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Consensus in Movements

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1. Social movements, conflict and consensus: An introduction

“We have approved unanimously that the constitution of ATTAC-Spain should be based on a consensual basis” (ATTAC Spain, Constitution, 2001).

“Our aim is to take decisions that reach the maximum consensus” (RCADE, *Final draft about the organization*, 5th general meeting, 2001).

“All Independent Media Center’s ... shall organize themselves collectively and be committed to the principle of consensus decision making” (Indymedia, Principles of Unity, 2002).

“The Turin Social Forum will experiment with an organizational path that favors participation, reaching consensus and achieving largely shared decisions” (Proposal of organizational structure of the TSF, n.d.).

Like these social movement organizations, many others groups linked to the Global Justice Movement mention consensus as a main organizational value. Although now quite widespread cross-nationally, consensus has not traditionally been a main catchword for social movement organizations, as well as political organizations in general. Similarly, consensus as a concept has not been relevant for social movement studies that have instead stressed *conflict* as the dynamic element of our societies. The “European tradition” in social movement studies has looked at new social movements as potential carriers of a new central conflict in our post-industrial societies, or at least of an emerging constellation of conflicts. In the “American tradition”, the resource mobilization approach reacted to a, then dominant, conception of conflicts as pathologies. In his influential book “Social Conflicts and Social Movements”, Anthony Oberschall (1973) defined social movements as the main carriers of societal conflicts. In “Democracy and Disorder”, Sidney Tarrow (1989) forcefully pointed to the relevant and positive role of unconventional forms of political participation in the democratic processes. Not by chance, “Social Movements, Conflicts and Change”, one of the first book series to put social movements at the centre of attention, linked the two concepts of social movements and conflicts. From Michael Lipsky (1967) to Charles Tilly (1978), the first systematic works on social movements developed from traditions of research that stressed conflicts of power, both in the society and in politics. In fact, a widely accepted definition of social movements introduced conflicts as a central element

for their conceptualization: “Social movement actors are engaged in political and/or cultural conflicts, meant to promote or oppose social change. By conflict we mean an oppositional relationship between actors who seek control of the same stake – be it political, economic, or cultural power – and in the process make negative claims on each other – i.e., demands which, if realized, would damage the interests of the other actors” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 21). In the introduction to the same book, the word “conflict” is mentioned 59 times, against 5 for the other one I am going to discuss in this chapter: “consensus”.

If the presence of conflicts is certainly not denied, nevertheless, especially since the 1990s, the conception of politics as an arena for the expression of conflicts has been challenged (or at least balanced) by an emerging attention to the development of political arenas as spaces for consensus building. In political theory, a focus on consensus emerged within the debate on *deliberative democracy*—stressing in particular, the importance of the quality of communication for reaching consensual definitions of the public good in democratic processes (see della Porta 2005a and 2005b; also chap. 1 and conclusion). Some of the proponents of the normative deliberative vision of democracy have seen social movements and similar associations as central arenas for the development of these consensual processes (Mansbridge 1996; Cohen 1989; Dryzek 2000; Offe 1997).

Again in normative theory, but also in the empirical research on institutional participation of non-institutional actors in democratic decision making, attention to consensus developed especially within the study of civil society. A core meaning in the definition of civil society refers, in fact, to rule governed societies based upon the consent of individuals instead of coercion (Kaldor 2003, 1). In this vision, civility implies respect for others, politeness and the acceptance of strangers (Keane 2003). In many reflections on contemporary societies, civil society is referred to as being capable of addressing the tensions between particularism and universalism, plurality and connectedness, diversity and solidarity. Civil society is “a solidarity sphere in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes gradually to be defined and to some degrees enforced” (Alexander 1998, 7). In social movement studies, concepts such as “free spaces” points at the role of movements in constituting open arenas where public issues are addressed (Evans and Boyte 1992).

In the GJM deliberative practices have indeed attracted a more or less explicit interest. Within this conception, politics is a space for the construction of common identities that would overcome conflicts of interests, and discourse is a way of addressing even the most divisive issues through the development of mutual understanding about the conception of the public good.

The tension between conflict and consensus can be addressed by a conceptualization of different arenas for politics: consensual ones, where relatively minor conflicts among potentially compatible actors are addressed through discourse and the search for consensus, and conflictual ones, where conventional and unconventional forms of political participation are used in a power struggle. This seems to be the view of two of the main proponents of the concept of civil society, who stated “social movements construe the cultural models, norms and institutions of civil society as the main stakes of social conflicts” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 523). This is however no easy solution. In general, although it is to a certain extent normal that there are different visions for internal and external democracy, the concept of politics as a space for mutual understanding is in inherent tension with that of politics as conflict for power. Second, the borders between the two “arenas of politics” are not so easy to draw. This is all the more true for a “movement of movements”, where networking and dialogue between diverse and plural actors is stated normatively, but where organizational loyalties nevertheless persist. With their strong profile and legacy from the past, large, old, formal, well-structured organizations are also part and parcel of the movement. As we are going to see, in fact, different conceptions are present within the Global Justice Movement Organizations (GJMOs), bridging “consensus” with different organizational values and practices.

In what follows, I shall address this tension between conceptions of conflicts and consensus indirectly, looking at the way in which consensus is defined and addressed by GJMOs. In this endeavour, I’ll refer to some results from the Demos project (Democracy in Europe and the Mobilization of Society), looking in particular at the analysis of the fundamental documents as well as the websites of about 250 social movement organizations involved in the global justice movement in six European countries and at the transnational level as well as at interviews with their representatives.¹

¹ Among others, I shall refer to some results published in the reports of the Work Packages 2, 3 and 4 of the Demos project (Democracy in Europe and the Mobilization of

First, I will describe some main democratic values that are often mentioned in the documents of those organizations (§ 2). In the next sections, I aim at *explaining* the consensual conceptions of democracy in both (different) epistemological meanings of social science explanation. Within an interpretative perspective, I also highlight the different (meaning) of consensus for different types of actors (§ 3).

2. Consensus as a multidimensional concept

In the Global Justice Movement, references to consensus have been noted as belonging to a search for innovative models of decision-making aimed at overcoming the limits of “assemblerism” as well as delegation. In the social forum process emerging models “combine limited and controlled recourse to delegation with consensus-based instruments appealing to dialogue, to the transparency of the communicative process and to reaching the greatest possible consensus” (della Porta, Andretta, Mosca and Reiter 2006, 30).

Our research indicates that consensus is mentioned by several (about one fourth) and diverse organizations involved in the Global Justice Movement. Already proposed within the student movement and taken up later on with more conviction by the feminist movement, consensual methods have been however considered as inefficient, slowing down decision making to the point of jeopardizing action. Many global justice groups revived the consensus model but developed new, more or less formalized, rules to help overcoming the hurdles in decision making created by differences of opinion or the manipulation of the process by a few individuals.

Society; <http://demos.iue.it>); see della Porta and Mosca 2006. The project is financed by the EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 6th FP PRIORITY 7, Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Based Society, and (for the Swiss case) the Federal Office for Education and Science, Switzerland. The project is coordinated by Donatella della Porta (European University Institute). Partners are University of Kent at Canterbury, UK, Christopher C. Rootes; Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin fuer Sozialforschung, Germany, Dieter Rucht; Università di Urbino, Italy, Mario Pianta; Centre de recherches politiques de la Sorbonne (CRPS), Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, France, Isabelle Sommier; Instituto de Estudios Sociales de Andalucía, Centro Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (IESA-CSIC), Spain, Manuel Jiménez; and Laboratoire de recherches sociales et politiques appliquées (resop), Université de Genève, Switzerland, Marco Giugni. Research collaborators were: Massimiliano Andretta, Angel Calle, Helene Combes, Nina Eggert, Raffaele Marchetti, Lorenzo Mosca, Herbert Reiter, Clare Saunders, Simon Teune, Mundo Yang, and Duccio Zola.

Our qualitative as well as quantitative analysis of the organizational values on democratic issues indicates a large attention to consensus as well as to some “bridged” concepts. In our analysis of the organizational documents, we have coded references to democratic values, distinguishing values mentioned when addressing the internal functioning of our organizations and general democratic values. Additionally, we have analysed in depth the symbolic contexts in which these values were mentioned.

In general, the issue of democracy emerges as very relevant for our GJMOs: most of the organizations we have sampled make reference to democratic values in their fundamental documents. Our quantitative data indicates that three sets of values are often mentioned in the democratic conceptions of the organizations involved in the Global Justice Movement we have analysed (table 1). As we are going to see in this section, many of these values resonate with those normative theorists and empirical researchers alike associated with the above mentioned conceptions of participatory democracy, deliberative democracy and civil society.

A first set of values points at some *deliberative* qualities of the GJM as open spaces. In normative conceptions of deliberative democracy *consensus* plays a key role as decisions are reached by convincing others of one’s own argument. In contrast with majoritarian democracy, where decisions are legitimized by voting, decisions must be approvable by all participants. As mentioned (see introduction to this volume), the deliberative conception of democracy includes norms of equality, inclusiveness, plurality of values, high-quality discourse, transparency. Also the conception of civil society has a *discursive* dimension: “To the degree this solidarity community exists, it is exhibited by ‘public opinion’, possesses its own cultural codes and narratives in a democratic idiom, is patterned by a set of peculiar institutions, most notably legal and journalistic ones, and is visible in historically distinctive sets of interactional practices like civility, equality, criticism and respect” (Alexander 1998, 7). As internal value, the consensual method is mentioned by 17% of our groups, and deliberative democracy by 7%. Looking at general democratic values, references to plurality, difference, and heterogeneity as important democratic elements have been singled out in the documents of as much as half of our sample, with a value very near to that of the reference to (more traditional) participation.

Among the groups most committed to the experimentation of *consensual methods*, specific rules are developed in horizontal

communication and conflict management: “consensus tools” include “good facilitation, various hand signals, go-rounds and the breaking up into small and larger sized groups. These methods should be explained by the facilitator at the start of each discussion, but if you wish to know more about how we are using them please contact members of the process group at this gathering” (Dissent! - A Network of Resistance Against the G8). Facilitators or moderators are used (this is the case, for instance, for the Italian Rete Lilliput, or the British Rising Tide), with the aim of including all points of view in the discussion as well as implementing rules for good discussion, going from the (limited) time allocated to each speaker to the maintenance of a constructive climate. The method of consensus “stipulates that in the course of discussion the degree of agreement of the group’s various members on a specific question, which must be presented clearly and explicitly, must be assessed. Confrontation is continued, working on the possibility of reconciling differing opinions, based on an incremental model, whereby a decision can always be brought back into discussion so as to satisfy the widest possible number of people. The consensus method invites everyone to communicate the reasons for any disagreement, clarifying whether they will be prepared to uphold the decision eventually taken without exiting the group. The consensus method thus builds ‘agreement within disagreement’, since any particular disagreement is always set within a framework of more general agreement, based on respect and reciprocal trust” (della Porta, Andretta, Mosca and Reiter 2006, 53-54). Supporting this type of conception, in its “Criteri di fondo condivisi” (2002) Rete Lilliput defines the “method of consensus” as a process in which, if a proposal does not receive a total consensus of all participants, there is further discussion in order to find a compromise with those who disagree and, if disagreements persist and involve a numerically large minority, the project is not approved (Tecchio, quoted in Veltri 2003, 14). According to Dissent!, “Consensus normally works around a proposal, which, hopefully is submitted beforehand so that people have time to consider it. The proposal is presented and any concerns are discussed. The proposal is then amended until a consensus is reached. At the heart of this process are principles that include trust, respect, recognition that everyone has the right to be heard and to contribute (i.e. equal access to power), a unity of purpose and commitment to that purpose and a commitment to the principle of co-operation. At these gatherings we seek to reach consensus on most issues, although this is not always possible and often there is no need to reach 'one decision' at the end of a useful discussion” (Dissent! - A Network of Resistance Against the G8). In the same vein, the Spanish net Espacio Alternativo defines the rules for good communication thus: “In this

direction, the following criteria are to be met: 1) trying to develop good debates on which are the real differences, if any; 2) signalling what these differences are; 3) knowing how widespread a certain position is in the member organizations; 4) spreading information about them through the communication instruments of the federation; 5) respecting the rights of individuals and collectives to disagree on specific points, in words as well as in deeds” (IV Encuentros Confederales Espacio Alternativo, Documento de Organización).

Attention to consensus methods as a way to improve communication resonates with the widespread idea of the movement as building public spaces for dialogue and (good) communication. This is illustrated for instance by the Spanish *Derechos para Tod@s* (s/d) that stresses “our goal is to contribute to the spreading of debates, not by narrowing spaces, but by opening them to all those who are critical of this globalization that causes exploitation, repression and/or exclusion ... No alternative to the current system can be regarded as the ‘true’ one. That is, we want to set up a space to reflect and to fight for a social and civil transformation” (Jiménez and Calle 2006, 278). Attention to consensus building and debate as being valuable per se is reflected in the conception of the organization as an arena. In its self-presentation, ATTAC Germany states that the organization is “a place, where political processes of learning and experiences are made possible; in which the various streams of progressive politics discuss with each other, in order to find a common capacity of action together” (Zwischen Netzwerk, NGO und Bewegung, *Das Selbstverständnis von ATTAC, 8 Thesen*, October 2001). In the *Documento de constitución del Foro Social de Palencia* (Ámbito provincial), the forum is presented as a “permanent space for encounters, debates and support for collective action”, where “decisions are made by consensus”. In fact, the pluralist nature of the forum is positively assessed in the definition of it as “a meeting place of different visions and positions with some common denominator, not an organization that has to reach a unique position”.

Mechanisms of national and transnational diffusion certainly helped the spreading of values of consensual decision making. The “Zapatistas experience” is often mentioned as a source of inspiration. The founding assembly of ATTAC Italy, held in Bologna in June 2001 (about 2000 participants), “created a provisional directory but as far as the drawing up of a constitution was concerned decided on a ‘zapatist consultation’” (Reiter 2006, 255). Similarly, the mentioning of consensus in the constitution of the World Social Forum reverberated in most regional and

local forums stressing consensus as a main organizational principle—e.g. all Sicilian Social Forums state that decisions have to be taken by “massima condivisione” (maximal level of sharing) (Piazza and Barbagallo 2003). On March 2001, the Genoa Social Forum stated the value of the consensual method seen as “a way to work on what we have in common and continue to discuss what divides us... So that all can feel the decisions taken as their own, although with different degrees of satisfaction” (quoted in Fruci 2003, 189). Transnational campaigns and social forums also helped mutual learning about the techniques that facilitate consensual decision making. So, for instance, in international meetings, the Italian metal workers union FIOM became acquainted with, and started to appreciate, the use of facilitators (Reiter 2006, 249). At the national level, social movement organizations often refer to specific documents written by groups and individuals that promoted the method of consensus by formulating specific rules of communication. For instance, Indymedia Italy refers to a document written on the occasion of the assembly of the organization involved in fair trade (Italian Chart for the Criteria for fair and solidarity trade). The most committed organizations also often offer training. Among them, the British Dissent network organizes, at the local level, “3 or 4 days of community work, building, community empowerment projects, dance training, consensus training. The goal is to introduce principles and leave the community with tools, skills and energy to continue projects” (Newcastle Dissent Gathering December 4 and 5 2004: Minutes).

A second set of values reported in the fundamental documents of our organizations revolve around *participation*, which is at the same time a fundamental component of social movements conception of democracy, but takes in the GJM a new meaning (see also chapter 2). In normative theory, beyond the traditional reflections of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970), some normative conceptions of deliberative democracy support participatory visions as deliberation is said to require “some forms of apparent equality among citizens” (Cohen 1989, 18) and must exclude power—deriving from coercion, but also an unequal weight of the participants as representatives of organizations of different size or influence. In what is described as a “utopian version”, also the concept of a civil society is linked to the notion of participation: “It is a definition that presupposes a state or rule of law but insists not only on restraints on state power but on a redistribution of power. It is a radicalization of democracy and an extension of participation and autonomy” (Kaldor 2003, 8).

As for the values on internal democracy, participation is still a main component of the GJMOs' vision of democracy, mentioned by one third of the organizations as an internal value and by more than half as a general value. Not only the pure forms of social movement organizations have participation as a founding principle, but so do trade unions and left-wing political parties. However, additional values emerge which specify (and differentiate between) the conceptions of participatory democracy. References to limits to delegation, rotation principle, mandated delegation, criticism of delegation as internal organizational values are present although not dominant (each mentioned by between 6% and 11% of our groups). Non-hierarchical decision making is often mentioned (16%), and even more frequently mentioned is inclusiveness (21% and 29%). If we group the positive responses on critique of delegation, limitation of delegation, non-hierarchical decision making and mandated delegation into an index of non-hierarchical decision-making, 23.4% have positive scores on it. Significantly, representative values are mentioned by only 6% of our organizations.

A third set of values can be described under the label of autonomy, resonating with those put forward in normative theories of civil society, as the notion of civil society links consensus to values of autonomy. In Cohen and Arato's words, "The legitimating principles of democracy and rights are compatible only with a model of civil society that institutionalizes democratic communication in a multiplicity of publics and defends the conditions of individual autonomy by liberating the intimate sphere from all traditional as well as modern forms of inequality and unfreedom" (1991, 455). In our data base, frequently invoked is the autonomy of member organizations (33%) and local chapters (38.5%). As for the general valued, if we combine mentioning of cultural and individual autonomy these sum up to 39.8% of the sampled organizations.

Table 1. Internal and general democratic values (% of yes); No. of cases 244)

Internal Values	% of yes	External Values	% of yes
Consensual method	17.2	Difference/plurality/heterogeneity	47.1
Deliberative democracy	7.0	Dialogue/communication	31.6
		Transparency	23.8
Participatory democracy	27.9	Participation	51.2
Inclusiveness	20.9	Inclusiveness	25.8
Explicit critique of delegation/representation	11.1	Equality	34.0
Non-hierarchical decision-making	16.0		
Limitation of delegation	6.6	Representation	6.1
<i>Any of the three values mentioned above (index of critique of delegation)</i>	23.4		
Rotation principle	6.6		
Mandate delegation	6.1		
Autonomy of member organizations *	33.1	Autonomy (group; cultural)	18.9
Autonomy of the territorial levels **	38.5	Individual liberty/autonomy	21.7
<i>Any of the two values mentioned above (index of organizational autonomy)</i>	39.8	<i>Any of the two values mentioned above (index of individual or cultural autonomy)</i>	32.4

* Variable is not applicable for 114 (46.7%) groups, that do not mention organizations as members.

** Variable is not applicable for 62 (25.4%) groups, that do not mention territorial levels of their organization.

3. Understanding conceptions of consensus

“Consensus: Majority which emanates without vote or with a widely majority vote. ... If a large majority does not emerge (a minimum of 75%), the debate continues» (AC!, Charte 2002).

“People can object to proposals or block consensus being reached. Major decisions are only made when everyone is in agreement. This means lots of talking! Hand signals are used to communicate with the facilitator and other people in the meeting when you are not speaking” (DISSENT! Gathering, Edinburgh 18th – 19th September 2004, Minutes).

The selected quotes accurately represent the growing interest for consensus that characterizes many GJMOs, but also the different meanings given to ‘consensus’ within different traditions. If consensus is mentioned by different organizations, it can be however defined in different ways. While the statistical analysis allow to single out some associations between reference to consensus with other characteristics of our organizations

(della Porta 2009 and forthcoming), the qualitative analysis of our documents allows for a better understanding of the relations between democratic values and other organizational characteristics by pointing at the diverse meanings that consensus has for different organizations, as this emerging value is bridged with previous organizational cultures. I distinguish in particular between a plural and a communitarian conception of consensus, each bridged to different traditions.

A first one is a *plural conception of consensus through high-quality dialogue*. This is a most innovative understanding of the method of consensus, which often characterizes network-organizations. As in many social forums, consensus is here considered to be “functional for safeguarding the unitary-plural nature of the movement as well as members’ demands for individual protagonism” (Fruci 2003, 169). In networks and campaigns, the consensual method is advocated as allowing for working on what unites, notwithstanding the differences. The Spanish *Espacio alternativo* considers that “the method for clarifying differences has to be consensus and large agreement on the basis of achieving unity beyond these differences. We therefore consider that... we have to continue our debate until we agree on the themes, trying to reach consensus and common positions. If they are not possible, our public communication would ensure knowledge of agreements and differences” (IV Encuentros Confederales Espacio Alternativo, Documento de organizacion).² Also the transnational network Our World is Not for Sale link explicitly the consensus method to networking. In its declaration of intent, the group writes:

“OWINFS works to develop and link campaigns around the world toward the end of reshaping the corporate-dominated trade agenda to support human rights, environmental sustainability and democratic principles. OWINFS acts as a ‘hub’ for social

² Rete Lilliput developed a sophisticated system of consensual decision-making on line oriented towards the implementation of “Lilliputian thinking of ‘acting on what unites us and research on what divides us’”. In this conception, the valorization and involvement of each individual member is also mentioned together with consensual attitudes. In its presentation of “Democrazia a bolle” (based on deliberation on line, with each member expressing positions going from consensus to conditional agreement, constructive disagreement and dissent), Lilliput states “We tried to design a method which could be used directly by all Lilliputians in order to participate in the writing of these documents. In other words: * the documents can originate in any node of the net; * all mechanisms used in order to manage the documents are simple and transparent” (Il metodo a bolle).

movements and NGOs working on globalization issues who are interested in sharing analysis and coordinating action efforts internationally. The active participation of OWINFS members is what drives our collective work forward. We coordinate efforts on conference calls and make decisions by consensus. There is no formal network “staff”—rather member groups volunteer to carry out agreed upon tasks. A strength of the network is that individual movements and organizations can work together where it is strategic and helps advance their initiatives, and are free to dedicate as much or as little time to the network as makes sense for them in order to meet their objectives”.

In this sense, in organizational networks, consensual principles are presented as resonating with a respect for the *autonomy* of the individual organizations that are part of the federation. Dissent! explains the ways in which the group made decisions as follows: “The previous Dissent! gathering reached consensus that: (1) The Dissent! Network holds bi-monthly gatherings. The Gatherings are the only Network decision making body - email lists and web discussion forums are not where Network decisions are made! Local groups are autonomous from one another and are able to take any form of action they choose. Local Dissent! Network groups should not speak for the whole network. (2) Local groups should also consider, however, that the actions which they take will actually reflect on the network as a whole. The Dissent! Network is therefore primarily a networking tool” (Dissent! - A Network of Resistance Against the G8).

Consensual decisions seem all the more necessary when organizations emphasize *internal diversity*. This is the case, for instance, of ATTAC Italia, which in its Chart of Intent stipulated that it “wants to be a democratic and open association, transversal and as much as possible pluralistic, composed of diverse individuals and social forces. ... it wants to contribute to the renovation of democratic political participation and favours the development of new organizational forms of civil society” (Reiter 2006, 255). As the national assembly of ATTAC Italia (27/2/2007) stated, “We want to continue to build shared associational forms, based on participation and the consensual method, fit for letting diversities meet and work together and develop democratic decisional practices. Because we consider democracy as the most important element of the common good and we want, all together, to re-appropriate it”.

Participation and the method of consensus are, in this sense, considered as the main expressions of democracy “as a common good”. In particular, but not only, for networks, consensus resonates in fact with an emphasis on the *respect for differences*, bridged with calls for *inclusiveness*, within the conception of the organization as an open space—a metaphor often used by our groups. For instance, the Turin social forum states in its proposal for an organizational structure that “the TSF wants to be an open place in which even the individuals, as well as the organized actors, can meet and work together; a space in which internal differences are accepted and given a positive value, and not considered as an instrument to be used in order to acquire increased visibility and impose working methods; a space in which there should be no place for hegemony and instead the search for a sufficient degree of maturation and consensus is the guiding principle for each initiative”.³

Another vision can be singled out in *communitarian conception of consensus as collective agreement*. This conception is expressed by groups with a deep-rooted ‘assembleary’ tradition. For instance, the British Wombles declared: “We have no formal membership; all meetings are weekly & open to anyone who wishes to attend. These meetings are where any & all decisions concerning the group are made. The politics we espouse are those we wish to live by – self-organisation, autonomy, direct democracy & direct action against the forces of coercion and control ... As such, no individual can speak on behalf of the Wombles as all group & all decisions are made collectively based on consensus” (The WO Collective statement). Similarly, among the Italian *Disobbedienti*, in case of disagreement in its management council regarding decisions under discussion, these decisions are frozen and set aside, pending resumption at a later date (della Porta, Andretta, Mosca and Reiter 2006, 53).

In this area, consensus resonates with *anti-authoritarian, horizontal relations*. According to Indymedia Italy, “All IMCs (Independent Media Centers) recognize the importance of the methods (used) for promoting social change and are committed to the development of non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian relations, as far as both interpersonal and group dynamics are concerned. Therefore, [they are committed] to organize collectively and adopt, in order to make decisions, the method of consensus, that develops in a participatory, horizontal and transparent way”.

³ The minutes of the seminar “Quale futuro” mention the intervention by an activist who stressed that “the TSF made the strongest effort in order to be inclusive: it practiced the method of consensus, it gave representativeness to all sides; it never decided through a majority vote”.

In this vision, consensus is presented as part of a more complex, anti-hierarchical. Alternativa Antimilitarista-MOC, a group that declares to make decisions by consensus within general assemblies, defines “as a process in which we attempt to reach the most satisfactory agreement for all members”, Consensus is here mentioned as part and parcel of an horizontal conception of democracy: “we promote forms of horizontal organization by taking our decisions by consensus, since our very functioning challenges hierarchical structures, in the attempt to overcome all possible leadership. We promote rotation and the capacity of all group members so that they can get involved in the activities they wish to perform. There is no ‘charge’ that gives any individual more power” (Declaración Ideológica de Alternativa Antimilitarista-MOC Domingo,18/7/2004). Consensual methods should help avoiding the creation of power relations. So Indymedia presents itself as a ”platform for your news and background information on political and social issues. In order to avoid the development of positions of power, the members of the moderation committee rotate and the committee decides on the basis of consensus“ (Was ist Indymedia?/Grundsätze). And the French Réseau Intergalactique, that developed around the construction of a self-managed space at the anti-G8 summit in Evian, states in its Chart, «there is no dominant voice. It is what we call an horizontal way of functioning: there is no small group who decide. There is not then on the one side thinking heads and on the other small hands and foots. The aim is to facilitate the integration of each in the discussion and decision-making ».

Consensual methods are also adopted within a prefigurative vision of organizational life. They are linked to the aim of realizing social changes not only through political decisions, but through deep transformations in everyday life and individual attitudes. For “it is impossible to realize a social transformation through merely political decisions. The activities have to relate to the needs and desires of the people, so that anti-militarism can bring about life alternatives and a struggle in positive way. This would develop by consensus, understood as a process that aims at reaching the agreement which is most satisfactory for all” (Declaración Ideológica de Alternativa Antimilitarista-MOC Domingo,18 de julio de 2004).

4. Summarizing

If social movements have been traditionally considered as conflictual actors, and social movement studies have traditionally linked movements and conflict, in both attention has recently increased on what can be considered as the opposite of conflict: consensus. This attention resonates with concepts such as civil society and deliberative democracy that have become more and more relevant in social and political theory. Even though conflict is a concept used to refer to the relations between social movements and their external opponents, and consensus to refer to relations inside the movement, there is nevertheless an inherent tension between the two concepts, as they tend to construct different visions of politics as, respectively, antagonistic and the realm of power struggle, or, alternatively, deliberative and oriented to dialogue. In the first conception, conflicts are perceived as irreconcilable: the political debate is characterized by a struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, and no common good in this sense exists. In the second conception, conflicts can be solved through dialogue: discourses (or at least good communication) help the emergence of a shared understanding of the common good--and democracy is indeed conceived as the most important common good. Open in political theory (with the critique of the Habermasian conception of deliberation) and in social theory (with the critique of a “neoliberal” vision of the civil society), this debate resonates not only within social movement studies, but also social movements organizations themselves.

The results of our research indicate in fact that references to consensus emerged in the global justice movement, presented as a new value, especially by recently created organizations. Travelling from the Zapatistas Sierra Lacandona to Europe, consensus values (and the method of consensus, often written in capital letters in the documents of that one fifth of our organizations that mention it). Consensus tended to be linked to other values, resonant within the social movement tradition. In the documents of our organizations (as, significantly, in theories on deliberative democracy and civil society), consensus is bridged to values such as pluralism, dialogue, inclusiveness, horizontality, participation and transparency.

We also saw, however, that the mentioning of consensus, as well as other values, tended to vary. Using an in-depth qualitative analysis of our documents, we observed however that consensus has acquired different meanings, when meeting different organizational cultures. In particular,

we can single out a conception of consensus that developed mainly in network organizations, characterized by wide heterogeneity. Here, good communication is perceived as all the more relevant in order to improve dialogue among different actors. In a different, horizontal tradition, the method of consensus is coupled with an assembleary tradition. Here, assembleary collective decision making through consensus as a way to form the collective identity of the group.

Common to our organizations is an emphasis on the construction of open spaces, for high-quality dialogue between many and diverse actors. If social movements have been traditionally seen as aiming at building public spaces, there are some innovations in the recent GJM that deserve attention. In particular, traditional conceptions of participation are intertwined with conceptions of deliberation, that meet those values of openness, inclusiveness, plurality, dialogue good communication, autonomy, consensus that are resonant with conception of public spaces. Although with different meanings, consensus is particularly relevant as a normative base for the creation of public spaces. In fact, organizational forms such as the social forum present themselves as spaces open to the encounter of different actors and cherish a dialogue oriented to the exchange of knowledge as well as reciprocal understanding.

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