

# Fetishizing Process



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procedural rules, and people skilled at applying such rules, to which we might turn in attempting to deal with the problem.

- If we find that we need to make a decision, but cannot reach consensus on what the right decision is, we should by all means give symmetrical authority to both action and inaction. There is no grounds for privileging one over the other in the abstract. (Of course we might agree that in this case either caution or action is to be privileged due to particular factors.)
- If we cannot come to consensus on a given issue, then the issue becomes how to make a decision, and consensus is demanded on this. Though we will likely vote, such a procedure can only be just on the basis of a rationally and morally arrived at consensus on the appropriateness of voting in this case. Voting is often the right procedure to turn to, and far more likely to be procedurally correct than is consensus procedure, but whatever authority voting procedure has will derive from consensus practice.

This all seems to point to a particular practical recommendation for anyone aiming to form an anarchist organization: do not write down any procedure as part of the defining structure of the group! Any procedure you try to legislate is as likely to be abused, as likely to give people a crutch to lean on, or an excuse to avoid careful thinking, discussion, and inclusive labor. No procedure guarantees wise decision making, and a wide variety of procedures can be useful in arriving at wise decisions. So do not privilege one over another in the abstract. If you must have a constitution, say “our group will attempt to take each other seriously, to look at issues rationally, to engage in careful, respectful, critical, rigorous analysis and argument, and to arrive at the wisest and most just decisions on all issues before us.” If you need to say more than this, then say much more. Say that among the tools we will use in trying to arrive at such just and wise decisions are ... and then initiate and ever-growing list of useful techniques.

Above all, remember that constitutions, like the rules they record, are no better than the people who implement them. So the task is just as much to make better versions of ourselves as it is to make better versions of society.

If one were forced to explain consensus process in five minutes, one might begin with a brief pitch about the kind of discussion that should precede the group taking a decision. Such a pitch would be fairly vague, and would deal with such things as listening, including all points of view, critical discussion and argument, and creativity in the formulation of possible compromises and syntheses. But one would quickly switch from the topic of discussion to the specific procedure that is used to take a formal decision. Here the account is not at all vague, as precise as any sort of voting procedure. One would explain how a position is proposed, how people have the choice of supporting, standing aside, or blocking, how a position can only be adopted by the group if no one blocks, etc. (It is likely, and relevant, that the majority of people who have been part of decision making under the banner of “consensus process” have little more than such a five minute understanding of what is involved.)

If one had much more than five minutes to explain consensus process, one would say little more about the formal procedure for taking decisions. This part really can be defined in a few minutes. One would, however, go into far more detail on the complex, less precise, more deeply contextual business that precedes actually taking a decision. That is, one would focus on the process of discussion, option formulation, argument, etc.

In what follows, let us call the complex process of discussion – a process about which much can be said, but the proper functioning of which is unlikely to be definable via a set of precise rules – “practice”. The set of formal rules that define a method of taking a decision will be referred to as “procedure”. This distinction, in itself, is nothing surprising or new, but I want to argue that it is of great import to the debate between majority voting and consensus. Such debates are central to anarchist theory as they concern the form and content of democratic inclusion. Indeed, if anything is essential to anarchism, it is the idea that social decisions are to be taken by everyone affected, and that this inclusion must involve substantive participation of each in deliberation and decision-making. Thus a dispute on the nature of such participation is a dispute about the very essence of anarchism.

But I argue that the debate between voting and consensus is deeply flawed. First, many advocates on each side run together procedure and practice in a pernicious way – criticizing procedures of the other side, while defending not their own procedure, but rather their conception of practice. Second, it turns out that the right answer to how we ought to structure ourselves – around a norm of consensus or a norm of majority rule – depends crucially on whether we are talking about procedure or practice. In

short, and rather misleadingly, procedures should be closer to majority rule, but only in the service of a practice which is geared around a deep commitment to consensus. In arguing for this second point, I show that consensus *procedure* is actually deeply unsuited to radical organizations. But at the same time, I begin to make the case that a focus on procedure itself is ultimately the real problem, which brings us to the third and most important point. An anti-authoritarian democratic organization must not understand itself as defined by a set of formal procedures. Rules can be used, as tools of a virtuous community with a largely functional practice, but they should be no more than tools.

Understanding the goal of democratic community to involve a search for the right set of formal rules that we can then blindly follow with no further obligation to their proper and just implementation is no better than understanding it as a search for the best and most just king. Making a fetish of a process – worshipping a way of doing things – can be every bit as oppressive as making a fetish of personal authority.

### *§1: More heat than light*

One might expect discussions of decision-making process by anarchists to be among the most intellectually sophisticated, civil, and collaborative of debates in political philosophy. After all, the idea that people can, without authoritarian or hierarchical oversight, reach just decisions among themselves in a way that expresses and at the same time nurtures the autonomy of the individual is central to anarchism. So surely, at least in their internal discussions of how to achieve these goals in existing organizations, anarchists would strive to exhibit the sorts of collaborative process they advocate for society at large.

On the other hand, there is the real world.

Though there exist careful and respectful contributions to the anarchist debate on group process, one finds a great deal more by way of caricature, denouncement, and table-pounding. Advocates of consensus, for example, try to associate voting with coercion, unthinking mechanism, rigidity of thought, and an endorsement of liberal representationalism.

Consensus means making decisions by the united consent of all. It is noncoercive, as it avoids imposing anyone's will on others. ... Consensus is really more natural than majority vote. ... In consensus, the group encourages the sharing of all viewpoints held by those with interest in a topic. These viewpoints are then discussed in a spirit of respect and mutual accommodation. New ideas arise and viewpoints are

Whereupon the leading voice of the losing group said “Absolutely not. We made our arguments, gave our reasons. As always, everyone listened, took us seriously, and we failed to convince you. So I will not hear of re-opening the issue. We have a case where we disagree and a strong majority of the department thinks one way. The only reasonable thing for any of us to support in such a case is that vote as we find it.”

What went on here: majority voting, or consensus? It is obviously misleading to characterize things either way. We found no consensus on the issue at hand, but we equally did not simply vote. Rather, we reached a consensus in favor of going with the majority position. We recognized that our collective rationality, our group virtue, was insufficient to reach a consensus on the issue at hand, and therefore made use of a formal voting procedure. But our local failure sparked an expression of a deeper structural kind of virtue – both virtue on the part of each participant, and a collective virtue embedded in the habits of discourse among them. And it was precisely this kind of virtue which was missing in the Mobilization for Global Justice. Rather than carry on respectful and careful discussion until we found consensus, if not on what to do, at least on what procedure to employ, a small minority forced the mechanical application of one particular procedure down the throats of the majority on the grounds that it had been adopted earlier. In the context of such social vice, it was no consolation whatsoever that the procedure had a happy name like “consensus”.

### *§6: Contentious concluding remarks*

So where are we? Though I've hardly argued in detail for such grand claims, I urge that a number of conclusions are made plausible by the foregoing discussion.

- A key goal of any anarchist strategy must be the development of discursive, social, and rational virtue in each other.
- Any viable anarchist society must institutionalize things like schools, discussion forums, and critical process discussions, which will allow us to form and maintain such virtues in ourselves.
- The only fully democratic way to reach a decision is to have a discussion the end of which is a consensus on what is the right decision.
- If our local lack of virtue prevents a fully democratic decision-making practice in a particular case, there are any number of

When the group comes to the view that the most important thing is a decision, even though discussion is not moving towards consensus on any particular decision, one fall-back is to reach consensus on the appropriateness of voting. Such a decision should always be seen as a recognition of some sort of failure. Assuming that the choice is substantive, then one decision is, in reality, the better one. So the fact that we cannot find perceptions, considerations, arguments, data and the like that supports one or the other is a sign that we are arguing badly, are missing something, are not in possession of adequate data, or that some of us are not being reasonable. But still, such kinds of things happen in the crush of real-world circumstances, and when they do, we sometimes decide quite fairly, to vote.

If we do so decide, then the argument of section 2 means that our procedure should be symmetrical. Thus, while it need not be as simple as majority vote, the procedure will be closer, in such a circumstance, to voting than to consensus procedure. But I want to urge that it is misleading, nonetheless, to think of this as an endorsement of voting over consensus.

By way of illustration, let me recall a particular decision taken by the Georgetown philosophy department. On the day in question we had a highly disputed decision before us for which there was no possible compromise. That is, this was the sort of decision for which there were exactly two options. And the department came into the meeting strongly divided. Group A felt that accepting the proposal before us was right and important for the future of the department. Group B felt that rejecting the same decision was equally important. And so, we discussed the matter. We argued, back and forth, brought up new considerations, laid out ways of thinking about the issue, creatively tried to relate the decision to other ones we had made, to contextualize the issue within the broader goals of the department, etc. ... for several hours. And very few minds were changed. Sensing that we were making little progress, the chair finally called for a vote. And the motion passed, something like 16 – 8, whereupon we prepared to leave, assuming the chair would pass this decision on to the dean.

Before we could do so, the leading voice in Group A – the winning group – stopped us. “Wait,” she said.<sup>13</sup> “I’ve never seen us adopt an important decision with such a split vote. It may not be our rule, but it is our practice to discuss things until we arrive at a view we all respect. And we always take account of everyone’s concerns. I worry that the minority are going to feel bullied here, and so think we should discuss this more.” Though not thrilled to have to stay longer, everyone immediately heeded the call and resumed their chairs.

<sup>13</sup> Roughly. This is not an exact quote, but closely captures what was said.

synthesized, until a formula emerges that wins general approval. ... Consensus is “organic”—unlike mechanical voting.”<sup>1</sup>

Consensus is a decision-making process that reflects commitment to the right of every person to influence decisions that affect them. ... Consensus is a creative process. It is a process for synthesizing the ideas and concerns of all group members. Unlike voting, it is not an adversary, win/lose method. With consensus, we do not have to choose between two alternatives. Instead we can create a third, a fourth or more as we see that problems may have many possible solutions. Those who hold views different from ours do not become opponents; instead, their views can be seen as giving us a fresh and valuable perspective. As we work to meet their concerns, our proposals may be strengthened. When we use consensus, we encourage each person's active participation, and we listen carefully to what each person says.”<sup>2</sup>

Or finally: “Voting is a process in which people express their preferences – whether strongly heartfelt or weakly ephemeral. Voters are usually forced to choose between two proposals – ostensibly opposite, but often both unacceptable: “would you rather be poked in the eye with a stick or hit on the head with a rock?” The decision is reached by simplistically adding up these preferences. [Voting] often encourages cagey manipulation.”<sup>3</sup>

“Those who hold views different from ours do not become opponents; instead, their views can be seen as giving us a fresh and valuable perspective,” ... unless they advocate voting. If they advocate voting, it seems, there are few limits to the caricatures and red herrings we can utilize. Why, if we advocate voting, can we not be respectful of and learn from different views? Why must we consider only two proposals? Why must we coerce people, or ignore their right to influence decisions that affect them?

<sup>1</sup> “Coming to Consensus: Tips for Cooperation and Collaboration in Decision Making, or How to Run Meetings So Everyone Wins” By Mark Shepard [http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/Consensus.html]

<sup>2</sup> NONVIOLENT ACTION HANDBOOK Group Process, by Sanderson Beck [http://www.san.beck.org/NAH1-Nonviolence.html]

<sup>3</sup> “Notes on Consensus Decision Making,” Randy Schutt [http://www.vernalproject.org/RPapers.shtml#CoopDecMaking]

But those who oppose the current trend towards consensus in anarchist circles are, if anything, worse:

The only collective alternative to majority voting as a means of decision-making that is commonly presented is the practice of consensus. Indeed, consensus has even been mystified by avowed "anarcho-primitivists," who consider Ice Age and contemporary "primitive" or "primal" peoples to constitute the apogee of human social and psychic attainment. I do not deny that consensus may be an appropriate form of decision-making in small groups of people who are thoroughly familiar with one another. But to examine consensus in practical terms, my own experience has shown me that when larger groups try to make decisions by consensus, it usually obliges them to arrive at the lowest common intellectual denominator in their decision-making: the least controversial or even the most mediocre decision that a sizable assembly of people can attain is adopted -- precisely because everyone must agree with it or else withdraw from voting on that issue. More disturbingly, I have found that it permits an insidious authoritarianism and gross manipulations -- even when used in the name of autonomy or freedom.

I can personally attest to the fact that within the Clamshell Alliance, consensus was fostered by often cynical Quakers and by members of a dubiously "anarchic" commune that was located in Montague, Massachusetts. ... In order for that clique to create full consensus on a decision, minority dissenters were often subtly urged or psychologically coerced to decline to vote on a troubling issue, inasmuch as their dissent would essentially amount to a one-person veto. ... Having withdrawn, they ceased to be political beings -- so that a "decision" could be made. ... On a more theoretical level, consensus silenced that most vital aspect of all dialogue, dissensus. The ongoing dissent, the passionate dialogue that still persists even after a minority accedes temporarily to a majority decision, was replaced in the Clamshell by dull monologues -- and the uncontroverted and deadening tone of consensus. In majority decision-making, the defeated minority can resolve to overturn a decision on which they have been defeated -- they are free to openly and persistently articulate reasoned and potentially persuasive

one or another person is feeling a bit intimidated and is not participating. Perhaps there is a disagreement that we are not resolving by argument. Perhaps someone is not bothering to do their homework before entering into discussion.

In a case like these, there is a point to engaging in some sort of reasonably well defined procedure to attempt to deal with the problem -- go around the room and ask everyone to speak before others do, accept that moving forward is important and agree to vote, make up a list of the things that people are responsible for studying before the meeting. Two points are clear, however. First, while reasoned debate, respectful discussion, and other aspects of practice are intrinsically valuable to this process, the point of procedures is purely instrumental. We adopt procedures as a pragmatic tool for getting around a concrete problem in the course of our discussions.

Not only must we see procedure as instrumentally pragmatic, but we must also recognize a second point: that the usefulness of any procedure will vary widely with context. Since there exists an enormous range of ways that things can go wrong in a group, we have no reason to find one all-purpose procedure to fall back on -- "well we try to discuss, but if that fails, we vote", but why? Maybe what is called for is a go-around in which everyone tries to come up with a possible resolution never before mentioned, or we go home and cool off, or we bring in a facilitator, or we read a relevant book, or some of us stand aside, or we divide into two groups, or merge with a larger one, etc. Each of these could be a perfectly reasonable procedural response to a particular sort of problem.

Thus, what we need is not a *procedure*, much less an identification of good process with such a procedure, but a well stocked tool kit of ways to deal with the sorts of difficulties that come up within generally well-functioning, but fallible groups. And even more, we need well skilled craftsman to use those tools. Just as some are skilled in perceiving psychological symptoms, others at constructing experimental designs, and still others at developing complex political strategies, there are those who have honed a serious skill at mobilizing procedural tools to deal with the sorts of breakdowns that beset discursive communities. These are the people we call facilitators, mediators, or trainers. And we should make use of them. Of course this is not to say that we defer to facilitators -- mindlessly follow their guidance regarding process -- anymore than we should defer to a formal procedure. But if it seems to the group that someone is a useful facilitator -- that is, that they can help us by guiding us in the implementation of a range of contextually useful procedures -- we should take advantage of that.

§5: *Practical endorsement of contextual procedures*

accounts of practice given by sophisticated defenders of consensus and voting are remarkably similar. All focus on the need to include the positions of everyone, to inculcate careful and critical rationality, to be open to new ideas, to allow for creativity in the formulation of alternatives, to appreciate the importance of reaching agreement, etc. In short, there is an emphasis in these discussions on the kinds of virtues that democratic citizens must possess, and the kinds of institutional habits and structures that are conducive to training new citizens to embody such virtues and to maintain them in the ongoing group decision making.

Though, in this article I have nothing substantive to add to the discussion of democratic practice,<sup>12</sup> my point is surely not to criticize this emphasis. Indeed, however virtuous practice is to be spelled out – and, again, for present purposes I want to take some such idea for granted – my main point is to argue that the understanding, implementation, and maintenance of virtuous practice is central to democratic society. But at the moment, I ask the narrow question of what role there is for procedure when people and groups fully embody rational, moral, and political virtues. We have already argued that when people are sufficiently lacking in virtue, neither voting nor consensus procedure will help. If a sizable percentage of the group is determined to abuse procedure, then whatever procedure you choose will be abused.

But what if we have the opposite situation: everyone is virtuous – respectful of others yet committed to arguing for the truth as they see it, listening carefully and critically, well informed and sharing of information, interested in what is best for the group, its members, and society as a whole, etc? Well, in a situation like this, just about any procedure will do. It could be the “let Lelia decide” procedure, because Lelia, being virtuous, won’t decide without going through the whole open and inclusive discussion with her comrades. She will take part in the discussion – not as a duty of fairness, but out of a desire to find the truth – and at the end of the discussion, when the best position – as far as we are able to determine in this context, with this information, given our level of intellectual skill – emerges, she will choose that position, as would anyone else in our perfect community. And exactly the same choice would result from voting, consensus, etc.

So if procedure is completely beside the point for fully virtuous groups, and helpless in the face of highly vicious groups, when is it useful? Well clearly for those groups that are somewhere in between. We rightly fall back on procedure precisely when a group that is generally respectful and non-manipulative is running into local restricted difficulties. Perhaps

<sup>12</sup> I have a good deal to add, both in terms of the underlying philosophical ideas and specific practices, in *Awakening Reason*.

disagreements. Consensus, for its part, honors no minorities, but mutes them in favor of the metaphysical “one” of the “consensus” group.

The creative role of dissent, valuable as an ongoing democratic phenomenon, tends to fade away in the gray uniformity required by consensus. Any libertarian body of ideas that seeks to dissolve hierarchy, classes, domination and exploitation by allowing even Marshall's “minority of one” to block decision-making by the majority of a community, indeed, of regional and nationwide confederations, would essentially mutate into a Rousseauian “general will” with a nightmare world of intellectual and psychic conformity.<sup>4</sup>  
[Murray Bookchin]

(Don't we all feel empowered to dissent from Murray's position?)

Dissent must therefore be encouraged, not discouraged. Only through a principled discussion of what is at stake in an issue can the truth be clarified. It is liberals--those who accept the system--who water down and obscure truths to platitudes with which everyone can agree and who seek consensus in the form of “peace.” In an age of accommodation like ours--as in all ages--it is liberals who would deny the importance of clarifying radical truths.

Majority rule is the democratic method of determining the will of the large group in decision-making. For majority rule protects the minority's right to dissent, and majority rule exempts them from the obligation to carry out a group decision with which they disagree. In order for diversity of opinion to be valued, therefore, majority rule in large groups must be viewed as an acceptable process.  
[Janet Biehl]

It is indicative, I suppose, of the depth of feeling on this issue that these serious thinkers and activists could engage in such a breath-takingly irrational string of caricatures. For present purposes, I want to focus on one

<sup>4</sup> What is Communalism? The Democratic Dimension of Anarchism, Murray Bookchin – from The Anarchy Archive  
[[http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist\\_archives/bookchin/CMMNL2.MCW.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/CMMNL2.MCW.html)]

aspect of the caricature: that each side in this debate characterizes the other as defending a *formal procedure*, which is then held to a very high standard: essentially, to be foolproof. That is, if we can imagine, or cite actual instances of, behavior consistent with the procedure which violate core values or otherwise give rise to practices of deliberation we don't approve of, this is grounds for rejecting the procedure. On the other hand, each side defines *itself*, not in terms of the formal procedure, but rather the procedure together with a vaguely stated collection of good practices, just institutions, and virtuous agents.

Bookchin and Biehl, for example, define consensus as the procedure in which decisions are only adopted after universal assent (perhaps with stand-asides) and in which one person can block action. Then, Bookchin gives us an example of a group – the Clamshell Alliance – that abused this procedure by pressuring others into accepting the consensus.<sup>5</sup> (One hardly need speak here of his transparent guilt-by-association ploy of mentioning primitivists.) Biehl and Bookchin both conclude from examples like this that consensus in general denies the existence of minorities, bullies them into conforming, waters down radical truths, even leads to “a nightmare world of intellectual and psychic conformity!”<sup>6</sup>

Many advocates of consensus, similarly, define “majority rule” in terms of the procedure of voting on two pre-selected choices. They assume that people come to these choices and vote their antecedent inclinations (“whether strongly heartfelt or weakly ephemeral”), that such decisions are not “discussed in a spirit of respect and mutual accommodation,” that no effort is made to reformulate options, or to come up with others, that those with differing views are treated as “opponents,” and that manipulation is likely to be engaged in.

That is, in both cases what is criticized is the *practice* of concrete, far from ideal groups who utilize the procedure in dispute. Certainly there is no *essential* reason why dividing opposing votes into blocks and stand-asides must lead to a suppression of dissent. Indeed, as a simple matter of logic, consensus assigns greater, indeed dictatorial, power to minorities. The mere fact that we are going to vote is obviously no guarantee that some nefarious majority won't try to pressure minorities into accepting their position on the grounds that a unanimous vote shows strength, solidarity, etc. So it is really completely obvious that the Bookchin/Biehl worries have nothing to do with the choice of which procedure one employs.

Nor, however, is there any reason why a commitment to majority rule requires lack of discussion, limiting options to two, or treating people

<sup>5</sup> I have not researched this example, so I am simply taking Bookchin's word about it for purposes of argument. Nothing of import here hangs on the actual case.

<sup>6</sup> Lions and Tigers and Bears, oh my!

**Formulation 1:** We will affirm our support for the Right of Return  
And

**Formulation 2:** We will take no stand on the Right of Return

and thereby choosing to give one or the other group veto power over the other, is clearly not a rational way to settle things.

How such a deep dispute will go – extended debate, creative compromise, even the group breaking up – should not be settled in the abstract, much less by some legislated structure of group procedure. There is simply no way that a procedure that privileges one deep conviction over another is going to help. We have to argue. And if argument fails, one group is going to have to give up on a deeply held conviction. Aside from specific arguments about the Right of Return, its political importance, the tactical issues of affirming it or remaining silent, etc., how could one possibly think to find a wise settlement. But that is exactly what Consensus rules purport to do – settle such disputes formally, prior to substantive consideration of the issues.

#### *§4: Virtuous practice and the need for procedure*

I can well imagine a defender of consensus objecting to the previous argument. “Certainly,” they might agree, “there is something inherently conservative in allowing one person veto power over actions. But that is not a fair way to characterize consensus process. Consensus requires that we don't think of the ability to block as a veto power available to us whenever we disagree with the way the group is heading. Consensus procedure cannot be divorced from consensus practice and evaluated separately, and when we look to them together we see that blocks are only used when one has a deep objection to the action under consideration, an objection that one sees as important enough to warrant preventing the group from acting.”

Such a response, however, misses the point for two reasons. First, there is still no justification for the procedural asymmetry between action and inaction. Why not also give everyone an “inaction block”? Why, if I feel that failing to respond to, say, a congressional declaration denouncing the Right of Return, is deeply morally impermissible, indeed incompatible with the very point of our solidarity organization, should I not be able to block our doing nothing? To say that I cannot do this in principle, while others can, in principle, block doing anything about this racist bill, is to embrace a procedural conservatism, no matter what else is packed into the account of practice.

The second problem is that appeal to good practice as a defense of a given procedure misses the whole point of procedure. I noted earlier that the

action? When one goes about one's life and ignores political, economic, cultural disputes, don't we consistently argue that one is thereby supporting the status quo, playing a concrete role in keeping the system functioning? Sitting on one's ass may be the right thing to do in a given situation, but we radicals always insist that it is nonetheless *doing something*, something that calls just as much for justification as anything else.

How strange, then, to endorse a decision-making process that essentially privileges doing nothing over doing something, for that is exactly what consensus procedure is, on the current understanding. If we insist that the formulation of a proposal must be in the positive – a proposal to *do something* rather than to remain inactive – then we are legislating that one strongly held opinion can prevent action, while all-but-one's equally strongly held opinion is still insufficient to force action. Thus, if the earlier argument about the role of inaction in an institutionalized setting is correct, consensus process is deeply conservative, privileging acquiescence with the status quo far more than does voting.

It should be obvious that most forms of so-called “modified consensus” aren't any better motivated. Requiring  $\frac{3}{4}$  or  $\frac{2}{3}$  for a positive decision to be taken still privileges complacency over action. Unless one goes all the way to a principle like “attempt to find consensus, and if that fails, vote” one is stuck with a procedure that is asymmetrical between action and inaction. And I can see no way that one should embrace such asymmetry.

I should emphasize that I'm not here criticizing the distinction within consensus procedure between blocks and stand-asides. This is certainly a useful distinction. (Though one could go further. Obviously our opposition to various proposals does not always fall neatly into one of two categories. There is a range, even a multi-dimensional space, of attitudes towards a given proposal that one could adopt. Support/stand-aside/block is more nuanced than support/oppose, but only by a factor of 3-2.) What I object to is any procedure that isn't symmetrical between support and opposition to the proposal in question.

Suppose a Palestinian solidarity group is considering making a statement affirming the Right of Return. Say some people feel deeply opposed to such a statement, while supporting the goals and practices of the group in other ways, while others feel deeply committed to the essentiality of such a statement, feeling that silence on that issue is an insult to the majority of Palestinians who live as refugees. Why should either commitment be made more important than the other, by the very rules of argument? In each case, one could have a deeply held moral opposition/support, which one thought to be essential to the well being of the group. However we settle this, choosing between

as opponents. A group can engage in any sort of fair-minded, inclusive, open-ended discussion it likes, reformulating positions, trying out options to see if there is unanimity, learning from dissent, etc., all ending up in a majority vote on the proposal that seems to have most support in the discussion. Thus the advocates of consensus quoted above are no more focusing on essential features of groups that use voting than are Bookchin and Biehl focusing on essential features of consensus groups.

If there is an intelligible claim being made in either argument, it can only be that the pernicious sort of behavior in question is more likely in fact to follow from the use of the procedure being attacked. But neither side – nor any other literature that I'm aware of – makes any serious attempt to argue that one procedure is more likely than the other to be abused in this way. Presumably, such an argument would require concrete statistical evidence, and I'm skeptical that any significant generalizations are forthcoming. In my own rather extensive experience with activist groups, I've seen both procedures used well, and both abused, with about equal frequency.

By contrast, note how each group discusses its own approach: “In consensus, the group encourages the sharing of all viewpoints held by those with interest in a topic. These viewpoints are then discussed in a spirit of respect and mutual accommodation. New ideas arise and viewpoints are synthesized, until a formula emerges that wins general approval.” Or for a more expansive account:

So what would an alternative revolutionary decision making process look like, you ask? To begin with, a fundamental shift from competition to cooperation. ... Cooperation is more than "live and let live". It is making an effort to understand another's point of view. It is incorporating another's perspective with your own so that a new perspective emerges. It is suspending disbelief, even if only temporarily, so you can see the gem of truth in ideas other than your own. It is a process of creativity, synthesis, and open-mindedness that leads to trust-building, better communication and understanding, and ultimately, a stronger, healthier, more successful group. ... The last and most visible step towards revolutionary change in group process is the manner in which members of the group interact with each other. Dominating attitudes and controlling behavior would not be tolerated. People would show respect and expect to be shown respect. Everyone would be doing their personal best to help the group reach decisions which are in the best interest of the group. There

would be no posturing and taking sides. Conflicts would be seen as an opportunity for growth, expanding people's thinking, sharing new information, and developing new solutions which include everyone's perspectives. The group would create an environment where everyone was encouraged to participate, conflict was freely expressed, and resolutions were in the best interest of everyone involved.<sup>7</sup>  
[C.T. Lawrence Butler]

It is interesting that when allowed to speak for themselves, the advocates of voting espouse similar practices. Here is Bookchin again.

Even so knowledgeable a historian of anarchism as Peter Marshall observes that, for anarchists, "the majority has no more right to dictate to the minority, even a minority of one, than the minority to the majority."<sup>5</sup> Scores of libertarians have echoed this idea time and again.

What is striking about assertions like Marshall's is their highly pejorative language. Majorities, it would seem, neither "decide" nor "debate": rather, they "rule," "dictate," "command," "coerce" and the like. In a free society that not only permitted, but fostered the fullest degree of dissent, whose podiums at assemblies and whose media were open to the fullest expression of all views, whose institutions were truly forums for discussion -- one may reasonably ask whether such a society would actually "dictate" to anyone when it had to arrive at a decision that concerned the public welfare.

[IBID]

A purer case of talking (yelling) past one another could hardly be constructed. What emerges is that there are two fundamentally distinct dimensions of assessment going on, which we may call "procedural" and "practical". Procedural assessment looks to the formal rules that are explicitly adopted by the group as governing decision-making process. Practical assessment looks to the practices of the group, and the underlying habits, psychologies, traditions, and context that support the continuation of those practices. What is striking about the debate between consensus and majority rule, then, is that each side defines the other exclusively in terms of

but I think it misses the main point. I want to claim that *any* formal procedure can be abused. But in this section, I focus on consensus procedure, and offer a quite general abstract argument against it.<sup>11</sup>

While consensus decision-making is typically put forward as a radical alternative to voting, or at least as more suited to radical or revolutionary projects, it turns out that consensus rules are deeply conservative in their very structure. Recall that, according to consensus procedure, a proposal is formulated, and then it must receive unanimous support – ignoring stand-asides – to be adopted by the group. That is, if one person opposes it, the group cannot adopt it. The first problem with this procedure is that it doesn't prescribe a procedure based on the content or meaning of a proposal, but rather based on arbitrary features of its formulation. Suppose, for example, that a group is faced with a situation in which they would normally engage in some sort of protest action. Perhaps they are an anti-war group, and the US has just launched an invasion. Say for purposes of argument that all but one of the people thinks that a protest should be held, but one strongly opposes this for whatever reason. Here are two ways to formulate the disagreement.

**Formulation 1:**

Group A endorses protesting the invasion.

Group B (one person) opposes protesting the invasion.

**Formulation 2:**

Group B (one person) endorses remaining quiet about the invasion (doing nothing)

Group A opposes remaining quiet about the invasion.

The difference between these formulations comes to nothing under a majority voting procedure, but is absolutely crucial under consensus. If the proposal is "Let us hold a protest" then the one person opposing can block and nothing happens. But if the proposal is to do nothing, then any one of the many who support protesting can block, thereby forcing a protest.

Now in a case like this, it is probably natural to think that formulation 1 is the right one. What we need consensus for is to *do things*, and if we cannot reach consensus on what to do, the group will do nothing. But even if this distinction between action and inaction makes sense in all cases, it is not one that radical groups should be happy assigning such significance to. Isn't it a staple of our analysis that inaction is a form of

<sup>11</sup> Though the objection of this section is really quite obvious, so far as I know, it has not been discussed elsewhere. Given the nature of the point, I would not be surprised to learn, however, that it has been pointed out by someone I'm unaware of.

<sup>7</sup> "A Revolutionary Decision-Making Process " [See <http://www.consensus.net/revolutionary.html>]

department knows much about Roberts' Rules, and voting is usually a rather pointless afterthought. In the first decade of my participation, only a handful of votes ended other than unanimously, for the simple reason that discussion almost always led to a position that struck everyone as the rational one. And of the few cases in which there has been a vote, most have been overwhelmingly in one direction, with those who disagreed fully accepting the majority decision.

It is clear enough that the problem with what went on at MGJ wasn't primarily due to the use of consensus procedure. Had majority vote been the procedure, the NGOs could, for example, have engaged in a mass mobilization of members. (Part of the problem that day was that things were rushed, and these groups by way of their paid staff and better communication networks were able to prepare for the meeting much more quickly.) If they had done so, and turned out 51% of the people at the meeting, they could still have controlled the outcome, in roughly the same manner. Indeed, for all Bookchin's (correct) insistence that majority rule *need not* involve a tyranny of the majority, dictates or commands, it is perfectly clear that it *can* involve such things. There is certainly nothing in the procedural rules of voting that prevents this. (Think how many states are now passing patently heterosexist laws. Though these are usually the result of legislators rather than popular votes, there is little doubt that popular votes would turn out the same way in most cases. Such majority support hardly renders these laws less repellent, or the arguments behind them less vapid.)

Thus, whatever virtues the GU philosophy department instantiates are also independent of its commitment to voting procedures. At least as far back as Plato's Republic, it has been noted that when the procedure is majority vote, it is possible to mobilize the mob through graft, rhetoric, fear, or other irrational means, so as to force decisions on the minority that are neither wise nor just. Clearly, as Plato is at pains to emphasize, there is no essential connection between what the majority believes and what is right and just. (Of course there is also no such connection between what *everyone* believes and what is right and just. If we all agree, perhaps it is simply because we share our ignorance, prejudice, or bigotry.)

### §3: *why consensus procedure is inherently conservative.*

Defenders of consensus procedure often suggest that the MGJ case arose because of a violation of that procedure. Some suggest that consensus procedure properly includes a rule against re-opening questions unless there is a consensus to do so. Others suggest that there was a problem in the formulation of the proposal, or the structure of the debate. This is all fair,

a procedure, while defining themselves first and foremost in terms of practice.

To engage in "direct democracy" as Bookchin defines the term requires that one vote only after a full discussion. Direct democracy is, by definition, a procedure employed by a "free society that not only permit[s], but foster[s] the fullest degree of dissent, whose podiums at assemblies and whose media [are] open to the fullest expression of all views, whose institutions [are] truly forums for discussion." That Bookchin intends this to be a definitional truth can be seen from the fact that he never so much as considers other uses of voting to be relevant to the system he is endorsing. Similarly, advocates of consensus process define consensus as a procedure that is used by a respectful community of serious dialogue, a group which functions as a forum for fair discussion. Ask any consensus advocate how they can endorse giving one difficult person the ability to veto every decision unless we adopt his view and she will tell you that such a thing is not consensus process at all.

Now in neither case are we simply asked to ignore the possibility of procedural abuse. Advocates of consensus typically describe in some detail the sorts of attitudes that are necessary in order for participants to function in the way they should, and in some cases, explain the kinds of discipline, training, facilitation, and practice that are needed for people to carry this off. Bookchin, similarly, has written about the kinds of institutions that a society needs, and the sorts of attitudes and work that people will need to bring to those institutions, in order for society to function well in genuinely democratic forums. But this merely highlights my point: the practice of the participants, their skills, habits, relations, and virtues – along with the broader societal structures and institutions that engender and support these – are where the action is.

### §2: *Two case studies*

In this section we look at two decision-making institutions. One is a self-identified radical organization devoted to an ideology of inclusiveness and diversity, with the goal of liberatory social change, and operating by consensus. The second is a mainstream institution – an academic department – with no commitment to a radical agenda, operating officially by a formal voting mechanism. My point will not be to suggest that voting leads to better behavior than does consensus, but rather to highlight some aspects of respectful practice, and to indicate just how little formal procedure has to do with the quality of human interaction that goes on.

The first case involved the Mobilization for Global Justice (MGJ), the largest coalition of the Global Justice Movement to arise out of the

uprising in Seattle in 1999.<sup>8</sup> In Summer and Fall 2001, MGJ was planning for a convergence and demonstration around the annual meetings of the IMF and WB in Washington DC. A wide range of education, legal protest, and civil disobedience had been planned, generally in accord with the way these things had been going on for the past couple years. MGJ in DC was a large, diverse, and vibrant group, albeit one which in retrospect had two significantly different sorts of members. On the one hand, a wide range of grassroots protest, activist, or direct action groups were a part of MGJ. On the other, a number of formal NGOs with paid staff took part.

The attacks against civilians in New York and Washington, DC on Sept. 11, 2001 caused something of a crisis throughout the progressive community. Clearly this was an event that had deeply affected the American public and nearly everyone realized that it changed the political context in ways that called for a re-thinking of strategies and tactics. Going into a crucial meeting following the attacks, nearly every member group in MGJ would have supported scaling back the level of confrontation with police, many supported eliminating civil disobedience altogether actions, and a handful of NGOs favored completely canceling the protests.

Representatives of this latter group arranged to be in the position of facilitator on the day in question. After a bit of unfocused discussion, a proposal was put on the board. “The MGJ will go ahead with its plans for protests during the meetings of the financial institutions” (or something very much like that). Immediately, representatives of the group in favor of canceling the event announced that they were blocking this proposal. Objections, arguments, discussion, etc. were met with stony rejection. The proposal was blocked, and the events were canceled. It was estimated by those present that roughly 80% of the people in attendance opposed canceling things. But they had no real say. There was no real discussion or response to the arguments the majority made, merely condescending

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<sup>8</sup> The account that follows is from personal experience. I was centrally involved in the MGJ planning process for this convergence. Though my work was primarily with the educational series associated with the protests – the People’s Summit – I also attended general MGJ meetings. There are many others who have confirmed my memory of the events, though it is only fair to say that there are also those who dispute this account of what went on. For purposes of the general argument I am making here, nothing much hangs on this. You could just as well treat this as a hypothetical example of a way that consensus procedure could be abused. But I believe it is important for us to appreciate the real harm done, in the very contexts in which we work, by such abuse. And it is also important for us to develop habits of confronting efforts to so abuse our practice. I take the inclusion of a real case, rather than a hypothetical one, to be a small step along the way toward such habits.

lectures on being responsible protesters, and stony refusal to consider the block.<sup>9</sup>

Let us contrast with this case, the general practice of a quite different organization, one that is not in any way explicitly radical, but rather an academic department: the department of philosophy at Georgetown University. For the last 15 years or so, this department, in its internal deliberations, has been a veritable model of civility, rationality, and respect. It is a large department, as such things go, with around 24 members. It is ideologically, philosophically, and methodologically highly diverse including analytic and continental philosophers, conservatives, liberals, socialists, capitalist libertarians, and (one) anarchist, committed Catholics, and atheists.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, in almost every case, members of the department genuinely respect one another and, in the few counter-instances, nonetheless recognize the importance of treating their colleagues with respect and civility. Discussions are always open, intellectually sophisticated, and creative. Everyone in the department participates in discussions. Graduate student representatives to department meetings, and really any other graduate student with strong views on the matter, participate fully and openly. New members quickly learn that one does not try to score points, put down colleagues, ignore the arguments people are making, or, for that matter, blindly endorse anyone else’s opinion. That just isn’t the way things are done in our department.

Procedurally the Georgetown philosophy department works by a version of majority rule, officially following Roberts’ Rules in discussion, majority vote when there are two options, and a complicated variant of majority rule when there are more options. In reality, no one in the

<sup>9</sup> And the effects of this shameful manipulation were significant. The vacuum created by the pullout of MGJ was filled predictably by ANSWER [IAC, WWP], a significant event in the (now, apparently and thankfully, temporary) rise to prominence of this authoritarian organization. So deep were the feelings of hurt and betrayal by the actions on this day and subsequent “defenses” of them – defenses that often involved character assassination and verbal abuse – that MGJ in its previous form effectively disbanded. Nearly all the grassroots activists pulled out and joined other coalitions, generally with far fewer resources. Most NGOs stayed, but their subsequent protest actions and educational events were a shadow of their previous strength. It is noteworthy that one leader of the putsch in Sept. consistently defended the choice to cancel events – I heard this defense four times at different forums over the next two years – by saying that there had been consensus support for canceling, a use of language that can only be called Orwellian.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth saying explicitly that I am not suggesting anything about academia at large. Few are the academic departments which function the way this one does. Many are irrational, spiteful, dogmatic, and oppressive institutions.