

Translator's introduction, T. Lamarre

Isabelle  
Stengers  
Making Sense  
in Common  
A Reading of  
Whitehead  
in Times  
of Collapse

Translated by Thomas Lamarre

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# Contents

<b>Translator's Introduction: A Shock to Think Together</b>	vii
<i>Thomas Lamarre</i>	
<b>1. The Question of Common Sense</b>	3
<i>Does Philosophy Confront Ignorance?</i>	3
<i>The Defeat of Common Sense</i>	9
<i>Problematizing Abstraction</i>	17
<i>Civilizing Modernity?</i>	25
<b>2. In the Grip of Bifurcation</b>	35
<i>The Bifurcation of Nature</i>	35
<i>The Trick of Evil</i>	43
<i>The Importance of Facts</i>	48
<i>The Art of Conventions</i>	56
<b>3. A Coherence to Be Created</b>	65
<i>We Require to Understand</i>	65
<i>Dare to Speculate</i>	70
<i>Whiteheadian Societies</i>	79
<i>Heirs to Whitehead?</i>	89
<b>4. What Can a Society Do?</b>	101
<i>Thinking through the Milieu</i>	101
<i>Finding More</i>	109
<i>Caring for Analogies</i>	120
<i>Living Beings and Life</i>	129

<b>5. A Metamorphic Universe</b>	139
<i>Welding Imagination and Common Sense</i>	139
<i>In Praise of the Middle Voice</i>	150
<i>Tentacular Affects</i>	159
<i>Living in the Ruins</i>	171
<b>Notes</b>	181
<b>Bibliography</b>	193

# Translator's Introduction

*A Shock to Think Together*

THOMAS LAMARRE

The philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead has experienced a rather astonishing surge of attention in recent years. The surge has occurred especially in domains of inquiry related to media studies and science and technology studies, in which questions about culture and society are as important as the exploration of sciences, technologies, or media *tout court*. As Isabelle Stengers emphasizes in *Making Sense in Common*, Whitehead's philosophy is now engaged in dialogues and issues it never envisioned: antiracist struggles, Indigenous movements, climate-change activism, animal-rights advocacy. Stengers herself poses the challenge directly and lucidly: Does Whitehead's philosophy offer anything of relevance for the contemporary juncture? Her answer is a (prolonged) yes, and no one is better situated and equipped to address this challenge than Stengers. Not only has her work played a major role in generating the current surge of attention to Whitehead's philosophy, notably with *Thinking with Whitehead* (2002; English translation, 2011), which carefully yet boldly lays out a conceptual framework for understanding the genuine novelty of his manner of thinking, but it is also in her character as a thinker not to avoid troubled waters. The present book is not an exception: Stengers ventures here into unexpected domains of inquiry with Whitehead, charting a course across treacherous seas.

In this book even more than her previous work, Stengers brings Whitehead's philosophy into relation with the world of activist

struggles. Her discussion begins with a consideration of how certain people have been barred from participation in scientific knowledge, or rather how certain practices of formulating questions have been ruled out, disavowed under the rubric of "common sense." This disavowal of the agency of certain people ("commoners" or nonexperts) or even entire peoples (Indigenous peoples, for instance) is closely connected to another kind of disavowal: the disavowal of the agency of nonhuman beings within certain forms of scientific practice. Although these two kinds of disavowal cannot and should not be conflated, it is not surprising that struggles against them are becoming increasingly interconnected in the contemporary world, finding common cause, so to speak. As Stengers shows, the question of the status of nonhuman beings within the sciences is not just pertinent to contemporary social and political activism. It may be of the utmost importance.

The question of how to avow the agency of nonhuman beings grips Stengers. She is exceedingly knowledgeable about a broad range of sciences such as chemistry, physics, biology, and ecology. But scientific knowledge for her is not simply a matter of facts about nonhuman beings, such as molecules, rocks, forests, animals, and the earth itself. What holds her interest are the ways in which (and the extent to which) nonhuman beings contribute to the production of human knowledge about them. Some scientific practices presume yet disavow the participation of nonhuman beings in knowledge about them. Indeed, the institution of Science has tended to encourage such practices, for political and financial reasons as much as epistemological ones. But scientific practice does not (and probably cannot) eradicate the agency of nonhuman beings. And it is here that Whitehead's philosophy has never been more relevant. Whitehead offers Stengers a meticulously systematic approach to thinking through the dynamic contributions of "actual entities" to the formation of "societies" at every gradation and order of complexity.

At the same time, Stengers remains keenly aware of peoples who have been forcibly and violently excluded from definitions of humanity established by modern Western humanism, particularly Indigenous peoples. What on earth has Whitehead to contribute to such questions? After all, it is not especially useful or desirable to make a wholesale equivalence between the marginalization of human beings

and the marginalization of nonhuman beings, even if their struggles are frequently entangled. What kinds of relay are today possible between these two sites of contestation?

Stengers initially approaches this question from the standpoint of knowledge, questioning the status of different forms of knowledge and different ways of producing facts and speaking truth—"modes of abstraction." Here, too, her standpoint is above all that of activism, which allows her to think via struggles arising between different modes of abstraction. Yet her take on such struggles is idiosyncratic and sometimes unsettling, for she refuses to mobilize readers.<sup>1</sup> She rejects any form of mobilization that would encourage readers to accept the triumph of one side over the another. In some instances, such as the struggle against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) for agricultural use in Europe, she does not hesitate to take scientists to task, and one knows where her sympathies lie. Yet it is one of the hallmarks of her work that it shuns thinking in terms of victors and victories. She deliberately prevents her readers from concluding that scientists are entirely wrong while activists are in the right. She does not allow her readers to identify with any one cause. She refuses the comforting reassurance afforded by siding with either the victors or vanquished. This refusal of mobilization is Stengers's way of activating readers. Her tactic is, in effect, to combine activation and demobilization. The result is a restless, prickly style that may rub some readers the wrong way, for if no one may be declared the victor, neither is anyone to be considered just a victim.

It is to reactivate our thinking about contemporary struggles that Stengers introduces terms and concepts that some readers are likely to find unfashionable, dubious, questionable, and even objectionable, and as Stengers herself would add, for good reason. This is especially true of the key concept of this book, common sense. The very notion of common sense, because so closely associated with consensus, feels outmoded, surpassed, and ultimately exhausted. What can Stengers be thinking when she proposes reactivating, of all things, common sense? The same sorts of questions arise around other key terms in the book, in particular "civilization" and (Western) "modernity." These terms feel not merely outmoded, but potentially objectionable in light of the histories of colonial violence associated with them. Although Stengers does not propose to reactivate the paradigms of

civilization or Western modernity as such, neither does she reject them outright. For Stengers, terms such as “common sense,” “civilization,” and “Western modernity” are mobilizing terms. They spur readers to take sides without thinking. Her tactic, then, is to activate thinking by pushing readers to demobilize their responses to such mobilizing terms.

Without sustained and systematic philosophical engagement, such a tactic of provocation might appear simply abrasive, or even abusive. It is useful, then, to provide some sense of her philosophical method at the outset.

Prior to her deeper engagement with Whitehead, in addition to a series of monographs coauthored with thinkers with areas of expertise outside her principal fields of chemistry and philosophy, such as physics (Ilya Prigogine), German philosophy of nature (Judith Schlanger), and psychiatry (Léon Chertok), Stengers penned a series of interventions into the history and philosophy of sciences, gathered in *The Invention of Modern Sciences* (1993) and the seven volumes of *Cosmopolitics* (1997), the latter of which was subsequently published in two volumes. In these essays, Stengers draws a good deal on the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Gottfried Leibniz. Yet, where one might expect fusion, tacit agreement, or harmonious synthesis of the two philosophers, Stengers's approach is characterized by an unflinching respect for the positions of both philosophers, which leads her to develop a sharp contrast between them. Thus, when Stengers refers to her new diplomatic criteria for sciences as “the ‘Leibnizian constraint’ according to which philosophy should not have as its ideal the ‘reversal of established sentiment,’” she immediately notes Deleuze's disapproval of Leibniz's stance.<sup>2</sup>

This passage is revelatory of Stengers's method in a number of ways. First, it anticipates her focus on common sense in this book in relation to Whitehead, which she had previously articulated via Leibniz's respect for established sentiment. Significantly, Stengers provides a footnote for Leibniz's remarks, and yet, where one might expect a reference to Leibniz's text, she cites Whitehead: “You may polish up commonsense, you may contradict in detail, you may surprise it. But ultimately your whole task is to satisfy it.”<sup>3</sup> Her engagement with common sense and Whitehead, then, is announced early in her career, and clearly. In this respect, *Making Sense in Common*



is a summation of Stengers's work to date. It also marks a turning point. In her preface to the original French edition of the book, she expresses her desire to take on the challenge of a new mode of address to readers.<sup>4</sup> In this book, she aims to speak not only to the converted (those who are likely to agree with her or already in the know) but also to readers who may well disagree with her. As a result, *Making Sense in Common* is the most accessible of Stengers's books, at once an introduction to and summation of her thought. It does not, however, vulgarize it or dumb it down. Instead, while she strives for clarity of expression, she places even greater weight on developing the contrast between opposing sides of any struggle, which makes her diplomatic mission all the more difficult. *Making Sense in Common* is at once the most contrastive and the most diplomatic of her works to date.

Second, her source for the Whitehead citation is *The Aims of Education*, which underscores how Stengers's concern for knowledge production extends pragmatically (diplomatically) into education. Her aim for education is far from Socratic, however. She devotes the first chapter of *Making Sense in Common* to distinguishing her approach from that of Socrates. Her position as a philosopher is not that of "he who knows better precisely because he knows he does not know, and thus may teach." Stengers avoids this movement of *mise-en-abîme* in which knowledge turns into a dizzying and disorienting hall of mirrors around the *aporia* of knowing. Education for her never hinges on teaching those who do not know that they do not know. It is about learning by way of what matters to us, that which we do know. The philosopher for Stengers is not a teacher, authority, or specialist. The philosopher is one who cares enough about something to learn more about it with others. Her task is to *find more*. This often means the philosopher must engage in diplomacy at the same time: it is impossible to find more with others if one does not also keep the peace with them.

Third, when Stengers dramatizes the contrast between Deleuze and Leibniz with respect to common sense, her contrast does not imply a rejection of Deleuze in favor of Leibniz. Indeed, her philosophy owes so much to Deleuze that her fellow traveler Bruno Latour refers to him as her only true mentor.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps for this reason, disagreements with Deleuze pepper her work. Common sense is

but one example. Another prime example elsewhere in her work is her reconsideration of Deleuze and Félix Guattari's distinction between the sedentary and the nomadic in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Just as Stengers seems here to take the side of common sense, so she apparently sides with the sedentary over the nomadic.<sup>6</sup> To understand her tactics, it is important to recall that she never thinks in terms of victors or of victories in which one side is right and the other wrong. In this, her disagreement with Deleuze and Guattari is ultimately true to their own method. Even if they seem to revel in the ways in which the nomadic uproots sedentary habits, the former is not a category for them, but a tendency. It is impossible to think or to live the nomadic without the sedentary, or vice versa. The nomadic cannot be triumphantly celebrated as if in victory over the sedentary. At stake for Deleuze and Guattari is a logic of disjunctive synthesis and a practice of assemblage. Similarly, when Stengers seems to side with the sedentary, the nomadic remains in play. By the same token, un-common sense is in play in common sense. In effect, when Stengers disagrees with Deleuze, it is to introduce and develop a contrast in accordance with what might be called somewhat awkwardly "contrastive synthesis." Thus, when she insists on the importance of not shocking common sense, she remains highly attuned to the importance Deleuze ascribes to the nonsensuous and nonconscious that shocks us to thought. The question then is: where and how will Stengers situate that sort of shock?

Fourth, when Stengers insists that, above all, one must not shock common sense, it is important to note that she is situating shock on the same level as common sense. This introduces a complex parity between what shocks and what is held in common. Consequently, common sense or the "in common" is always situated in relation to collective endeavors and struggles. What we hold in common is not placed in opposition to what shocks us to thought, to nonsensuous and nonconscious activation. Her stance, then, implies that a "shock to thinking in common" or a "shock to think together" is already taking place.

When Deleuze was writing *Difference and Repetition* or when Deleuze and Guattari were writing *A Thousand Plateaus*, it may have made tactical sense to stress the shock to thought, and even to sensationalize it. For her part, Stengers does not disavow what

shocks us to thought: it is because the shock to thought is never distributed evenly or equitably that it has the power to transform the world. Indeed, Stengers is not loath to resort to shock. For instance, in her reprise of Donna Haraway's account of training with the dog Cayenne, Stengers remarks: "A zigzag may be generated out of the shock that the term 'trust' may arouse in some people." Today, however, in an era confronted with fake news, uprisings, and climate change, Stengers believes that our tactics must change. Amid constant shocks to thought, we also need ways to buffer or protect ourselves if we are to "make sense in common." We need to avow our vulnerability and understand what makes us vulnerable. Making sense in common arises in the interval between the Deleuzian shock to thought and the Whiteheadian lure to feeling. Making sense in common arises at the same level as the shock to think together.

Fifth, Stengers makes frequent reference to the defeat or undoing of common sense. The defeat of common sense means that neither scientists nor humanists take it seriously; they reject it to mobilize among themselves. Politicians and mass media do not take it seriously either; they mobilize it to accrue attention and profit. For Stengers, then, common sense is a mobilizing term in a profoundly practical way: so much is mobilized against it; its defeat has been triumphantly declared by the victors to further their cause. Defeat, then, does not amount to demobilization. Defeat for Stengers is a sign of total mobilization. Her aim is consequently to demobilize common sense, which does not mean rehabilitating or redeeming it. On the contrary, Stengers herself undoes the notion of common sense, discovering in it something of a contrastive synthesis: "sense" implicates diverse and heterogeneous orientations, while "common" implies unity. Equally concerning for Stengers are the temporality and historicity of this implied unity. She renounces placing unity in the past. While she stands against the developmentalism associated with capitalism—that is, economic development for its own sake—Stengers is nonetheless resolutely non-Romantic, without nostalgia for a retrospectively idealized past. Stengers turns instead to a series of pragmatic ways of making sense in common and aiming at a relevant future, among them the Quaker meeting, the palaver, and Latour's guidelines for a renewed agora, all of which evoke a past in the immediate present. Stengers thus makes clear that the unity of the

common belongs to what Whitehead calls the relation between the immediate present and the relevant future.<sup>7</sup> Unlike consensus, then, which implies an agreement to be reached and held, the unity of the common aims at the relevant future. Making sense in common is an ongoing process, an aim instead of a goal.

Sixth and finally, Stengers continually returns to a passage from Whitehead that becomes a catchphrase for her project: the “welding” of common sense and imagination. The metallurgical operation of welding affords a fitting image of Stengers’s method. When two pieces of metal are welded, they are operationally situated on the same level, even if it is an edge joint or tee joint or lap joint. The two pieces remain distinct, yet now belong together in an assemblage, and one in which the joint too is tangible. Contrast becomes palpable while introducing another dimension. Such welding is precisely what Stengers aims at in her approach to common sense and imagination, which is also to say, the pragmatic and the speculative dimensions of her thought. Thus, she draws on another of Whitehead’s fecund turns of phrase: “common sense brooding.” Common sense, however pragmatic, has something speculative about it. As for imagination, although Stengers does not speak to it as such, she puts her sense of it into action. Imagination, however prone to speculation, introduces a pragmatic turn when it allows for a mode of generalization, which implies a mode of abstraction that is neither inductive nor deductive, but imaginative. This mode of imaginative generalization that is produced when imagination is welded with common sense is called a “generative apparatus.”

In writing this book, Stengers constantly consulted the English editions of Whitehead alongside the existing French translations. Often, she adds footnotes explaining how and why she modified the French translation, many of which she deemed unnecessary to reproduce in the English translation. Needless to say, as Whiteheadian turns of phrase like “common sense brooding” suggest, translation of Whitehead into French is no easy matter. “Brooding,” for instance, becomes *ruminatio*n in French. I might equally well have rendered the “brooding of common sense” as the “rumination of common sense.” This shift in tonality introduces a challenge. When the word *ruminatio*n subsequently occurs in the French text, is it still “brooding,” or is it now “rumination”? This may seem a trivial matter, but given the highly expressive, even poetic nature of Whitehead’s prose, in com-

bination with its meticulous array of prepositions and conjunctions to highlight conceptual operations, it turns out to be of the utmost importance. I opted to retain some terms, such as “brooding,” to give a sense of how Whitehead’s prose affected Stengers’s thinking, for there is a way in which Whiteheadian turns of phrase seep into her turn of thought. Indeed, Stengers sometimes adopts mannerisms from Whitehead. For instance, she often begins sentences with “and,” an unusual gesture in academic French, a perturbation she wishes to prolong. But the same gesture in English no longer perturbs. What is more, when Whitehead starts sentences with “and,” his gesture is inseparable from a system of thought comprising a use of conjunctions, prepositions, and relative clauses that is impossible to sustain in translation, and surely undesirable, for the result would be an over-coding of Stengers’s style. And so, I adopted other turns of phrase, and even forms of repetition, that seemed to me to convey the tone of Stengers instead of trying to imitate Whitehead. In many instances, keeping to the spirit of her thought resulted in a radical departure from literal translation. In fact, Stengers herself opted to alter and expand some passages with me for this edition, not only for the sake of clarity and precision, but also to convey something of the tonality of thinking with Whitehead through a more contemporary English.

Our dialogues over terms and passages raise a deeper question of translation: how to convey how Stengers seeps into Whitehead? In the original text, because she is translating and modifying some of the existing translations of Whitehead into French, her thinking permeates Whitehead’s. When passages from Whitehead are returned to the original English, the effect can be jarring, and not only stylistically, but conceptually. A chasm opens between his English and her more contemporary prose in English, where the two styles felt more entangled in the original French. This divide risks making her approach feel like a form of exegesis of passages from Whitehead, when nothing could be further from Stengers’s undertaking. She refers to her approach as a way of relaying Whitehead, of taking up the baton from him. She also remarks that Whitehead’s language is not our own, by which she means that it belongs to a time and place implying particular problematics. It is this “relay” of problematics (or the ingression of eternal objects) that matters to her.

To give some sense of how Stengers affects Whitehead, I tried, whenever possible, to emphasize her turns of phrase that alter how

we read Whitehead. One example is her use of *fait*, both as “fact” and as “done.” This emphasis on the production of facts is in keeping with Whitehead, and the effect is reinforced with the continual use of compound verbs with *faire*, such as *faire sentir* and *faire prévaloir* and *faire compter*. The doing implied in such compounds may be somewhat literally translated as “make feel” and “make prevail” and “make count.” Not only does such a translation eventually prove awkward and feel tendentious if overused, but it also fails to capture the subtle turn Stengers introduces, which is akin to James’s expression “in the making” or Whitehead’s “to be created.” *Faire sentir* approaches “feeling in the making.” Another example is Stengers’s use of language related to hands and tactility or hapticity. Like Whitehead, she disassociates feeling from perception and personalized emotion, and tactile terminology highlights the force of a nonpersonal and nonconscious feeling. Thus, in addition to deploying terms related to grip and grasp, she highlights echoes of Whiteheadian prehension in verbs like *apprendre* (apprehending or learning) and *comprendre* (comprehending). It would be too much, of course, always to tack on “in the making” or “make” in every instance of *faire*, or to render *apprendre* as “apprehending” when “learning” is more appropriate. Yet another example is Stengers’s use of the language of taste, tasting, and savoring, which insinuates an unsuspected yet pertinent dimension of experience into Whitehead’s articulations. In all instances, I aimed for a judicious introduction of turns of phrase that might express something of the stylistic and conceptual entanglement of Stengers and Whitehead in the original. Indeed, I found myself thinking and practicing translation in the manner of generative apparatus, in Stengers’s terms. Translating, like Stengers’s relaying of Whitehead, can be made into a mode of making sense in common. I am grateful for Stengers’s participation in that process.

The remarkable achievement of *Making Sense in Common* is to show us how to take what we know and what shocks us to think together, and to weld them into a generative apparatus for making sense in common, through the use of contrastive synthesis. In a time in which it is impossible to deny that living on a damaged planet is upon us, Stengers, with Whitehead, teaches us how to live in the ruins by imagining a future relevant to what we know.