

# Consensus

## The Togetherness of Those Who Would Not Wait for One Another

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### 1

What was new the last time there seemed to be something new in assembling was that people did not feel the need to all decide together everything that could be left to individual decisions, or to initiatives by a few at a time. Many of the people felt okay with other people doing other things, things they would not have considered doing themselves, or would not have done, or maybe would have done but then were thankful that others were already doing them, focusing on doing other things instead. There was a whiff of the spirit of a division of labor permeating the assembly, but without the structures that implement the division of labor in economic enterprises. The assembly held up its legacy of not assigning tasks according to an economic matrix, not putting the most skillful in the positions that require skills, the fastest where matters are most pressing, the most robust where violence is imminent, the ones with so-called natural authority in leading positions. Just as before in the democracy project, everybody was entitled to anything, as things worth doing were worth doing badly, and competence never counted as an argument *against* someone doing something. Still, the looseness that comes with a division of labor, when the occasional synchronization of rhythms breaks free from the constancy of being together, somehow materialized in the gatherers' bodies, the bodies of those who stayed with the plenary session most of the time no less than the bodies of those who would

come and go. The bodies unfurled in their attendance, as it were, and a visitor might have believed that this less cramped fashion of being there came about inside-out, that the participants had been guided to assume a relaxed aggregate phase from insight into their totality as a collective organism, but it really came about outside-in. It came from the society the people came from, and returned to after the assembly or during the assembly. It had to do with their routines of working, of collaborating or letting collaboration happen. Possibly, much of it could be traced back to the pitiable fact that they had forgotten how to stop working, even when taking time off their jobs for participating in a political assembly. Nonetheless, people were right where they were, but while they kept arguing and defending a position that seemed decidedly theirs, they realized how replaceable they were in virtually every respect save making that point and defending it. In whatever followed from the assembly's decision, others would do things for them, and even in their place, just as often as they would do things for others, and even in their place. And as though that temporality of collective acting, of filling in and helping out, had been admitted to the time of collective decision-making, everyone who stated their position in the debate did so in a form that suggested a moment for one position to give way to another position, or to move into a position previously maintained by another person. Positions, it followed, were not coordinates in an ideal, timeless geometrical space, to be adopted by a majority of individuals present at the assembly, in order to make the proposal connected to that position stronger than any other. Neither did positions represent those outposts which activists had conquered and successfully or unsuccessfully secured in their struggles, becoming unquestionable, for the fighters themselves no less than for others, as the victories and defeats seemed too heavily laden with individual pain to be questioned. Rather, positions were linked to the positions inhabited by the individuals in the real space and time of the assembly – not identical, as identity does not exist in real space and time, but willing to embrace the materiality of the gatherers' living bodies, the bodies in gathering, and of the finite time they would have at their hands for realizing their decisions, if realizing was to mean something other than just continuing the struggles on hold, hurrying back to those outposts that had been successfully or unsuccessfully conquered and secured in that legendary time before the assembly. Making decisions in the assembly was thus disengaged from (the illusion of) enacting laws. At least for the time

being, the assembly had done away with being a weak version of that powerful congregation that enables a bunch of mortals to pass resolutions whose period of validity will be a weak version of eternity. And it had also shaken off the contempt of those who only saw assembling as an interruption of their activism, as idle, self-enamored talk that had to be constantly reminded of some urgency it neglected. As the people's weakness turned out to be not that of being less than eternal in their respective lives, and less than immortal in their dedication, the assembly's weakness turned out to be not that of being less than an institution capable of sublating its members' voices into a compact statement resounding with the authority of an absent origin and an absent fulfillment. As the shortcomings of using words turned out not to be due to words being less real than deeds, the pressure to inflate speech with hatred and to turn the debate into a surrogate battlefield vanished. The decision this assembly arrived at, if it did (and more often than not, it did not), verified an understanding of assembling that considered assembling a part of everyone's lives, that is to say a limited period of time within limited periods of time, and just as nobody would be in the position to wait for anyone else at the point of death, adding two deaths up to one more comprehensive death and then three, four, etc., the participants did not think this was the thing to try doing during their lifetimes. Since without my body you can never be in my position, let us see how we can transform opposition, the drama of ideologies clashing where every speaker speaks in the name of a silent majority, claiming to represent all those who will not object (hence causing plenty of objections), into a more corporeal performance of raising voices: one that has silence mean ›I find nothing to require alignment of our separate intentions‹ instead of ›I agree‹, and speaking out mean ›This would be a place and time to metonymize...‹ – thus they kept telling each other with whatever they left unsaid, or said.

## 2

Yes, that assembly accepted two conclusions, two states of being many once the time of assembling was over. One: disbanding without having accomplished a formal agreement, leaving acting to individual decisions or initiatives by a few at a time. And one: consensus. It is hard to know what people know, particularly when there are many people, but it seems likely that many

of the gatherers were unaware that favoring consensus-oriented decision-making in political movements had once been inspired by Quaker practice, where patiently listening to the opinions of others organized an aggregate waiting for God's voice to communicate the truth. In that religious practice, the assumption of a God, of that God conveying His wisdom through that which happens with a random composition of His creatures, of a truth to be revealed in the course of speaking and listening, and even silence and listening – all of this firmly embedded the finite time of the gathering in eternity, and only those who were willing to wait, to wait, if necessary, until the end of their lives, could be counted on to be valuable members of that community. For if they were not willing, or unable, to wait until the end of their lives, their consent to something someone else had said might not have confirmed that that something someone else had said was the divine message related to all of them, but that they wanted to cut the meeting short as they needed to leave. After the assumption of a God had been dropped, there remained a naked, unmediated power imbalance based on how much time assembly members would be able to devote to the process of forming consensus, and also on their desires. Participants with more time would be in a more powerful position than people who needed to observe working hours, care for children, the elderly or the sick, attend other meetings, sleep. Participants who wished for a quick leap from discussion to action, either out of fear that an opportunity to act might pass or because they suspected their own motivation to act might not survive a long and tedious deliberation process, found themselves at a disadvantage against those whose prime pleasure consisted in playing a certain role in the assembly, and whose self-confidence appeared unshakable. More than just a few remembered a feeling of impotence in moments when they had desperately wanted a meeting to close, and yet others would go on forever raising objections, finding problems, multiplying viewpoints. Their obliviousness as to the genealogy of that impotence perhaps added to the despair. Why does our commitment to consensus come without a sense of timing, they might have asked themselves. Because without reference to the eternal, consensus cannot coincide with truth anymore, someone might have answered. Take Badiou, who insists that political action discloses a universal truth. In order to proceed to that kind of action, you will need a philosopher to have the last word. Any assembly, then, whatever it decides or fails to decide, can hardly be more than an arrangement of waiting, popu-

lating a stretch of time suspended in eternity, filling that time with warm-hearted or coldhearted chatter. The value of that assembly, whatever it decides or fails to decide, will have been an event, which it eventually turns into; and the people gathered in the assembly will be in need of a philosopher to inform them on that very turn. With god being dead, the philosopher takes over the job of a priest. And if he doesn't, someone might have asked in that familiar manner of asking simply for the sake of masking an objection as a question: What if we do not let him? In that case, the assembly will be frustrated, time and again, about its inability to match up consensus with truth. Lacking reference to eternity, consensus cannot coincide with truth, not because there can be no truth but because there can be no coincidence with truth. Instead of appreciating a time that can never be the time of waiting for the event, for the intervention of the eternal into the temporal – instead of saying ›OK, then let's do something else than wait for the event with what we're doing in our attempts to reach a consensus‹, a lot of people stubbornly keep waiting. I suppose I do, too, someone like me might have added. Despite better knowledge, I still do, and my impatience with assemblies stems from waiting for the event. While I hesitantly join in on what I perceive as a dry, bureaucratic exchange concerning problems and solutions, my deeper self won't let go of hoping for that moment when something someone says transforms the meeting into the collective-singular source of the *good idea*. A divine inspiration minus God for us unpropheted disciples. But what else is there to expect, except the *good idea*, others or myself might have asked in that manner of true curiosity that sometimes pierces through the thicket of rhetorical questions: compromise? Please don't tell us all we can hope for is compromise! I think there is a risk that compromise becomes the predominant form of acknowledging the immanence of the finite, the reality of our time dedicated to consensus. However, compromise presents itself as a compromised ideal result. It continues to show us that whatever we achieve in what little time we have is but a flawed, deficient proxy for what good we could achieve if the voices of our mortal bodies embodied a message from beyond the temporal sphere. Compromise means disappointment about being mortals, and too many of them (more than one). This is why the spirit of a division of labor might be helpful when permeating an assembly that, although it does not assign tasks according to an economic matrix, understands consensus less in the sense of an all-inclusive agreement and more in the sense of ›This is what we will remember as an occasion to distinguish our

preferences, until distinctions felt right, before we all went off to do whatever we considered the right things to do. A godless consensus, with a non-evental, uncoincidable truth: a drumless groove for the many who knew they would replace each other any number of times in doing what the consensus was, going along in casual proximity, taking over, moving in and making way, precisely because they knew they were all mortal, they knew nobody was in the position to wait for anyone else at the point of death, and hence they did not think that waiting for each other was a habit worth preserving during their lifetimes. Taking consensus to be the togetherness of those who would not wait for one another, not even while participating in an assembly – that was definitely not a *good idea*. But did it work at the time?



