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## The Origins of Collective Decision Making (Synopsis)

**Abstract:** A synopsis is provided of the origin and history of the three main paradigms of collective decision making – Counsel, Majority and Consensus. From a reflection on the conditions under which each arose and the historical evolution of each tradition, the ethical foundations of each mode is brought into relief and an appropriate attitude to collective decision making is suggested which would foster creative collaboration on the Left.

### The question

Ever since participating in the S11 protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000, I have been intrigued by processes of collective decision making and in particular by the antagonism between the two main paradigms used on the Left, viz., Majority and Consensus. Reading the literature arising from the Occupy Wall Street events I became alarmed at the depth of this antagonism and in particular the way the problem was being aggravated by ‘histories’ of Consensus decision making based on hearsay and ill-informed speculation, and the apparent belief that Majority decision making does not have a history at all.

Everyone on the Left has some measure of familiarity with both paradigms but the overwhelming majority of activists are firmly committed to one or the other and this problem is emerging as a significant barrier to collaboration on the Left and the success of our shared project.

Further, because people – not only young people, but even experienced hands – have no idea of the historical origins of these two paradigms, but simply compare and contrast them pragmatically and on the basis of personal experience, the reasons underlying this antagonism remain shrouded in mystery.

In 2014 I set out to trace the origins of each paradigm, hoping that the findings would shed light on the meaning of this antagonism and provide guidance on how to overcome it. Some elements of the history I recovered from historical records made available on the internet and from published books, although the mode of decision making was invariably an incidental topic for both the actors themselves and historians, who were concerned with *what* was decided rather than *how* it was decided. The remaining elements, not to be found in any records, I was able to recover by interviewing participants and witnesses of events in the 1950s and early '60s. There is much work to be done, but I know from having spoken to eye witnesses and experts in the relevant periods, that *no-one* has asked these questions before. So the history which is to be published by Brill in July (Blunden, 2016) will be the first ever history of collective decision making based on evidence rather than guesswork.

## Research methodology

To understand a social practice is to capture its birth, life and death, and to grasp what is *rational* in that development – the good reasons people had for doing what they did. But a rational history cannot be assembled from snapshots of the past. If someone did something in some past century and someone else did much the same thing today, this is no evidence as to origins. How did it get from there to here? In what sense is it the same practice? Furthermore, without understanding the earlier instance within some continuing practice or tradition, that is to say, in its context, it is most likely going to be misconstrued.

Practices develop and change through the collaboration of people who are struggling in some social situation and drawing on their own and each others' resources. Innovations do not arise because they were 'in the air', even though I was often told this in the early stages of my research. A new practice is 'in the air' because it has been devised and embraced by real individuals already collaborating together in some practice, and responding to specific problems. To write a history of collective decision making meant tracing the relations of collaborative participation by individuals in social practices such that either through the continuous operation of definite projects and traditions, or in times of transition, through the lives of the individuals themselves, so as to construct a continuous line of collaborative development from some historical moment to the next and up to the present (c.f. Ricœur, 1984 and Gadamer, 2005).

Faced with potentially thousands of years of world history, I decided at the outset that I would make my beginning with those forms of collective decision making in which I had participated myself and through the proximate origins of those practices, trace back and back to what I could speculatively propose as an origin, and then carefully work forwards again, this time not speculatively, but rigorously. The aim was to see if I could reconstruct a continuous line of collaborative practice from a supposed point of origin to my personal experiences in London and Melbourne, discarding those lines of development which could not be connected into a line leading back to my starting point in the present.

This is an avowedly subjective approach. However, despite my Anglophone, first-world starting point, given that my researches took me back into Anglo-Saxon England following the end of the Roman occupation and into West Africa from where slaves were taken to the Americas, and in the course of chasing up loose ends, into several European countries and even Asia, I am confident that what I have discovered is in great measure a history shared by the whole of the Left. But I must leave it to others to fill in the gaps.

## Collective decisions without voting

I found a number of instances where people assured me that they had long used Consensus decision making and that their practice was not derived from the Peace or Women's movements or from the Quakers but had been developed independently. I also

found Quakers who regarded Consensus as alien to the Quaker way of doing meetings. All these opinions arose from a mixing up of the concepts of Negotiation and Consensus. I found that the Danish belief that their political life is based on consensus comes from a long history of multi-party Legislatures and the eternal need to negotiate compromises – an extremely conflictual process. I found Labor leaders and educators in the U.S. who called their approach to negotiating labor contracts “consensus” because they made agreements with the bosses without the use of strike action. I found likewise that Japanese businesspeople who described the way they operated as “consensus” were referring to negotiation of business contracts not the formation of a common will.

As I use these terms, the difference between Negotiation and Consensus is that in Negotiation at least two distinct parties enter into discussion to arrive at an agreement which meets the needs of both/all parties; but they remain before, during and after the negotiation *separate parties* pursuing separate aims, and are usually represented in negotiations by delegates. Collective decision making, on the other hand, involves individuals making a decision together as part of a common project. From time to time, a collective may split and discussions degenerate into Negotiation between mutually independent parties who go their own way as soon as the negotiated agreement is discharged. In such a case, there is no longer collective decision making because there is no longer a collective subject.

The other problem I came across in research is the presumption that if a group of people make decisions together without voting, then *ipso facto* they are using Consensus. This is false. It is one of the rationalizations for the baseless conviction that Majority is some alien procedure imposed from above on indigenous and working people, and that present day Consensus is the recovery of an historically earlier practice. In fact, Majority is far more ancient than Consensus. But before Majority was invented, there was Counsel.

## Counsel

Counsel is a third paradigm of collective decision making. I discovered this paradigm when I had worked my way back in search of the origins of Majority decision making and I was studying Anglo-Saxon England, that is, the period between the end of the Roman occupation and the Norman Conquest. The most important decision making institution of this period was the Witenagemot, the King’s Counsel. Turning my attention to the Church, I came across St. Benedict, who in about 500AD wrote the “Rule” which governs life in monasteries. In Chapter 3 of the Rule he codified collective decision making. Later, checking to see if African Americans may have brought Consensus to America with them from Africa in the days of the slave trade, I found what is mistakenly called “African Consensus,” but is more properly referred to by its African name of Lekgotla. All these practices belong to the same paradigm: Counsel. In St. Benedict’s words:

As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. The decision is rather the abbot's to make, so that when he has determined what is more prudent, all may obey. (St. Benedict, 1949, Chapter 3)

Not only is this recognizably the same method as used by the Witenagemot but it is also the same as Lekgotla. A moment's reflection will confirm that this is the same method of collective decision making used in private companies, in traditional patriarchal families and artistic productions – one person, be it the Abbot, the Chief, the CEO or the Director, takes moral responsibility for making the decision, but he must consult every one of the group before announcing the decision. Once the decision has been announced there is no dissent.

I have witnessed this mode of decision making in an Executive meeting of an Australian trade union led by Maoists, just as described by St. Benedict, except that at the end, everyone raised their hand to indicate their consent. Isn't it obvious that if a foreigner were to witness Lekgotla in an African village, they would believe that they were witnessing Consensus decision making, because they would be unaware of the complex status relations between the speakers. Likewise, someone who witnessed the union meeting I referred to could believe that the decision had been made by Majority, just that there happened to be unanimity.

So it can be seen why it is important to study these practices *historically*, otherwise judging by superficial appearances, what is really going on may be completely misconstrued.

Where did Majority comes from?

To find the origins of Majority I started with my own experiences in unions in London and Melbourne. How long had unions been using these procedures? I had previously transcribed the Minutes of the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association of 1864, and the procedures used there were exactly the same as those I had experienced in London in the 1970s. So it was clear that the English trade unions, to which members of the General Council all belonged, had been using these procedures throughout the intervening century. I found the minutes of a meeting of the London Workingmen's Association in 1837, at a time when such meetings were illegal under the Conspiracy laws, and if the minutes had fallen into police hands, the members would have been liable for transportation. The procedures were the same.

As luck would have it, in 1824 the Combination Laws were repealed and a Select Committee of Parliament collected the Rulebooks of 13 British trade unions, before shortly afterwards, following an upsurge of militancy, the Conspiracy Laws were introduced.

These rulebooks were fascinating. On the one hand, there could be no doubt that they were precursors of the rulebooks of modern trade unions, but they were also marked by distinctly antique features, such as fines imposed for minor transgressions of meeting protocol and a narrow, particularist consciousness. On one hand, they all clearly belonged to a family of conceptions reflecting common anxieties and aspirations, with many rules appearing in identical form in different rulebooks or with minor variations, but also differences, sometimes very marked. There could be no doubt that the creators of these rulebooks had a rich palette of rules to draw from, and the participants were all well used to such rules. They were neither orchestrated by a single precedent nor invented *de novo* by each group. As it happens, the lives of the poor of early 19th century England were saturated with a spectrum of such local organizations for mutual benefit, insurance, saving and charitable, religious, political and professional functions. With no protection or aid from the state, the poor had long been used to managing their own welfare, and the source of these structures were the medieval Guilds, to which the unions of 1824 bore an unmistakable family resemblance.

I consulted experts in the field and my intuitions were confirmed: the early British trade unions were the direct progeny of the Guilds. But I also found that no-one had written or was specializing in the history of the Guilds so my next task was to discover the origin of the Guilds. As luck would have it I found a history of the London Companies written in 1838 which extended back to the twelfth century and included detailed information about the rules and regulations governing the guilds together with their life histories, and the information that the guilds had existed before the Norman Conquest.

So I then turned to a study of Anglo-Saxon England.

### Origins of Majority

It soon became clear that voting was inconceivable in Anglo-Saxon England because there was no notion of equality; in fact every citizen had a *wergeld* – effectively a price on their head according to their place in the social hierarchy; not only was there slavery, but Anglo-Saxon England exported English slaves. Decisions were made by Counsel, from the Witenagemot at the top down to the tything, where the senior tythingman was responsible for the other nine members of the tything at the base of the hierarchy. Apart from royalty and widows with property, women had no rights at all. The whole social formation was based on the land and nested relations of tenancy and lordship from serf up to King. Anyone who was not tied to some piece of land and under some lord did not legally exist and could be hunted like an animal.

In the year 997, Ethelred II introduced a jury of 12 leading thegns for criminal cases and a majority of 8 to 4 was sufficient to make a decision, provided the minority paid a fine!

This is the first instance of Majority in English law (Loyn, 1984, p. 145). But this is not the source of Majority decision making, though it may have presaged it. Majority decision making was the creation of the guilds which quietly came into existence during the last century before the Norman Conquest.

During this period, commerce began to eat away at the foundations of feudalism under which all purchases were supposed to be authorised by a court. Towns began to spring up which lay outside the relations of feudal tenancy, and the merchants and artisans who lived there lay beyond the pale of feudal right. Travelling around the country, they had no rights, and could be killed or robbed with impunity! So these merchants and artisans banded together for their own protection to make arrangements for retrieving their bodies if they died far from home, insurance against fire and provisions for the welfare of their families in the event of their death, and sometimes simply recreation. Over time, the functions of these guilds broadened, were eventually recognised by Royal Charters and the guilds took responsibility for managing the affairs of their trade.

It was in these guilds that strangers came together and made voluntary associations for mutual protection on the basis of mutual autonomy, equality and solidarity, and they made their decisions by Majority. Although Majority voting had been used in Church elections, there was no precedent for general decision making by Majority. Given that guilds were formed by the free association between equals, bound together by the pressing need for the solidarity of others like themselves, Majority decision making was the logical and probably the only option available to them.

### The Development of Majoritarianism

Majority was the invention of the guilds, which predated the House of Commons by about 400 years. Working people were apprentices, journeymen and masters, but moved through these categories over their life and there was no sense of class division among the manufacturing and commercial population until the early 19th century. Although the guilds were largely run by masters, they were accepted as representing the whole trade, and even in those cases when journeymen set up their own guilds to push for improved conditions, they used the same Majority procedures. I was able to trace the development and propagation of Majority through the centuries and from the guilds into town corporations, universities, the House of Commons, trading companies and the earliest colonial governments in 17th century New England. Gerard Winstanley thought that the guilds provided a “very rational and well-ordered government.” (Winstanley, 1965, p. 549)

So, contrary to the widely held view that Majority was imposed from above, that Parliamentary procedures trickled down from above into the lives of the working masses, the *opposite* is the case. Debates in Parliament could not be published until 1771 and until the 19th century ordinary people would have had no knowledge about how debates were held in Parliament. On the other hand, everyone was involved in the myriad of self-help bodies which provided respectability and basic welfare to everyday

people. Further, every member of the House of Commons would have been a member of a guild up until the time of the English Revolution, and like everyone else would have learnt how to make collective decisions through participation in guilds of one kind or another.

Throughout this development, we see unceasing efforts to counteract the formation of cliques and bureaucracies. These problems were not twentieth century discoveries, but were the focus of concern even in the fifteenth century. But no-one considered that this was a problem inherent in Majority, but rather arose from *private* relations; all their efforts were directed towards attaining the most consistent implementation of Majority possible.

The zenith of majoritarianism was in the Chartist movement which united the disenfranchised population of Britain against the 1/6 of the adult male population who had been given the vote by the 1832 Reform Act. The very essence of Chartism was Majority, but being dedicated to constitutionalism and facing an implacable bourgeoisie which not only refused to give the working people the vote but used Conspiracy laws to suppress the democratic internal life of the National Charter Association. After the third great petition was rejected by Parliament and the people saw no hope of a political solution to their desperate situation, the Chartist movement faded and the working people retreated into trade unionism and working class mutual aid to look after their interests without the mediation of the state.

These unions and similar self-help organizations all used Majority decision making. Techniques of self-government developed by the Methodist Church were appropriated to build the kind of national organizations with the more universal spirit introduced by the English Jacobins, transcending the particularism which had marked the unions in 1824.

With the great strikes of the 1890s – the Bryant & May Matchgirls, the Beckton Gasworkers and the Dockers' Tanner strike – general unions were established with universal membership and dedicated to the fight for socialism and universal welfare. These general unions gave to Majority the classic and universal form in which it was received in the twentieth century. But instead of representing the vast majority of the population outside of the small class of landowners, the mass membership of these general unions represented the poor, actually a minority, in a working population which had been fragmented and stratified. Even the skilled craftsmen – cobblers and tailors – who had formed the International Workingmen's Association in 1864, were no longer part of the workers' movement at all. Skilled manufacturing workers, such as the Engineers and Railwaymen, still carried the legacy of particularism which had been regenerated by the refusal of the British bourgeoisie to accept universal suffrage and had driven workers back to the narrower trade bases of their solidarity.

The only instance in which there was an effort to introduce Consensus into the workers' movement, was when the Quaker Joseph Sturge called a Conference in 1842 to unite the National Chartist Association with the middle class Complete Suffrage Union. When he

proposed an equal number of delegates from each party to find a Consensus, rather than by means of a vote which would have given control to the numerically vastly superior Chartists, the Chartists denounced the very idea of one gentleman having an equal vote with 10,000 working people, and walked out.

### Crisis of Majoritarianism

The crisis for majoritarianism came in the aftermath of the Second World War. When the Soviet Union and the Communist Parties around the world struck a deal with Imperialism, under which a majority of the world was excluded. The people of the colonies were left in the lurch. African Americans were left at the mercy of Jim Crow. Women were left at home. The post-war settlement brought relative peace, prosperity and stability to the organized working class, but the dirty deal done with imperialism left majoritarianism with a bad name in the eyes of those who had been *excluded*.

At this point I must turn to the origins of Consensus.

### The Quakers and Consensus

My first contact with Consensus was a book (Coover et al, 1977) which I picked up at the Friends of the Earth bookshop in Melbourne in the mid-1980s and then in the early 1990s when I helped set up an Alliance bringing together socialists and anarchists to work together on campaigns. The Alliance broke down quite quickly because the only way it was going to work was by Consensus, and yet my socialist friends would not consent to Consensus decision making under any conditions. It wasn't just a pragmatic question – although it was often expressed that way – but a moral revulsion, much like the reaction of the Chartists to Joseph Sturge's proposal. So in setting out to do this investigation I consulted a friend who had been one of the anarchists in that project. He had learnt Consensus from his American anarchist contacts in 1977, which brought me back to the book I had read which had been published in the US in 1977 by the Movement for a New Society. Indeed, later investigation confirmed that anarchists had learnt Consensus from MSN. But where had MSN got it?

Founded in 1971, MSN was the direct progeny of A Quaker Action Group. So this posed me the next problem – where did the Quakers get their Consensus?

The Quakers were founded by George Fox in 1647, in the wake of the English Civil War, with a radical critique of established religion which attracted the most militant elements from the New Model Army. The Quakers held that every believer could interpret the Scripture themselves if they listened to the voice of Jesus within their own heart. In the wake of a bloody civil war, this liberalism, when combined with their uncompromising critique of established religion, led to disaster. In 1656, a leading Quaker, James Naylor, staged a provocative attack on the established Church which triggered the savage suppression of the entire sect. In 1662, they adopted the uniquely Quaker way of doing meetings which ensured that individuals would be prevented from going off a tangent, so to speak, but avoided setting up a hierarchy or orthodoxy (See

Hill 1975). Only proposals which met with the agreement of an entire meeting, without persuasion or argument, would be taken to express the Divine Will. This measure ensured that Quakers would always conform to the prevailing intuitions of the social milieu of which they were a part, which in the wake of the Civil War, was for peace and stability.

Quakers have continued in this way up to the present day. While their opposition to slavery has been absolute, their Peace Testimony has not; many Quakers fought in the American Civil War on the Union side and signed up for both world wars like the loyal citizens that they were. Despite this, the Quakers kept the Peace Testimony alive by providing succor to conscientious objectors and Pacifists outside their own ranks. This had the effect of providing a steady flow of Quaker converts who were politically active Pacifists. A Quaker Action Group was a group of such Quakers who tried in vain to renew the Quaker commitment to the original Peace testimony, but ultimately gave up trying and launched the Movement for a New Society in 1971 (Smith 1996).

However, Consensus had already taken root in the Peace, Anti-War, Women's and Civil Rights movements long before this time, a fact which I was able to establish by persistent enquiry amongst veteran American activists using email. I managed to identify and make contact with activists, such as Casey Hayden, Mary King and James Lawson, who had been present in the earliest days of SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee – “snick”) in April 1960 and Women Strike for Peace in 1961. These two events were the two more or less independent points at which Consensus was introduced into social change activism in the US, a decade prior to MSN, and each of these three sources introduced a slightly different style of Consensus, which would merge in the Peace and Women's Liberation movements during the 1970s. But this discovery still left open the question as to how Consensus came to be invented or discovered by SNCC and WSP. What were the conditions which led these groups to adopt Consensus and where did they get it from?

The case of WSP was clear enough, but I had to investigate eleven different possible routes to come to a conclusion with respect to SNCC. Two individuals must share credit for this innovation, the ‘hill-billy’ Marxist educator Myles Horton and the Black Methodist theologian James Lawson.

### Myles Horton and Consensus in SNCC

In the depths of the Great Depression, Horton set up Highlander, an adult education center in rural Tennessee, and shortly before the launching of the CIO he began training rank-and-file union members from unskilled trades to build their unions and run disputes. His courses included training in the use of Robert's Rules of Order, the procedures they would need to operate within the labor movement. After the war, as the CIO moved to the right, Horton moved to training poor farmers to prepare them to set up their own cooperatives to free themselves from exploitation by agribusiness. In 1954 he turned to the embryonic civil rights movement, and Rosa Parks was one of his

students shortly before she launched the historic Birmingham Bus Boycott. Following the Supreme Court ruling on desegregating school he focused on this movement and in August 1954 launched the literacy program in which hundreds of thousands of Blacks learnt to read so that they could register to vote.

When a group of activists came to Highlander they were put in charge of running the center, just as the various projects like the literacy program, were put under the control of the participants themselves. Horton absolutely insisted that decisions were made by the students and refused, once even at the point of a gun, to make a decision for them.

Collective decision making was at the center of his approach, the means by which his students actually took charge of their lives and emancipated themselves from those who were hitherto running their lives for them. When he turned from the Labor Movement, which was built around Majority, to the unorganized poor farmers and Southern Blacks, he abandoned the use of Majority and used a form of Consensus. The unions used Robert's Rules of Order, but "Negroes have never mastered that way, their churches don't act that way. ... In the mountains poor people ... get together and talk" (Horton, 2003, p. 180-1).

I have no documented evidence, however, of this process being used outside of Highlander until the founding of the SNCC in April 1960. However, the records of the Highlander show that Horton was training groups of poor people in Consensus decision making from the early 1950s. Horton had no connection with the Quakers, and so far as it is possible to determine, Horton invented an informal consensus decision procedure without a pre-existing model.

### James Lawson and Consensus in SNCC

James Lawson was a Methodist theologian whose mother was a pacifist and his father a militant gun-toting NAACP preacher. James embraced nonviolence from an early age and travelled to India in 1953 to study nonviolence under followers of Gandhi, and after returning to the US in 1956 he was invited to join Martin Luther King as his adviser. As the lunch counter occupations began in 1960, Lawson ran an intensive program of nonviolence training in Nashville and it was this group who attended his program who played the leading role in establishing SNCC; most of the same students had also previously attended Highlander.

The Methodist Church uses a strict Majority system of decision-making, devised by John Wesley in the 1780s, which was later appropriated by the socialist and trade union movements, and use of Majority applied as much to the Black Methodist Church as anywhere else in the segregated Methodist Church in the US. However, Lawson insists that in his work with the Methodist Youth, of which he was Vice-President in 1952, and with the young students who formed SNCC, he always worked by Consensus. It was certainly Lawson who was closest to the students and the most significant influence on them when they created SNCC, and it was Lawson who wrote the constitution of the SNCC. But Lawson would not have been conscious of the fact that before the students

came to his nonviolence workshops, they had already learnt how to make collective decisions amongst themselves without deferring to their preacher – as was required by the method of Counsel generally practiced by the Black Churches, which were the main organizing bodies for Black communities in the Southern United States. This was a generation of Black youth unlike any previous generation, a generation which would no longer defer to either their elders or to Jim Crow. Ultimately, it is the young SNCC activists themselves who developed their own intense version of Consensus, but the idea did not fall from the sky. Consensus prevailed in SNCC only until 1966 when Stokely Carmichael was elected Chairman.

### Women Strike for Peace

Women Strike for Peace was founded in Washington in September 1961 by a group of housewives (and I use this word advisedly) alarmed by the nuclear arms race and who had become alienated from the mainstream peace organizations, such as SANE, in particular their bureaucratic procedures, their reliance on lobbying rather than public protest and their capitulation to McCarthyism (See Swerdlow 1993). One of the six founders was Eleanor Garst who had joined the Quakers as a result of their support for her husband as a conscientious objector. Garst taught WSP the Quaker way of doing meetings, but WSP implemented the idea in their own unique way, with kids playing on the livingroom floor and pastries being passed around as half a dozen women spoke at the same time. But the WSP way of doing meetings also included the periods of quiet reflection, adopted from the Quaker way, which was not at all characteristic of the disciplined and intense way the SNCC made decisions.

The women who founded WSP were in their '30s and '40s and had been active on the Left before the War, but WSP was a separatist women's movement which was emphatically *not* feminist. The WSP women were largely the mothers of those young women who went on to create the Women's Liberation Movement, but WSP continued up into the 1980s and played an important, if contradictory role, in the creation of the Women's Liberation Movement. They embraced their identity as 'housewives' and used this stereotype to advantage in promoting their Peace message. But there is no doubt that their organizing methods were a major legacy for the Left.

WSP refused to maintain a membership list, far less collect a membership fee or elect officers. They never voted and only carried out actions which conformed to the well-established stereotype of the peace-loving, middle class, American housewife. This method, sometimes ironically referred to as 'unorganization', was the subject of fierce arguments (Freeman 1970) as the implementation of Consensus was fine tuned in the development of the Women's Liberation Movement, which in its beginning, was not at all run exclusively by Consensus – women's groups originating from the labor movement used Majority voting – but over time, a form of Consensus emerged which drew to some degree from each of its three sources.

## Ethics of Collaboration

I have identified three traditional modes of collective decision making – *Counsel*, *Majority* and *Consensus*, each with their own roots. Further, collective decision making, between individuals who are committed to a *common project*, is distinguished from agreements made between distinct projects, which generally involves a process of tit-for-tat *Negotiation* and which I have dealt with elsewhere (Blunden 2010). The ethical commitments entailed in each of these political processes are so deep that they have survived revolutions and literally millennia of social change.

By ethics, I mean the *norms* of social life. Like any other institution or social practice, political collaboration and conflict is impossible without norms. Norms change over time, but these paradigms seem to represent the most deep-seated norms of social life.

### Counsel

The most ancient paradigm of collective decision making is Counsel. Counsel originated historically before the division between the public and private sphere, but is still the dominant form of decision making in *private* firms and traditional families and is often the de facto form of decision making even where the procedures characteristic of Majority or Consensus are acted out. Counsel is also used in artistic projects, such as when a sculptor engages a technician to make castings, to the extent that Counsel is sometimes seen as the art paradigm of decision making because of its emphasis on realizing the authentic vision of the artist rather than the satisficing of diverse visions.

Counsel should not be discounted as a genuine and effective form of collective decision making. The King is only as wise as his Counsel, and whereas both Majority and Consensus risk producing decisions which tend to be some kind of average between divergent points of view, a decision by Counsel is the considered and undiluted decision of one well-advised person.

There are procedural requirements such as to consult everyone, but the ethic of Counsel is primarily an ethic of *virtue*. The attributes of the good chief are many, but include wisdom and the ability to listen. Once the Chief has announced the decision, there is no dissent, so an outsider can easily mistake Counsel for Consensus.

### Majority

Majority originated at the end of the early medieval period with the emergence of a merchant class and independent tradespeople based in the towns who had no rights in the feudal system and formed guilds and corporations based on voluntary association and mutual aid. Modern parliaments, companies, municipal councils, political parties, universities and trade unions all originate from these medieval guilds and by and large inherit from them the same procedures for collective decision making and the same ethical principles.

Majority is distinguished from Counsel and the norms of feudal society in general by its *egalitarianism* which is reflected in each member having one vote equal in value to the vote of every other member. Such a procedure was unthinkable in feudal times though it was used in some circumstances and usually in truncated form, in Church elections. Majority originated to allow decision making under relations of equality, solidarity and tolerance, and over the centuries it hardened into a powerful ethical principle in its own right. During the nineteenth century and later struggles for universal suffrage Majority became arguably the most powerful and significant principle of political ethics, acting as a proxy for the notion of universal equality.

If there is no dissent on the *question* to be posed, Majority can reliably produce a valid decision. However, as Marquis de Condorcet showed 230 years ago and Amartya Sen (2002) has demonstrated exhaustively, majority voting is unable to reliably decide on realistic differences among individual members of a collective, which are inevitably *multidimensional*. However, over the centuries, elaborate procedures have been developed on the basis of the principle of Majority to facilitate relatively satisfactory decisions in situations where concrete, multidimensional decisions are to be made. Majority decisions carry great moral weight, foster creative deliberation, rational and reasonable dialogue and are generally accepted by participants and concerned non-participants alike as ethically valid, if arrived at in accordance with *agreed traditional procedures*, such as those documented in Walter Citrine's *ABC of Chairmanship*.

A majority vote does not *in itself* warrant a decision as valid, because majority votes can only decide one binary at a time. For example, in 1999 Australian voters were asked by the monarchist Prime Minister John Howard to choose between an unpopular model of Republic and the status quo, thus ensuring that the referendum was defeated despite a majority of voters preferring a Republic.

The ethical status of Majority is an established moral fact of modernity, even though it cannot reliably and consistently function by itself as a proxy for the moral equality of all persons. But it is the product of a tradition which is more than any other responsible for the very existence of whatever freedoms we enjoy today. Its ultimate justification is that tradition.

Beyond the principle of majority, Majority decision making expresses three other ethical principles which are part of the same tradition and are built into Majority procedures: equality, tolerance and solidarity.

It was the principle of *equality* which made Majority possible and is expressed in the equal value of each vote. The principle of equality means all that members are recognized as autonomous agents having an equal stake in the outcome.

The impulse which gave rise to Majority was not equality itself but the principle of *solidarity*: members extend mutual aid to one another and maintain the collective irrespective of whether they are in agreement with decisions – everyone works under majority decisions. This principle probably arose from pragmatic grounds as a voluntary

association can only survive by all contributing irrespective of whether they agree with the conduct of the collective or not. Over the centuries the pragmatic acceptance of this principle been transformed into a matter of deeply held moral conviction. Solidarity brings with it the important learning principle: we learn by participating in collective action. Thus unresolved differences are usually resolved in action.

*Tolerance* is the principle that complements and sustains the principle of solidarity – the majority protects the minority and secures its continued participation and its dissenting voice in decision making. Tolerance differs from *laissez faire* because dissidents are still required to maintain their contribution to the collective. While dissenters are given respect to the extent of recognising them as autonomous moral agents with an equal stake, this recognition does not extend to taking account of a dissenter’s view in decisions. Respect would entail that a minority view is not only listened to but respected in action.

These three ethical principles – equality, solidarity and tolerance – have been nurtured under the principle of Majority in the formation of the modern world.

Majority became fixed as an ethical principle in opposition to the rule of a *wealthy or privileged minority*. However, the bourgeoisie has restricted Majority to a cunningly circumscribed public sphere while the real decisions are made in a so-called private domain by the owners of the social means of production. In this truncated form, Majority has been used as a tool for the rule of a wealthy, privileged minority. This conundrum arises from the defect of Majority decision making – the ruling class has always been able to effectively set the agenda. *In itself*, counting votes is an abstract procedure incapable of consistently producing rational and fair decisions on concrete questions.

## Consensus

Consensus was introduced by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Women Strike for Peace in the USA in 1960/61. The social strata which were mobilised by these organizations were young Black students in the South (and the white students who supported them) and middle-class housewives respectively. These were two groups who had been excluded by the post-World War Two settlement and were inspired by the national liberation movements’ on-going success in bringing an end to colonialism. Consensus spread from the SNCC and WSP to the Peace, Women’s Liberation and later Environmental Movements. As the profile of the labour movement in the social justice movements outside the workplaces declined from the 1990s, Consensus became the preferred method of decision making among a larger and larger section of voluntary associations of all kinds.

The rationale for the use of Consensus in SNCC was that no-one could be forced to put their life on the line confronting racism with nonviolent resistance, simply on the basis of having *participated* in making the decision. Only if a person had positively affirmed a decision could they be expected to endure its consequences. For WSP, Consensus was

connected to their desire to remain firmly within ideas and forms of action which were uncontroversial within their own social base and to avoid the construction of the apparatus of a voluntary organisation. As things developed, we can see that the essential basis for Consensus is that *the only resource people have is each other* (lacking property assets and full-time professional staff), and the collective has neither the desire nor the capacity to oblige individuals to comply with a collective decision. The impression is one of unity, but the essential counterpoise to unity is *laissez faire*.

The actual process of discussion which generates the collective decision is not essentially different in Consensus and Majority; *both aim for unanimity*. “We decide what we do” is the maxim for both. The difference manifests itself when disagreement is persistent. In the case of Majority, there is solidarity in action; in the case of Consensus, it is *laissez faire*.

Consensus fosters certain duties and virtues which are not fostered by Majority. The ethic of Consensus is above all *inclusion*. Discussion will continue until every point of view has been taken account of in the decision. Consensus does not foster solidarity however, because if unanimity is not achieved, dissenters are free to go their own way and majority and minority are under no obligation to one another.

Consensus expresses *respect* for others, for the different. Whereas in Majority, dissent is tolerated, in Consensus, this option is not open; the collective must continue discussing until the dissidents’ point of view has been incorporated. This can lead to intolerance for persistent nonconformity, but at the same time it fosters respect for difference.

Equality is not an ethical principle which is relevant to Consensus; individuals are considered *incommensurable* rather than equal, making the adding up of votes senseless.

The problem with Consensus is the *paradox of the status quo*: if there is no consensus, then the default decision is the status quo. Suppose that all the employees in a privately owned firm meet with the owner with a view to transforming the firm into a cooperative; everyone agrees except the owner. Under the paradigm of Consensus, the firm remains in private hands. Social transformation cannot be achieved by Consensus, because one cannot opt out of a social order

Further, the absence of solidarity in the ethics of Consensus means that it is impossible to accumulate assets, and with the exception of the Quaker community, history has confirmed this truth. If you want a leaflet printed or premises for the night, call upon the solidarity of a trade union, local council or socialist group.

## Negotiation

Negotiation, or ‘exchange’, is the most common relation between mutually independent projects and is constitutive of modernity. It entails each doing something for the other, within finite limits, on the basis of mutuality, either explicitly or implicitly involving a contract. Decisions are made by negotiation, to make a deal which allows each project

to further its *own* end. It is a relationship of mutual instrumentalisation. Typical instances are everyday purchase-and-sales, labor agreements, commercial contracts or treaties.

Negotiation fosters *autonomy* among agents who gain *recognition* from others by virtue of the fact that they can do something which meets the needs of another. Each treats the other as an autonomous agent and bargains in *good faith* and *honestly* fulfills their obligations without exploiting the other.

Negotiation must be distinguished from Consensus, because in Negotiation, the two parties retain their mutual independence and do not form a common will, just a temporary *modus vivendi*.

## Conclusion

As can be seen, each of these modes of decision making are embedded in ethical foundations, which gain their legitimacy from powerful traditions and express the firm convictions of their participants. However, none of them can guarantee wholly satisfactory decisions in the face of persistent disagreement. If the Left is to find a shared ethical framework for collaboration, then recognition of the ethical validity of each others' preferred approach is a starting point. It took centuries for Majority to develop procedures which approximate consistently valid outcomes. Consensus decision making has only been on the scene for 56 years and much remains to be done, above all the imperative to transcend the contradictions between the different paradigms of decision making.

Basing ourselves on the principle of "We decide what we do," we need to develop procedures which tell us when Counsel is appropriate, when Consensus is needed and when to take a vote.

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