and political hegemony.
- iii According to Durkheim, social facts are relative in nature which means they vary from society to society. Social Facts considered normal in one society may be considered pathological in the other.