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# Critical Thoughts on Consensus Decision Making

James Herod

2008

*(Two Memos and some Bibliographical References)*

*[Prefatory note, March 2017: The workshop established at the 6th Regional Assembly of NEAN in 2008 fizzled out after a few email exchanges. I still hope to undertake a thorough study of this issue and come up with some recommendations for both overall meeting procedures and for a modified consensus process. But in case I don't, I'd like to make these notes available to others. Perhaps others will be inspired to take up the needed re-evaluation of our meeting and decision-making practices. AK Press published a nice little study which takes a critical approach to some of our practices and deals with some of the issues I raise below. It is useful, and insightful, and represents a good start, but it is not nearly comprehensive enough, and is not meant to serve as a new meeting procedures manual. See: Richard Singer and Delfina Vannucci, Come Hell or High Water: A Handbook on Collective Process Gone Awry, 2009, 127 pages. Also, the needed re-evaluation might be usefully bounced against studies of representation in general,*

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*against academic studies of collective decision making, a la Kenneth Arrow, and against traditional manuals of parliamentary procedure.]*

Concern: Meeting Procedures

**Proposal: Set up a Study Group to examine the issue and come up with recommendations.**

*(Submitted to the 6<sup>th</sup> Regional Assembly of the Northeast Anarchist Network, Ithaca, New York, March 21-23, 2008)*

Hello,

This is a proposal to set up a group to study various models of consensus decision making and/or alternative procedures. What follows is an off-the-cuff attempt to put some substance behind the request. This certainly should not be seen as a substitute for the recommended study. Working through to effective meeting procedures will require a great deal of study, reflection, and discussion, but it is a task that we need to undertake, in my opinion. Anyway, here are some random thoughts on some of the difficulties I've noticed about the way we are (dis)functioning. Of course there have been many good meetings too. This is an initial critique of the "so-called consensus" decision-making practices that we've been using from the very first assembly in February 2007.

*[Note: Since we dropped into the network structure that we've defined, regional assemblies do not have decision-making power, although probably there will be occasional decisions about marginal matters taken even at regional assemblies. But of course there is simply the matter of how to conduct our regional meetings. This study, however, is aimed primarily at developing meeting skills in our local groups and sub-regional assemblies.]*

1. *No explicit decision on meeting procedures.* First of all, there has never been any explicit discussion and agreement on what meeting procedures we are going to use. This was perhaps understandable for the first or second meeting, but it surely should have become a first item of business to explicitly agree and write down the procedures that the network was going to use. Instead, a certain way

John Gastil. *Democracy in Small Groups: Participation, Decision Making, and Communication.* New Society Press, 1993, 213 pages.

Kevin Wolf. *The Makings of a Good Meeting.* 2002, 31 pages. On line at:

<<http://www.wolfandassociates.com/facilitation/manual.htm>>  
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*Excerpted from an Email of April 10, 2008, "Letter on Meeting Procedures, No. 2"*

Here a few *more online references.*

There is an excellent Wikipedia article on consensus decision making at:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus\\_decision-making](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making)

The references in the notes are quite useful. As are the External Links listed at the end. I checked out all the links and most are worthy.

Facilitating Meetings Effectively

<http://www.casagordita.com/meetings.htm>

Hints for Facilitators: Handling Difficult Behaviors in Meetings

<http://www.casagordita.com/difficult.htm>

*On Robert's Rules and Parliamentary Procedure* General Henry M. Robert, *Robert's Rules of Order* [1876]. Many editions, e.g., *Robert's Rules of Order*, Newly Revised. Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1970, 594 pages.

Thomas Jefferson, *A Manual of Parliamentary Practice for the Use of the Senate of the United States* [1801]. Applewood Books, 1993, 144 pages.

E. C. Utter, *Parliamentary Law at a Glance.* Based on Robert's Rules Revised. Reilly & Lee, Chicago, 1949, 66 pages.

Lawrence E. Susskind, *Breaking Robert's Rules: The New Way to Run Your Meeting, Build Consensus, and Get Results.* Oxford U.P., 2006, 240 pages.

<<http://www.ic.org/nica/Process/meeting.html>>

This site has lots of links to other materials.

Is Everybody Happy? (pros and cons of consensus decision making)

<<http://www.fraw.org.uk/gs/handbook/condecis.htm>>

Rob Sandelin. Running Effective Meetings

<<http://www.ic.org/nica/Process/Effmeet.html>>

Consensus is not unanimity: making decisions cooperatively

<<http://www.rantcollective.net/article.php?id=9>>

Myths about Consensus Decision-Making

<<http://archives.lists.indymedia.org/imc-process/2001-February/000463.html>>

Murray Bookchin and Janet Biehl on Consensus

<<http://www.geocities.com/collectivebook/bookchin.html>>

<<http://www.geocities.com/collectivebook/janetbiehl.html>>

*Manuals and Books I have on hand*

Peter Gelderloos, *Consensus: A New Handbook for Grass-roots Social, Political, and Environmental Groups*. See Sharp Press, 2006, 126 pages.

C.T. Lawrence Butler and Amy Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus. A Handbook on Formal Consensus Decision Making*. Food Not Bombs Publishing, 1987, 63 pages. I think Butler has continued to work on this, perhaps Rothstein too. They may have published other things, although nothing turned up on Barnes & Noble, Amazon, or Abebooks. Abram Karl-Gruzwitz mentioned Butler in earlier Ne(A)Net email discussions. I can photocopy this manual. It's short. Oh. I see here in my folder a huge print-out. Butler has a web site, at <<http://www.consensus.net/ocaccontents.html>>. The site has the pamphlet, other materials, information about workshops, and so forth. Strong on nonviolence. [Note: jh – March 2017: In 2009 Butler published *Consensus for Cities*, 176 pages. It is available from the author.]

Center for Conflict Resolution. *Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making*. 1999, 124 pages.

or manner of operating has simply been assumed (or imposed). At each assembly the facilitator gets up and explains how the meeting is going to be run, by consensus. They then explain the hand signals and a few other general things. It is my strong impression that this is a severely truncated version of consensus decision making that we have been using in meeting after meeting. It's like a bastardized version that has somehow become common custom in the radical culture. But it will take a study group to carefully examine what has gone wrong. We don't have to follow the manuals of course. But we shouldn't ignore them either, codifying as they do procedures that have been carefully worked out over several decades.

2. *Misuse of the block*. This is just one example of what seems to have gone wrong. The block is supposed to be a rare thing. It can only be used in cases of extreme disagreement. Yet in our practice, as evidenced by the past four regional assemblies, it is a very common thing. Various individuals are often heard to say "I block that," sometimes right at the beginning of a discussion, which is certainly inappropriate. And facilitators routinely ask: "Any concerns, stand-asides, or blocks." This turns the block into a routine procedure that anyone can use at any time on any decision. This is not right. Plus it has evidently been entirely forgotten that a meeting can overrule a block. No one even knows how that would be done.

3. *The twinkles are not working*. I've never liked this hand signal. For one thing, it's a ridiculous thing to be doing. But beyond that it so easily prejudices a proceeding. Some people like to do this. So all the way through a discussion various individuals are always twinkling their approval of what is being said. Here's what's wrong with this. It is much easier to agree than to disagree. Yet there is no comparable hand signal, certainly not one that has entered into common practice to such a degree, for expressing disagreement or disapproval. What would it be, a thumbs down hand signal? Furthermore, the twinkle is now being used as a substitute for a vote. A facilitator will say, toward the end of a discussion of an issue,

when it is thought that a consensus may have been reached: "Let's see the twinkles." How is this any different than asking for a show of hands? Well, there is one huge difference, isn't there? Normally, when a chairperson would say: "All those in favor," this would be followed by: "All those opposed," with this approval or opposition being shown by raised hands. But in the "twinkling" exercise, the no vote is eliminated. In fact, meeting procedures as I have witnessed them in operation in our assemblies so far, and twinkling is a big part of this, ***are heavily stacked against dissent.***

4. *The hand signals in general are not working.* These signals are supposed to assist the facilitator in calling on appropriate speakers. In my opinion they just introduce confusion, and not only because so many people seemingly invariably misuse them, but because it places unreasonable demands on the facilitator. It would take an exceptionally skilled facilitator to navigate through only those hand signals. I suspect that upon further study I might even recommend that hand signals be abandoned entirely.

5. *The unhappy practice of having two facilitators at once.* Where did this come from? I've never seen it before. It is surely a bad idea. It introduces unnecessary tension, especially if there is an attempt to "balance gender" by having a man and a woman both trying to facilitate simultaneously. Two people cannot drive a car at the same time. The function of a facilitator is to guide a discussion toward a decision. That is best done by just one person.

6. *Misuse of the stack.* Many of our stacks are way too long. A good facilitator would keep them much shorter. Plus the stack keeper should be separate from and sitting away from the facilitator. Also, there are many other modes of discussion besides just the stack, like: two pro two con, free-for-all, round the room (in cases of extreme disagreement only), and so forth. None of these are ever used by us. We limit ourselves strictly to the stack.

7. *Ambiguity of the stand-aside.* I've mentioned this before. Does it mean that the people who stand aside will not help carry out a decision, or does it mean that they will, even though they disagree

want to listen to men arguing. But what about women arguing? And how can reasoning be separated from emotion? I don't think it is primarily a gender issue. It is a cultural thing. Europeans know how to have passionate arguments without a loss of civility, just as they know how to flirt without getting all twisted up with puritanical guilt. USAmericans don't.

Nor is it a solution to say that we should criticize a person's ideas but not their persons. This is another one of those near universal cultural items which sounds plausible enough but is actually wrong. People identify strongly with their ideas. It is meaningless to say that you can criticize their ideas without criticizing them. You *are* criticizing them when you criticize their ideas. They are the ones holding these ideas, that is, their "person" is.

Our anarchist culture seems to be moving inexorably toward suppression of dissent, with its misguided concern for avoiding "conflicts" in meetings. This was sadly, but amply, demonstrated by the list of "meeting agreements" that was spontaneously generated at the beginning of the 8th regional assembly of NEAN in Ithaca. Aspects of that list were quite disturbing in their emphasis on conformity and the suppression of disagreements.

So what we need to do is learn how to restore civility even to passionate discussions.

10) What's going on when decisions are made without either a vote (show of hands) or the consensus process? This happens all the time. We have come to refer to it jokingly as "decision by silence." A facilitator will ask if we should do such and such. No one says anything. And that's it. That is taken as the decision. And things proceed.

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**Initial Bibliography on Meeting Procedures and Consensus**  
*Excerpted from an Email on March 24, 2008, "Kick-Off Letter for Meeting Procedures"*  
*Some Internet Items to Start On*  
Resources for meeting and group process

decision effectively derailed, once again, the discussion of network structure. When we reconvened, half the assembly had left, and half our time was gone. It was late in the day. Everyone was tired. The momentum of the meeting had been lost. A substantive victory had been achieved through a procedural proposal.

I don't have an answer to this dilemma. Mixing majority rule voting (with a show of hands) with consensus procedures seems very odd to me. Yet it is equally wrong-headed to use consensus for every last decision; it is cumbersome, time consuming, and impractical.

8) What to do about multiple proposals which are on the floor simultaneously? This happens in almost every meeting. It's not supposed to. We're supposed to be dealing with one proposal, considering concerns, revising the proposal, until agreement is reached. But almost invariably we end up with several proposals on the floor instead of one. The meeting gets all tangled up, and the poor facilitator doesn't know what to do. There are no clearly established procedures, at least none that are in common practice. Nor is this necessarily the facilitator's fault. People raise their hands and get on stack. When it comes their turn, they make another proposal. This is probably related to point number five above, about changing the direction of a discussion. People making a new proposal are trying to solve the issue under discussion by showing another way out. But how is the new proposal to be handled? Do we start over, with the consensus process, to work on the new proposal? And how do we decide that? And how do we choose between three or four different proposals which have suddenly been submitted during a discussion? This is a very thorny matter that demands urgent attention and solution.

9) We should lift the ban on heated debate. Active anarchists are political animals, who take their ideas seriously. Of course they are going to feel strongly about them. It is ridiculous to ban heated debate. And it turns our meetings into boring, tedious affairs. I suspect that this ban has come from feminists, who say that they don't

with it? For some decisions it doesn't matter. Say the decision is to donate a certain sum of money in solidarity with a political prisoner. Then the check is cut, and that's it. But if the decision is to mount a sustained campaign of support for that prisoner which will extend over weeks, then are the stand-asides going to help or not. (I believe there is a fuller discussion of this in my March 07 article on the efforts to create a new anarchist network, in my remarks on so-called consensus decision making, but I may have misremembered.)

8. *Institutionalizing a Cop to Monitor Emotions.* At first I thought the idea of a vibes watcher was probably a good idea. But as I've seen it in practice I've come to really hate this idea. I don't want some cop sitting in every damn meeting monitoring my emotions, scolding me and putting me down if they don't think I exhibit "good vibes." And we haven't even been appointing a vibes watcher. The function has just been taken over by everyone. ***Everyone has become a damn cop***, ready to pounce on anyone they think is out of line. What kind of fascist nonsense is this? And what's it doing in a meeting of anarchists?

9. *Lack of due process.* People routinely get attacked in our meetings, yet they are never given a chance to defend themselves. At the very least, someone who is attacked (criticized in a personal way, not just disagreed with on an issue) should have the right for an immediate rebuttal. It doesn't have to go beyond that. But a criticism should not be allowed to stand unchallenged. What if it's not true and is unjust? An unchallenged attack just hangs there in the air and may poison the rest of the meeting or push it in a direction that it would not have gone in if the attacker has been rebutted. ***Defense is an essential part of the critical outlook.***

10. *We've been putting ourselves in a straight-jacket.* Some of these meetings have become way too rigid. All spontaneous discussion is rigorously suppressed. No arguments are allowed. You can't speak out of turn. You can't answer your attackers. There is no way to change the direction of a meeting. In retrospect, I swear

that Robert's Rules were more flexible than the procedures we've been using. Direct democracy is turbulent, chaotic, emotional, creative, unruly, spontaneous, outrageous, and noisy, none of which attributes prevents us from reasoning together. Too many of the meetings we've been having are sterile, boring, and petrified. It's like we're suffering from rigor mortis before we even die.

So these are a few of the concerns I have off hand. I could do a more thorough job if I had more time. Hopefully a study group will be set up to examine this matter and perhaps I can participate in it.

Do I need to point out that of course there have been some good meetings too, and that in general I remain excited and hopeful about this political initiative.

Kind Regards,

James Herod

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### **Initial thoughts on Revising Consensus Procedures**

*James Herod, June 2009*

*A memo to the Boston Anti-Authoritarian Movement*

We need to take a critical look at the standard model of consensus decision making and consider making any changes that we think would work better for us. Here are some thoughts, just off the top of my head, about changes that we might consider. I'm sure other items could be uncovered if and when I find the will and energy to systematically study the available materials on decision making.

1) For most serious, substantive topics, perhaps a period of open discussion might be useful before any specific proposals are even accepted for the consensus process. Some manuals suggest this. This could save a lot of time, effort, and frustration later on because the range of opinion on the issue would be gotten out into the open first off, and so any proposal that would subsequently be made could be better by having taken into account these differences of opinion. In other words, what might have to be dealt with as "concerns" later in the process could be dealt with front with

dissent, disagreement, debate, difference, conflict, argument. None of these is allowed. My god! What have we gotten ourselves into?

c) Conversation style. A facilitator, seeing that a few people are on to something, could say: Okay, you, you, you, and you can engage in a free-flowing conversation, back and forth exchanges, unregulated by stack or "taking turns" – just normal conversation, including even interruptions (they not having been banned) on this topic for five minutes. Stack would be set aside. I regard the absence of this mode of discussion in our assemblies as a severe handicap.

7) Is the consensus process appropriate for every decision taken at a meeting? The consensus process, of dealing with concerns about a specific proposal, is long and complicated. How could it possibly be used for every decision that needs to be made in a meeting – when to begin the meeting (seeing that our meetings often start late), when to take breaks, when to move on to the next agenda item, when to adjourn, deciding who will facilitate, deciding on the agenda, and so forth. Yet, if we're not using consensus for these matters, what are we using? Majority rule, decided by a show of hands? (I seem to remember one manual recommending this.)

One is tempted to say that we should separate procedural from substantive issues and use consensus only for the latter. A moment's reflection, however, collapses this distinction, by showing that it is false. Any procedural matter can have serious substantive significance. An incident which occurred at the 2nd NEAN assembly, at Amherst, can illustrate this point. A group had been fighting to keep a discussion of the network's structure off the agenda, and had succeed all day, pushing it off to the very last item for the day, with one hour and a quarter left to deal with it. And so it finally came time to talk about structure. At that very minute a member of the group opposed to talking about structure proposed that we take a break and stretch our legs. This rapidly became what we did (through I don't know what kind of decision making – I certainly never had a chance to object to it). So this seemingly procedural

ferent procedural options for discussing issues. It's definitely time to rule Robert out of order.

6) We need a variety of "modes of discussion," formalized and standardized. At present we use mostly one, rigid adherence to stack, and occasionally a second, going round the room. A facilitator should be able to shift to any number of other modes of discussion at any time during a meeting. Here are three ideas for other modes of discussion, in addition to stack and going around the room. There may be others.

(By the way, going around the room is grossly misused in our meetings. It should be a rare event. It is very time consuming. It should be reserved, especially in large meetings, for occasions of absolute deadlock which demand opening up a discussion to a wider range of opinions. There is usually no need to hear *everyone's* opinion on a matter. What needs to be heard are all the *different* opinions. There are better ways to accomplish this than by going around the room and asking everyone to speak to the issue, which eats up meeting time like a monster pac-man.)

a) Free-for-all discussion without stack. Why is this so universally banned in our assemblies? This is often the best way to go. But it has been outlawed. Sure it would be noisy and chaotic. But so what? I suspect that it has been banned because of a mistaken belief that strict adherence to stack will equalize gender participation while a free-for-all discussion would favor loud-mouthed men. This is certainly not necessarily true, and other ways might be found to deal with gender imbalances, without having to sacrifice a critically important mode of discussion.

b) Pro and Con. A facilitator could say, Okay, let's have two speak in favor and two against the proposal. I've read objections to this procedure by consensus proponents, saying that it fosters divisions and polarizes issues. But isn't asking for "concerns" just a euphemistic way of asking for disagreements? Isn't a "stand-aside" a person who disagrees with the proposal? The substitution of "concern" for "debate" illustrates the general bias in consensus against

the initial formulation of the proposal. Quite often, in our meetings, we start off the discussion with a formal proposal, and then all the discussion of disagreements has to be worked into the consensus process (i.e., the airing of "concerns").

2) A possible change in rules. Any proposal regarding a serious, substantive topic of discussion (as opposed to say, procedural), must be submitted in writing to the note taker before the proposal can be taken up and subjected to the consensus process. The note taker will read the proposal back, or even write it up on a sheet or chalk board. Any subsequent changes in the proposal, after discussion of concerns, will be duly noted and recorded in the changed wording of the proposal. Often the change of only one word can change the meaning of a proposal dramatically. The all-too-frequent failure to do this simple thing often causes debilitating frustration and tension, all quite unnecessary.

3) Reconsideration of the use of hand signals. Various people have expressed frustration about our use of hand signals. We should not consider this way of interacting in meetings to be written in stone. Hand signals were just devices invented with an eye to facilitate decision making in meetings. If they fail to do this job, or do it poorly, then their usage should be reconsidered.

Questions about the effectiveness of "twinkling" have been raised. But for now I'd like to focus on another hand signal – the direct response hand signal. The direct response signal is a way of breaking stack, but for very limited purposes, like adding factual information. It explicitly excludes substantive discussion of what the last speaker has just said. What this does is reconfirm and reinforce the standard consensus decision-making model's firm rejection of any spontaneous debate or conversation between two or a few people about someone's remarks. The strict and rigid adherence to the stack is thus vigorously asserted. This puts the group in a straight jacket. Yet, in actual practice, in almost every meeting, such spontaneous exchanges do break out, off stack, and are often quite essential for resolving an issue and moving the group toward

agreement on a proposal or toward overcoming an impasse or misunderstanding. Such episodes should be recognized, accepted, and formalized, not condemned (see below).

Such an episode occurred at the 8th regional assembly of NEAN in Ithaca just recently in the Saturday afternoon discussion of a proposed change in the network's structure document. At one point a brief conversation broke out between three or four people which greatly clarified things. But someone immediately piped up and said that the discussion was getting chaotic and that we should get back to the stack. This shows how rigid adherence to stack can get in the way of effective decision making.

4) The overall structure of the meeting. The standard flow charts of consensus decision making deal only with how to reach agreement about a single proposal. They say nothing about the overall structure of the meeting. In my youth, most all meetings followed a generally accepted format (which at that time everyone just assumed was universal, and based on the natural order of things). The meeting was convened, the minutes of the last meeting were read, announcements were made, old business was dealt with, then new business was taken up, the time and place of the next meeting was set, and then we adjourned. We need something like this.

5) We need ways of completely changing the direction of a discussion. None is provided in the standard flow-chart of consensus decision making, as I presently understand them. Robert Rules provided for this and are actually superior to the consensus process in this regard. In consensus, once a proposal is on the floor for decision, all you can do is raise concerns about it, until all concerns are dealt with. But what if your "concern" is that the proposal be dropped entirely, or postponed? Or what if you want to suggest a substitute proposal which is completely at odds with the one under discussion? None of these is possible under the consensus process. Yet they were possible with Robert's Rules. You could move that a discussion be ended (that is, the proposal be dropped), that it be tabled, or you could offer a substitute proposal.

Robert's Rules, although written by an army general, were nevertheless based on centuries of experience with parliamentary procedure. There may be things that can be salvaged from them. Or someone might want to go back and examine more original sources, like Thomas Jefferson's Guide to Parliamentary Procedure. We might pick up a few useful ideas.

Robert's Rules were stifling, and were resoundingly rejected by the movements of the sixties. But I'm beginning to have the same feelings about consensus, as it has evolved. It's becoming a rigid, written-in-stone, set of rules that are vigorously enforced by peer pressure, rules which suppress dissent and give entirely too much power to the facilitator, the stack keeper, the vibes watcher, and all those present who speak out to enforce the unwritten and unconsented upon "rules" for behavior in meetings. It is especially disheartening to me to see this kind of informal enforcement in meetings of anarchists.

Here is a brief rejection of Robert's Rules which I wrote in the seventies, and which I incorporated into my book. I'm beginning to think that it might apply also to the standard model of consensus decision making.

#### **Reject Robert's Rules of Order**

Robert's Rules of Order, written by a retired army general in 1876, have become deeply embedded in popular culture in the United States, to the extent that they are often automatically taken as the bible for how groups should behave in meetings. They are like an external law, imposed on us from above. People forget that they can write any rules they want to for their meetings, or have no rules at all. Robert's Rules give far too much power to the chair. They encourage parliamentary maneuvering. They are stifling and rigid, and can quite easily be used by skillful manipulators to defeat the collective will. We need to invent more flexible, democratic, and less centralized procedures for organizing our collective assemblies. B procedures that allow for much more chaos, spontaneity, interruptions, talking out of turn, quick trial votes, arguments, and dif-