

The Origins of Collective Decision Making (Synopsis)

by Andy Blunden

[The Origins of Consensus Decision Making](#), by Andy Blunden, April 2016. 269pp, hardback, Leiden, Holland: [Brill](#). Paperback available from Haymarket Books in 2017.

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 in 2011 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 Origins of Collective Decision Making* is 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 in the historical circumstances in which they lived. 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, shared 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. 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 looking at 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 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.

Further, as Hegel (1821) pointed out, a collective can only achieve sovereignty if it is able to speak through the voice of an individual; historically this was the monarch, but even a modern social movement has to be able to represent itself through an individual spokesperson, leader or role model, and in this instance the mode of decision making would be Counsel. Counsel in fact co-exists with Majority and Consensus.

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.

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 orientation. 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. 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 (public servants) 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 all 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 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, that is, from a tendency to degenerate into Counsel. 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 in 1848 and the people abandoned hope of a political solution to their 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 strikes – 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 Anti-slavery campaigner, 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 excluded from public life. 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*. The ethic of *solidarity* was supplanted by the ethic of *inclusion*.

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 on this investigation I consulted my friend, Jeremy Dixon, 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, argument or negotiation, 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 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?

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 1955 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 on 17 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. When 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 began in Washington on 22 September 1961 at a meeting 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 noisy 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, and became the preferred mode of decision making in the women's movement.

1968 and After

The Vietnam War and the events on the international stage stimulated the emergence and expansion of new social movements, mass movements united around ideals such as Women's Liberation, Participatory Democracy and the Environment. At the beginning, even in the case of the Women's Liberation Movement, both Majority and Consensus were adopted as norms for decision making, because many of the activists had come out of the socialist and labor movements where Majority was the norm, while others had come out of the Peace Movement where Consensus was the rule. In many cases however, the only vote came when disagreements could not be

resolved and a group split. The three styles of Consensus that had emerged from the 1950s merged and became the preferred mode of decision making in social movements, except where labor movement involvement predominated and Majority remained the norm.

Murray Bookchin, whose anarchist ideas about organization were influential in throughout the 1960s and '70s, confirmed that the organizing traditions of 19th and early 20th century anarchism were unknown to the young anarchists of this time, who learnt Consensus from the Movement for a New Society in particular and the social movements generally.

With the rise of alliance politics after 1999, Consensus became essential to the effective collaboration within alliances, and the antagonism between Majority and Consensus became more and more a feature of radical politics.

Conclusion

As can be seen, each of these modes of decision making 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.

References

Coover, V., Deacon, E., Esser, C. & Moore, c. (1977), *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution. A handbook of skills & tools for social change activists*. Philadelphia, PA: Movement for a New Society.

- Freeman, J. (1970). *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*.
<http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg (2005/1960). *Truth and Method*, London, UK: Continuum.
- Hill, C. (1975). *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, London: Pelican Books.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1821). *Philosophy of Right*.
- Horton, M. (2003). *The Myles Horton Reader. Education for Social Change*. Ed. Dale Jacobs. Knoxville, TE: University of Tennessee Press.
- Loyn, H. R. (1984). *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England, 500-1087*, Chicago, IL: Stanford University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and Narrative. Vol. I*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Saint Benedict (1949). *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Rev. Boniface Verheyen.
- Smith, A. (1996). The Renewal Movement: The Peace Testimony and Modern Quakerism, *Quaker History*, 85(2), Friends Historical Association, Haverford College Library, Haverford, PA. <http://www.quaker.org/renewal.html>
- Swordlow, A. (1993). *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s*, University of Chicago Press.
- Winstanley, G. (1941). *Works*, with an introduction. Ed. G. Sabine. Cornell U. P.

[Andy Blunden's Home Page](#)