The Review of Politics 77 (2015), 73–98.
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doi:10.1017/S0034670514000849

The Uneasy Alliance between Consensus and Democracy

George Vasilev

Abstract: Consensus both serves and threatens democratic inclusion. On the one hand it provides the means for individuals to will in common. On the other hand, it can impose assimilatory pressures that marginalize perspectives at odds with the prevailing point of view. Agonists have responded to this tension with a call to abandon consensus-oriented politics, contending an adversarial democracy more credibly advances inclusionary and egalitarian goals. I argue this wholesale rejection of consensus is unsustainable from the very pluralist perspective agonists wish to promote. In place of the view of consensus as an unattainable and undesirable absolute, I put forward an understanding of it as a matter of degree. I contend this understanding better captures the complexity of human relations and allows us to distinguish the potential accomplishments of consensus from its potential hazards.

Consensus has a close affinity with democracy. Democracy provides a set of criteria for collective action based on mutual convictions, and this activity of joining with others to make a proposal publicly acceptable serves as a pathway for the realization of democratically prized values tied to freedom and respect. By aspiring to win others' support, one is seeking to rule with them, not over them. And by making claims openly justifiable to those potentially bound by them, one is going beyond self-interest to orient oneself to a common good.[1]

However, the search for consensus is all too often inconclusive. Persistent disagreement characterizes the social world, and against this backdrop, the

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I would like to thank Nicholas Barry, Dan Bray, Mark Chou, Robyn Eckersley, Adrian Little, Kate Macdonald, Terry Macdonald, and Mark Triffitt for generous comments on an earlier draft; members of the Legal and Political Theory Working Group at the European University Institute, Florence, especially Vesco Paskalev, for their feedback; and Catherine Zuckert and five anonymous reviewers for constructive comments.

[1]James Bohman, "The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 6, no. 4 (1998): 401–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pursuit of mutually acceptable answers can violate, and not only promote, freedom and respect. When disputed values, beliefs, and preferences clash so intractably that they defy reconciliation under a single horizon of agreement, parties compelled to arrive at a common position can be those compelled to give ground on their deepest commitments. The imposition of such pressures to conform runs afoul of the democratic objective to produce decisions that are reflective of the needs and concerns of all by silencing those who deviate from the prevailing point of view and allowing the partial perspectives of the privileged to go unnoticed behind the universalist garb of the common good.

Some theorists have responded to the tension between consensus and democracy's inclusionary aspirations by concluding that the former needs to be dispensed with in order to guarantee the latter. The most thorough articulation of this viewpoint in recent times has been provided by agonists. In their view, democracies need to uphold conflict as an end in itself, rather than strive for the closure of a consensus, as a domain of interaction devoid of an expectation of agreement best nurtures the open-endedness in human relations necessary to secure freedom and the integrity of diverse actors. This perspective has been highly influential. As Simone Chambers concludes in a survey article, even deliberative theory, with its origins in an ideal of consensus, "has moved away from a consensus-centred teleology—contestation and indeed the agonistic side of democracy now have their place."[2]

In this paper, I reflect on the agonistic turn in democratic theory, and argue that a rejection of consensus is unsustainable from the very pluralist perspective agonists seek to uphold. In place of viewing consensus as unattainable and undesirable, I put forward an understanding of it as a matter of degree. I contend this understanding not only better captures the complexity of human relations, it also allows us to distinguish the potential accomplishments of aspiring toward consensus from the potential hazards.

To make these points, I begin by charting competing interpretations of consensus that characterize it as either an embodiment of democracy or a threat to it. Then I turn to the agonistic understanding of consensus as always impossible and always coercive. I argue this one-sidedly negative characterization is misplaced, as it is founded on semiotic insights that lack causal and explanatory relevance to how concrete actors embedded in empirical situations agree and disagree with one another. I then go on to demonstrate how consensus and conflict exist along a continuum of comprehensiveness. I do this by building on Dryzek and Niemeyer's typology of consensus to introduce the concepts of an "active" and a "passive" consensus.[3] In the final

[2]Simone Chambers, "Deliberative Democratic Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (2003): 321.

[3]John Dryzek and Simon Niemeyer, "Reconciling Pluralism and Consensus as Political Ideals," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 634–49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

part, I consider the normative implications of these findings. I spell out how a norm of consensus can be consistent with the egalitarian expression of diversity, and offer reasons for favoring it over a norm of dissensus, even where the complete resolution of conflict appears remote.

Consensus as a Democratic Ideal

Consensus has long occupied a central place in democratic thought. In classical Athens, *homonoia*—literally, "same-mindedness"—was upheld as a primary virtue, as a citizenry acting with one mind was seen to be contributing to the welfare of the city.[4] *Homonoia* implied that social and political differences had been overcome in a unified community of interest, and that the threat posed to the city by narrow interests had been contained by a citizenry willing in common.

Centuries later, Rousseau revived this thinking, refashioning consensus to meet the challenges of representative government in mass societies. For him, the appeal of consensus lay with its ability to function as a bridge between individual and collective freedom. While these ideals can pull in opposite directions, Rousseau understood consensus to come to the service of both, as individuals desiring the same thing remain free when subject to collective decisions.[5] Consensus, according to Rousseau, would ideally be generated by a unifying "legislator," who would bring individual wills into alignment with the common good.[6]

In contemporary times, consensus has been put to the task of processing conflicts over value pluralism. For Habermas, consensus functions as a "post-metaphysical" condition for legitimacy in decision making among people no longer worshiping the same God.[7] Previously, biblically transmitted prophetic doctrines imbued public decisions with legitimacy. However, with the historical transition to secularism and a pluralism of worldviews, religion has disintegrated as a public basis of morality shared by all. In a world where human beings have been "forsaken by God," rational argumentation steps up as the final arbiter of legitimacy. The attainment of legitimacy now depends on the extent to which acceptance of a norm is generated through justification from the perspective of all relevant interests and value orientations.[8]

[4]Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 297.

[5]Dryzek and Niemeyer, "Reconciling Pluralism," 634.

[6]Patchen Markell, "Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere," *Constellations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 380.

[7]Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 7–10.

[8]Ibid., 42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rawls echoes these themes through his notion of an "overlapping consensus." Modern societies might be constituted by religious and philosophical worldviews fundamentally at odds with one another. However, in Rawls's view, these "comprehensive moral doctrines" (or at least the "reasonable" ones among them) overlap enough to permit a consensus about the values that ought to underpin the shared political system. Key to the discovery of such a consensus is the exercise of "public reason"; that is, adherents of each comprehensive doctrine "explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality."[9]

While philosophically minded theorists have sought to link consensus to theories of justice, pragmatically minded ones defend it as a matter of practical benefit. In Arend Lijphart's view, a "culture of consensus" better fosters the institutional inclusion of historically marginalized voices than a "culture of competition."[10] "Consensus democracies," that is, democracies ordered around a "coalitional and consultative style of decision-making," are supposedly highly receptive to a society's spectrum of diversity, as policy-making success in such systems depends on winning the assent of actors outside one's immediate political affiliations. By contrast, majoritarian systems, with their absence of a unanimity requirement to pass decisions, lack the incentive structure that would motivate participants to track the interests of differently defined others, leaving such systems ill equipped to fulfill the inclusion criterion of democracy.[11]

Consensus might predominate in philosophical models of the ideal society and in institutional designs on how to produce justifiable policies in a context of conflict. However, it has not been embraced by all as a self-evident good. Indeed, as far back as classical Athens, the ideal had its detractors, perhaps the most famous among them being Plato, who viewed agreement among the deliberating masses as a product of rhetorical cunning. As he saw it, anyone versed enough in the art of persuasion could steer an ignorant crowd toward a particular viewpoint through group think and words that gratify.[12]

Much later, in the course of the nineteenth century, J. S. Mill expressed similar reservations about consensus at a time when the expansion of political rights was opening up governing power to an ever-increasing proportion of the population. Mill believed dissenting voices would be cowed by the

[9]John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason," in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 97.

[10]Arend Lijphart, "Consensus and Consensus Democracy: Cultural, Structural, Functional, and Rational-Choice Explanations," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 105.

[11]Ibid.

[12]R. W. Sharples, "Plato on Democracy and Expertise," *Greece & Rome* 41, no. 1 (1994): 51–52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

weight of public opinion in a system that vests political judgment in "the people," as individuals would be tempted to blindly defer to the views of the person next to them, and to believe that "an opinion is better if other people hold it too, and best if shared by everyone."[13] The association of consensus with the urge to follow the crowd led Mill to ultimately dismiss it as dangerous. Not only did it lead to poor judgement, it was how society could exercise despotism over free-thinking individuals.[14]

Consensus as an Antidemocratic Ideal

In recent times, these historical objections have been raised with renewed vigor by agonists questioning the compatibility of consensus with democratic ideals of inclusion and equality. Agonists join hands with liberals like Mill in highlighting the threat consensus poses to the autonomy of individuals and minorities by constraining the expression of viewpoints that deviate from those receiving popular acceptance. However, while liberals have conventionally conceptualized the impediments to consensus as a matter of ethical incommensurability, agonists have held that this focus on a clash of ethical commitments leads to a rather superficial understanding of conflict and a misguided belief that conflict can be overcome under the right empirical conditions.[15] For agonists, the attempt to manipulate the empirical world in order to make it more amenable to full inclusion and harmonious relations is a futile endeavor, because the impediments to consensus are not any lack of motivation among people to reconcile their competing visions of the good life, but more fundamentally, the semiotic reality that representations of the good life, however inclusively they may be formulated, always leave traces of exclusion that stimulate antagonism.

This refutation of consensus has been profoundly influential. It has compelled democratic theories to defend and revise themselves in view of how they potentially affect identities that only figured marginally in earlier thinking owing to a preference for abstract theoretical analysis or an overreliance on hypothetical subjects that all too often projected the biases and oversights of the philosophers behind them. I believe this trend has taken theorization in beneficial directions. However, I am also of the view that a wholesale rejection of consensus is incompatible with the very pluralist goals agonists and other democrats hope to advance. In what follows, I support this view with two arguments: first, that agonists have a misplaced theory of social relations that leads them to erroneously conclude that consensus is *always* unattainable

[13]Alfred Moore, "Deference in Numbers: Consensus, Dissent and Judgement in Mill's Account of Authority," *Political Studies*, vol. 62, Issue Supplement S1 (2014): 8, doi: 10.1111/1467-9248.12066.

[14]Ibid., 5–6.

[15]Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and its pursuit is *always* implicated in antagonism; second, that a norm of consensus is actually presupposed by the inclusive solidarity agonists hope to achieve, rather than something it can dispense with.

1. The Semiotic Refutation of Consensus

Agonists establishing a link between semiotics and politics typically draw on Derrida's concept of the "constitutive outside." According to this concept, meaning is a factor not of any relation a signifier bears with an isolatable and stable referent, but rather its relation to other signifiers, which similarly acquire meaning through their relation to other signifiers, and so on. This perpetual postponement of complete meaning, or *différance*, where every meaning is a meaning of a meaning, implies a quasi-exclusionary quality, as what is being represented is never fully internal to the signifier. Rather, it remains an always as yet to be realized representation.[16]

The key move of agonists is to apply these insights beyond the realm of language—the context for which Derrida originally intended them—to account for conflict and exclusions occurring in the empirical world. Insofar as totality in signification remains unattainable, it is reasoned that ethical confluence and harmonious relations must remain unattainable. Every attempt at unity will be accompanied by exclusion, as the "constitutive outside" tells us that such exclusions are a very precondition for the emergence of unity. In the words of Mouffe, "since the constitutive outside is present within the inside as its always real possibility, every identity becomes purely contingent."[17] Owing to this, we must "abandon the very idea of a complete reabsorption of alterity into oneness and harmony." A "non-exclusive public sphere of rational argument where a non-coercive consensus is attained" will forever remain an impossibility for the fundamental reason that "consensus is a *conceptual* impossibility."[18]

For agonists, the inability of discursive structures to produce final closure has two implications. First, it reveals that a consensus is a hegemony, and not an inclusive confluence of ideas divorced from the effects of power. If no instituting act is fully encompassing, and if decision occurs along "an undecidable terrain," it follows that a consensus is simply a form of symbolic displacement and a repression of structural possibilities.[19] As Aletta Norval puts it, the "fullness of community is constructed in its absence."[20] This

[16]Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 33–65.

[17]Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 21.

[18]Ibid., 33 (emphasis in the original).

[19]Aletta J. Norval, "Hegemony after Deconstruction: The Consequences of Undecidability," *Journal of Ideologies* 9, no. 2 (2004): 143.

[20]Ibid., 144.

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incomplete fullness results from a competition between different groups "to temporarily give to their particularism the function of a universal representation."[21]

The second implication is that antagonism will be an unavoidable constant in social life. Insofar as all representations are hegemonic, and insofar as all identities are forged in the absence of full inclusion, it follows that conflict will be an eternal feature of societies, as people who are marginalized by prevailing hegemonies and contingent notions of community will respond with defiance. In the words of Mouffe, "the constitutive outside allows us to tackle the conditions of emergence of antagonism. . . . If collective identities can only be established on the mode of an us/them, it is clear that under certain conditions, they can always be transformed into antagonistic relations."[22] The implications are that antagonism can never be eliminated, only transformed into more desirable forms. That is, it can manifest itself as a relationship between "enemies," what Mouffe calls "antagonism proper," or as a relationship between "friendly enemies," what Mouffe calls "adversaries."[23]

However, a closer inspection of these implications reveals they are premised on a rather shaky line of justification. First, there is no reason why semiotic indeterminacy should prevent empirically constituted actors from seeing eye to eye with each other. At its most basic, a consensus is a mutually held perception of sharing something in common with another, and incomplete signifying activities can coexist side by side with such a convergence of consciousness. Indeed, it would be odd to tell a collection of people that the common standpoint at which they have arrived is false simply because systems of signs cannot yield a stable representation of the world. People agree (and disagree) about values, beliefs, and preferences regardless of what assumptions a semiotic methodology might have about the stability or instability of signifying elements.

Put differently, a semiotic refutation of consensus is inadequate precisely because it is divorced from the lived experiences of people for whom it is accounting. A consensus conceived simply as an order of signification misses the critical interplay between the interpretive horizons of its actual authors. It relies, instead, on a dehistoricized insight into opinions that reduces them to configurations of signs. This window on the situation makes no appeal to an epistemic subject at all in order to make sense of the epistemic object. Instead, as Seyla Benhabib has pointed out, the "subject is replaced by a system of structures, oppositions and differences which, to be intelligible, need not be viewed as products of a living subjectivity at all."[24] Yet no theory of consensus can be complete unless it addresses knowledge from

[21]Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 35.

[22]Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 13.

[23]Ibid., 13.

[24]Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 209.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the perspective of the participants themselves.[25] It is, after all, their underlying generative knowledge that brings them to see their commitments as mutually compatible and it is their understanding of what binds them together that gives rise to a consensus.

The second reason why the semiotically based implications raised by agonists are misplaced is that there is no reason why a consensus is destined to be accompanied by antagonism just because it is not universally inclusive. Even if we accept the view that a consensus is unavoidably forged as a "we" in relation to a "them," it does not follow that this contrastiveness will automatically produce in its wake a Schmittian friend/enemy configuration, or for that matter, even a more benign adversarial configuration involving "friendly enemies."[26] This is because people are not hell-bent on gaining inclusion into every sphere of association, nor do they consider every act of social differentiation some kind of existential threat. People value goods differently, and for this reason, are content to be included only in those decisions that have direct bearing on the share of goods they value most or to remain members of only those communities which matter to them most.

Thus, the flaw with the agonistic line of reasoning is that it presents the relationship between exclusion and antagonism as "before the fact," contending that the latter aprioristically follows in the wake of the former. In reality, antagonism bears no logical relation to exclusion—the relationship is in fact an empirically contingent one. Whether antagonistic relations arise in the wake of exclusion can only be ascertained on a case-by-case basis, depending on how people react in the face of social differentiation. It is not a matter that can be determined independently of observation and experience. Indeed, were a relationship of conceptual necessity to hold true, the social world would be characterized by what Jeremy Valentine describes as a "complete and irreparable randomization of everything."[27] Insofar as individuation itself is based on exclusion and social differentiation, antagonism would have to define every social interaction, right down to the level of individuals, leaving no grounds for human relations to emerge, and no basis for collective agency and cooperation, only anomie and atomization.

2. The Agonistic Dependence on Consensus

We have noted that the agonistic position is defined by its rejection of consensus, at both an ontological and a normative level. However, the force of these

[25]Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Cronin P. Ciaran (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 22–25, 50.

[26]Arash Abizadeh, "Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005): 58.

[27]Jeremy Valentine, "The Hegemony of Hegemony," *History of the Human Sciences* 14, no. 1 (2001): 90.

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objections is undermined by the observation that agonists actually depend on, rather than dispense with, consensus to promote their idealizations of an inclusive society. This dependence is evident in two ways.

First, agonists introduce caveats to qualify their opposition to consensus. Despite railing against consensus, agonists accept its possibility and express sympathy for it in various understated ways. Consensus retains its place within agonistic theory because it plays an indispensable circumscribing function on diversity, ensuring it remains consistent with the goals of community and avoids descending into an "anything goes" relativism.[28] Thus, Mouffe asserts that a layer of "commonality" is necessary to bind together the radically plural polity she envisages.[29] The nature of this commonality is left undefined. But whatever its basis, it is at odds with Mouffe's core contention that antagonism is "ineradicable."[30] She also argues for "some common ground" and "a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality."[31] Yet these principles bear an uncanny resemblance to the very procedural principles she objects to in Habermas's model of deliberation, which, on her account, self-servingly "eliminate those positions which cannot be agreed to by participants."[32] The tenor of this vocabulary is not merely descriptive. It is also normative. Mouffe is not only *describing* sites of consensus, she *wants* consensus to materialize and sees it as having a certain value.

In a second, less direct sense, agonists depend on consensus for the attainment of the inclusive solidarity they envisage. Andrew Schaap has summed up agonistic solidarity as the inauguration of "civic friendship," whereby "enmity" is transformed into an "integrative and ethical" relationship, and a "shared horizon" emerges on the basis of "shared understanding."[33] This specification of solidarity does not necessarily imply the *attainment* of a consensus, as it is possible for parties to express the civic friendship necessary for an integrative relationship without sharing the same views on a matter. Such a relationship would emerge through mutual acceptance of the other's position as legitimate despite its incompatibility with one's own position

[28]Dryzek and Niemeyer, "Reconciling Pluralism," 637.

[29]Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 55.

[30]Ibid., 104.

[31]Ibid., 102.

[32]Ibid., 86. For a detailed analysis of how Mouffe and other agonists are reliant on consensus and foundational standpoints, despite criticizing liberal and deliberative theories for this, see Dryzek and Niemeyer, "Reconciling Pluralism," 644; Andrew Knops, "Debate: Agonism as Deliberation—on Mouffe's Theory of Democracy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007): 116–17; and Eva Erman, "What Is Wrong with Agonistic Pluralism? Reflections on Conflict in Democratic Theory," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35, no. 9 (2009): 1044.

[33]Andrew Schaap, "Political Reconciliation through a Struggle for Recognition," *Social and Legal Studies* 13, no. 4 (2004): 524, 538.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(see below). Nevertheless, the objective of moving from enmity toward this desired endpoint does imply an *orientation* of consensus, as parties must enter their encounters with a preparedness to accept something valid about each other. Where this readiness to be persuaded by the other is missing, there is little hope for the kind of inclusive and open-ended solidarity desired by agonists. Parties will not be searching for a shared horizon, they will not be seeking any insight into each other's positions, nor will there be, in Markell's words, a "foreswearing of the mechanisms of coercion."[34] Instead, desired outcomes will be pursued strategically, whereby the intent to win and advance one's own objectives will predominate over the intent to learn and question one's objectives from the standpoint of the other.

Consensus as a Matter of Degree

I have argued up to this point that a conceptualization that reduces consensus to systems of signs is inadequate owing to its detachment from human experience. I have also argued that a characterization of human relations as always adversarial is too sweeping, for it fails to account for the empirical reality that humans agree and cooperate, not only quarrel and struggle. In what follows, I will respond to these conceptual shortcomings by providing a countertheory of consensus rooted in empirical practice and social psychology. The aim is to show there are degrees of consensus, and that it is not an unattainable absolute whose pursuit is simply implicated in coercion. Understanding human relations in this way allows us to appreciate the subtle and beneficial ways a norm of consensus can inform democratic practice even where the complete attainment of consensus appears remote. It also helps us appreciate how falling back on an antagonistic model of democracy as a response to deep difference is drawing the institutional possibilities too narrowly. Just because *absolute* reconciliation is an empty hope does not mean movement toward reconciliation will be an empty hope or, indeed, that aspiring to reconciliation has no normative merit.

To develop these arguments, it is instructive to move along the tracks laid out by Dryzek and Niemeyer's typology of consensus.[35] The refined portrait of consensus this paints serves as an ideal starting point from which to further build on a theoretical answer around the possibilities of consensus and the normative benefits of its pursuit.

Dryzek and Niemeyer distinguish between, on the one hand, qualities that a consensus can take and, on the other hand, levels to which consensus can attain. On matters of quality, a consensus can take the form of a normative, an epistemic, or a preference agreement. A *normative* consensus refers to agreements over values; *epistemic* consensus to agreements over the validity

[34]Markell, "Contesting Consensus," 390.
[35]Dryzek and Niemeyer, "Reconciling Pluralism."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the systems of knowledge relied on to make sense of the world (e.g., competing scientific paradigms, or more fundamentally, competing scientific and nonscientific paradigms); and *preference* consensus refers to agreements over what should be done (e.g., competing policy options).[36]

On matters of level, a consensus can be present at the "simple" level as a substantive agreement or at the "meta" level as a thinner agreement over the legitimacy of positions that are in dispute. Thus, the foregoing taxonomy of consensus operates at the "simple" level, as reference is made to a convergence of positions over values, belief systems, or preferences. By contrast, the corresponding meta counterparts would have no convergence at this simple level. Instead, parties would perceive their positions to be in a zero-sum relationship, but would nevertheless be in mutual agreement that their disputed positions can rightfully form the basis of politics. In these terms, a *normative* meta-consensus would mean parties are holding divergent values but agreeing over the legitimacy of each other's values; an *epistemic* meta-consensus would mean parties are holding divergent worldviews but accepting the reasonableness of their disputed worldviews; and a *preference* meta-consensus would mean parties are diverging on what is the most appropriate way to act, but nevertheless accepting the range of disputed alternatives for action as being appropriate.[37]

The upshot of this typology is that any meaningful reference to consensus does not have to assume the discovery of agreement along all plains of social life. Instead of being an all-or-nothing phenomenon, consensus is available on a sliding scale of comprehensiveness, varying in scope and level across issue domains and across actors with different kinds of stakes in different kinds of issues. Through this reconceptualization, it becomes apparent that actors can approach a given policy issue with profoundly different values, but converge on the preferences they hold on how to act collectively. For example, Catholics value the traditional heterosexual family constituted by a gendered division of domestic labor, while radical feminists fiercely reject this ideal as the source of women's subordination. Nevertheless, both support bans or restrictions on pornography, seeing this policy option as supportive of their particular values.

Alternatively, we can appreciate that actors might approach a policy issue with the same values, but diverge profoundly on the desired choice of action. For example, classical Marxists and social democrats have overlapping egalitarian principles of justice focused on need. Nevertheless, a bitter rift has historically separated each camp based on their irreconcilable preferences for the realization of their egalitarianism. Marxists have felt that equality is best realized through the abolishment of the capitalist system that is deemed the source of laborers' exploitation, while social democrats believe equality is

[36]Ibid., 638.
[37]Ibid., 639–41.

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best served by renovating the capitalist system through distributive programs and the expansion of worker's rights to give the system a more human face. In these examples, there is no universal consensus. But there is a consensus nevertheless, as agreement exists on some, though not all, aspects of these actors' identities.

The same point applies on matters of level. Where deep and impassioned conflicts divide populations, it may be an exercise in futility to search for consensus at the simple level, but not at the meta level. Indeed, a meta-level consensus forms the basis of compromises, which are a ubiquitous form of conflict resolution and find expression in all spheres of human life: interethnic peace accords, international trade agreements, industrial relations agreements, commercial contracts, property settlements, native title acts, and divorce settlements are all relevant examples. On the face of it, a compromise seems like a simple-level consensus over preferences in the sense of parties agreeing over what should be done. However, in actual fact, a compromise is a meta-consensus, as parties continue to have dissonant claims about what should be done, and have only come to agreement over how to manage those claims.[38] And yet, even though parties in a compromise retain, rather than dissolve, their conflicting claims, their relationship is defined by an element of consensus that was not present prior to their deliberations. That is, in the course of argumentative exchange, parties have converged on a mutually acceptable solution for the management of their disputed claims (meta-consensus) when such claims were previously an impediment to a cooperative relationship (meta-dissensus).

A meta-consensus is a less onerous objective. In comparison to a simple consensus, "it makes fewer demands on partisans to compromise their first-order values, beliefs and preferences."[39] This explains the greater frequency of its discovery, and why Dryzek and Neimeyer favor it as the coercively less fraught, and therefore normatively more favorable, mode of conflict resolution.

However, while the maintenance of modest conciliatory ambitions can guard against conformist zeal, this does not rule out the possibility or desirability of a simple-level consensus. Reconciliation is not forever stuck at the meta level: deep differences do dissolve at the substantive level of relationships. What is more, they do so in the absence of policing behavior associated with assimilatory designs. To appreciate the legitimate place of these transformations in a normative theory of conflict resolution and to grasp how they are not necessarily bound up with unjust conformity pressures, we can build on the foregoing typology to incorporate an additional dimension of consensus, namely, that of consciousness.

[38]Ibid., 642; Peter Jones and Ian O'Flynn, "Can a Compromise Be Fair?," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 12, no. 2 (2013): 117, 128.

[39]Dryzek and Niemeyer, "Reconciling Pluralism," 642.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Consciousness: Active and Passive Consensus

A consensus can be an active or a passive agreement in the sense of people's awareness of the complementarities they have come to share and the roundness of the disclosure of those complementarities. An *active consensus* is the more familiar understanding of the two, and derives from what Alastair Johnston would describe as an "active assessment of the content of a particular message."[40] The changing of minds, opinions, and attitudes toward convergence is a "high intensity process of cognition, reflection and argument about the content of new information."[41] People come to agreement because they have systematically weighed evidence, puzzled through counterarguments, and as a consequence, been led to conclusions different from those with which they began. An active consensus is typically generated through a short time frame of contact and high intensity of interaction. This interaction produces a strong sense of awareness that movement toward a shared position is taking place, and typically culminates with an explicit disclosure of the positive content of that shared position (either to oneself or externally).

By contrast, in a *passive consensus*, parties have nonreflectively undergone transformations toward convergence. Rather than being induced by deliberative flashes that trigger a sudden realization that one was mistaken all along about one's deepest commitments, agreement arises through a low-intensity process of cognition and assessment over values, beliefs, or preferences. People drift toward a new interpretation of themselves and a rival, with the imagined disjuncture between them closing through an authorless process of identity change. This mode of reconciliation typically ensues over a prolonged period (often intergenerationally), and does not necessarily culminate with parties disclosing to one another or themselves what is held in common as distinct from what was formerly held apart. Rather, parties simply "move on," either assigning diminishing weight to their disputed commitments, or where those commitments continue to be held as first order, they have been reconstituted such that they are no longer perceived as diametrically oppositional.

The analytical distinction between a passive and active consensus can be further highlighted through a compact reformulation of the insights on conformity present in the social psychology literature:[42] whereas an active consensus involves public conformity *with* conscious acceptance, a passive consensus involves public conformity *without* conscious acceptance. In the

[40]Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 25.

[41]Ibid., 156.

[42]Ibid., 25. Jeffrey T. Checkel, "International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework," *International Organization* 59(2005): 811.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

latter, agreement has a taken-for-granted quality, present as a noncalculative adherence to a common position, rather than resulting from any conscious act of persuasion. If individuals were invited to explain how they came to hold a position that is shared by an out-group, they would, upon reflection, respond by saying: "I cannot identify a specific moment or reason. It's simply how things have come to be between us."

This does not mean that a passive consensus is devoid of causal properties and represents only a coming together of random events we have no influence over. On the contrary, a social context can be nurtured that is conducive to its attainment, through, for example, the introduction of institutions that incentivize cooperative behavior or the prevalence of discourses that break down prejudicial attitudes. However, relative to an active consensus, the actor transformations brought about by such interventions will be less consciously perceived.

While an active consensus implies a direct form of communication encompassing claim making and reason giving, a passive consensus implies communication that is indirect, but by no means less powerful in its transformative impact. One way of understanding the nature of this communication is through socializing experiences, whereby the exposure to discourses present in schools, the mass media, work, the family, and friendship circles, among other formative environments, can subtly alter perceptions of values, beliefs, and preferences toward convergence. It can also be understood from the complementary perspective of the public sphere. In this social space between individuals and the state, communication is subjectless and decentered, mediated among people dispersed in space and time.[43] Yet despite its amorphous nature, this communication still leads to the consolidation of opinions, with these opinions being politically consequential to the point of having a bearing on policymaking within the state. The opinion formation that takes place through such deliberations is characteristic of a passive consensus, as the convergent actor-transformations underlying the process are not immediately apparent to those undergoing them, but are instead noncalculative in their origins.

Examples of Active Consensus

Some empirical examples will help illustrate these points. Deliberative microcosms, such as deliberative polls and citizens' juries, are sites of preference convergence that embody an active consensus at both the meta and simple levels. These face-to-face deliberative arenas are cognition-rich settings, as participants receive carefully balanced information laying out the main policy options and the arguments for and against each, discussions are

[43]Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 167.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

facilitated by trained moderators, and participants have the opportunity to ask competing partisans and policy experts questions.[44] When deliberative microcosms generate increased agreement, it represents an increase in active consensus at the simple level, as parties have come to support a course of action on which they previously had differing views through a process of reflective assent and after having thought long and hard about the implications of their own views.

An increase in simple-level consensus is not the only notable form of reconciliation generated by deliberative microcosms. An increase in meta-level consensus is also commonplace, for even when parties do not agree on proposals that have been subject to rigorous deliberation, they can come to accept the legitimacy of a wider sweep of proposals after gaining a more considered insight into why someone would support proposals different from their own. This increase in meta-consensus is also of the active kind, as shifts in attitudes are, once again, the result of systematic consideration and discussion of differing opinions, and parties are aware of the positive shift in attitude they have undergone, given that opinion changes are quantified and announced at the end of proceedings.

An unlikely exemplar of active consensus at the simple level is peace negotiations to end political violence between states and their populations.[45] Such negotiations follow a two-track structure, whereby a normative consensus must be established in the first track before second-track negotiations can proceed to flesh out the finer details of a compromise agreement. The normative consensus entails an abstract principle of justice that belligerents jointly develop to denote what they expect from a fair outcome and is supposed to guide the give and take of positions in the course of negotiations so that parties avoid running afoul of their mutually shared idea of a fair outcome. The establishment of such a principle is integral to the success of peace negotiations, so much so that negotiations founder when parties fail to reach a mutually acceptable articulation of the principle.[46] Importantly, while the eventual peace agreement is a meta-consensus, the justice principle preceding it is a simple consensus: in the peace agreement, parties are agreeing over how to manage disputed assertions over practical arrangements, with this compromise agreement emerging through a degree of political horse-trading; in the justice principle, parties actually adhere to, rather than dispute, the values that should drive the negotiation process, with this adherence being "not simply a matter of [compulsory] power, but of each side's calculations

[44]James S. Fishkin and Robert C. Luskin, "The Quest for Deliberative Democracy," in *Democratic Innovation: Deliberation, Representation and Association*, ed. Michael Saward (New York: Routledge, 2000), 19–20.

[45]William Zartman, *Negotiation and Conflict: Essays on Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[46]Ibid., 68.

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of acceptability."[47] That is, it is reflective of the exchange of reasoned arguments constitutive of deliberative communication.

Thus, while successful negotiations more obviously produce an active meta-consensus over preferences (the actual peace agreement), they also produce an active consensus over values (the shared principle of justice) in order to guide negotiators to a shared endpoint. The normative agreement is an active, rather than passive, consensus because parties have come to jointly delineate the normative structure of their interaction through a process of assessment: that is, they have reflectively internalized a new understanding of what is a legitimate position to bargain over, what is off limits, and what is beyond the pale.[48]

This free flow of arguments and openness to persuasion is uncanny for an environment typically associated with bargaining behavior. However, it can be explained by the relative detachment of communications from the final decision-moment of the peace talks. That is, while preliminary negotiations do not directly determine the nature of the peace accord, the negotiations that follow do, making them what John Dryzek, following Archon Fung, would term "hot" deliberative settings.[49] In this higher-stakes environment, negotiators will be less open to reflection and changing their mind, given the high consequentiality of doing so. By contrast, the lower consequentiality of the preliminary negotiations takes the heat out of communications, freeing up negotiators to deliberate, and not simply bargain, their way to a common position.

Examples of Passive Consensus

Examples illustrating a passive consensus at the simple level would include Arend Lijphart's archetypal consociations—the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, and Belgium.[50] Formerly, these societies were deeply divided along sectarian and class lines, with rival communities perceiving their identities to be profoundly incompatible and tolerable only through the maintenance of partitioned social institutions that sustained a parallel social existence. This system of voluntary social partition was known as pillarization, and involved segmented and homogenous education systems, newspapers, broadcasting, trade unions, hospitals, and leisure associations, all differentiated on the basis of membership in Catholic and Protestant faiths, or middle- and working-class communities. During this period of strongly pillarised self-perceptions, each society was held together by a meta-consensus

[47]Ibid., 69.

[48]Johnston, *Social States*, 16.

[49]John Dryzek, "Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies: Alternatives to Agonism and Analgesia," *Political Theory* 33, no. 2 (2005): 229.

[50]Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (1969): 207–25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

consisting in political elites accepting the membership of each other's communities in the polity and committing themselves to across-pillar cooperation despite the deep antipathies that existed at the grassroots level. This elite-level cooperation became the basis of Lijpart's theory of consociational democracy.

However, beginning in the 1960s, these societies underwent a process of "depillarisation" that led to the virtual (but not complete) disappearance of pillars within three decades.[51] In this period, the number of people with pillarised ideological and confessional self-perceptions significantly declined, with behavioral correlates such as party preference or associational membership being less obviously determined by membership in traditional communities and increasingly shaped by a growing heterogeneity of alternative cultural and ideological influences.[52] This transformation embodies a shift toward consensus at the simple level, as formerly divided communities began to perceive themselves as no longer embodying values and ways of life that were fundamentally at odds (increase in normative consensus), and, consequently, they began to consider it no longer imperative to wall themselves off from each other in every sphere of social life (increase in preference consensus). As Dekker and Ester put it in the context of the Netherlands: "Religious faith lives on, but its institutional pillarized consequences are rejected."[53]

Importantly, this transformation embodies a *passive* consensus, as the redefinition of identities in mutually compatible terms has occurred gradually and nonconsciously, rather than through intentional action and active assessment. The positive stimulation of perceptions of complementarity and the reduction in conflictual behavior along plains of collective identification that formerly divided populations has occurred over a long and sustained period, lacking any immediate goal-directedness or purposive action. There was no plan between pillars to undertake the task of rearticulating their positions toward complementarity, even though this was the eventual outcome.

The EU offers another illustration of how a consensus can be passive in nature. Prior to the EU's inception shortly after the Second World War, the European territory was the site of intense interstate rivalries that periodically erupted in devastating wars. The defining impact of EU integration was to tame these rivalries, but also to diminish the extent to which forms of authority below, above, and across the nation-state were interpreted as predatory to each other. As Michael Keating has pointed out, conceptions of political authority and public action in Europe have undergone transformations

[51]Paul Dekker and Peter Ester, "Depillarization, Deconfessionalization, and De-ideologization: Empirical Trends in Dutch Society 1958–1992," *Review of Religious Research* 37, no. 4 (1996): 326.

[52]Ibid., 338–39.

[53]Ibid., 332.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

toward "post-sovereignty."[54] This does not mean that sovereignty has lost meaning, but rather that it has undergone a shift in its meaning so that "it is no longer monopolized by the state but becomes a claim to original authority, which can be advanced by various actors and institutions and is intrinsically divisible."[55]

In terms of the foregoing schema of consensus, postsovereignty embodies an epistemic consensus at the simple level, as it involves a convergence of beliefs over the impact of different assertions of sovereignty: whereas previously nationalists held a realist assumption that competition and the accrual of exclusive state sovereignty would further national interests, they have since come around to the Europeanist understanding that cooperation and the transferral of state sovereignty at the sub- and supranational levels better advance national interests, and can do so to the overall benefit of all involved. Importantly, this convergence of belief has had consequences at the preference level, stimulating consensus on policy choices on the back of a shared faith in the potential for cooperation to advance everyone's interests better than competition.

This shift away from intractability toward mutual encompassment in perceptions of sovereignty can be illustrated at the various levels of institutionalized politics in the EU.

At the level of the state, perhaps the most striking illustration is found in the dramatically altered relations between France and Germany. Prior to the Second World War, France and Germany were deemed "hereditary enemies" who "would never escape the security dilemma of two competing, neighboring powers."[56] Today, collaboration is perceived by these historical foes to advance national interests far better than rivalry, with each state perceiving the other to share political values common to both. This was famously symbolized through French President Jacques Chirac's representation of Germany in the European Council in 2003.[57]

At the regional or substate level, assertions of collective will were formerly considered a threat to the state's existence, and therefore best met with state suppression. Today, these identities have increasingly come to be perceived as complementary to the state, even though integration has weakened the authority of the state relative to the regions. This complementarity is evident through the growing trend of dual identification (for example, Catalan-Spanish), where formerly citizens felt impelled to choose between their regional or state identity (I am Catalan because I am not Spanish).[58] It

[54]Michael Keating, "European Integration and the Nationalities Question," *Politics and Society* 32, no. 3 (2004): 367–88.

[55]Ibid., 369.

[56]Thomas Diez, Stephan Stetter, and Mathias Albert, introduction to *The European Union and Border Conflicts*, ed. Diez, Albert, and Stetter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

[57]Ibid., 5.

[58]Montserrat Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 50–57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is also evident in the trend toward devolution, whereby states increasingly accept assertions of political autonomy at the substate level,[59] or in the opposite direction, the trend away from independence claims at the substate level, whereby minority nations increasingly seek to realize their aspirations for self-determination through asymmetrical federalism or insertion into "Europe."[60]

At the supranational level, nationalists initially feared that a deepening of EU institutions would take away from the ability of states to self-govern and nations to be culturally distinct. Today, EU membership is regarded as constitutive of these and other national objectives among a broader section of the population, both inside the EU and outside it among those countries wishing to join.[61] For example, member and aspiring member states refer to the "pooling" or "sharing" of sovereignty, rather than its "loss," in their characterization of the transferral of authority to EU institutions. Furthermore, decades of EU integration has seen the rise of dual attachments, whereby citizens think of themselves as simultaneously national and European, rather than simply one or the other.[62]

All this is not to suggest that the EU embodies a universal consensus. It clearly does not. Vocal Eurosceptics stand opposed to further integration and enlargement, and member states do not simply cooperate, but also pursue their interests as self-seeking competitors within the EU's intergovernmental institutions, sometimes quarreling bitterly over critical policy issues.

Nevertheless, the EU has been more than an arena where conflicts are simply managed. It is also where conflicts have been dissolved, with subnational, national, and supranational actors coming to share common beliefs about the impact of European integration and, consequently, common policies in a range of domains that were previously sites of intense rivalry. Importantly, the epistemic consensus that has underpinned, but also been generated by, EU integration is *passive* in character. No decisive moment of deliberation to test and clarify cause-and-effect relations between the different assertions of sovereignty marks this epistemic convergence. Rather, it emerged gradually and nonreflectively in the course of expanding multilevel government, with historical experience revealing that this alternative paradigm of authority permitted, as opposed to took away from, economic development, cultural distinctiveness, and geopolitical influence, among other traditionally defined national interests.

[59]Ibid., 47–57.

[60]Keating, "European Integration and the Nationalities Question," 369–70.

[61]Milada Anna Vachudova, "EU Leverage and National Interests in the Balkans: The Puzzles of Enlargement Ten Years On," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 1 (2014): 122–38.

[62]Neil Fligstein, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 250.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Passive Consensus or Nonconscious Subjugation?

One objection to the concept of a passive consensus—particularly from agonistic quarters—might be that far from embodying the autonomy of action and thought one would expect from genuinely consenting parties, it resembles the subjugation and illusion of free will present in a Gramscian hegemony or Foucauldian disciplinary regime. After all, if people are not consciously reflecting on the norms they are internalizing, then collective convergence on a particular view is being attained through acquiescence that is subtle in nature and dominative in effect: that is, people are converging on a particular form of consciousness because of the difficulty or impossibility in translating "the outlook implicit in their experience into a conception of the world that will directly challenge the hegemonic culture."[63] Importantly, the constraints on agency imposed by the selective vocabulary within which people must think and act remain hidden from view, allowing a historically dominant segment of the population to claim with at least some plausibility that its particular interests are those of society.[64]

However, nonconscious conformity does not mean nonconscious domination. It all depends on how this conformity is generated. In what remains, I would like to spell out the criteria that enable us to make such a distinction.

On a basic level, these criteria correspond with what is required for any act of communication to be oriented toward mutual understanding. As Habermas has pointed out, this includes guarantees of freedom of access to the dialogue, equal rights to participate, truthfulness on the part of participants, and an absence of coercion in adopting positions.[65] Where one or more of these criteria have been violated, there are grounds to reject the authenticity of a consensus, as the communications behind it have fallen short of enabling participants to assess a proposal on the basis of its argumentative merits. More than likely, the resultant agreement reflects coercive force, whereby one or more participants have sought influence not through argumentative redemption but through such interventions as threats, manipulation, and deceit.

However, Habermas's counterfactual remains rooted in an actively forged consensus. It is describing the prerequisites for noncoercive opinion-formation in the context of a public that is critically debating issues and making full use of its reasoning abilities to accept or reject norms. By contrast, as we have seen, a passive consensus entails the arrival at a common standpoint in the absence of any conscious aiming at ends. These alternative circumstances call for a more refined formulation of the conditions for

[63] T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possiblities," *American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 569.

[64] Ibid., 571.

[65] Habermas, *Justification and Application*, 31.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

noncoercive actor-transformations. The revised characterization must meet the distinctive normative demands thrown up by a situation where concordant dispositions arise without reflection on their merits.

There are two criteria in particular such a reformulation must emphasize if it is to adequately perform its critical and normative functions: good faith and recognition. As I will now explain, these criteria are necessary conditions for an open and inclusive formative environment. They also allow us to avoid the blunt conclusion that anything short of a clear-cut decisional moment to internalize norms or complete mastery over the content of one's identity must somehow amount to surreptitious domination. The extent to which a formative experience is dominative is context dependent, contingent on the degree to which the power structures underlying a sphere of socialization are arbitrary. Each of the two criteria enables us to draw a line between arbitrary and legitimate transformative power, and consequently, each offers normative guidance for reconstructing the empirical world so that the influence of subtle forms of coercion on people's dispositions is kept at bay.

Good Faith

The criterion of good faith refers to sincerity in the expression of facts and beliefs giving shape to minds and attitudes. It is an indispensable component of a freely attained consensus, as honesty in the justification of claims is how one respects the integrity of those one hopes to persuade, along with their autonomy to judge for themselves what is right and in their best interests. By contrast, where justification ensues through deceit and cunning, people are being manipulated into sharing the same viewpoint. Such individuals are maneuvered in a desired direction by having the erroneous sources of their own thought concealed from them. As such, they are neither treated as ends in themselves, nor are they extended the ability to be autonomous judging subjects. Were the full sweep of relevant evidence made available to them, they would recognize as invalid the received claims of others and would hold preferences different from those shaped by communication designed to mislead.[66]

Good faith has a pivotal role to play in a passive consensus, as individuals not assessing the content of a formative discourse are particularly vulnerable to being taken advantage of. Under such circumstances, there is increased scope for the manufacture of realities that stealthily serve a specific interest, given that the assumptions channeled into the public sphere are adopted or overlooked without clear analysis. A criterion of good faith allows us to make a distinction between influence that encompasses veiled manipulation of this kind and influence that simply takes effect without active reasoning by

[66]Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 48.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

placing emphasis on the quality of the background discourses subtly shaping opinion. Where a disposition of sincerity underlies the presentation of viewpoints, their nonconscious uptake remains consistent with the extension of respect and a concern for the autonomy of others. No one has been converted through trickery, and no one is receiving a lie as the truth, even though no direct assessment of views has taken place. While a power dynamic is still at play in this kind of interaction, the individuals justifying values and preferences remain committed to the integrity of their audience by truthfully advocating favored positions.[67] This being so, any conversion in attitude that follows can be deemed noncoercive, this holding true for both the interlocutors reflexively accepting the claims and the disinterested spectators nonreflexively doing so.

Understood in these terms, good faith requires not only a commitment to the accuracy of evidence presented, but honesty in one's motivations for presenting that evidence. This is because the robustness of evidence drawn on to marshal support behind a view does not preclude manipulation. People can still be misled in a context of factual accuracy, typically through the selective channeling of information in a discourse to subvert viewpoints that conflict with an interest.[68] This is an especially common ploy of oil companies, which strategically deploy particular factual claims to self-servingly promote popular skepticism about anthropogenic climate change in order to protect their vested interest in the continued consumption of fossil fuels.[69]

As a criterion for judging the legitimacy of a passive consensus, good faith does not rule out partisan communication. Although some theorists have asserted that good faith demands reasons be couched in common-good terms,[70] this stretches the meaning too far, for the pursuit of political gain does not necessarily equate with a cynical motive to engage in duplicitous behavior. People can promote an interest that is specific to their own group and yet remain committed to a norm of public truthfulness. The determining factor is that they are coming clean on their desire to promote a want that is relevant to a narrowly defined constituency when attempting to sway public opinion. Such transparency ensures that the interests of the cunning few are not received as the interests of the unwitting many.

Partisan interaction might appear antithetical to a passive consensus through the promotion of seemingly narrow agendas and an emphasis on pressure tactics to advance a cause. However, partisanship can play a vital role in facilitating the circulation of views historically excluded from the public sphere. In such instances, partisanship becomes an ingredient for a

[67]Patti Tamara Lenard, "Deliberating Sincerely: A Reply to Warren," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39, no. 4 (2008): 630–31.

[68]Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*, 58.

[69]Dryzek and Niemeyer, "Reconciling Pluralism," 646.

[70]David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 96–97.

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passive consensus, and not its very obstacle, by cultivating a more informed and enlarged public consciousness.

The activity of protesting serves as an illustration. On the one hand protest appears to embody coercion, given its reliance on disruption to generate attention to one's views through picketing, heckling, and shouting opponents down. On the other hand, such behavior can act as a counterweight to falsified facts and misrepresentations that sustain a distorted interpretation of events. In this situation, shrillness and offensive behavior get an overlooked issue on the agenda and expose unwarranted beliefs by facilitating the circulation of suppressed information and correcting inequalities in access to influence as more voices enter the public sphere.[71] The effect can be to cement a new, more considered and more accepting consciousness among a population previously reduced to mischaracterizations, misinformation, and stereotyping in their everyday conceptualizing of a social reality.

Recognition

Recognition in the sense intended here refers to an open value-system in which people are mutually esteeming each other's forms of life and manners of belief.[72] This reciprocity in esteem enables us to determine when an unregistered shift toward oneness in thought is compatible with the possession of freedom over oneself and when it embodies the invisible self-assimilation associated with the public denigration of one's identity.

Such denigration need not always stimulate a compulsion to assimilate into a valorized mode of being. It can, as Axel Honneth has pointed out, have the opposite effect, heightening social fragmentation as individuals react with indignation at those deemed responsible for their experience of disrespect.[73] However, when the effect is silent acceptance of the system of disesteem, social relations are reflective of the gentle and insidious domination Pierre Bourdieu referred to as "symbolic violence."[74] What is taken as voluntary self-ascription toward a shared social horizon is in fact unperceived self-censorship and regulation. People are unknowingly internalizing modes of speech, bodily comportment, personal tastes, and political preferences linked to a socially authorized identity in order to overcome symbolic and

[71]Jane Mansbridge et al., "A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy," in *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, ed. John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 19–21. See also Monique Deveaux, "A Deliberative Approach to Conflicts of Culture," *Political Theory* 31, no. 6 (2003).

[72]Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

[73]Ibid., 135–36.

[74]Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press

material deprivations they would otherwise endure under their devalued identity.

Relations of recognition imply a field of interaction uninhibited by this kind of hidden coercion. People undergo transformations in their behavior and thought under a societal frame of evaluation that is allowing them to maintain a positive relationship toward themselves.[75] To the extent that this wholesome psychological state is sustained, people remain autonomous actors, even though they may not necessarily be reflecting on the content of the new cultural forms and modes of thought they have made their own. Their subjection to roles and rules that normalize does not constitute a violation of any inner freedom to articulate life goals, as each individual is understanding the other as a self-authoring source of reasons and claims through the extension of respect.[76]

In practice, complete parity in social esteem is virtually impossible to achieve. It is an unavoidable fact of social life that particular cultural forms will have greater prestige and honor heaped on them than others. This appears to imply an inability to overcome the hierarchy of social classifications that give rise to symbolic violence, pointing, some might conclude, to the futility of pursuing nondomination.

However, the fulfilment of nondomination is not dependent on an exact equality of esteem, but on an assurance that people are free from denigration when they undergo transformations in their beliefs, values, and preferences. The crucial factor is the maintenance of an enhanced attitude toward oneself, for it is only then that self-disclosure can be considered genuinely autonomous, regardless of whether one has a strong or weak awareness of the path that led to that consciousness. Such a state of psychological well-being does not presuppose the eradication of all hierarchies of evaluation, only those that shape habits of thought and action through ridicule, humiliation, and self-loathing. Outside such crippling manifestations of institutionalized cultural value, human integrity is safeguarded, for while individuals are still constrained by the normalizing impositions of prevailing patterns of prestige and honor, they nevertheless possess the self-confidence to contest such impositions if they so choose. Put differently, to the extent that a society is constituted by ties of mutual respect, it will contain "spaces of appearance" and not merely "spaces of surveillance."[77] Its members will always be tempted to self-regulate in light of value structures, but at the same time, will always be in a position to express individuality and put into question the constraining power of interaction-regulating values.

[75]Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 174.

[76]Mansbridge et al., "A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy," 11–12.

[77]Xavier Marquez, "Spaces of Appearance and Spaces of Surveillance," *Polity* 44, no. 1 (2012).

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Conclusion

Just because complete consensus appears out of reach does not mean we should do away with aspiring toward consensus altogether. Conflict and coercion is everywhere, but so too is agreement and cooperation. Were this not true, there would be no foundation for constructive human relations and no basis for aspiring to transform conflicts in positive ways.

Supporting a norm of consensus does not entail insisting on or enforcing the complete resolution of a conflict. As should be clear by now, such a heavy-handed application of the norm is neither feasible nor desirable. The imposition of an expectation that political communication *must* end in unanimous and absolute agreement introduces social pressures that inhibit the free expression of opinions when they deviate from the prevailing point of view. While certain models of democracy, such as those influenced by republican tenets, maintain expectations of unanimity approaching this level of stringency, they represent merely one way among many that a norm of consensus can be incorporated into a dialogic forum. A consensually oriented democracy that was serious about showing deference to the expression of diversity would hold a much looser expectation of what argumentative dialogue should yield. The goal of unanimity would not trump the forum's constituent opinions. Rather, participants would be permitted, even encouraged, to conclude their deliberations without unanimous agreement where their exchanges revealed irreconcilable differences, and where their exchanges did not produce the transformations in values, beliefs, or preferences necessary for those differences to be overcome (simple consensus) or even mutually accommodated through a compromise (meta-consensus).

Understood in this way, a norm of consensus signals a less demanding expectation that participants enter a political forum with a commitment to take each other's viewpoints seriously and reach an agreement, even where their preconceptions tell them they are unlikely to overcome their differences. However, where such encounters fail to achieve agreement because participants had good grounds to continue opposing each other, they would be free to leave the issue unresolved, deferring the search for a resolution for the time being, but anticipating a moment in the future when the dialogue can once again be reopened.

This noncompulsory formulation of consensus strikes an appropriate balance between the freedom to hold firm convictions on one's own position when convinced of its merits, on the one hand, and the need for open-mindedness so that movement toward mutually acceptable positions becomes conceivable in a democracy, on the other. Both of these polar outcomes are possibilities when seeking agreement, given that a process of reflection does not automatically generate a convergence of positions, but can also reveal that one has even stronger grounds for rejecting another's viewpoints. A norm of consensus understood as a disposition to seek (as opposed to

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compulsorily attain) outcomes acceptable to all sides leaves space for both, for it does not force people to compromise their convictions solely in the interest of agreement, but it does compel people to reflect on their convictions to determine the possibility of points of convergence with those of others.[78]

But why aim for consensus at all? We have noted that many conflicts are intractable to the point where they cannot be resolved without parties conceding something that is definitive of who they are. What justifies the search for common ground under such conditions? Would not the vitality of a democracy be better ensured by encouraging citizens to encounter one another as adversaries, unconstrained in their endeavors by an expectation (nonobligatory or otherwise) that they aspire toward a common endpoint that is to all intents and purposes elusive?

The answer is that societies have nowhere else to turn but to a norm of consensus if they wish to understand themselves as *communal* and *cooperative* enterprises. When problem-solving needs arise that are communal in nature, the processes of diagnosis and prescription at the center of these needs rely on the pursuit of consensus in order to remain genuinely communal. At the level of diagnosis, collective consciousness of a problem implies some level of public acceptance of a particular interpretation of what is at fault or what is at issue. As Daniel Bray points out, using John Dewey's pragmatist insights, where there is no agreement on the existence or nature of a problem, there will be no shared consciousness of a problem-solving need, and no impetus for the appearance of a problem-solving public.[79] The same point applies at the level of prescription, as authority around the most appropriate course of action implies a process of seeking its acceptance for those who must bear its consequences. In the words of Gerald Gaus, when "*something must be done* . . . we do not just want to do anything, but that which is best justified."[80] Were there no sense of responsibility to justify the claims one is pressing on comembers, the "jointness" is removed from problem solving. It becomes, instead, a solitary pursuit and authoritarian exercise of simply handing down private judgments and executing accompanying policies others must obey.

[78]Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 84–85.

[79]Daniel Bray, *Pragmatic Cosmopolitanism: Representation and Leadership in Transnational Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 161.

[80]Gerald F. Gaus, "Reason, Justification, and Consensus," in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 233 (emphasis in the original).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849 Published online by Cambridge University Press