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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Group Styles of Consensus Decision-Making in the United States and Germany:
A Comparative-Historical and Cross-National Analysis

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Sociology

by

Kathryn Rachel Bongar Hoban

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Francesca Polletta, Chair
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2019

DEDICATION

For Brad,
my everything

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Group Styles of Consensus Decision-Making in the United States and Germany:
A Comparative-Historical and Cross-National Analysis

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Professor Francesca Polletta, Chair

Consensus decision-making is a horizontal decision-making practice used by activists in the United States, Germany and other countries. Scholars tend to address consensus as a uniform practice and have heavily criticized it. Nevertheless, consensus decision-making has only increased in its frequency of use and its reach. Which raises the questions: How have activists' consensus-decision making practices changed over the many historical eras in which it has been practiced? How do activists in different nations come to practice consensus with a common approach and what explains differences in their practice? And, have contemporary activists approached consensus in ways that have effectively resolved the dilemmas of consensus identified by scholars? To investigate these questions I employ Eliasoph and Lichterman's theoretical framework of *group style*, which refers to *culture in interaction*, as observed in the norms members of civic organizations hold for how they are expected to behave, speak, relate to outsiders, and make claims. Drawing upon 60 semi-structured interviews that I conducted with activists in the US and Germany, historical analysis, and the lens of group style, I have found that that activists are more flexible in their use of consensus than scholars expect.

My analysis reveals that activists are able to adapt consensus decision-making through group style, in response to the missteps of past generations and the circumstances of their current context. However, there are limitations to the extent to which activists may adapt consensus because their commitment to consensus is ultimately ideological. Because group style can be shared by many groups, movements, and nations it is of great relevance when attempting to understand how the same practices and perspectives come to be shared by German and American activists. Considering that group style is an element of culture, it is useful for understanding how activists' commitment to consensus is enduring, even when it may not always be the most effective way to make decisions. Group style can enable activists to address the dilemmas of consensus, but it can also mask them and therefor prevent activists from accurately assessing and addressing the shortcomings of consensus.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

While conducting field work in Germany, I was invited by an old friend to participate in the DeGrowth Summer School, a week-long gathering of activists that included workshops, music, shared meals, and meetings that culminated in a large-scale direct action event that shut down a nearby coal mine. Upon my arrival at the camp, I found myself surrounded by familiarity despite being thousands of miles from my home in California. The energy, creativity, and palpable people-power of the activists there brought me back to the height of the Occupy movement, as did their practice of consensus decision-making, a horizontal decision-making process that gives every member the opportunity to veto a group decision. I easily joined in the consensus decision-making at the DeGrowth summer school because the way they talked and the processes and hand signals they used were the same ones I had previously experienced in other American social movements.

When I interviewed members of DeGrowth, they lit up with passion as they described their monthly planning retreats that preceded the camp. They would get together monthly, spending 36 hours in each of their consensus-based planning retreats. They glowingly told me their meetings left everyone feeling good. As an American activist who spent three months living in the encampment of Occupy San Francisco, I was floored by the positive way German activists described their group dynamics. When I interviewed American activists in 2015 – several years after the pinnacle of the Occupy movement – they articulated their ongoing commitment to consensus, but they did not talk about consensus in terms of group members feeling good during meetings. Instead, they described their group dynamics as being rife with conflict, because they work to reach consensus across demographic and ideological differences.

German and American activists embrace consensus decision-making with a firm commitment to radical democracy, horizontalism, and equality. They use similar decision-making procedures. Despite their distance, German and American activists share common values and decision-making procedures, which raises questions of why these similarities exist. Their distinct sentiments about their group dynamics add to this puzzle – how is it that activists use the same decision-making processes with shared values, yet describe their group dynamics differently? In what follows, I investigate why German and American activists share both similarities and differences in their practice of consensus decision-making using multiple approaches. I look at the historical development of consensus, contemporary variation between how consensus is practiced in the US and Germany, and how contemporary activists measure up to established critiques of consensus.

INTRODUCING CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

Consensus decision-making, or simply ‘consensus,’ is a horizontal decision-making practice that aspires toward reaching complete agreement among all participants. Consensus decision-making includes a range of decision-making processes, including various forms of full and modified consensus, spokes councils and working groups, and other horizontal forms of decision-making.¹ Describing consensus as horizontal means there is typically no voting and no chain of command. Consensus processes for ratifying proposals can be formally regulated with hand signals, speakers-lists, and highly developed protocols. Conversely, consensus can be unstructured, with decisions made through loose conversation and tacit approval. Groups that use consensus can consist of as few as two members, or as many as tens of thousands. Consensus decision-making takes place in

¹ Deliberative democracy, participatory democracy, direct democracy, consensus-based decision-making, and consensus-oriented decision-making, and consensus are related as terms and as democratic practices.

closed circles of activists and in open public assemblies. Social movements use consensus in meetings as well as in decision-making on the fly, sometimes in the midst of a demonstration. The Alter-Globalization movement implemented an intricate decision-making model involving spokes councils, which linked many distinct groups together (Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2011). The historic roots of Consensus in social movements also includes the pacifist movements of the 1940s and 50s, the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Movements of the 1970s and 80s, as well as the Zapatistas of the 1990s (Polletta 2002).

Consensus decision-making has been used in organizations with myriad of missions. Healthcare collectives, schools, grocery stores, bookstores, cafes and bakeries, housing and business cooperatives, community farms, childcare collectives, entire neighborhoods, and entire social movements have come together around consensus decision-making (Rothchild-Whitt 1979). Consensus is often partnered with horizontal organizational forms, though it is sometimes utilized within more conventional organizations. Many organizations have hybrid decision-making structures using consensus for certain kinds of decisions. Community organizing non-profits, for example, often practice hierarchical decision-making among staff, yet use consensus among the membership base.

Consensus has had a historic and contemporary presence that extends around the globe. In the US, consensus decision-making has been practiced by the Quakers, the radical pacifist movement of the 1940s and 50s, the Civil Rights movement, and the Women's Movements of the 1970s and 80s. Internationally, consensus has been a driving force of the 1960's and 70's movements, the Global Justice movement, anarchist movements, the Zapatistas of the 1990s, and the Spanish Indignados. Observing the historical roots of consensus decision-making brings up questions regarding why consensus decision-making has been such an enduring fixture in social

movements, and how it has changed over time. Considering the international scope of consensus decision-making raises question on whether activists in distant locales practice consensus similarly, and if so, why.

I explore these questions by looking beyond shared procedures for practicing consensus. Through interviews I conducted with activists in the US and Germany, I analyze *how* activists practice consensus and the meanings they instill in it. Eliasoph and Lichterman's (2003) construct of *group style*, refers to culture in interaction. Style encompasses how group members are expected to act, speak, and relate to people and institutions beyond the boundaries of the group. Style factors into the kinds of claims civic organizations make, and how they respond to the settings they inhabit. Employing the lens of group style, I assess how consensus decision-making has been practiced in the US and Germany with changing meanings and norms of interaction over time. I also compare contemporary activists in the US and Germany to gain a broader perspective on how styles of consensus decision-making come to be shared—or not—by activists in different positions on the globe. Through the lens of group style, I aim to better understand how activist practices develop over time and are shared internationally. Additionally, with the perspective made available through the lens of group style, I will revisit established critique of consensus to see if those critiques still ring true today.

WHY CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING?

Consensus decision-making has been heavily critiqued by scholars of social movements. Despite intentions for horizontal decision-making to foster radical equality, groups that practice consensus may reproduce power imbalances (della Porta 2005 and 2013; Freeman 1973; Leondar-Wright 2012; Polletta 2002; Young 2002). “Structureless” organizations, Freeman (1973) wrote,

inevitably fall into patterns where informal cliques dominate, creating power imbalances that ostracize newcomers. Della Porta (2005) observes: “unstructured assemblies tend to be dominated by small minorities that often strategically exploit the weaknesses of direct democracy with open manipulation.”

The time-intensive nature of consensus decision-making can prohibit the participation of those with less time available, such as working people and people with children (Leondar-Wright 2012; Treloar 2003). Additionally, consensus has been criticized as being alienating to newcomers who are not accustomed to the processes and norms of activist subcultures (Juris 2013) and those who do not fit the selective profile of appropriate attitudes, values, and identities of a particular movement (della Porta 2005). Polletta’s (2005) study of SNCC concluded that Civil Rights organizations abandoned horizontal organizational forms and consensus when those forms began to be seen as “White,” and consequently, culturally “other” to those in the organization. Mansbridge (1983) argues that the biggest problem with consensus is not that it is alienating or exclusive, but rather its proclivity toward debilitating impasses that result from major differences of perspective. Such stalemates can render a group ineffective, inactive, or divided in factions. Others consider that consensus is slow and sacrifices benefits of expertise (Cornell 2011; della Porta 2005; Hammond 2013; Gitlin 2012; Smucker 2013). For these reasons, consensus has been criticized for compromising political opportunities (Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002).

Prefigurative, Ideological, or Strategic Explanations

Despite these critiques, consensus has increased in popularity among movement groups and in public visibility (della Porta 2005, 2013, 2013b; della Porta and Rucht 2013; Polletta 2013). The Occupy movement gathered people in public spaces across the globe and their General Assemblies

echoed via the “people’s mic.” The Occupy movement organized itself internationally around general assemblies, and the prominence of the Occupy movement brought consensus new levels of popular recognition and ushered in a new moment for consensus decision-making. Likewise, the Spanish Indignados brought together constellations of general assemblies to protest austerity measures. Consensus decision-making has increased in prevalence despite being extensively critiqued, which beckons a question: Why do activists practice consensus decision-making?

Generally, scholars agree that activists’ use of consensus decision-making is an enactment of prefigurative politics. Through horizontal decision-making structures, patterns of social relations, and organizational structures, groups that use consensus go beyond protesting for social change; they embody it (Boggs 1977). According to Breines (1982), the central task of prefigurative politics is “to create and sustain within live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that ‘prefigure’ and embody the desired society” (p. 6). Consensus is understood to be *prefigurative* because activists attempt to “be the change they wish to see in the world” via their internal decision-making processes. By using consensus, activists seek to embody change rather than merely making demands of an external institution. Prefigurative movements often strive to develop solutions to social problems through the development of horizontal and radically democratic organizational forms, alternative economies, or grassroots solutions to social problems that embrace a DIY (do it yourself) ethos. Many activists see their practice of consensus decision-making as an avenue to improve upon methods of autonomous, small-scale governance, while others understand it to be an effective way to mobilize for more institutionally motivated social change demands.

Scholars disagree on whether consensus is driven by activists’ ideological inclination *or* by strategic sensibilities. In her study of German social movement cultures, Leach (2006, 2015,

2016) defines ideology as a “collectively held system of beliefs, subjectively felt to be true, which is fairly coherent and stable and comprised of three cognitive elements: a theory of how society works, a set of values about the end-states and principles of behavior that should govern society, and a set of related attitudes about people, objects, issues, and practices corresponding to those values.” She found their respective varieties of collectivistic democratic organizations were shaped by their distinct ideological cores. Groups’ organizational structures, decision-making practices, and tactics were derived from the ways in which they are ideologically cohesive and diverge.

Some scholars have argued that activists use consensus because their ideological commitments propel them to continue to practice consensus despite its pitfalls. Smucker (2014) identifies strategic and prefigurative politics afoot in the Occupy movement. He finds activists’ unrelenting prioritization of prefiguration at odds with their strategic interests. Looking at the New Left, Breines (1982) emphasizes that modeling an alternative to the political system is a political act, one that has potential to achieve significant social change in the arena of culture. However, the benefits of participatory democracy and other forms of prefigurative politics can come at a cost. Activists’ ideological commitment to horizontalism has been shown to interfere with their ability to build the kinds of organizations required for long-term, large-scale political transformation. Additionally, participatory democracy contributes to the prefigurative aims of building community, nurturing alternative relationships, and modeling that another world is possible, but it interferes with their ability to participate in the political arena. Breines sees prefigurative politics as distinct from strategic politics and in conflict with strategic aims. Groups can engage with both prefigurative *and* strategic politics, but they will ultimately be in conflict. The ideological commitment to participatory democracy tends to interfere with groups’ ability to form lasting organizations and fundamentally alter social institutions.

Polletta (2002) argues that organizations' use of participatory democracy does not definitively infringe upon their external efficaciousness. Actually, cultivating civic participation may be necessary to reach a broader goal of deepening democracy at large. Participatory democracy has the potential to enhance a group's strategic capacity through deliberative talk, establishing a basis for legitimate authority, cultivating a sense of ownership, building solidarity, and fostering innovation, among other things. Thus, prefigurative politics can play a part in a group's strategic efforts. Staggenborg (1995) finds that informal organizations are more effective at promoting cultural change and building long lasting movements. Maeckelbergh's (2011) study of the Alter-Globalization finds consensus can be strategic under two conditions: when it is unviable to make institutional demands for change, and when movement goals are multiple and not predetermined.

Introducing the Theoretical Lens of Group Style

I contend that an alternative explanation for how activists use consensus is called for, one that integrates the concept of *group style*. Style includes but is not limited to how groups determine membership and maintain bonds, draw boundaries and build relationships with outsiders, and practice speech norms. The term *group bonds* refers to how members of a group relate to each other in consideration of the outside world. *Group boundaries* are how a group relates to those outside of their group, particularly whether other groups or institutions are "like them, not like them, or irrelevant to them" (Lichterman 2006). *Speech norms* determine appropriate ways for group members to talk to each other and establish subjects they can or cannot discuss. These three dimensions, among other elements of style, work together in the context of a social setting and are distinguished only as a heuristic. Styles may be attributed to a single group or may be observed in many. The same styles have been observed across many groups and movements.

Regardless of whether activists are motivated by ideology or strategy, in practice consensus decision-making can look the same. Group style has the potential to deepen the understanding of how groups enact their ideological commitments. Style has the potential to expose how groups navigate their ideological and strategical complexities. Likewise, style may be able to account for the ways which groups with similar ideological inclinations may approach consensus in divergent ways. Additionally, activists of different ideological inclinations or strategic preferences work together. “Diversity of tactics” became a mantra among the activist left throughout the Occupy movements and into the Black Lives Matter movement. Movement moments bring people of diverse ideologies and strategies to into collaboration. Given that groups can be comprised of people with a variety of ideological or strategic inclinations, style can be an apropos approach for understanding how a group works together despite their lack of cohesion.

Choosing to study style does not by any means mean neglecting consideration of ideology and strategy. Indeed, style can be used to understand what groups’ use of consensus looks like, regardless of the ideological or strategic motivations. Style is the way that activists put their ideological commitments or strategic intentions into practice—intentionally and unintentionally. Style can help to illuminate how activists draw the lines that determine what is ideologically permissible. Ideology works reciprocally with style. A group’s ideological inclinations may lead them to embody particular styles. Likewise, a group’s style may shape their ideological preferences (Lichterman 2009). Style and strategy have a different kind of relationship: style constrains strategy (Dasgupta and Lichterman 2014). Style carries ramifications in terms of what issues a group identifies as social problems, what demands they select to make, and how they make those demands.

Group style is a shared way of doing things. It is often considered “the way we’ve always

done things.” Seeing consensus as expressed through style helps to explain why groups practice it regardless of whether it is the most ideologically consistent or strategic form. As I will further explore in the next chapter, the style of decision-making used by contemporary activists in the US and Germany emphasizes its practical, strategic benefits. That is a style that is different from the one used by activists of the 1960s. Activists from both eras had the same prefigurative goals, and they were similarly committed to consensus for ideological reasons. However, they differed in terms of how they saw consensus’ relationship to equality and the extent to which they viewed consensus as practical. Contemporary activists talk about the strategic benefits of consensus, but they ultimately practice consensus without considering an alternative decision-making approach. Their group style is evident when they claim to practice consensus for strategic benefits even though they do not overtly decide to use consensus, nor do they cease to use it when it is not serving their strategic interests. Thus, studying consensus decision-making with lens of group styles helps to understand the complex relationship between activists’ ideological commitments, expressed strategic intentions, and actual motives for practicing consensus.

Another reason to look at consensus through the lens of style is that it offers insight into how consensus decision-making and the styles that accompany it have spread internationally. Group styles can be shared by many groups and social movements, and they can be learned formally or informally. Group styles can be regional or shared across the globe. For that reason, Chapter Four employs the group-style lens to explain how consensus decision-making has diffused by way of activist networks. People adopt a group style by doing, and they also learn the rationale for it. Style is something that activists collectively perform, which means they may purport to use consensus for a reason that is not accurate in terms of characterizing their motivation.

My analysis of group style reveals that activists adopt consensus for ideological reasons,

but that activists today are much more likely to emphasize its practical, strategic benefits. Addressing the notion of group style accounts not just for differences in how activists have practiced consensus. Style also accounts for differences in how they have understood the relationship between consensus, ideology, and strategy. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Four, a better understanding of activists' style of consensus reveals why activists today have not been debilitated by the problems that analysts have seen as intrinsic to the form. It also explains why activists today continue to struggle with certain problems.

For this study, I analyze interviews with Germany-based and American activists through the lens of *group style*, the varied ways that activists understand the meaning behind consensus and enact it. With this approach, I aim to illuminate how style can deepen understandings of how groups practice consensus. In consideration of the increased popularity of consensus in the face of its many critiques, this study revisits questions that are central to the analysis of consensus: (1) How does the group style of consensus change over time in the US and Germany? (2) How are the group styles of consensus of American and German activists similar and different, and why? How do the styles used to practice spread from one group or place to another? And, (3) when activists' practice of consensus is assessed through the lens of group style, are the limitations of consensus the same as scholars would expect?

METHODOLOGY

Consensus in Germany and the United States

I conducted interviews with 30 US-based activists and 30 Germany-based activists.² In both places, I was able to easily find social movement activities in which to participate and recruit

² I interchangeably refer to the activists in this study as either "American and German" or "US-based or Germany-based" to acknowledge that not all of the activists I interviewed in Germany were German nationals.

activists from a broad spectrum of social movements given each country's diverse social movement fields. Germany and the US each have a substantial history of social movement organizations using consensus, and both are well documented in sociological literature. In both the US and Germany, social movements take on similar issues of anti-racism, ecological justice, refugee/migrant rights, feminism, queer and gay rights, anti-capitalism, anti-austerity, community development, and alt-globalization.

In both nations, consensus decision-making is practiced in social movement organizations, as well as in housing and workers collectives. The great majority of activists in both nations were currently or had previously lived in a housing collective. In the US, most of the activists had participated in the Occupy movement and other anarchist collectives. Activists in Germany had prior experience in the European Social Forum, DeGrowth Germany, or ATTAC Germany. In the US, only a few activists had any prior experience in party politics. However, German activists were more likely than not to have participated in a political party at some point in their lives.

Study participants were exclusively from leftist social movement organizations and non-governmental organizations based in the US and Germany with experience in consensus-decision making. In both countries, the activists identified with many different political identities of the left, including left/leftist, anarchist, democratic socialist, Green, progressive, and radical. It was of paramount importance to me that my participants represent a diversity of social movements. For that reason, I recruited participants from four or more cities per country, and from at least five distinct social movements and/or social movement organizations. My goal was to gather accounts from "experts on the ground" who had spent a good amount of time thinking about consensus. I was able to select participants who have diverse experiences practicing consensus and were thoughtful about their participation in consensus.

Table 1.1: Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants*

		US	Germany	Combined
Gender	Male	19 (63%)	16 (53%)	35 (58%)
	Female	11 (37%)	14 (47%)	25 (42%)
Race/Ethnicity	White	18 (60%)	26 (87%)	44 (73%)
	Person of Color	12 (40%)	4 (13%)	16 (27%)
	Black**	5 (17%)	3 (10%)	8 (13%)
	Latinx	5 (17%)	0 (0%)	5 (8%)
	Asian	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
	Middle Eastern	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	1 (2%)
	Mixed Race	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Age	20's	9 (30%)	15 (50%)	24 (40%)
	30's	16 (53%)	6 (20%)	22 (37%)
	40's	2 (7%)	6 (20%)	8 (13%)
	50 and above	3 (10%)	3 (10%)	6 (10%)
Employment	Not working***	9 (30%)	4 (13%)	13 (22%)
	Employed Part-Time	7 (23%)	7 (23%)	14 (23%)
	Employed Full-Time	13 (43%)	6 (20%)	19 (32%)
	Student****	1 (3%)	13 (43%)	14 (23%)
Education *****	No college	11 (37%)	5 (17%)	17 (28%)
	Bachelor level	13 (43%)	18 (60%)	30 (50%)
	Graduate level	6 (20%)	7 (23%)	13 (22%)
Nationality	Citizen*****	30 (100%)	25 (83%)	55 (92%)
	International	0 (0%)	5 (17%)	5 (8%)

*Percentages are rounded to the whole number; percentages do not always add up to 100%

*Refers to a person of African origin or descent

**Unemployed, minimally employed, or retired

***Any currently a student was placed in the student category regardless of other employment

****Refers to a degree in progress or completed

*****Citizen of either the US or Germany

Select demographic characteristics of study participants can be viewed in Table 1.1, above.

The combined characteristics of the activist participants indicate that they are majority White and in their 20s and 30s. Also, the majority of participants attended college or graduate school. With the exception of five study participants, the activists were citizens of either the US or Germany.

Demographically, activists in the US and Germany differed in a few noteworthy ways. American activists were far more racially and ethnically diverse in a way somewhat reflective of the general diversity of the US. However, the activists from Germany included more foreigners and recent refugees, which reflects Germany's membership in the European Union and the influx of refugees into Germany at the time the research was conducted. While activists in the US and Germany had a similar age range, German activists were notably younger than the American activists. German activists were also far more likely to be students, and more likely to have a college education.

Scholar-Activism: Access and Other Considerations

I approach this study as a scholar-activist with fifteen years of experience practicing consensus decision-making in social movement organizations. In my role of researcher, I inhabit several roles: an experienced practitioner of consensus, a friend and comrade, participant observer, and inquisitive scholar. Many of the participants and I had previously organized in social movements together, and many were recommended to me by other interviewees. Interviews took place in the context of ongoing collaboration and in the midst of protest activities. I immersed myself into activities hosted by activist communities in the US and Germany and recruited participants I met through those activities.

It is not uncommon in the study of social movements for scholars to have relationships with the participants in their studies. Scholar-activists often research movements in which they already participate (for example, see Juris 2008 and Maeckelbergh 2011). Given the prevalence of what activists call “security culture”—i.e., attitudes and measures geared toward preventing infiltrators from accessing and monitoring social movement spaces and activities—it can be said that the radical movements that utilize consensus are best studied by those with insider-status. My

scholar-activist status has certainly opened opportunities to interview organizers from many distinct yet exclusive social-movement spaces and organizations, as was made apparent by this study.

As a scholar-activist, I strive to be especially aware of how my personal experiences may bias my interpretations and analysis. With this in mind, after activists responded to my questions, I would rephrase what they had said, asking if my understanding was accurate. It was my goal for organizers to think out loud about consensus, and I believe the nature of my relationship with them made it easier for them to do that. I wanted participants to respond thoughtfully to questions, and to feel comfortable either critiquing or championing consensus.

Data Analysis

Given that I entered into the interviewing and observation processes with my personal experience with consensus, and with familiarity with the sociological literature on group style and consensus, I have utilized an abductive analytic process (Timmermans & Tavory 2012; Tavory & Timmermans 2014). With abduction, I entered the process of collecting data with a strong grasp on germane theory, and looked for unexpected findings in order to refine existing theory or create new theory. Also, in my analytic process, I used open coding methods to guide my analytic process (i.e. Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser 1992; Snow, Morrill, & Anderson 2003).

The abductive process advocates for entering the field with a well-developed and broad theoretical base rather than setting preconceived notions aside. In my own research process, I entered the field with a theoretical base developed by my many years of practicing consensus decision-making and extensive prior knowledge of relevant literature. My experiences, explorations of the literature, and previous discussions about consensus factored into how I

designed my study, how I approached potential participants, the kinds of questions I asked, and how I analyzed the data. Through the processes of transcribing, coding, and analyzing my data, I have deepened my understanding of it. Thus, in my abductive process data analysis, theory learning and theory building worked reciprocally.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Transmission and Spreading of Styles of Consensus

In Chapter Two, I contextualize contemporary German and American activists' consensus practices with that of previous generations of activists. I draw upon other scholarly works to derive a profile of how activists have enacted their commitment to consensus in past eras. I compare activists in the US and Germany from several eras: the 1940's and 50's, 1960's and 70's, the Global Justice activists from the 90's and early 2000's, and today. Activists in each of these eras practiced participatory democracy, however they did not do so uniformly. They practiced consensus with distinct understandings of their social impact, notions of equality among group members, and characteristic ways of relating to one another. This comparison offers insight into how contemporary activists may have derived their styles from prior generations. Also, it provides perspective on the novel aspects of how contemporary activists use consensus.

Styles of Consensus on Two Continents

In Chapter Three, I further explore the styles of consensus-using activists in the United States and Germany. Based on my interviews with contemporary activists in both countries, I find many commonalities in their style of consensus. Through this comparison, I find commonalities between the US- and Germany-based activists, illustrating similarities of style held by groups in separate

continents. They practice consensus with procedures that look essentially the same. They share an approach to practicing consensus that is grounded more in the practical benefits that consensus contributes to their organizing than in notions of broad-sweeping, prefigurative impact. They celebrate consensus because it helps them recruit new members, foster commitment, and make better decisions. They also share a similar understanding of equality, one that is attentive to power inequalities among group members. There were differences in their style of consensus, as well. Whereas activists in Germany described positive group dynamics as being characteristic of their organizations, American activists talked at length about conflict in their meetings. American activists talked enthusiastically about ideological diversity, which was quite different than German activists, who explained to me that consensus works best in groups that are ideologically homogenous.

Based upon my interviews with activists in the US and Germany, I draw conclusions about how activists come to practice consensus and how they spread consensus to others. This cross-national analysis highlights the different styles that activists employ while engaging in consensus. To explain the differences between American and German activists' style of consensus, I analyze how two recent movements—the Global Justice and Occupy movements—have shaped the style and practice of consensus in each country.

A New Look at the Limitations of Consensus through the Lens of Style

There are many problems with consensus, yet activists continue to use it. An obvious question is whether, in fact, consensus decision-making is inevitably prone to those problems. In Chapter Four, I look at three pitfalls of consensus decision-making identified in the literature. Scholars have critiqued consensus for its propensity for inefficiencies, stalemates, and missed political

opportunities (Mansbridge 1983; Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002; Cornell 2011; della Porta 2005; Hammond 2013; Gitlin 2012; Smucker 2013). The pragmatic group style of the German and American activists creates opportunities for activists to make decisions more effectively. Rather than dogmatically adhering to the procedures of consensus, these contemporary activists embrace a more flexible approach. They make decisions with formal decision-making procedures and a number of more efficient informal approaches. Scholars also critique consensus for the way it incorporates newcomers, people of color, working class people and other people with limited availability (Leondar-Wright 2014). My interviews with contemporary activists reveal that although their group style include talk about race and class inclusion, they have not effectively incorporated these values into their consensus processes.

Paying attention to the ways in which groups practice consensus, to their group style, shows why today's groups are less vulnerable to some of those problems—while at the same time still vulnerable to others. Using the lens of style illuminates activists' ability to remedy certain pitfalls of consensus, but not all. The literature on style offers reflexivity as a way for groups to discuss and improve upon their styles (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Chapter Four reveals that applying reflexivity to consensus decision-making offers a means through which groups can improve upon the issues with consensus identified in the literature, although within limits. Groups are more likely to remediate pitfalls of consensus when they are aware of a problem and when they can practice consensus differently and in distinct contexts. Reflexivity is ineffective at resolving problematic aspects of group styles when groups do not use it, when the problem is invisible, and when they attribute the cause of the problem to be outside of their group.

Group Style's Contribution to Consensus Decision-Making

Through looking at consensus decision-making through the lens of group style with a multi-generational and cross-national comparison, I contribute to our understanding of how consensus is used, how it changes and spreads, and how activists address its limitations, or not. Interestingly, the same decision-making processes and procedures can look very different when groups enact consensus via distinct styles. This is apparent in how the styles of past activist eras compare to contemporary styles and how the group styles of American and German activists compare.

By looking at *how* activists use consensus, we can see they are much more diverse in their approach of using consensus than is often presumed in the literature. Also, we can see that activists are actively attempting to address and improve upon the limitations of consensus. However, they are not always capable of doing so. Which problems they are able to address and *why* they are—or are not—effective in doing so offers valuable perspective on the extent to which activist groups are capable of improving their internal processes, addressing inefficiencies, and be as inclusive as they strive to be.

CHAPTER TWO

The Evolution of the Styles of Consensus Decision-Making in the United States and Germany over Four Activist Eras

Activists have a long history of practicing consensus decision-making, and the meanings that shape how and why they use consensus have progressed with the times. Looking to past eras of consensus gives insight into how consensus has changed and sheds light on the unique characteristics of our current era. Group life and activist practices can be studied through the lens of group style.

Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) define group style as “culture in interaction.” Style is an element of culture that can be observed in how group members act together as they engage in a variety of aspects of group life including: how group membership is established, how group members interact with one another, how group members are expected to act and treat one another, speak, as well as how they frame issues, make claims, relate to outside organizations, form coalitions, and more. Style extends beyond *what* activists do to describe *how* they do it. Styles can be shared by a single group or many groups, as well as a single social movement or many movements—including transnationally. Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014) also found that groups’ styles can vary by the “scenes” or settings that activists inhabit. Members of groups are able to vary their styles in accordance with the demands and expectations of a number of contexts.

According to Lichterman (2009), a group’s ideology works reciprocally with a group’s style, meaning that a group’s style may be shaped by their ideology, and their ideology may be shaped by their style. Both ideology and style offer perspective into the complexities of group life. Group style looks at how ideology and other aspects of culture express themselves through interaction. One benefit of studying activists through the lens of group style is that style is a property of a group. Groups can be comprised of many individuals, including individuals of a variety of ideological inclinations. Group members may not have matching individual ideologies,

but they do coalesce around how to “hold beliefs and present opinions in a group setting” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). By characterizing the way activists describe their consensus decision-making through the lens of group style, I do not invalidate the role that ideology plays in shaping activist practices. Rather, I highlight the varying ways that activists enact their ideological commitments. Groups with the same ideological commitments may enact those commitments in different ways because there are many variations of group styles for them to embody.

Group style can be observed by comparing groups across time and in many places. When the same organizational forms and processes, such as the protocols and practices of consensus decision-making, take on different characteristics or meanings, then style is at play. Comparing *how* activists practice consensus decision-making at different points in history reveals distinct styles accompanying consensus. Activists’ commitment to consensus decision making may be driven by their ideological commitment to horizontalism, but how they enact that commitment varies in accordance with their group style. Scholars have tended to focus on consensus decision-making in a single period, which makes it difficult to see how the practice of consensus has changed over time. Also, scholars have focused on changes in the procedures of consensus, making it difficult to grasp the ways in which new purposes and commitments may be built into the procedures. Thinking about consensus in terms of different styles allows for the understanding of the way procedures are shaped by those purposes and meanings.

In this study, I make use of three points of comparison when I assess the group styles of each activist era: how activists understand the social impact of consensus, what activists believe counts as equality, and how activists characteristically relate to one another. Examples of questions that correspond with each dimension of style are also included in Table 2.1. I borrowed these three points of comparison Polletta’s (2002) comparative historical analysis of participatory democracy.

However, for the first time, I am considering each of these points of comparison as elements of a group’s style. Table 2.1, below, details how each of point of comparison relates to Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) fundamental elements of group style.

Table 2.1: Points of Historical Comparison of Group Style

Points of Comparison	Dimension of style as defined in Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003)	Corresponding Questions
Notions of social impact	<i>Group boundaries</i> – “a group’s assumptions about what the group’s relationship (imagined and real) to the wider world should be while in the group’s context.”	Do activists believe their internal practices will cause other organizations and institutions to change? Do activists’ decision-making practices promote or interfere with their ability to form coalitions, promote structural change, and have political impact?
	<i>Speech norms</i> — “a group’s assumptions about what appropriate speech is in the group’s context”	What are the norms for talking about social impact?
What counts as equality	<i>Group bonds</i> – “a group’s assumptions about what members’ mutual responsibilities should be while in the group context.”	What does it mean for group members to treat each other as equals?
	<i>Group boundaries</i> – “a group’s assumptions about what the group’s relationship (imagined and real) to the wider world should be while in the group context.”	Do activists see themselves as equal to the populace?
	<i>Speech norms</i> — “a group’s assumptions about what appropriate speech is in the group’s context”	What are the norms for talking about equality?
Characterization of relationships between activists	<i>Group bonds</i> – “a group’s assumptions about what members’ mutual responsibilities should be while in the group context.”	How are group members expected to treat one another?
	<i>Speech norms</i> — “a group’s assumptions about what appropriate speech is in the group’s context”	How are group members expected to interact with one another?
		What are the norms for talking about group dynamics?

I interpret activists’ notions of the social impact of consensus as a group style because it pertains to how activists attribute meaning to consensus decision-making, more specifically, how activists articulate their perceptions of their social impact. Activists’ *group boundaries*—shared assumptions about how to relate to the world beyond the boundaries of their group—are central to

their notions of their social impact. Do activists believe their internal practices will cause other organizations or institutions to adopt consensus? Do activists' decision-making practices promote or interfere with their ability to form coalitions or to have political impact? Activists' ideas about what counts as equality is part of their *group bonds*, shared assumptions of how group members behave and relate to one another, as well as their *group boundaries*. Relevant questions for that element of style are: In what ways do group members treat/not treat each other as equals? Do activists see themselves as being more elite than the populace, or as equals? The third point of comparison, the characteristic relationships that underpin activists' practice of consensus, is connected to *group bonds*. To observe this element of group style, I look for evidence of how group members of each era of activists interact with one another. Lastly, *speech norms*, an element of group style that includes shared assumptions of what constitutes permissible speech for group members, can be observed in each of the three points of comparison between activist eras. Questions that probe activists' speech norms include: What are the norms for talking about social impact? What values do activists express about equality? How do group members talk about their group dynamics?

Using these three points of comparison, I will create a profile of each era's group style. What characterizes these three elements of group life as group style is that they are shared and durable fixtures of group life. Also, these points of comparison can be identified as group style by observing them recur in many groups or movements, considering that group styles are not idiosyncratic to individual groups. Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) describe group style as "recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group's shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting." Thus, group style can be found in any aspect of group life that includes shared norms around speech and interactions.

The historical eras and movements I address in this chapter include: 1940-50's radical pacifists in the US and '45ers in Germany; 1960-70's student movements, anti-war movements, women's liberation movements in the US, and the '68er movement in West Germany; and the 1990-early 2000's Global Justice movement, which includes the US, Germany, and many other countries internationally. To compare historic and contemporary approaches to consensus decision-making, I draw upon the work of scholars who have developed portraits of prior activist eras in the US and in Germany. I then compare past eras to the current one by drawing upon interviews I conducted with 30 activists in the US and 30 activists in Germany who have experience using consensus.

Using a historical approach, one can see continuity between the American radical pacifists, 1960's new leftists in the United States and Europe, global justice activists in the 1990's, and the Spanish Indignados of the 2010's. Defining these episodes of consensus solely by their continuity would miss important differences in how activists have practiced the form. All these groups shared ideological beliefs in radical equality and saw consensus decision-making as prefiguring equality on a broader scale. But they differed in a number of respects, including: 1) how they saw consensus within the movement having an impact outside the movement; 2) what relationships underpinned their practice of consensus; and 3) what counted as equality. Their different styles of consensus reflected the context in which they operated, as well as what they had learned from prior movements.

Through this comparison of activists' eras of consensus, I identify the way their group style for consensus has taken on new meanings, orientations, and relationship forms. The driving questions for that investigation are: 1) How have activists' group styles of consensus changed over

the years in terms of social impact notions, equality, and relationships? And, 2) Through what mechanisms do styles change?

FRAGILE DEMOCRACY IN THE 1940's AND 50's

In the in 1940's and 50's, activists responded to World War II and the Cold War in ways that were greatly shaped by their social and political context. In the United States, radical pacifists resisted militarism and centralized power through tightly knit participatory democratic networks. Their style of consensus was characterized by their intention to preserve participatory democracy until a time with less repression, their lack of interest in including or recruiting outsiders, and relationships grounded in religious fellowship (Polletta 2002). In Germany, a generation known as the '45ers explored new forms of political engagement and social roles while being greatly influenced by their experience during and after the fall of the Nazi regime. Although history does not recall members of the '45er generation engaging in experiments with radical democracy, they were nevertheless absorbed in the great experiment of transitioning their nation from fanatical fascism into a representative democracy. The '45ers are also significant given that they set the backdrop for the political experiments of the 1960's.

The Radical Pacifists of the United States—Preserving Participatory Democracy for Prosperity

In the 1940's and 50's, American radical pacifists formed organizations such as the Peacemakers and the Committee for Non-Violent Revolution around the principles of participatory democracy, with the intention of preserving it despite their hostile political context (Polletta 2002). They embodied their anti-militarist values by working together cooperatively. They lived their collectivistic principles.

The pacifists organized in the midst of a repressive political context despite lacking public support or sympathy (Katz 1974). After WWII, the cold war cultivated the public's skepticism towards pacifism and elevated government repression of dissenters. The radical pacifists' context was one of public support for the war effort and government repression of anti-war efforts. As a result, they worked within insular organizations without the immediate aim of expanding the popularity of participatory democracy. Instead, they tasked themselves with a duty to preserve radical democracy, so that it might eventually flourish in a more hospitable context down the line. They were more interested in the quality of their own internal processes, rather than in recruiting more people to join their ranks. They were isolated, and their understanding of their potential political impact was shaped by their awareness of said isolation (Polletta and Hoban 2016).

As a result of their isolation, the radical pacifists directed their efforts toward improving democratic forms within their own organizations, which tended to be comprised of people who were ideologically, demographically, and politically similar (Polletta and Hoban 2016). Their sense of equality among one another was mediated by the religious belief that they were equals before God (Polletta 2002). They worked to create egalitarian relationships among one another, but they were not concerned about broader representation within their groups. Equality among the masses was not a priority for the radical pacifists. To the contrary, they viewed themselves as the vanguards and were not interested in leveling the status between leaders and members.

Polletta (2002) characterizes the relationships of the radical pacifists as having been guided by a sense of religious fellowship. Fellowship bestowed upon group members a respect for one another as equals in the eyes of God, while also creating precedence for accepting authority among the group. Group interaction was marked by mutual respect. They were open to dissent, but within limit. Too much dissent was often seen as lacking civility.

The '45er Generation Germany – The Historic Backdrop for the Radical 1960's

The '45er generation is not known to have practiced participatory democracy and is not a social movement. However, I include them in this discussion because they played an important role transitioning German society from the fascism of the Third Reich. They created the context from which the radical movements of the 1960's could emerge. It was not until later that participatory democracy established a strong presence in German social movements (Mackaelbergh 2011b).

Members of the '45er generation came of age within the Nazi regime and were tasked with the mission of rehabilitating German society in the wake of WWII. Their parents' involvements with the Nazi party made it easier for them to break away from the tradition towards democratization and a new type of social relations. Burdened with the atrocities of their nation's past, '45ers opted to ignore rather than directly confront it. According to Moses (1999), the '45ers' socialization under the Nazi regime diminished their faith to "challenge history" in effort to create a better world. The '45ers are characterized by accepting the legitimacy of the state, at the cost of embracing radical or participatory democracy.

The 45ers' position on participatory democracy, prefiguration, and equality is most apparent in how they regarded the later rebellions of the 1960's. According to Moses (1999), the '45ers were critical of the social experiments of the '68er generation because they had seen firsthand the "dangers of utopianism and youthful romanticism" as Hitler Youth. The '45ers viewed the radical experiments of the '68ers as "dangerously totalitarian." The Nazi regime left an ongoing mark on German culture through the persistence of right-wing culture, including patriarchal and hierarchical thinking, and social conformity. The '45ers' continued compliance with social norms they learned as youth under Hitler's regime set the backdrop for the cultural rebellion of the 1960's. The generation of '68 rebelled against the '45ers' complicit silence about

Germany's Nazi past, their social norms preserved from Nazism, and their unquestioning embrace of democratic forms imported from the US. In these ways, the '45er generation provided the context for later emergence of radical experiments with democracy of the 1960's and 70's.

RADICAL DEMOCRACY IN THE 1960's AND 70's

The 1960's ushered an era of experiments with democracy internationally. Activists in the US and Germany were inspired to action by the Vietnam War, the civil rights movements, and a cultural moment in which relationships between citizens and the state were being renegotiated. Bolstered by international solidarity, they took on the mission of political and social transformation. With participatory democracy, they embodied their democratic values in their organizing practices, thus modeling the world they were working to create. They experimented with new collectivistic forms that reject authority and embraced horizontalism in decision-making and division of tasks (Rothschild-Whitt 1979). The group style of activists from the 60's and 70's was characterized by their confidence in the prefigurative potential of consensus decision-making, their notion of equality being tied to equal say among group members but little consideration of structural inequalities, and relationships based on the template of friendship (Polletta 2002).

The New Left in the United States

Activists from a variety of social movements in the 1960's, including the civil rights, women's liberation, and anti-Vietnam War movements, embraced participatory democracy. In doing so, they sought to model an alternative to the existing political system—one that embraces a more radically democratic ethos. Students for a Democratic Society built upon the momentum of the

anti-war movement to build a broad base of membership and established consensus decision-making as the standard for participatory democracy.

Unlike the radical pacifists of the 1940's and 50's, activists of the new left benefited from a more opportune social and political context (Polletta 2002). Given the extent to which the public was actually mobilized, the activists of the new left were justified in their aspiration to spread participatory democracy more broadly. They were confident they would create social change by modeling an alternative, but at times their prefigurative ambitions were in conflict with their ability to pursue policy reforms (Breines 1983). The activists' staunch opposition to hierarchy generated conflict regarding the formalization of organizations, which hampered the long-term stability of the movements. During this time, the extraordinary spread of organizations operating on principles of consensus emerged. Rothschild-Witt (1979) observed that consensus decision-making was adopted in organizations with a plethora of missions including newspapers, food coops, health coops, and book publishers. Even entire urban neighborhoods operated as collectives. Regardless of the primary mission of these organizations, they took on prefigurative mission of horizontalism. Activists of the 1960's struggled to balance their prefigurative ambitions with their commitment to political reform.

The activists of the 1960's embraced horizontalism passionately. They were deeply concerned about leveling status among group members and cultivating equality internally (Rothschild-Witt 1979). They aimed to cultivate the development of group members in an effort to overcome status barriers (Polletta 2002). Equality for them was about distributing access to power among members, but they did not go so far as to actively address differences in privilege and power (Polletta and Hoban 2016). Women in SDS reported feeling that their contributions were less valued than those of their male counterparts (Polletta 2002). In SNCC, White and Black

activists worked together, but with distinct roles and status. Polletta (2005) found that despite efforts to educate newcomers to participatory democracy and include them in decision-making, participatory democracy came to be associated with Whiteness. Ultimately, the intricacies of the decision-making process became alienating. Freeman (1973) found another downside to the lack of structure among new left organizations: persistent informal hierarchies. Organizations of the new left struggled to address and overcome imbalances of informal power among group members.

The relationships among activists of the 1960's were forged in the fire of political opportunity in the face of horrendous political repression. Enduring that context cultivated relationships among activists who were grounded in mutual respect. Due to their informal organizational structures, activists adopted friendship as the template for relationships among group members. This sense of close comradeship facilitated easy delegation of tasks and made differences manageable. However, the downside to friendship ties is that friendships are prone to conflict and friend groups can be difficult for newcomers to permeate (Polletta 2002).

The '68er Generation in West Germany

The '68er generation differed from earlier eras of activism through the boldness with which they defied social norms, their deliberate effort to confront and redress Germany's Nazi past, and the use (by some) of militaristic, direct-action tactics. Less burdened than prior eras by the detrimental political experiences of the Nazi regime, this cohort was more receptive to participatory politics (Dalton 2001). Generally, '68ers rejected the hierarchical organizational forms of orthodox Marxism and other sectarian groups. However, East Germany's '68ers were politically left, yet reluctant to disassociate entirely from communism (Vinen 2018).

Students led the vanguard of '68er movements. The American Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had an influence on the creation of the German SDS, and the groups shared a lot in common. One activist, Michael Vester, attended the Port Huron convention of 1962. His enthusiastic participation contributed greatly to the vision articulated in the statement, which went on to shape global understandings of participatory democracy. According to Patty Lee Parmalee, an American SDS member who lived in Berlin, in the German SDS, their meetings had a “high level of debate” in “endless, smoke filled meetings” (in Gassert and Klimke 2018). Another activist group, Subversive Aktion, used theatrics to confront capitalism and used more aggressive direct-action tactics than the sit-ins and teach-ins of the US. Eventually, Subversive Aktion infiltrated the SDS and imparted upon SDS their direct-action techniques (Vinen 2018).

The '68ers made their mark on German culture by embracing decentralized organizational structures, participatory decision making, and other prefigurative movement practices (Mackaelbergh 2011b). Activists in the 60's did this by breaking away from the singularly focused communist and socialist movements of prior generations and embracing instead a prefigurative approach with multiple objectives. During the 1960's, the meaning of participatory democracy was transformed to primarily refer to consensus decision-making and grew in terms of how many people engaged in these practices. The '68ers sought to develop alternate institutions that would show the world what a truly democratic society could look like. Similar to their American counterparts, the '68ers were optimistic about the efficacy of their prefigurative practices, but they lacked sufficient analysis of how their prefigurative aims would ultimately lead to impact.

The '68ers are celebrated for accomplishing a cultural revolution and criticized for failing to accomplish significant political wins. They are generally discussed as though they were one cohesive movement, but they were comprised of diverse base that was rife with contradictions

(Hockenos 2007; Hockenos and Fischer 2008). They were varied ideologically, including their inclination toward nonviolence and guerilla tactics. Equality and horizontality were valued, yet women expressed their frustration of being treated less than equals, as did American women of the same era (Polletta 2002). The '68ers espoused egalitarian rhetoric but did not question or examine internal power differences, which was also the case in American 60's movement. The '68ers rejected parliamentary democracy in favor of participatory democracy, but they lacked the kind of experience and examples that could have supported them in developing optimal internal structures to sustain (Maeckelbergh 2011).

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING IN THE GLOBAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT: 1990-2010

The Global Justice movement is a conglomeration of individuals and groups from around the world who advocate for fair-trade policies and oppose globalization and global financial institutions such as the World Bank. The group style of the Global Justice movement is characterized by a strong belief in the prefigurative potential of consensus decision-making to foster a more radically democratic world, intricate efforts to level structural inequalities among movement participants, and relations ground in identity and political affinity (Polletta 2002).

Beginning in the 1990's, activists from around the globe, including Germans and Americans, mobilized in conferences and mass actions to network and demonstrate against neoliberalism and globalization. The Global Justice movement prizes transnational solidarity, and the World Social Forum and its more local manifestations have brought activists and social movement organizations together to deliberate and organize. Other organizational fixtures of the Global Justice movement include IndyMedia, a grassroots independent media network, and ATTAC, an international alt-globalization network of organizations. The massive direct-action

events, like the protest of the WTO in Seattle in 1999, and intricately coordinated convergences of the World Social Forum provided activists with the opportunity to refine consensus-based decision-making processes and share them with millions of activists around the globe.

The Global Justice movement practices participatory democracy with the aim of prefiguring a better world, and as a tool determine goals in movements in which goals have not been predetermined (Maeckelbergh 2011). Central to the Global Justice movement's practices is the prefigurative aim of "being the change" one wishes to see in the world, and that "another world is possible." In the Global Justice movement, consensus decision-making is more than a process, it is also seen as having the potential to promote a more democratic world more broadly. For that reason, organizations of the Global Justice movement mirror their values in their organizational forms. According to Juris (2008), the impact of the Global Justice movement was mediated and enhanced by the technological advancement of the time. The internet fueled the Global Justice movement by creating opportunity for transnational networking. Activists' organizing efforts were met with greater potential for transnational movement-building and the opportunity for activists to tell their own stories and publicize events in unprecedented ways. This new potential shaped activists' belief that a new world was, indeed, possible.

The Global Justice movement prioritizes their commitment to equality through the practice of consensus decision-making and many process mechanisms intended to address inequality among participants. In an effort to address the flaws of past eras' use of consensus, activists of the Global Justice movement revamped consensus decision-making with innovative facilitation tools like spokes-councils, multilingual simultaneous translation, and structured procedures. The Global Justice movement popularized the progressive stack, a process mechanism that prioritizes the participation of women and people of color by allowing them to jump ahead in the speaking order.

Global justice activists introduced a practice of having one or more participants in meetings to serve as “vibes watchers” who monitor group process dynamics. They also modified consensus processes to include intricate hand signals. One hand signal was intended to be used when a participant had a “point of process” that they want to raise about the procedures and group dynamics at play. The use of this hand signal provided for conversations about power and inequality among group members that evolved into the procedures of consensus—procedures that became adopted by social movement organizations around the world.

The first World Social Forum was held two years after the Seattle WTO protests. It was conceived as an open space where activists and organizations from around the globe could come together on equal footing to discuss and formulate plans for action to address the challenges brought about as a result of globalization and major economic institutions’ social impact. Within the World Social Forum are ongoing conversations about how to invite and prioritize the participation of women, people of color, economically disadvantaged people, and people from the global south (Juris 2013). An example of how the World Social Forum and many other conferences and convergences of the Global Justice movement make efforts to include the participation of diverse peoples is through their incorporation of simultaneous multilingual translation (Doerr 2009). Equality is not something that is taken for granted within the Global Justice movement; it is something that is deliberately and effortfully aspired toward.

Polletta (2002) describes the relationship between Global Justice activists as characterized by being identity-based and guided by political affinity, rather than modeled after friendship or religious fellowship. As Polletta describes, *affinity* is explicitly political, derived from ideological purpose, and tied to identity. For Global Justice activists, the goal of consensus is not to create conformity, but rather to bring together people of shared political affiliations or identities.

Activists of the Global Justice movement embrace consensus decision-making with optimism about its potential to bring more radical democracy to the world. Global Justice activists are sensitive to issues of power imbalance within the movement, and they make attempts to address those issues with intentional group processes. Their relationships are characterized by political affinity and shared identity.

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING TODAY IN THE US AND GERMANY

Based on interviews I completed with 60 activists based in the United States and Germany, I find that their notions about consensus decision-making are unique in many ways, but they are also continuous of past eras in other ways. As I have done for previous eras, I describe activist style regarding how contemporary activists perceive consensus to factor into their social change goals, how they view and address equality and anti-oppression within their group, and what characteristics are fundamental to the relationships among activists. With the first two topics, the activists who participated shared common perspectives, regardless of nationality. However, I found that activists in the US and Germany described their relationships within some variation, and I explore those differences below and in the following chapter.

Contemporary Activists' Social Change Notions

Like the activists of the 1960s and activists of the Global Justice Movements, contemporary activists in the US and Germany agree that by practicing consensus they are demonstrating a more democratic alternative to the status quo. With an underlying distrust of the government, the activists see that an effective way to address social issues is to generate alternatives. Kira, an Occupy activist from Oakland, California, poses the question: “Do you try and create change

within the existing infrastructure, or do you work to create an alternative infrastructure?” For Antonio, an LA-based activist, the answer is clear because “the system is not going to help people, it’s not going to change for the sake of wanting to change to help folks. We have to start anew. We have to build something . . . build something completely different or new.” Sven, an activist with ATTAC Berlin, explained that a distinguishing characteristic for his and other groups is that they “take matters in our own hands and we don't trust political parties.” Activists take matters into their own hands in ways that are similar to past generations: they build autonomous social programs and they embody the principles of a just society by living them. As Atrey, a German activist, explains, prefigurative politics are central to their understanding of how social change happens: “For culture to change we have to talk about it, but we also have to live it . . . live consensus and embody it.”

Contemporary activists certainly share aspects of the prefigurative vision held by activists of the 1960's, but they do not match their confidence in how broad-sweeping the impact their participatory democracy will be. Many consider ridiculous the notion that by practicing consensus decision-making in their groups, they may somehow make government more democratic. Celia, a community organizer in Santa Ana, California, laughed at the idea of her city's council adopting consensus, having previously been exposed to the council through interactions with her group. Abdul, an activist from Occupy Oakland, struggled to imagine how the 400,000 residents of his city would ever be able to reach consensus. Similarly, Kira pondered, “How are you ever going to get a whole country to agree?” When I asked Friz, a member of the DeGrowth movement, if he thought that consensus decision-making could have a broader impact, he told me that his organization was too small to have an impact. He did, however, think that a larger more powerful movement could.

Their confidence in the power of prefigurative politics waned in comparison of the 1960's and Global Justice movement activists. They were distinctly different than the wide-eyed idealists that consensus practitioners are often portrayed to be. Stripped of expectations that cultural transformation would result from their groups' horizontalism, the activists I spoke with were skeptical. In Sven's perspective, "Of course there's the impact of the movement, but if you focus on consensus decision-making, I don't think there is a big impact." As Salone, an Occupier and squatter from Oakland said: "Does consensus change the world—no. That's magical thinking." Nathan, an occupier from San Francisco, shared that he had experienced a passing "magical thinking" of sorts, but only at the height of the Occupy movement: "When I got swept up in it, and really started believing it. I thought, why couldn't neighborhoods across the US organize themselves like this? . . . It seemed possible, even if just for a moment." Yagil, an activist in Berkeley, California, told me that his experience with the occupy movement and other horizontal organizing project taught him: "You still need clear, proximate goals. You're not going to swallow the society with the prefigurative society."

The contemporary activists were dismissive of participatory democracy's potential to cause massive social transformation but they still believed it had the potential to change society through what Selina, an activist from Kansas, described as a "ripple effect" that "will change the way we make laws, change culture, change community." They see that participating in consensus decision making is developmentally enriching experience, one that supports activists in becoming better at articulating their positions and listening to others. Alexandra, in Cologne expressed that consensus has a broad impact because "individuals are getting used to voicing their opinion. I think they might develop also stronger demands toward the government to hear their voices." Kira struggled to consider the limitations and impact of consensus:

Does consensus have an impact in and of itself? I wouldn't go so far as to say that one group's consensus process is going to affect society at a large scale. But I think the important thing is that in the process of doing that you learn so much about yourself, your prejudices and privileges. So, the real social impact it has is the impact it has on individuals and the impact that has on society. In that way it has a very strong effect, on the grassroots. And who knows, maybe it can eventually accumulate to have an impact as a whole.

Even though they reject that consensus has a broad prefigurative impact, today's activists embrace its transformative potential as a result of how it empowers and educates participants.

During interviews, I asked activists if they believe that consensus is strategic. Their answers indicated that while they are skeptical of the prefigurative potential of consensus, they are confident that consensus improves their movements' ability to accomplish their strategic aims. Consensus, they explained, was essential for their groups' ability to reach their goals because, among other things, it supported them in building a base, learning to work together, cultivating solidarity, inspiring action, fostering solidarity, and making better decisions. Today's activists see consensus decision-making as strategic because of the many pragmatic benefits it promotes within their movements.

Activists stressed the pragmatic benefits of consensus and offered many examples of how they adapt consensus decision-making experimentally. However, I found they only make adaptations to consensus within limits. They are not willing to abandon consensus and embrace voting in times when consensus decision-making is not strategically beneficial. The confines of their adaptation efforts reveal that their commitment to consensus decision-making is inherently ideological, yet they adopt a pragmatic style to cope with the inefficiencies of consensus to the extent that they are able.

Contemporary Activists' Perspectives on Equality and Anti-Oppression

The contemporary activists I interviewed shared similar perspectives to those of prior eras of participatory democracy regarding hierarchy. They articulated strong perspectives about the damaging and oppressive nature of hierarchy to explain why they prefer to organize using

consensus decision making. Like activists from the 40's to the early 2000's, they value consensus because of the opportunity it provides for all members of a group to control group decision-making efforts and have equal say. They told me that, as a result of this aspect of consensus, both themselves and other group members experience empowerment.

Unlike the radical pacifists of the 1940's and 50's, contemporary activists extend their egalitarian ideals beyond the boundaries of their group. They want for others to have the experience of empowerment through participating in consensus decision-making. Ross told me he hopes that the greater population will see the alternative institutions that they have created and join in. As seen during the Occupy movement, they make large, visible demonstrations of the consensus process and host their general assemblies in public spaces where anyone can join in. Yet, Sarah recognizes that consensus is “mostly used in the left-wing scene and that excludes some people that don't get in contact with that scene,” but she still believes that it's possible to solve that issue by “spread[ing] the idea of consensus.”

Contemporary activists differ from activists of the 1960's and 70's in their acute awareness of the realities of power imbalances in their groups. They recognize that despite their groups' intentions to gather as equals, differences in social status, power, and privilege that are evident in society at large permeate their groups. Giovanni explained that in his German student activist group, “we would try to be hierarchy-free and we would have discussions about it—the outcome is that it's not possible. There will always be hierarchy.” The power differences, Sven described, are persistent because “These hierarchies in groups—often you don't see it. It's a structural thing.” They make efforts to address the imbalances of informal inequalities as a result of ‘structurelessness,’ which as Freeman (1973) identified was a plague for women's liberation and other organizations in the 1970's. Friz, of the German DeGrowth movement and Konzeptberg,

told me that they try “to be anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-egoistic, and so on . . . It's in the details.” Regardless, they readily described informal leadership cores who held greater power and influence over decision making outcomes. Sher, who’s activism experience dates back to the Freedom Summer, told me “there was a group of people at Occupy Oakland that had a huge amount of power and used it pretty much without any need to camouflage it.”

The contemporary activists who participated in this study were adamant about the potential of consensus decision-making to support their groups’ commitment to anti-oppression, as the US-based activists described it, and awareness, the term used by activists in Germany. They see that consensus can be used to level hierarchies within their groups and create spaces for the voices of more marginalized group members like women, people of color, and those who are homeless and socially disenfranchised. Sarah, a member of an anarchist musical ensemble, described the impact consensus had on her: “From a gender perspective, it empowered me to say no, and to say, I have doubts or I don't want it.” Practicing consensus with anti-oppression in mind, they say, involves creating space for group members to actively confront inequalities and discrimination within the group. Akil, an activist with Black Lives Matter and Occupy LA, explained that even in consensus-based organization:

We deal with white supremacist attitudes, we deal with racism, we deal with sexism, we deal with all the things that, we're fighting against patriarchy . . . If somebody has a concern about something like that, it's addressed right then and there, and not swept under the rug.

Contemporary activists consider inequalities in power and privilege within their groups as unavoidable but strive to address them when they do arise.

They told me that working in diverse groups in this way is rewarding but not without difficulties. Juika, and organizer with an anti-racism festival in Berlin described backlash within her organizations when White group members felt that their contributions were undervalued. They

were “complaining that they were marked as White and didn't have the same time of speech.” According to Naomi, a youth organizer from Chicago, “there's always more to learn and unpack,” when it comes to confronting one’s own privilege, which is both incredibly challenging and rewarding. Akil agrees that “Everybody has some type of privilege that they have to check,” and recounts his own experience learning to “check his male privilege.” Which is why Saka, an activist from Ireland living in Berlin believes that “Even a group that is really trying to confront sexism, racism etc., can have things come out from subconscious. That's why it's really important that groups be open to feedback and change. Not to just think, because we have this setup, we are bulletproof.”

Charles, a community organizer from Detroit, Michigan, celebrates participatory democracy as being the “only way” to make decisions, because “if we want massive change that changes the reality for people of color, it is only going to come from people of color.” Naomi agrees that “the people who've experience that trauma, they're the ones that need to be calling the shots about how that's being talked about, and how it's being addressed.”

Consensus decision-making has the potential to give decision-making to those people most affected by social issues, but not always. Charles observed that sometimes giving equal weight to everyone’s position on a decision may not be optimal—he proposes that those most affected by the decision, as well as those most impacted by the issue at hand, should sometimes be the ones to call the shots. The refugee rights movement in Germany, which occupied public plazas in Berlin and other cities for years, adopted decision-making structures that prioritized the voices of refugees. Nussy and Cosa, both refugees and organizers in the Oranienplatz occupation in Berlin, explained that in their movement, they include refugees and “supporters” who are not refugees. Both factions are

welcomed to participate in meetings and have their perspectives heard. But, when it comes time to make a decision, the members of the group who are refugees branch off from the group, deliberate, and decide. They do this because, as Nussy describes, “The decision should come from the refugees . . . because they are the ones affected. That's why the supporters should not take decisions.”

The activists I spoke with are deeply committed to promoting equality and anti-oppression within their groups and in the world at large. For that reason, as Sven from ATTAC Germany put it, “How we organize is really important.” Atrey, an activist with DeGrowth Germany believes that with thoughtful facilitation, an organization can remain attentive to privilege and dynamics of oppression. A big part of doing so is cultivating a group style that encourages members to call out and talk through ways that inequalities are reproduced within the group.

In Chapter Four of this dissertation, I will further explore contemporary activists’ notions of equality and how they embody their values related to equality. In that chapter, I demonstrate the ways the activists’ anti-oppression and anti-capitalist values fall short of actual inclusion of people of color and working-class people. This observation serves to highlight that activists’ embodiment of anti-oppression is a style, rather than a direct enactment of their values.

Contemporary Activists’ Ways of Relating to One Another

Activists in US in the 1940’s and 50’s came together in isolated circles bound together by religious fellowship and mutual deference. Activists of the 1960’s and 70’s gathered with friendship as the template for their way of relating to one another. A central aspect of their movements was to radically reconsider and reshape societal norms and social roles, and they embodied that by experimenting with organizations forms that attempted to level hierarchies between group

members and society more broadly. In response to some of the pitfalls of new social movements' informal structures, the global justice movements of the 1990's and early 2000's developed relationships that were more driven by political identity and affinity—in other words, more centered around how group members relate to one another in the context of political action (Polletta 2002).

Activists today embrace participatory democracy with relationships that build upon aspects from 1960's and 1990's movements. Both US-based and Germany-based activists value relationships that thoughtfully address and work through differences among group members in order to develop common ground. They appreciate how consensus supports them in bringing diverse people and perspectives together. Akil, a Black Lives Matter and Occupy activist, has “seen people that probably normally wouldn't function with each other outside of activist circles come together and become great friends.” Mona, a student activist in Austria, explained that with consensus it is “really nice that we have a really respectful way of dealing with each other. We can communicate with each other . . . also get to know each other too.” Giovanni, a member of the same group elaborated: “You're able to reflect on your own position because you're not in competition.”

They expressed to me that building common ground takes work, but it is an essential aspect of working together without hierarchy. Salone, an Oakland-based anarchist explained that “when you eliminate that hierarchy you also eliminate the mechanism that we're raised to rely on to reduce conflict.” Akil explained that in his activist circles, they rely upon communication to work through interpersonal issues: “Instead of holding or harboring grudges, we would talk about it. And that's how, in that aspect of dealing with interpersonal conflict, I'm like, ‘Okay, so we can fight and argue, and say hurtful things to each other, and resolve it.’” Friz, an activist from Freiburg,

Germany, told that diverse interests can be a “recipe for failure,” but that consensus decision-making paired with skilled facilitation can bring diverse interests together.

Activists of the US and Germany differed in the level of conflicts they found to be expected in group dynamics, and in how they work with conflict. American activists believe that conflict is unavoidable and a positive part of group life. During my interview with Salone, she told me that “All groups have this and it’s an important part of figuring out how to work together on the most basic things. There’s conflict because you’re doing a very hard thing, and a very new thing.” Still, she acknowledges that conflict has a serious downside because she and “a lot of people I know have dropped off of mass public organizing in the Bay because people can’t get along.” Lava agrees that conflict is inevitable, because “not everyone’s going to be best friends” but what matters most is “how we find common ground and do something really successful together. Sometimes it involves making compromises, hearing the other person, remembering the mission of what you’re doing and try to be in alignment with that.” Despite the difficulties that conflict brings, activists also told me it can ultimately lead to better decisions that incorporate diverse interests.

German activists also conveyed how they value having distinct perspectives come together to make an inclusive decision. However, they do not see conflict as an essential component of that process. Instead they articulate a higher premium on friendship and “good vibes” as a way to bring the different perspectives of their group together. When speaking with German activists about their group process, they described it very differently than American activists. Atrey told me that his organization’s series of three-day long planning retreats were “so great,” because “we seldom disagreed because we were with friends.” Nora, an activist in Cologne, Germany, told me that in her group, consensus is “organic and eye opening,” and “people are really smiling all the time.”

When describing conflict within that same group, Michael attributed it to individual people who have “a lot of negative energy,” who either complain or are aggressive. Other activists I spoke with similarly attributed challenging group processes to specific individuals with negative attitudes and poor communication skills. In my conversation with Max and Adele, they proudly told me that older activists who have attended their group meetings have been impressed with the civility of their group dynamics, which differed from the confrontational style of past eras’ communist “K-groups.” They and other activists from their group explained that skilled facilitation was key to their group’s ability to work together without disruptive conflict. German activists’ attitudes about conflict will be explored further in the next chapter.

The German activists I interviewed find common ground by using facilitation techniques to discuss different perspectives. The American activists, I discovered, find common ground by sticking through it as they hash through conflict. Regardless of the approach, I learned that relationships of the contemporary activists are defined not by friendship or conflict, but rather by their commitment to hear and be heard toward the goal of finding common ground. A central aspect of group style is how members of civic organizations relate to one another. Contemporary activists relate to one another through the prism of difference. However, they use different styles to mediate differences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Looking at activists’ use of participatory democracy now and in the past, it’s apparent that consensus decision-making is shaped by style. Activists of each era share common ideological commitments to equality and a common embrace of prefigurative strategies of social change. Additionally, they share a common practice of organizing collectively. All the activists I have

described—in different eras and different countries—believe that equality demands consensus decision-making. All of them see consensus within the organization as prefiguring a more radically democratic society. They share a common value of working collectively in ways that prize lengthy communication and complex group dynamics.

As Table 2.2 demonstrates, although the activists share these commonalities, they enact them differently. While each generation has been motivated by the pursuit of equality to practice

Table 2.2: The Group Styles of Consensus in Several Activist Eras in the US and Germany

Activist Era, Place, and Movements	Notions of Social Impact	Notions of What Constitutes Equality	Characteristic Way of Relating to One Another
1940-50 in the US <i>The Radical Pacifists</i>	Limited – intended to preserve participatory democracy, but not spread it	Group members were seen as equal under the eyes of God; more elite than the general public	Religious fellowship
1960-70 in the US and Germany <i>Anti-War, Civil Rights, and Women’s movements</i>	Broad-scale – believed in the potential of participatory democracy to democratize the world	Equality meant equal say and equal veto power; saw themselves on the same level with the general public	Friendship
1990-2010 in the US and Germany <i>The Global Justice movement</i>	Broad-scale yet pragmatic – Believed in the potential of participatory democracy to democratize the world, also emphasized the pragmatic benefits of consensus	Equality meant equal say <i>and</i> taking measures to level imbalances of power among group members	Political affinity and shared identity
Contemporary activists (2010-on) in The US and Germany <i>Occupy, DeGrowth, Refugee/Immigrant Rights, Anti-Racist (etc.) movements</i>	Pragmatic—Skeptical about the potential for broad impact; emphasizing the practical ways consensus supports their organizing work	Anti-oppression/ ‘awareness’—Equality means equal say <i>and</i> taking measures to level imbalances of power among group members	US: Collaborators for common ground (emphasizing conflict) Germany: Collaborators for common ground (emphasizing lack of conflict)

consensus, notions of equality have shifted over time. Activists’ understandings about the impact of prefiguration and their ways of relating to one another have changed significantly, as well.

Observing how the ways in which activists enact their values and relationships differ over time reveals variation in activists' group style. Having looked at participatory democracy in several eras of activism, and in two places, the US and Germany, I have identified ways in which consensus users have changed their perspectives of consensus.

In comparing the activist eras in terms of their notions about the social impact of consensus, I find that activists' confidence in the prefigurative potential of consensus waxes and wanes in response to the political contexts that surround them. In the 40's and 50's, activists existed among repressive political contexts (Polletta 2002). They organized without the comfort of widespread public support. The radical pacifists experimented with egalitarian democratic forms, however they did so with intention to preserve rather than spread radical democracy. In the 1960's and 70's, activists embraced a stronger prefigurative ethos by adopting the understanding that by modeling alternate democratic forms, they would create a more democratic world (Polletta 2002). This perspective was apropos given the strength and social influence of movements at that time. The Global Justice movements of the 1990's and 2000's embraced the mantras that "another world is possible," and to "be the change you wish to see in the world." However, taking lessons from the past, they also focused their efforts on strategic campaigns (Juris 2008). Contemporary activists embraced some aspects of prefiguration while dismissing others. They believed in the importance of creating alternative institutions and systems. However, they were skeptical of the applicability of consensus beyond groups like theirs.

By looking at the orientation to equality and anti-oppression held by the activist eras, it's possible to observe how activists learn from previous eras. The radical pacifists of the 1940's and 50's valued equality among members and saw themselves as equals under the eye of God (Polletta 2002). However, they did not extend their egalitarian commitment beyond their group. Instead

they positioned themselves apart from and superior to the masses. 1960's activists embraced participatory democracy with more pronounced commitment to equality—among and beyond movement participants. However, their enactment of equality did not take into account informal difference in power within the group or the manifestations of structural inequalities within the group (Polletta and Hoban 2016). Learning from the past, activists from the 1990's to today are aware of the potential for informal imbalances of power. Additionally, they are more acutely sensitive to structural inequalities within their groups. They see that consensus decision-making can be a platform to address inequalities—not just by leveling them, but by providing a forum for them to openly addressed.

Each subsequent movement has deepened and expanded their notions of equality. For example, women of the 1960's movements who felt undervalued within their organizations went on to make their own efforts toward egalitarian relations only to unwittingly reproduce inequalities. Concerns about 'structureless' inspired the Global Justice movement to implement mechanisms to prevent informal power and address structural inequalities.

Movements are learning from past mistakes as they evolve their understandings of equality. Changes in how movements understand equality may also be shaped by evolving meanings that are pervasive within a culture at large. Looking at the theme of equality and anti-oppression, I can see that understandings of equality that are relevant within consensus-using social movements have evolved in ways that are also represented in American and German culture more broadly. Arguably, participatory democratic movements have furthered popularly held notions around equality. Also, the evolution of cultural understandings around power, status, and oppression most certainly have shaped how and why activists understand equality as they do.

Over the decades, activists have adapted varying modes of relating to one another that animate their consensus decision-making processes (Polletta 2002). The radical pacifists of the 1940's and 50's convened around religious fellowship, and the '45er generation was united by an implicit pact to put the past behind them. Activists of the 1960's and '70s cultivated friendship-based relationships, and that was how they navigated the structureless of their organizations. Polletta (2002) characterizes the relationships of the Global Justice movement as distinctly marked by political identity and affinity. Today, activists discuss their relationships in terms of finding common ground across differences in perspective and identity. I found, however, the US-based and Germany-based activists differed on the extent to which they embraced conflict as a part of that process of finding common ground.

As I have shown, activists adapt their style of practicing consensus as they learn from prior generations and their own experiences. They develop their style in response to changes in their political contexts and shifts in their shared understanding. As Polletta (2002) noted, with each generation, activists have had more experience and more resources to pull from that inform how they practice participatory democracy. Whereas activists in the 1960s practiced consensus without a framework, essentially making it up as they went along, activists today are able to take lessons from the past and pull from a toolkit of resources. According to Haug and Rucht (2013), the Global Justice Movement has taken steps to avoid under-structuring or over-structuring their organizations. An important note: Activists are not always cognizant of their group style and activists do not always adapt their group style intentionally. Like other elements of culture, group style can change with or without activists' awareness.

Activists develop their style for practicing consensus by adapting to experience and opportunities. For the radical pacifists, political repression resulted in them having the goal of

preserving rather than spreading participatory democracy. Political opportunity had the opposite effect on activists of the 1960's—it led them to believe that consensus could seep into political institutions. When I spoke with contemporary activists about their understandings of the potential for consensus to have a transformative social impact, they did not envision other institutions adopting consensus as a result of their group's activities. They did, however, hold onto the notion that consensus could transform society through a ripple effect. Many of them had lived through periods of political opportunity and repression.

From this analysis of consensus-using groups over many generations of activism, we can derive glimpses into varied styles for practicing consensus. In doing so, we can see what attributes make contemporary activists unique: their pragmatism, their anti-oppressive perspectives on equality, and that they relate to one another by building common ground across difference. This comparison also sheds light on *how* styles change. I find that styles change a) in response to current political repression and/or opportunity, b) by following and/or modifying the example established by prior eras of consensus decision making use, and c) in response to cultural evolutions beyond the movement.

By looking at how activists have practiced consensus over time, it is apparent that activists are able to adapt their style, but within limits. Activists adapt how they practice consensus decision-making, however they are not willing to abandon it. Through their group style, activists are able to maintain their ideological commitments to consensus while adapting it—to an extent—in response to their current context and to lessons learned from prior movements. Investigating activists' practices through the lens of style provides perspective into the liminal space between activists' actions and intentions. As I will demonstrate, variation in group style can be observed in

how activists of different eras attempt social impact, construe equality among group members, and relate to one another.

As the analysis of this chapter demonstrates, the group style lens helps to explain 1) why activists' practice of consensus today looks different from fifty years ago; and 2) why activists do not see their lowered thresholds for reaching consensus as ideologically inconsistent and their use of consensus as strategically ineffective. Part of contemporary activists' style of consensus involves emphasizing its practical benefits. This allows them to experiment to some extent, in a way that does make consensus more practical. On the other hand, it also allows them to refuse to recognize points at which, or respects in which, consensus simply is not practical—although it may still be worthwhile to use it for ideological reasons.

This chapter has examined variation in how activists have practiced consensus in distinct activist eras. Viewing this variation through the lens of group style places a spotlight on the many ways activists have embodied their values of horizontalism, equality, and comradery. Contemporary activists have derived their style of consensus through inheriting and modifying the consensus-based practices of prior generations. This analysis sheds light on where styles come from, how they are derived, and how styles progressively develop. This historic analysis is important because it helps us to understand how contemporary activists derive their group style. In subsequent chapters, I further explore the nuances of group styles of consensus. Chapter Three compares in greater depth the styles of US- and Germany-based activists for practicing consensus in order to understand how activists in different countries come to share similarities in their group styles and what explains their differences. In Chapter Four, I investigate the extent to which contemporary activists' group style does or does not afford them the benefit of overcoming the pitfalls that decades of scholarship have identified with consensus decision-making.

CHAPTER THREE

Internationally Shared Group Style and Local Variations of Group Style in the United States and Germany

In Chapter Two, I explored differences in the way consensus decision-making has been practiced in distinct activist eras in the United State and Germany. In this chapter, I further develop my analysis of the contemporary *styles* for practicing consensus among US-based and Germany-based activists. *Group style* refers to how group members share common ways of interacting, including but not limited to how members: determine membership, set norms for communication, interact with people and institutions outside their group, frame issues and make claims, build coalitions, and respond to different settings (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2009, 1999, 1996; Lichterman & Eliasoph 2014; Dasgupta & Lichterman 2016). Whereas Chapter Two took on the question of how styles change over time, this chapter explores how styles spread geographically and across movements.

Through ethnographic work, scholars have found that the same styles may be shared by many groups within a society. Styles are not created “from scratch” by each group (Lichterman 2009). Movement organizations may learn from and imitate other groups (Lichterman 2009, 1999, 1996; Eliasoph 1998). Organizations may adopt certain practices even when they are not efficient, which explains why activists adopt consensus decision-making despite its limitations. Social movement organizations may hold similar group styles and organizational forms.

Styles of consensus decision-making are derived from activists’ ideological commitments and the evolution of their movements. By comparing two activist subcultures in Germany, Leach (2002) found that ideological differences between and within each subculture manifested in different expressions of group culture. Additionally, each activist culture drew inspiration from different historic movements. Polletta (2002) traced lines of connection between several activist

eras, demonstrating how practices of one generation of activists inform future eras of consensus-based activism. Drawing upon the examples provided by Polletta and Leach, it is reasonable to infer that the US- and Germany-based activists may have similar or dissimilar styles for consensus-based decision-making because of their ideological inclinations and their movement history.

My interviews with activists revealed great similarity in how activists in the US and Germany practiced consensus. As I will demonstrate, the similarities between activists in the US and Germany provide an example of a group style that is shared by many activist groups who have not had direct contact with one another. Despite geographical distance, activists hold similar political persuasions and perspectives on the state. They share a pragmatic style, one that focuses more on the benefits of consensus decision-making in the here and now than on its potential prefigurative impact. They celebrate the practical ways consensus decision-making supports them in accomplishing their mission. Additionally, activists in both places demonstrate awareness about power imbalances within their organizations and demonstrate concern about structural inequalities among members. These similarities invite explanation.

Alongside these similarities, there are several noteworthy differences between the US-based and Germany-based activists I interviewed. Activists in Germany often extolled the benefits of skilled and intricate facilitation techniques. However, not one activist in the US made any mention of facilitation techniques, skilled or otherwise. While activists in Germany valued harmonious group dynamics, activists in the US expressed an appreciation for contention within their groups. Activists in Germany often told me that ideological homogeneity led to better group dynamics, but activists in the US tended to emphasize the benefit of diverse perspectives. While there are certainly commonalities between US and Germany-based practices of consensus, clearly there are points of distinction, as well. This raises questions about how styles are differentiated.

This chapter tackles two questions: How do group styles come to be shared by many groups and movements? And, what accounts for group style differences? In what follows, I look to the Global Justice and Occupy movements to understand why consensus decision-making in the US and Germany is characterized both by similarities and differences. The shared aspects of style I observed in the activists I interviewed reflected the forms taken by the Global Justice movement. The Global Justice movement created enduring structures, like the European Social Forum and the United States Social Forum, in which there was a true premium on making consensus work among a network of activists, organizations, nations, and movements. More recently, the Occupy movement popularized consensus decision-making and modified the styles of consensus in the US from the group styles in Europe.

A COMMON STYLE OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

The activists I interviewed from the US and Germany described themselves as politically left in varying ways. Generally speaking, they lived with friends in cooperative houses or shared flats and were immersed in a community with other activists. In both countries, activists engage in movements that use varying levels of consensus decision-making (100% or 90% consensus, for example). The activists have varying levels of experience with consensus, and they spoke thoughtfully about it. They are drawn from a comparable representation of social movements; in each country I interviewed people in movements concerned with racial justice, environmentalism, alternatives to capitalism, refugee or immigrant rights, and government accountability.

In my interviews, I asked activists questions about their worldviews, specifically their perspectives on government and what they imagine the future 50-100 years from now will look like. Activists in both countries expressed some variation in both respects. While many of them

are vehemently anti-government and see the government as inherently oppressive, in both countries I also spoke with activists who were open to the possibility of working with the government to achieve their aims. The most common response I heard when I asked them about what they foresaw in the future was a mixture of grave concern about environmental and social disasters paired with hopefulness that social movements would be better organized and people would have more power. Activists tended to lean more toward either disaster or hopefulness. Diversity in that respect was present among US and Germany-based activists.

The activists I interviewed also shared many common aspects of the ways they practice consensus decision-making. I consider these shared practices and perspectives held by activists in the US and Germany to be indicators of a commonly held *group style*. Their style is apparent in their approaches to practicing consensus and in their understanding of how consensus decision-making impacts their organizing work.

Similar Perspectives and Approaches for Consensus Decision-Making

Despite the geographic distance between the US and Germany, activists described similarities in how they practice consensus decision-making and their attitudes about it. Germany- and US-based activists employ similar practices to reach consensus. In both countries, meetings can be informal and loosely structured, or very ritualized and structured. Some organizations use a more complex structure of separate working groups, while others only met as a whole. In both countries, most groups utilized ritualized communication processes such as hand signals, speakers lists, structured agendas, etc., but not all groups. Consensus processes in both countries involved varied levels of consent. While some groups reach consensus with 100% agreement among members, others do so

with 90%, 80% or some other required level for consensus. However, most activists expressed that full consensus was ideal but not always feasible.

Another common element of style between US- and Germany-based activists is, as described in Chapter 2, their attentiveness to power imbalances within their organizations. During interviews, activists showed awareness of the reality of informal hierarchies present within their organizations. They had not overcome that challenge, but it was clear they were aware of power dynamics. While it is not clear that they have mastered Freeman's (1973) tyranny of structurelessness, they were certainly aware of it. Additionally, they strive to address inequalities that result from structural inequalities. In the US, the activists talked about the importance of confronting oppressive dynamics when they arise within the group. German activists told me about the importance of "awareness" which refers to a group's attentiveness to differences in power among members. Equality did not mean that racial, gendered, or class bias did not exist among members. Rather, that those issues were confronted when they did arise.

Perceived Strategic and Utilitarian Benefits of Consensus Decision-Making

One of the most distinct features of Germany- and US-based activists' shared style is how they articulated the impact of consensus. Unlike the activists of the 1960's, who believed that by practicing consensus they could change the world, activists today in the US and Germany have a more limited notion of the scope of their impact. They reject the notion that their radically democratic ways may lead to more democratic governmental institution. They do not believe that consensus decision-making has the ability *in and of itself* to change the world. However, they still see it as having the potential to contribute to social change by contributing to the development of those who use it, making them better listeners, more politically aware and empowered, and more

compassionate. Some activists contemplated that perhaps this might lead to a “ripple effect,” as the people who have been shaped by their participation in consensus, in turn, go on to shape the world. A few activists in the US and Germany told me that they were not sure of how, but they felt that this could eventually lead to what some described as a “consciousness shift” or “evolutionary shift.” However, activists with that perspective were few in number compared to those who outright rejected the potential of consensus to lead to broad social impact.

Activists also told me that consensus decision-making contributes to social change in practical ways, by supporting their group in reaching their goals. They appreciate consensus for its utilitarian benefits. They told me that consensus decision-making in and of itself is not strategic, but it enables them to reach their strategic aims by improving how they organize. As Nesity, a Congolese refugee activist in Berlin, put it: “The success is not how we make decisions. The decision is part of our structure...It's contributing to the success.” Activists articulated a lengthy list of pragmatic benefits of consensus decision-making that contribute to their success.

They report that consensus decision-making builds trust and strengthens their relationships. As Sven of ATTAC Berlin explained, trust is necessary for operating within the challenging context of direct action. It also improves their group’s ability to work together “as a team,” said Celia of Santa Ana, California. Vee, an Occupy the Farm activist from Minneapolis, Minnesota, explained that consensus might actually improve social cooperation and improve trust. Consensus cultivates stronger buy-in from group members, sometimes by giving veto power to every individual. Sher, with Food Not Bombs East Bay, described why this kind of buy in is so important: “If you want to do something that's effective, with everybody is on their toes doing their job . . . everybody has to really be involved. The decisions and the discussions that lead to that action have to include everybody to the point where they feel like it's their action.” Giving members a say can

positively affect a group. According to Michael, an organizer in Cologne, Germany, the opposite can be true. If group members “don't have a voice and they feel excluded, commitment goes down.”

Germany- and US-based activists report that consensus decision-making enriches their capacity to work together. Cosa, a leader in the refugee rights movement in Germany, described consensus decision-making as a “networking platform” that brought people with different interests together. Rather than shirking away from acknowledgement of differences, participants in consensus decision-making are forced to directly confront these differences in perspectives. Akil, of Los Angeles, California, noted that consensus decision-making opens the possibility for collaboration. Every participant feels as if they have a stake in outcome, which increases activists’ investment in consensus. As Celia, of Santa Ana, California noted, “It's been a challenge, but it's incredibly rewarding to let every person there know that the decision depends on them, and they have the ability to shut down the whole thing if they want to. It helps us work better as a team.” Celia saw a direct relationship between this personal investment in decision-making and how well the group worked as a team. These activists highlighted the positive consequences of consensus decision, including giving each individual the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings to the group. Activists not only get to have a perspective, they also are forced to consider those of others in the group. In turn, activists are able to use this social knowledge to move towards consensus.

The trust that is built through consensus decision-making helps strengthen the relationships between activists. Activists perceived these relationships as inseparable from this form of decision-making. Yagil, of San Francisco, California, spoke to this when he said, “I think I had an immediate

intuition that the purpose [of consensus decision-making] was to mobilize the base ... to get people to see each other and recognize each other and build relationships with each other.” These relationships and the trust that was established through them was directly connected to the ability for groups to mobilize support and participate in direct actions. As a result, groups that practice consensus decision-making have a strong sense of group identity. This is essential to the productive functioning of the group. Wynd of Occupy Oakland expressed this when he said consensus is about “being a healthy community and listening to each other.” When group members feel more heard by and committed to the group, the collective is more effective at accomplishing its goals.

Given that every participant has a stake in the group, activists felt that consensus decision-making ensures that participants are on equal footing. This equality lends itself to building coalitions. When participants feel as if everyone is on the same level, they’re more likely to see others as integral to moving forward. As Phillip, a German activist explained, “It’s really necessary when you come together with different initiatives that you come at the same level.”

Because coalition groups and individual members buy into the process, they are more committed to the actions and decisions that the groups make. Sher, of Oakland, California, explained: “The decisions and the discussions that lead to that action have to include everybody to the point where they feel like it’s their action.” The collective nature of the decision-making process helps ensure that all participants are committed to and responsible for the actions of the group. Many others agreed with this point, with activists such as Mona, a German activist, noting: “There are decisions that we do together, and we are all responsible for it together.” Another impact of that buy-in, Kira, of Occupy the Farm said, is that “everyone feels accountable for the implications of every decision.” The egalitarian nature of consensus decision-making and the increased buy-in among members contribute to the feeling that it is sustainable over a long period

of time. As activist Sven, of ATTAC Berlin, explained, “there are no hierarchies in the group and so the group is really sustainable and works for a long time.”

The collective belief in the efficacy of consensus decision-making stems from the collective nature of the decision. Activists feel more committed to the decisions of the group because everyone has had a voice in each decision. Because consensus decision-making takes into account diverse perspectives, it is seen by activists as a method for leading to better decisions. Nora, of Cologne, Germany, echoed this sentiment, saying “if you have a lot of people that are deciding together, you have more minds, and more ideas and experiences.” Similarly, Alexandra, a German LGBTQ activist, expressed that the time investment consensus decision-making requires is worthwhile because it “truly [considers] all the points of views” and therefore results in a “more holistic decision.” Charles, a community organizer in Detroit, Michigan, expressed how this form of decision-making prioritizes empowering typically disenfranchised populations, which leads to better decisions:

Part of the frustration in our communities is that people are making decisions for us, or telling us what the problem is or what the solution is. So, you know, we are kind of the experts because we are the ones faced with whatever the problem is, whatever the campaign is.

Consensus decision-making creates an opportunity for marginalized people who are most impacted by social issues to directly participate in making decisions.

Other practical benefits activists described take the form of leadership and personal development. Many activists expressed that consensus decision-making gave them the opportunity to engage in public speaking, express their opinions for the first time, and inspire others. Abdul highlighted the humanizing potential of consensus decision-making when he described the impact consensus decision-making had on houseless people at Occupy Oakland: “Some actually started by looking at themselves a little more humanely rather than stigmatized as being with their

struggle,” and each person began to see themselves as a “human being on that plaza.” He and other activists observed that marginalized peoples were specifically empowered by consensus decision-making.

Activists reported that using consensus decision-making makes them feel more powerful as individuals and as a group. The more participants felt committed to the group, the more they felt empowered to move towards their goals. Celia, a community organizer in California, spoke to this: “It’s my goal to also make sure that the group has a good identity, that it has a strong identity, and that [the members] see each other as allies and as partners in the struggle.” The power she and other members of her organization experience is a “reflection of how we operate internally.” Activists expressed that it is not enough to be individually connected to making social change, but that the change they are called to make requires collective action. They emphasized that collective action and collective decision-making are paramount for cultivating the kind of change that is necessary.

Activists cautiously speculated that their practice of consensus decision-making may lead to a “ripple effect” in which individual transformation and personal development could eventually culminate in mass change. Kira, a Berkeley-based organizer with Occupy the Farm, a food and land sovereignty project, explained that although she does not believe consensus is feasible en masse, the impact it has on individuals might lead to broad social impact:

I wouldn’t go so far as to say that one group’s consensus decision-making is going to affect society at a large scale . . . the real social impact it has is the impact it has on individuals and the impact that has on society . . . and who knows, maybe it can eventually accumulate to have an impact as a whole.

Selena, of Topeka, Kansas, cautiously shared a similar yet uncertain vision of change: “ripples—you can only change what’s around you, and maybe everyone will do that and then it will be better, [but] I don’t know.” Sarah, a German activist, laughed with embarrassment as she speculated “in

a bigger way, everyone who is in the group and sees how cool consensus decision-making is, that could be a multiplier for the rest of society, that could bring revolution.” It is not that activists do not want consensus to contribute to massive change, as did past generations. They are skeptical about the feasibility of it and cautious about making sweeping claims.

Group Style Shared Transnationally

The Germany- and US-based activists share many common attributes, such as the issues they address and their general political attitudes. They also share similar approaches to practicing consensus decision-making, including meeting structure and processes, awareness of power dynamics within their groups, and a notion that consensus leads to socially transformative unity. Additionally, activists in both nations hold similar perspectives on the strategic nature of consensus decision-making. While rejecting the notion that consensus decision is a strategy for social change in and of itself, they celebrate the pragmatic ways that it supports their organizing work.

These shared practices and perspectives are a reflection of a common style shared by activists in the US and Germany. This common style is of particular interest given the geographical distance between these two groups and given their distinct social movement histories. Activists’ utilitarian view of consensus decision-making reflects their uniquely pragmatic group style. Contemporary activists in the US and Germany share a group style that celebrates the practical ways consensus decision-making improves how organizations’ function, thereby enhancing their strategic aptitude. As was discussed in Chapter Two, unlike activists of the 1960’s and 70’s, contemporary activists are skeptical about the potential of consensus decision-making to have a broad-scale, prefigurative impact. Contemporary activists’ group style is distinguished by their

emphasizing that they practice consensus because it improves upon their organizing in the pragmatic ways outlined above.

Activists' style portrays their commitment to consensus as being driven exclusively by strategic intentions—to reap the pragmatic benefits described above. However, their pragmatic style may be portraying their motivations with partial accuracy. Activists emphasize the utilitarian benefits of consensus even when consensus seems to hamper their ability to operate effectively. Regardless of the effectiveness and the variation in the practical benefit of consensus, activists still talk about consensus through the lens of their pragmatic styles.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND GERMAN ACTIVISTS' GROUP STYLES OF CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

There are noteworthy differences between US- and Germany-based activists' approaches to consensus, such as their orientation toward homogeneity, their perspectives on internal conflict, and their tendency to use structured facilitation.

Differing Ways of Discussing Ideological Homogeneity

Two factors I observed that distinguish US- and Germany-based activists are demographic diversity and their attitudes about ideological homogeneity. US-based activists tended to organize in groups that are demographically diverse—including people of varied levels of education, social classes, and ethnic or racial backgrounds. They idealized consensus decision-making for its ability to bring together people of diverse backgrounds and diverse perspectives. By contrast, Germany-based activists tended to organize in groups that were not so demographically diverse. Their organizations were comprised primarily of participants who are university educated, many of whom hold doctorates. With the exception of activists from organizations with explicitly anti-

racist or refugee-rights missions, German activists were entirely White. Activists in Germany, however, had more variety in terms of nationalities; several participants were from other European or African countries. Whereas activists in the US more often described the benefit of organizations including people with dissimilar perspectives, activists in Germany tended to assert that consensus worked best in groups comprised of people with similar perspectives.

From my interviews, I observed that activists in the US were not concerned about ideological homogeneity. Instead, they celebrated consensus decision-making because it brings together a diversity of people and perspectives. Sher, of Oakland, California, told me that the most important thing about consensus is that it has given her group a sense of inclusivity and a “very diverse community that respects everybody's right to be part of the decision-making process.” Inclusive access to participation was paramount to Sher and other US-based activists. Akil, of Los Angeles, California, appreciated how “people that probably, normally, wouldn't function with each other outside of activist circles come together and become great friends.”

American activists do not see their ideological diversity as exclusively a good thing. As Yessu, of Occupy Wall Street, lamented:

I mean, me and you could sit here and be totally like-minded the whole night and then get into an actual situation where it's time to have consensus, and totally fundamentally disagree on the way to do something. Not even what we're doing, just how we're going to do it. And then we could end up spending days just discussing the ins and outs of it.

Yessu and other activists pondered that these differences can result from a failure of their organizations to explicitly discuss goals. Antonio, of Occupy Los Angeles, explained that ideally different political factions can work together, but there has to be “some groundwork” so that organizations with different positions “have points of unity” and “agree to how we're going to make decisions or whatnot.” Despite acknowledging that

shared agreements would be beneficial, most activists admitted their organizations rarely have those kinds of discussions.

When I asked activists in Germany what, to them, can make consensus work well, many observed that consensus works best with groups that are ideologically homogeneous. They described divergent perspectives as the cause of undesirable friction within their group. Max, of DeGrowth, Germany, told me that their meetings were very long, but also very pleasant. He acknowledged that one reason why they worked so well together was because they were “homogenous, which helps a lot I guess.” Atrey who works closely with Max, explained that although, “we have a group of different people from different initiatives” they are “maybe not so different because we are all white, and all academics.” Ideological homogeneity can result from people being drawn to work together on certain issues, or as a result of a deliberate process of selecting new group members. As Michael of Cologne, Germany described, sometimes differences can cause people to opt out of a particular group: “language barriers, getting left out of decisions, people with different ways of doing things . . . those people have dropped out.” Michael’s suggested solution was to cultivate “a more open and honest discussion of who should be in which group,” rather than contemplate how to include those with differences. It is not that Michael and other German activists interviewed did not value diversity; they simply prioritized harmonious group dynamics over the conflicts that diversity can bring.

Both US- and Germany-based activists confer that having distinct ideological perspectives within a group can present challenges. They differ, however, in how they describe the impact of ideological differences in their groups. Activists in the US tended to see it positively because it indicated that their groups encourage open communication and inclusiveness. They felt that their groups would likely function better if they had more deliberate conversations about shared goals

and procedures. Activists in Germany were more apprehensive about ideological differences, seeing them more as unproductive disturbances. Unlike the US-based activists, they tended to have more deliberate conversations about the groups shared goals and practices.

Distinct Orientations Toward Conflict and Harmony

Activists' demographic and ideological homogeneity, or lack thereof, seems to carry implications in their group dynamics. Activists in the US valued demographic and ideological diversity, even though they expressed can be a source of conflict in their organizations. They put a premium on diversity, despite its tendency to cause contentious group dynamics. Conversely, activists in Germany reported that their organizations' group dynamics were harmonious, even "magical." In listening to US-based and Germany-based activists describe their group dynamics, it is hard to believe at times that they are all describing the same decision-making approach. Their group dynamics are consistent with Mansbridge's (1983) and Rothschild-Whitt's (1979) findings: Consensus works best when people share interests, and it quickly becomes dysfunctional when group members have competing interests. The activists I interviewed differed in their orientations toward conflict and harmony in ways that corresponded with their positions on diversity and homogeneity. Whereas activists in the US described their organizations as being rife with conflict, activists in Germany characterized their group dynamics positively.

During interviews, American activists vented at length about their conflict-ridden meetings. "You're going to have name-calling, you're going to have people insult you," Akil, of Los Angeles, California, explained. Conflict, they expressed, results from having people with diverse backgrounds and strong convictions working together in a context that encourages open communication. The activists acknowledged that conflict can present challenges in their

organizations. They believe that conflict actually makes their organizations stronger rather than weaker because it because they work through their differences together. As a result of conflict, consensus decision-making is “always a headache,” Yessu explained, “but also really rewarding if you’re working with the right group.” They expressed appreciation of the fact that working through conflict has the potential to lead to personal and organizational growth. Lava of Oakland, California said, “I think it’s important for my personal growth to go up against those challenges . . . not everyone’s going to be best friends.” Through consensus decision-making, her organization finds “common ground to do something really successful together.” Sher shared with me that in his community, “consensus has made us more tolerant.”

When I first began conducting interviews in Germany, as an American activist myself, I was taken aback when I heard activists there describe their group dynamics as being characterized positive interactions. They prioritized the goal of group members *feeling* good during meetings. Members of DeGrowth Germany described their groups’ 36 hour-long retreats as being wonderful experiences because everyone is able to get along nicely and work together without conflict. Their organization has two group members who play the role of “feel-good managers.” Friz, a member of DeGrowth, explained that for their group, “feeling good” referred to being happy and feeling close to group members. It also refers to people feeling included in the group and that their voice matters. When German activists described group processes going astray, they often conveyed it was a result of one or more participants negatively impacting group dynamics. Michael, of Cologne, Germany, surmised that “maybe sometimes a more open and honest discussion of who should be in which group would be better . . . this is a repeated problem you encounter with people who have a lot of negative energy.” Rather than directly eliminating people from the group, they told me people with minority perspectives would usually get frustrated and stop participating.

The US-based activists described their conflict-drenched group dynamics as being challenging but beneficial. They valued conflict because it indicates that they are communicating across difference. In fact, they seemed to take pride in their groups' proclivity for conflict because it represented to them their commitment to organizing with diverse people, issues, and ideological perspectives—an organizational attitude that mirrors the open, diverse, multi-issue, multi-perspective approach of the Occupy movement. While the German activists also valued open communication and working well together, they prioritized positive group dynamics rather than conflict as being instrumental in meeting their aims. The activists' orientation toward conflict and harmony represent a noteworthy style that is apparent in how activists at large speak and relate to one another. These findings are not to say that German, consensus-based organizations do not ever experience conflict. Rather, these findings speak to activists' attitudes about their group dynamics. Whereas activists in the US find their group dynamics to be frustratingly mired in conflict, activists in Germany feel positively about their group dynamics.

Skilled Facilitation is Optional

Moving between activist spaces in the US and Germany, one of the most noticeable differences I observed was in the quality and character of facilitation of meetings. Activists appeared to use the same template for consensus decision-making, as described above, but they actualized it differently. Perhaps the different levels of conflict and harmony within German and American social movement organizations can be attributed to their different approaches for facilitation.

During interviews with activists in the US, they often detailed dysfunctional dynamics during meetings. Akil of Occupy Los Angeles stated that in order to be more effective, movements “need to find a way to deal with issues without falling out over not agreeing.” Sher told me that

meetings often “end up as fighting.” He speculated that with more training they could possibly improve, but acknowledged that he’s “embarrassed to say that Food Not Bombs in the East Bay started in the 90's and we haven't gotten really good at it.” They emphasized the contentious nature of their meetings without putting forward any techniques for improving their group dynamics. Antonio, of Occupy LA, once brought a proposal to the General Assembly suggesting they use break-out groups with flip charts to discuss proposals. Five years later, he is still frustrated that his proposal was blocked by people who were not open to change.

Unlike the US-based activists, the Germany-based activists had more positive things to say about their group process and enthusiastically described skilled facilitation techniques used to improve their dynamics. Friz, of Freiburg, Germany, explained that his organization emphasizes “strong facilitation to make sure the jobs get done, that we get finished on time, that people who normally talk too much quiet down a bit so there's room for people normally don't say anything. There are [many facilitation] tools.” The German activists also discussed the value of improving upon process-keeping tools. According to Sarah, “it’s important not to say, 'we are using this tool,' but to always work on improving the tool itself.” Many of the activists discussed participating in trainings that taught them facilitation techniques. Concerted facilitation was much more frequently discussed by activists in Germany than activists in the US.

The stylistic differences identified in how activists in the US and Germany approach facilitation speak to how they perceive their ability to address undesirable group processes. US-based activists placed a higher emphasis on diversity within their groups, which can lead to less experience with consensus and facilitation among group members. The Germany-based activists who were most enthusiastic about skilled facilitation were members of organizations that had central leadership groups, and in some cases those central leaders were also non-profit staff of

hybrid structured organizations. Having established organizations, and in some cases with a formalized staff structure, seems to be tied to their enthusiastic embrace of skilled facilitation. As described above, the Germany-based activists were all highly educated, and many of them were academics, which brought them to approach consensus decision-making academically. They enthusiastically developed their skills as facilitators as they tried, tested, and taught facilitation techniques.

As mentioned above, German and US activist organizations' proclivity to conflict or harmony may be connected to their use of skilled facilitation. Groups that make use of skilled facilitation may manage group disagreements better, and therefore have fewer conflicts. The opposite may be true, as well. Groups that are prone to conflict may be less likely to adopt skilled facilitation due to limited bandwidth, so to speak. For example, groups that are steeped in conflict may not bother improving their facilitation because they believe conflict is inevitable. It is also worth considering that some facilitation techniques may not appeal to all activists.

Stylistic Differences Between Activists in the US and Germany

As described above, activists who use consensus decision-making in the US and Germany have both noteworthy similarities and differences in their group styles. They are distinguished by their attitudes and practices related to their group dynamics. One factor that distinguished the activists' group styles was their orientation to demographic and ideological homogeneity. The US-based activists told me that even though it could lead to challenges, they appreciated having a diversity of perspectives within their organization. Alternatively, the Germany-based activists agreed that groups worked best when members shared goals and similar perspectives. Many German activists critically commented on their lack of ideological and demographic diversity, but they did not seem

bothered by it. During interviews with activists in the US, they detailed extensive conflict in their meetings, but they did not necessarily see it as a bad thing. Conversely, activists in Germany described their meetings as being harmonious, marked generally by “feeling good.” Whereas activists in the US used unrefined facilitation techniques, their German counterparts displayed enthusiasm and confidence in their use of skilled facilitation exercises. These points of difference are manifestations of variant group styles.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the US- and Germany-based activists’ notions of equality included anti-racism, inclusion, anti-oppression, and *awareness*, as they said in Germany. Like activists of the 1960’s and 70’s, the goal was for all group members to have equal say. In addition to those values, they were also committed to questioning power within their organizations, and to creating spaces in which their organizations could challenge oppression. Many activists were motivated to practice consensus-based activism by these values. Looking at the way the activists described their groups’ orientation toward diversity and homogeneity offers interesting insights about their group styles. Germany-based activists shared a similar language about equality and anti-oppression to that of the US-based activists. However, they appeared to enact it very differently, in organizations that were more demographically and ideologically homogenous. There were also ways that activists in the US and Germany alienated and excluded people of color and other marginalized peoples. In the US, it conflict-drenched group dynamics may turn prospective members off; in Germany, newcomers may be intimidated by their academic approach. I will further explore activists’ potential to turn off and alienate potential group members in the next chapter.

The US-based activists I interviewed made a lot of references to what a headache consensus-based decision-making is, and seemed to imply, at times, that it really paralyzed their

organizations. However, they also talked about how useful it is in building group unity and commitment. Those two perspectives seemed to be in conflict, which provides a glimpse at how style operates. Their assertions of the practical utility of consensus are manifestations of their group style. Consensus has the potential to build unity, but it does not always do that. Activists do not abandon consensus when it does not build unity, and that is telling. Their commitment to consensus goes beyond its utilitarian benefits. In that sense, their commitment is actually ideological, not practical. When activists emphasize the pragmatic benefits of consensus, they are articulating their style more than explaining their motivation.

Another contradiction in the group style of US-based activists is apparent in their approach to facilitation. They articulated their style to be one of experimentation. They believed that their utilitarian style of consensus enabled them to adapt it, making it more efficient and functional. Yet when it comes to facilitation, American activists did not seem to be adapting consensus. Instead, they were “stuck,” with it, and were not necessarily getting better at it, as Sher described. They perceived themselves adapting consensus decision-making to their strategic interests. However, they did not seem to be making adaptations to how they facilitate consensus. German activists, on the other hand, enthusiastically described their nuanced facilitation techniques and facilitation trainings. They seemed more empowered to directly enhance their efficiency and reduce conflict through their facilitation approaches. Observing that both Germany- and US-based activists emphasize the utilitarian style of consensus, but have different facilitation approaches, reveals that they have a pragmatic *style* that can express itself differently.

EXPLANATION FOR SIMILARITIES & DISSIMILARITIES IN ACTIVISTS’ STYLE

As detailed above, contemporary activists in the US and Germany shared many similarities in their styles of practicing consensus, including decision-making practices, their appreciation of the pragmatic benefits of consensus, and their attention to inequality and differences in power among group members. There were differences, as well. Activists in Germany described themselves as being more ideologically and demographically homogenous than did activists in the US. Whereas activists in Germany described meetings as having positive group dynamics and feelings, activists in the US described group dynamics that were rife with conflict. Lastly, unlike activists in the US, activists in Germany told me their organizations use a plethora of skilled facilitation techniques. American and German activists’ shared and distinct styles are summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Comparison of American and German Group Styles for Consensus

Nationality	Facilitation	Homogeneity	Attitude Toward Conflict	Social Movement Influencer and Logic	Shared Style
American Activists	Did not talk about facilitation; do not overtly teach other organizations about consensus	Low demographic and ideological homogeneity; Took pride in working in diverse organizations	Talked a great deal about conflict – saw it as necessary when working with diverse groups	Occupy movement; aggregating logic	Emphasized pragmatic ways that consensus supports their organizing; demonstrated flexibility in adapting consensus (but does not abandon it) Shared belief in giving group members equal say <i>and</i> leveling power between group members
German Activists	Emphasized the benefits of skilled facilitation and overtly teaching other organizations about consensus	Noticeable demographic and ideological homogeneity; preference for ideological homogeneity voiced.	Talked a great deal about harmony – said that consensus works best without conflict	Global Justice movement; networking logic	Shared procedures like meeting structure, hand signals, lingo etc. Consensus is “the way things are historically done” and adopted without considering an alternative approach. A range of leftist political perspectives

To understand why activists in the US and Germany share certain aspects of group style but not others, I asked them about how their groups came to practice consensus and if they had made efforts to spread consensus to other groups. Then, I looked at two movements that have shaped contemporary activist styles for consensus: the Global Justice and Occupy movements.

How Styles are Spread or Adopted by Movement Organizations

Lichterman and Eliasoph develop the concept of style as a cultural dimension that can be shared by a single group or many, by a movement or many movements, within a particular geographic region or internationally (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). The above sections detail similarities and differences in how the Germany- and US-based activists describe their practices and perspectives regarding consensus decision-making. These two comparable case studies offer insight into how styles come to be shared internationally and why differences that persist.

According to Lichterman and Eliasoph (2003), people can transpose a group style from one setting or group to another. I asked activists if they had observed other organizations using consensus decision-making based on firsthand observations of its effectiveness. They speculated with great apprehension that consensus decision-making could indeed, inspire more people to adopt it, which could lead to transformative social change. Sarah, a German activist, chuckled with embarrassment when she contemplated that movements that use consensus could be “[multipliers] for the rest of society that could bring revolution.” Sher, of Berkeley, California, voiced the same belief in the potential of consensus decision-making to be more broadly adopted, but he thought that better use of the media would be a prerequisite for that to happen. He acknowledged that this had not happened and was unlikely to happen. Interview participants proposed that consensus decision-making spreads when activists participate in a coalition using consensus and then return

to their groups of origin. Many German activists spoke of attempts to spread consensus decision-making through facilitation trainings. “Our organization is trying to work as a multiplier for consensus decision-making,” explained Mary, a German youth activist. Ollie and Marie, of Oakland, California, each brought consensus decision-making into their workplaces—a legislative campaign office and public policy institute, respectively. However, they brought in aspects that had previously worked for them and left out the “hand signals and gimmicky parts,” as Marie said.

When I asked activists about how their groups took up consensus decision-making, most responses indicated that they did so without deliberately deciding upon it. When groups actively decided upon consensus, it was because one or more group members introduced it to the rest of the group, and the rest willingly agreed to use it. Atrey, of Berlin, explained, “it was so normal, we didn't even say ‘Who's for it? Who's against it?’” because there were several members of his organization that had a “strong impulse for the culture of consensus.” Giovanni, a student activist in Vienna, had a similar experience with his group: “There was never a discussion to decide on consensus . . . it was just clear.” The compulsory use of consensus may result from it being “taboo to question the appropriateness of the consensus decision-making,” suggested Vee, of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The activists articulated that, within their groups, they assumed they would be practicing consensus decision-making. They saw consensus to be a given, and some expressed a belief that consensus is a part of the historical traditions of leftist movements. As Lava, an activist in an Oakland community health collective explained, “It's the way we've traditionally been doing things in anarchist or radical communities.” Additionally, not one activist told me they had been in an organization that had adopted consensus decision-making, and then later decided to abandon

it. Interestingly, I learned that activists would sooner leave an organization as a result of their frustrations with consensus rather than abandon consensus altogether.

Activists reported several ways that their organizations intentionally introduced consensus decision-making to individuals and other organizations. However, the way their own organizations came to practice consensus decision-making lacked intentionality. They told me that within their organizations, they either assumed they would be using consensus decision-making or had followed the initiative of experienced group members without deliberation. One activist referred to consensus decision-making as “the way it’s historically been done,” and another critically referred to consensus as compulsory. For this reason, in the next section I look to recent movements that have championed consensus decision-making to explain where contemporary activists’ shared style of consensus came from, and how the style of German and American activists came to differ.

Common Movement Roots of Styles for Practicing Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus decision-making has been popularized in recent decades by the Global Justice movement and the Occupy movement. When I interviewed contemporary activists from the US and Germany, I found that they shared many aspects of group style for consensus decision-making. These shared elements of style can be traced first to Global Justice movement, which shaped how consensus was practiced internationally. Years later, activists from the Global Justice movement played important roles in the early days of the Occupy movement. They infused the Occupy movement with consensus-based practices and group styles of the Global Justice movement.

Activists in both the Global Justice and Occupy movements practiced consensus decision-making with an approach that appreciates its prefigurative potential while emphasizing the pragmatic benefits it contributes to their organizing work (Polletta 2002, Smucker 2013,

Maharawal 2013). Additionally, contemporary activists' notions of equality and inclusion mirror those held by activists in both the Global Justice and Occupy movements. Activists in the Global Justice and Occupy movements rejected the notion that equality stops at equal participation. Instead, they strived to create a more radical equality by challenging power within their movements and prioritizing the participation of marginalized persons (Juris 2013; Maharawal 2013; Leach 2013). However, despite their ethos of "radical inclusion" both movements have been criticized for their underrepresentation of working-class people and people of color (Juris 2013).

The Global Justice and Occupy movements were built by bringing people together across diversity and differences. The World Social Forum and the global summit protests brought activists and organizations from an array of nationalities to deliberate and take action together. The Occupy movement invited anyone from the 99% to join their public assemblies, encampments, and demonstrations. In both cases, consensus decision-making served as a platform that unified diverse actors (Maharawal 2013; della Porta and Rucht 2013). Today's activists approach consensus decision-making with the same desire to bridge differences and find common ground.

My findings show that the contemporary Germany- and US- based activists share similar aspects of group style, as described above. However, their group styles differ in other respects. I look to the Global Justice and Occupy movements to explain Germany-based activists' greater appreciation for facilitation and harmony, as well as US-based activists' greater appreciation for diversity and contention. I attribute the stylistic differences to the movements that were the principle carriers of consensus decision-making in each nation.

The Global Justice Movement's Influence on Styles of Consensus in Germany

The Global Justice movement ushered a new era of consensus-based decision-making, as it brought together activists and social-movement organizations from around world to protest corporate globalization. Enabled by digital networks, the Global Justice movement came together around “(1) the building of horizontal ties and connections among diverse autonomous elements, (2) the free and open circulations of information, (3) collaboration through coordination and consensus-based decision-making, and (4) self-directed networking” (Juris 2008). With so many diverse nationalities coming together, the Global Justice movement relied upon consensus decision-making to coordinate many social and political groups (della Porta 2009). Activists of the Global Justice movement learned from the Women’s movement and other movements of the 60’s and 70’s and made their own mark on decision-making form (Polletta 2002). Today’s activists mirror Global Justice movement activists in their prefigurative yet pragmatic approach their critical assessment of power dynamics within their groups, and their commitment to working together across difference.

According to Juris (2008), technology and new media facilitated the spreading of organizational forms and norms throughout the Global Justice movement. The expanding network of the Global Justice movement is a political model for reorganizing society based on “horizontal collaboration, participatory democracy, and the coordination through autonomy and diversity” (Juris 2008). As a result of participating in the Global Justice movement, activists from across the globe have converged in their styles of communication (della Porta and Rucht 2013b). Juris describes the activist networks of the Global Justice movement as “locally rooted, but globally connected.” As such, social movement organizations are shaped by “transnational flows of people, ideas, strategies, and tactics” and by local cultural and political context and history.

Juris (2016) found the Global Justice movement congregated around a *networking logic* that connected a network of activists, individuals, and organizations already committed to a common goal. As a result, the Global Justice movement was comprised primarily of experienced activists and established organizations who came together around predetermined goals. As a result, activists shared ideological and demographic similarities, much like the German activists I interviewed. Based on their own descriptions, German organizations seemed to also be ideologically and demographically homogenous, comprised primarily of White academics.

Another similarity shared by the contemporary German and Global Justice activists is their honed agendas and prior experience with consensus decision-making. Like activists of the Global Justice movement, German activists use intricate facilitation techniques with familiarity. Activists in Germany were more likely to report using concerted facilitation techniques during meetings and participating in or leading facilitation trainings. As a result, they felt more capable of managing their group dynamics, avoiding conflict, and reaching decisions effectively.

The World Social Forum was conceived as an “open space” shared by activists of many nationalities and common goals. The social forums avoid conflict by making decisions in breakout groups and inviting deliberation without the expectation of reaching consensus as a whole body (Juris 2008). Della Porta and Giugni’s (2013) analysis of many European Global Justice movement organizations found that they place a great premium on mutual respect and positive attitudes in their group dynamics. According to Della Porta and Giugni, “the creation of a ‘good vibe’ has been openly advocated in movement experiments with decision-making by consensus, which sometimes even assign a specialized role of ‘vibe watcher.’” This value of positive group dynamics appears to have been carried forward by contemporary German activists.

The Occupy Movement's Influence of Styles of Consensus in the United States

In the US, the Occupy movement has more recently influenced the styles activists use when practicing consensus. American Global Justice activists played important roles in the early Occupy movement. As scholars have noted, the general assembly, the people's microphone, the hand signals, and the tactic of occupation were not invented by the Occupy movement. As Leach (2013), put it: "The Occupy movement is famous for all kinds of things that it didn't invent." These tactics were not new, but they had never taken place at this scale in the US—a distinct and demographically diverse setting for consensus. The Occupy movement was greatly influenced by the Global Justice movement, but it quickly picked up momentum of its own.

The American activists differed from their German counterparts because they valued practicing consensus in demographically and ideologically diverse groups. Juris (2016) found that the Occupy movement was formed using a *logic of aggregation*, which involves the assembly of individuals from diverse backgrounds en masse within a shared physical space. The Occupy movement infamously came together without previously determined goals. Occupiers aspired to reach consensus on a shared platform via their General Assemblies. The Occupy movement was characterized by an open, grassroots, multi-movement approach. The demographic and ideological diversity of the Occupy movement frequently derailed General Assembly meetings, at times to the point of dysfunction (Smucker 2013).

The Occupy movement's decision-making structures often involved large General Assemblies, working groups, spokes-councils, and same hand signals that were popularized during the global justice movement. Compared to the Global Justice movement, the Occupy movement engaged more inexperienced activists who would be less proficient in facilitation. The aggregating logic of the Occupy movement attracted diverse individuals who were less politically experienced,

and who were not used to sophisticated facilitation techniques. In contrast to German activists, activists in the US did not describe any skilled facilitation techniques, and they did not feel confident about their ability to improve how they practice consensus decision-making. American activists told me they were “stuck with the straight and narrow” of consensus decision-making.

In the US, activists described their consensus-based meetings as being conflict-ridden. They told me that as frustrating as conflict can be, they see it as a good thing because it allows them to work through differences. They may experience more conflict than German activists because, like the Occupy movement, their organizations are more ideologically and demographically diverse. Scholars agree that the more diverse the members of a group are in terms of ideology, education, and cultural background, the more their group processes are likely to be stalled by conflict (Mansbridge 1983; Rothschild-Whitt (1979).

Explaining Similarities and Differences in Activists’ Styles of Consensus Decision-Making

During interviews, I questioned activists in Germany and the US about how they came to practice consensus decision-making. Most reported that their organizations adopted consensus decision-making without even as much of a conversation about it. Within their movements, consensus is seen as the traditional, and therefore default, way to make decisions. Activists also told me about efforts to introduce consensus decision-making to new people and new spaces. These findings do not suffice to explain how activists from the US and Germany came to share many aspects of their style for practicing consensus, and why differences in their style remain. To ascertain the cause of the differences between American and German activists’ group style, I look to the movements that have popularized consensus decision-making in recent decades.

The networking logic of the Global Justice movement attracted activists and organizations around established goals and tactics (Juris 2008). The activists of the Global Justice movement were more likely to be experienced with activism, motivated by established movement goals, and familiar with consensus decision-making and facilitation techniques. Conversely, the aggregating logic of the Occupy movement attracted individuals to physical space without a prior-determined platform (Juris 2016). As a result, the Occupy movement was more demographically and ideologically diverse than the Global Justice movement, which has the potential to foster conflict (Mansbridge 1983; Rothschild-Whitt 1979).

The similarities between activists in the US and Germany regarding consensus decision-making provide the first case study of a group style that is shared by activists in different nations. My analysis of Germany- and US-based activists' group styles as it pertains to consensus reveals that there are differences as well as similarities. I was able to trace the shared elements of style originally to the Global Justice movement. Later, the influence of the Occupy movement brought about differences between the styles of consensus of US- and Germany-based activists. The differences include: demographical and ideological diversity within their groups, their attitudes toward conflict, and the use of concerted facilitation techniques. Analyzing the similarities and differences in US- and Germany-based activists' styles offers the opportunity to understand how group styles are shared cross-nationally.

CHAPTER FOUR

Evaluating the Dilemmas of Consensus Decision-Making through the Lens of Group Style

Thus far in this dissertation, I have established a relationship between group style, a dimension of culture, and consensus decision-making. In Chapter Two, I demonstrated that the styles activists in the US and Germany employ while practicing consensus have evolved over time as activists learn from the problems they have encountered in past eras and react to new opportunities that emerge in the present socio-political context. Given that the practice of consensus decision-making is cultural, activists may be wed to doing things in a certain way, not because it is either ideologically necessary or instrumentally optimal, but rather because it is part of their style. The activists' style prizes pragmatism, emphasizing the practical ways that consensus enhances their ability to reach their goals rather than holding notions about consensus having a broader prefigurative impact. Their group style is also characterized by their understanding of equality, which includes an anti-oppression orientation with attentiveness to power differences within the group. They also express their style by relating to one another as comrades working together across differences.

In Chapter Three, I compared the group styles of activists in the US and Germany, diving further into their similarities and identifying differences. The activists who participated in my study shared a common range of leftist political perspectives. I found further evidence of activists' *pragmatic style* when US- and Germany-based activists emphasized the practical ways that consensus decision-making supports their organizations in reaching their strategic goals by fostering commitment among members, encouraging better decision-making, and creating a basis of equality among members. Central to contemporary activists' pragmatic style is that activists experiment with different approaches to practice consensus, demonstrating some flexibility in how

they enact their ideological commitment to consensus. Even though activists saw consensus as traditional to leftist social movements, they also felt empowered to adapt consensus to the needs of their particular group and the demands or opportunities of their context.

Another central aspect of the contemporary German and American activists' group style is that, for them, equality extends beyond each group member having equal say in decisions. They make efforts to level structural inequalities and power differentials between group members. During interviews, activists spoke frequently about anti-oppression or awareness, as Germans put it, being central to *how* and *why* they practice consensus. Both groups German and American activists I interviewed spoke of implementing process tools that prioritize the participation of historically marginalized participants. Activists also talked about consensus as an approach to challenge capitalism because it celebrates taking the time to make thoughtful decisions rather than acting from a scarcity perspective. Consensus decision-making, they told me, is both anti-racist and anti-capitalist because it gives people of color and working-class people the opportunity to represent their own interests.

In this chapter, I revisit several scholarly critiques of consensus decision-making through the lens of group style. Given that American and German activists' group style is pragmatic, flexible, and grounded in anti-oppression, are they able to overcome any of the established scholarly critiques of consensus? Scholars have critiqued consensus for its inefficiencies, claiming that groups using consensus decision-making are at risk of allowing their ideological commitment to cause stalemates (Mansbridge 1983) and interfere with political opportunities (Cornell 2011; Epstein 1991; Hammond 2013; Gitlin 2012; Smucker 2013). However, as my analysis will reveal, the activists I interviewed were much more flexible than ideologically rigid, employing a range of decision-making approaches. With their flexible group style, activists are able to adapt consensus

decision-making, decreasing their risk of missing political opportunities. However, that flexibility extends only so far, which is made apparent by the fact that activists do not ever switch entirely to voting regardless of circumstance. Activists do not consider alternate decision-making forms, which reveals that they are ultimately ideologically committed to consensus even when it is ineffective. The flexibility of activists' group style has the potential to obscure the fact that they are committed to consensus more than they are committed to efficiency, and that may be a liability.

Not all of the pitfalls scholars have identified have been amendable by activist adaptations to groups style. Scholars have critiqued the intricate processes of consensus decision-making for alienating newcomers and outsiders (Leondar-Wright 2012; Treloar 2003; Juris 2013), particularly people of color (Polletta 2005). Scholars have also critiqued consensus for excluding working people, parents, and others who do not have the time to attend lengthy meetings that are notoriously known to endure late into the night (Leondar-Wright 2012). As my analysis shows, German and American activists intend for their organizations to be inclusive of newcomers, marginalized people, and working-class people. However, they have not succeeded in adapting their group style to address aspects of consensus decision-making that alienate these particular populations.

By drawing upon the scholarly work of others and my interviews with activists, I will explore the ways that activists address issues with consensus decision-making. I find that activists are able to adapt consensus through reflexivity and by varying their practices in different contexts. I will address why some problematic parts of consensus remain unchanged when viewed through the lens of group style. However, I also find that group style can actually obscure issues, making them less likely to be amended by activists. Activists are able to address problematic aspects of consensus through their flexible style, but activists' style can create problems of its own. Activists

have to make a choice between making decisions expeditiously and making them in a radically democratic manner, and their pragmatic style makes it difficult to recognize times when consensus really is not effective. Additionally, sometimes activists respond to a problem in ways that do not actually resolve it. Their style includes a speech norm that emphasizes anti-oppression and anti-capitalist verbiage, which can potentially mask the extent to which their organizations are actually inclusive. Lastly, even if activists are aware of an issue, they may not agree that there is something they can or should do to fix it. Thus, activists' group style has multiple potentials: it can enable them to resolve a problem, discourage them recognizing an issue, or prevent them from making a change.

With their pragmatic style that emphasizes anti-oppression, activists experiment with consensus-based organizational forms, demonstrating an interest in evolving and improving them. They learn from the failings of prior organizations' consensus processes, and they tinker with alterations, both of which raise some questions. Does activists' pragmatic style support them in evolving consensus beyond the pitfalls that have been identified in the literature? Does activists' avowed commitment to anti-oppression and anti-capitalism translate into their organizing work by making their organizations accessible to newcomers, people of color, and working-class people? Is their characteristically pragmatic and anti-oppression style actually supporting them to align consensus decision-making with their values and desired outcomes? This chapter highlights the ways in which style sheds light on problems activists do—and do not—confront, and how it improves upon their practice of consensus.

DILLEMMAS OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING ADDRESSED THROUGH STYLE

Scholarly Critique: Consensus Decision-Making is Inefficient and Leads to Missed Opportunities

Mansbridge (1983) argued that the biggest problem with consensus is not that it is alienating or exclusive, but rather its proclivity toward debilitating impasses that result from major differences of perspective. Activists idealize hearing everyone's perspective, however that requires time, resulting in the process going "no faster than the slowest." This time-intensive process makes it near impossible to make quick decisions in emergencies, can frustrate and bore members, and can cause division among participants. Such stalemates can potentially render a group ineffective, inactive, or divided into factions. Others consider that consensus sacrifices benefits of expertise (Cornell 2011; della Porta 2005; Hammond 2013; Gitlin 2012; Smucker 2013). For these reasons, consensus has been criticized for compromising political opportunities (Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002).

Most of the activists I interviewed acknowledged that consensus can be inefficient. Lava, an activist in Oakland, California bemoaned, "The process is very slow. If your proposal gets knocked down, you have to wait [until] next week," which slows the organization down in its undertakings. Salvatore, of Berlin, had similar experiences with consensus in ATTAC Germany, which uses consensus decision-making at the local and national levels. Consensus "makes a lot of problems because there's a very complex mechanism in how decisions are made . . . it was a good idea in the beginning to have this consensus mechanism, but nowadays it's kind of misused by certain people." Mona, a German student activist in Vienna, expressed feeling exasperated at times by her group's consensus decision-making: "Sometimes we discuss and we discuss and then we just say—'ok let's do it like this,' because we are annoyed that we've discussed for two hours."

Other activists either contended that consensus is effective or rejected that efficiency is the ideal. Celia, a community organizer, explained that her organization uses consensus because “Efficiency is not the goal,” and “We are not trying to move through everything as quickly as possible—we are trying to do things right.” Members of DeGrowth, Germany, take pride in their lengthy, three-day retreats because they take the time to listen to one another and make thoughtful decisions. As Kira, of Occupy the Farm humorously put it: “Consensus, like good love making, shouldn’t be rushed.”

Activists’ flexibility with decision-making takes them to a point near voting, but not quite. Activists reported that their organizations are not as strictly adherent to consensus decision-making as they are perceived to be. Atrey, a Berlin-based activist, spoke of organizations that have lowered their required level of consensus over time, from 100% consensus down to as low as 75% or 65%. Activists experiment with ways to make their organizations more functional. Salone told me that Occupy Oakland “used voting, and made a very specific decision to switch to voting and take as much power away from the [General Assembly] and put it into committees.” They chose efficiency in “very practical shunning of spiritual purity,” as Salone put it. She found that “Occupy Wall Street or Occupy LA, groups that didn’t do that, their GA became useless and dysfunctional.” Activists are willing to integrate voting, to a limited extent, into their decision-making processes in an effort to manipulate their decision-making process toward greater efficiencies. Their style of consensus enables them to practice greater flexibility in how they make decisions. However, their flexible style prevents them from contemplating formally voting as a decision-making option. Activists stretch consensus to its limits, but they never actually question their use of consensus altogether.

Another way activists address the inefficiencies of consensus decision-making is by simply avoiding it. Instead of making decisions by consensus, they opt to make decisions informally outside of meetings. Consensus was one of the “founding principles” of Sher’s Food Not Bombs organization, but they “end up not really using it because it's so cumbersome in so many ways.” Instead, he expressed that they make many decisions informally, outside of official meetings. Several activists of the Occupy movement described the consensus-based General Assembly as a “bureaucratic layer,” because regardless of what was decided or not decided at meetings, activists would ultimately do as they pleased. Activists also reported that there were unofficial “leadership cores” at the Occupy encampments who made decisions apart from the General Assemblies.

Activists take measures to make consensus decision-making more effective by improving their group processes. The members of DeGrowth Germany believed that facilitation techniques made meetings more efficient, as did culturing trusting relationships among group members. Celia, a community organizer in Santa Ana, California explained that for effective decision-making, it’s necessary to balance consciousness raising and efficiency. For that reason, her organization requires that anyone who blocks a decision justifies why and makes an alternate proposal. Additionally, activists vary their organizational form to improve their decision-making. Activists use working groups and spokes-councils to improve their effectiveness. Also, they switch to abbreviated processes when making decisions in a time crunch, such as when in the midst of direct action. For instance, I encountered an activist music ensemble in Germany that went about making decisions in the midst of direct action by playing call-and-response musical refrain.

In my interviews with activists, I found that they make adaptations to consensus when they form new organizations, drawing upon lessons learned from prior experiences. For example, according to Kira, many of the founders of Occupy the Farm had previously participated in Occupy

Oakland. Responding to the inefficiencies of consensus in the Occupy movement, Occupy the Farm founders brought the level of required consensus down to 80% and established a prerequisite that all new members log a quota of hours doing farm work before being able to fully participate in decision-making. Also, activists described several ways they attempted to innovate consensus decision-making, including web-based, decision-making platforms and reaching consensus via phone conferences. When I asked Atrey if any organization he has been a part of has changed their way of making decisions, he told me, “Most groups are changing all the time . . . We change our forms or our rules constantly.”

There are barriers that restrict the extent to which organization may adapt consensus decision-making to make it more efficient. During Occupy LA, Antonio proposed alterations to their decision-making process, but he was not able to persuade the GA to pass his proposal. Salvatore, an activist in Berlin, had similar experiences. He explained that it is “impossible to change the structure substantially because a few people always use their veto power to block every change.” The challenges to making formal changes to decision-making processes help explain why activists adapt consensus in the subtle ways that they do.

Style Enables Groups to Adapt Consensus Decision-Making to their Strategic Interests

The practices described above constitute the group style of activists in the US and Germany. Their group style allows for them to modify *how* they practice consensus decision-making in order to make it more efficient. Rather than miss out on political opportunities as a result of slow decision-making, activists employ a range of tactics to make decisions more quickly. They either improve their group process, change their level of consensus, or they avoid making decisions in meetings altogether. This group style allows activists to adapt consensus decision-making to meet their

strategic interests. It allows for activists to adapt rather than abandon consensus decision-making. In doing so, they are able to avoid the inefficiencies scholars associate with consensus. They are not as rigid in their ideological commitment to consensus as scholars portray them to be, nor are they as rigid in how they practice it.

Activists adjust how they made decisions depending on a number of factors including: the type of decision, whether the decision is pressing, who's making the decision, whether the decision is in a meeting, whether the decision is during direct action, where a decision lies in an agenda, etc. According to Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014), groups are able to develop variations in group styles that accompany different scenes. Group members are able to interpret distinct scenes, settings, and contexts, and adapt their style accordingly. Activists encounter many scenes, and rather than maintain one uniform practice of consensus decision-making, they adapt it. This allows them to be more efficient and respond to political opportunities.

Activists exhibit flexibility in how they make decisions, however that only extends so far. Activists do not ever switch entirely to voting regardless of how inefficient consensus can be. Activists enthusiastically extol consensus as being strategically advantageous. Still, they do not consider alternate decision-making forms when consensus interferes with their strategic aims, which reveals that their commitment to consensus is fundamentally ideological. Because they emphasize the pragmatic benefits of consensus, German and American activists' group style has the potential to obscure the fact that they are committed to consensus more than they are committed to efficiency.

DILLEMMAS OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING NOT ADDRESSED THROUGH GROUP STYLE

Scholarly Critique: Consensus Decision-Making Alienates Newcomers and People of Color

Consensus has been criticized for alienating newcomers who are not accustomed to the processes and norms of activist subcultures (Juris 2013), as well as those who do not fit the selective profile of appropriate attitudes, values, and identities of a particular movement (della Porta 2005). Polletta's (2005) study of Students for a Democratic Society concluded that the organization abandoned horizontal organizational forms and consensus when those forms began to be seen as "White," and consequently culturally "other" to those in the organization. Leondar-Wright (2012) dubs the hand-signals, jargon-filled speech, and process-heavy discussions of consensus decision-making to be "unnecessary weirdness" that turns off and turns away people who are unfamiliar with activist subcultures. Working class people, she reports, are more likely to be made uncomfortable by these niche ways that activists communicate. Nevertheless, activist organizations are unwilling to let go of these alienating mannerisms and decision-making structures. Their unwillingness to change demonstrates a greater commitment to their internal processes than to including working-class participants and other newcomers.

During my interviews with activists from the US and Germany, I asked them if they thought consensus-oriented decision has the potential to alienate newcomers, outsiders, or people who are marginalized by race or gender. Many responded to my question by sharing their own experiences of first encountering consensus. Initially, they found the intricacies that often accompany consensus to be off-putting. "At first, I was like, what are you guys doing? I didn't know. I had no idea what all that stuff meant," described Akil, of Occupy LA. Another activist from Occupy LA had a similar experience: "To tell you the truth, is it important, the hand gestures and all that, to the process? I don't think so . . . at first I found it strange—What are you doing?... I found it to be

silly.” Max, of Berlin, told me that consensus decision-making can be “very exclusive if you're not used to these kinds of decisions.” Anita, from Occupy Oakland agreed: “The newcomers were very confused.” Atrey, of DeGrowth Germany, observed that some people do not return after the first meeting they attended because they “don't feel secure in this space because there are so many strong people in this space who are acting in strong ways” and because group members use “academic language.”

Several activists observed that consensus was particularly alienating to people of color. Both Akil and Antonio are men of color whose past organizing experience took place in hierarchical organizations. They were initially unnerved by consensus decision-making because it was foreign to them. “Especially in the black community, they've been organizing [hierarchically] for so long, that they're afraid of exploring or trying different ways of organizing,” Akil told me. Nora and Alexandra, of Cologne, believed women may need time to adjust to consensus decision-making before they learn to speak up enough to be heard in the context of men who dominate speaking time.

Activists told me they do not want to alienate potential newcomers with consensus decision-making. Yessu, for instance, described the Occupy movement as “overly occult at times,” and felt strongly that activists need to “reanalyze how they're doing their consensus because if it's marginalizing anyone, then it's not effective.” According to Cosa, a refugee rights activist in Berlin, consensus decision-making “must be explained, and people must understand . . . for the consensus to be democratic.” Activists reported that their organizations take steps to teach newcomers how to participate in consensus decision-making. James, of Occupy the Farm, believed that “part of the process is to teach people what it is. People without exposure to consensus decision-making,” he said, need to be “taught how to live in a cooperative manner, instead each

person is out for themselves.” Activists told me that sometimes, at beginning of meetings, newcomers are introduced to the hand signals and other processes associated with consensus decision-making. Additionally, established group members sometimes directly assist newcomers, supporting them in acclimating to consensus.

As described above, many of the activists I interviewed found consensus to be somewhat off-putting, particularly activists who are people of color. They were unnerved initially, but they were also intrigued enough to keep coming back. They reported feeling validated from having their voice heard and motivated to keep participating. Consensus may have been initially off-putting, but eventually they acclimated. Because of their own experiences, activists believe that their efforts to teach newcomers consensus decision-making effectively addresses the problem of alienation of outsiders. Activists expect that newcomers’ experience with consensus will mirror their own. Although they perceive that consensus decision-making may be alienating to newcomers, outsiders, and people who are marginalized, they believe that the problem can be solved via education rather than by making any concrete changes to their consensus processes. They believe that the solution to this problem is to orient newcomers, because that is what helped them feel comfortable participating. They do not see that a solution may require changing the aspects of consensus that are alienating, perhaps because they cannot relate to people who are truly put-off by consensus.

The group style of the activists I interviewed exposes the values of equality, anti-oppression, and ‘awareness.’ They are aware of power dynamics within their group. For them, an anti-oppression framework involves activists having the space to work through differences. I contend that this element of their group styles masks activists’ ability to identify the problem of alienation and modify consensus to address it. Activists express their concern about equality and

anti-oppression in how they treat group members and how they talk about group dynamics. Their style for addressing issue of equality and inclusion as it pertains to group members, but it does not extend to perspective members. They readily talk about racial inclusion but are not willing to actually change how they organize, even if they are alienating perspective participants, particularly people of color. In this case, their group style inhibits, rather than enables, activists from modifying consensus decision-making to make it more accessible to newcomers and people of color. Activists' pragmatic approach to consensus does not extend to altering it in a way that would make newcomers and people of color feel more a part of the group.

Scholarly Critique: Consensus Decision-Making Excludes People with Limited Availability

Scholars have long critiqued consensus decision-making, observing that the time-intensive nature of consensus-oriented decision-making can prohibit the participation of those with less time available, such as working people and people with children (Leondar-Wright 2012; Treloar 2003) Leondar Wright (2012) found that the tendency for activist organizations to include lengthy discussions about group process often exhausts working-class members whose availability is restricted by their work schedules. As a result, working-class group members, as well as group members with caretaking responsibilities, such as parents, are not able to participate fully in group meetings and decision-making.

When questioned, activists acknowledged that consensus excludes working people, as well as those who are shorter in time availability. Several activists told me that they were able to participate fully in consensus decision-making when they were students, but they found it difficult to continue once they graduated and got full-time jobs. Yagil, of Berkeley, California explained, “The kind of time it requires and the kind of energy and effort it requires I feel makes a lot of sense

if you're a student.” As a result, only people with the privilege of not working are able to fully participate. Max observed that the only people who are able to participate in the DeGrowth movement are students, or people with jobs that pay well enough that they can afford to work less. Additionally, mothers and other caregivers, like Johanna, of Cologne, are often excluded from consensus processes: “I couldn’t follow some discussions,” she told me, “I had to be at home.” In speaking about Occupy Oakland, Charles observed that the General Assembly would go until late at night and was therefore “designed to take away the voice of concerned parents, concerned workers, people who couldn't stay until 12:00am.”

Activists also noted that consensus decision-making excludes people with limited patience. When meetings continue for hours, people are more likely to cede their position or leave out of exhaustion. Anita observed activists in Occupy Oakland working together to manipulate meeting outcomes by stretching meetings out and thinning out the number of people in attendance. The structure of consensus decision-making creates opportunities for people to “really wing-out and side-track things,” Wynd explained, which can “really turn off people who are more focused.” Yagil found consensus to be “emotionally prohibitive” because he admitted he is “not patient enough.” Time-intensive meetings can result in burnout, causing many people to drop out activism altogether. “I don’t have time to come to meetings five days a week,” Lava told me, “Burnout is a huge issue.”

Many activists acknowledge that the time-intensive nature of consensus can prohibit the participation of people with busy lives and low attention spans, however this does not mean they feel this warrants change. They contend that, while consensus takes a lot of time, that is not necessarily a bad thing. According to Celia, a community organizer for Santa Ana, California, “Efficiency shouldn't be a priority. Saving time shouldn't be a priority, ” because if you have a

good consensus process, “you have to be willing to invest time in it.” Activists are willing to prioritize their time-intensive group processes if it means making decisions thoughtfully. They recognize that consensus decision-making takes time because “good” consensus requires time, and it is worth the time it takes.

Yessu, of Occupy Wall Street, felt strongly that even though consensus is a “very time consuming, stressful thing . . . people should make time for it because the world has been getting really screwed up.” Activists believe that people ought to be willing to put in the time it takes if they want to have an impact. Saka, an Irish activist living in Berlin, felt that if people are committed, they should either be able to attend a five-hour meeting or just participate when it is important to them. According to Sher, of Oakland, activism is not for everyone because not everyone is willing to invest the intensive time it requires. The activists I spoke with equated investment of time with level of commitment. They, themselves, commit their time extensively to consensus-based activism, and they struggle to understand that a potential group member may be just committed but less available. In this regard, activists are unable to reconcile their pragmatic interests of recruiting new members to their group with their styles’ notion that commitment is equated to dedicated time. They fail to weigh the practical benefits of consensus, such as a sense of unity, greater commitment to the group and the cause, etc., against the liabilities of losing members. They struggle to balance these competing interests because they believe if a group member is actually committed, they will either make time or be satisfied with marginal participation in the group.

Activists believe that those who have responsibilities that restrict their ability to participate in meetings should simply participate when they are able and trust other members to make decisions when they are not there. Philip, a German activist, suggested that activists who are less

available can “step out of the process and say ‘I trust you to make a decision. I will follow along with this decision because I trust you in making good decisions.’” Anita, a community organizer in Oakland, suggested that those who are unable to participate fully because of time restrictions may not be able to play a leadership role, but they can still find ways to participate in the movement. Antonio of Occupy LA posed that people who cannot sit through meetings can make art or find some other way to support the group. Germany- and US- based activists alike seemed unaware or unconcerned about how people may feel about playing a marginalized role within their group and missing opportunities to make decisions. Activists in both countries held hypothetical narratives about how activists with less time *could* embrace the opportunity to participate to the extent that they are able and *should* trust other group members to make decisions in times they are absent. However, none of the activists I interviewed had been in this position themselves or had considered how a group member in this position may feel.

Activists described some ways they attempted to make their groups more accessible. They occasionally talked of incorporating translation. They also welcomed children in meetings. For example, Adele, of Berlin, told me she brought her nine-month-old baby to DeGrowth retreats and breast fed during meetings. The groups I observed occasionally offer childcare services, although this seems to be relatively rare and difficult to sustain. Juika, of Berlin, noted that smaller working groups were more able to accommodate the schedules of participants because they were fewer in number. Each of these efforts attempts to address features of consensus to make it slightly more accessible. However, they did not make any changes to the fundamental structure of meetings. Activists I spoke with did not consider if their efforts to be more inclusive were or were not effective, nor did they contemplate if they would lose potential group members if they were not effective.

Another reason why activists are unwilling to take steps to make their decision-making more accessible is that they believe it takes time to make the right decisions. They prioritize effectiveness—or their notion of it—over inclusion of working people and caregivers. Michael, of Cologne, bluntly told me: “I’m more concerned with pragmatics than with inclusion . . . I’m more concerned with effectiveness. It’s important to make a decision.” Other activists explained that while they would like to include everyone in decision-making, consensus takes time and is less effective if it is rushed. “You have to be willing to invest time in it,” Celia, of Santa Ana, California, told me. Sometimes, she told me, that means that not everything gets covered, so her group has to have an “emergency meeting” the following day, even if not all group members can participate. The activists I interviewed prioritized making quality decisions over quick decisions, regardless of how it may be excluding working people and caregivers.

A significant reason why activists do not make more of an effort to address this issue is because they believe the source of the problem lies in capitalism rather than within their own group. In their eyes, the problem is that people have to work as long as they do, or that society does not provide more support to caregivers. The problem is *not* that their organizational structure does not accommodate working people or caregivers. They view their organizations’ lengthy meetings in which they hear everyone’s perspective as an act of resistance to capitalism. Having shorter, more efficient meetings might be more inclusive of people who are busy. However, that would also mean allowing the limitations of capitalism to shape their organizational processes. Adele explained that:

The consensus principle is opposed to the capitalist system because it takes this much time, and people cannot be productive in this time . . . So the time it takes in our plenary session should not be minimized to be more efficient. It’s not about efficiency. The goal is to make a decision that is good for many people. If you really are a part of a consensus-based group, the practice is not being in a capitalist way of thinking.

Considering the way they see consensus relating to capitalism, activists' solutions for consensus-related issues are more theoretical than practical. They acknowledge that working people are less likely to be able to participate in their organizations, however they blame the limits of capitalism for that problem rather than entertaining the limits of consensus decision-making. They suggest that activists should invest as much time in their activism as they do in their paid work, and that parents would be more able to participate in movement activities if they were to have a collective living arrangement.

The phenomenon of working-class people being unable to participate has an interesting effect on activists—rather than making them reconsider consensus decision-making, it makes activists adhere to it more firmly. They focus their intentions on opposing capitalism rather than considering faults in their own organizational form. They are attached to the way consensus decision-making opposes capitalism by embracing time-intensive group dialogue over efficiency in an act of resistance. In this way, their group style perpetuates the issue of exclusion of working people rather than empowering activists to resolve it.

The activist's notion of inclusion is letting everyone have their say, but this ultimately can result in meetings that last for many hours; as a result, activists who have limits to their availability are ultimately excluded from weighing in on many decisions. They fail to address the exclusionary aspect of consensus because of their anti-capitalist belief system, as well as their notion that good decision-making takes time and the assessment that people should just join in what they can. They believe that true commitment to the issues means that people should be willing and able to sacrifice if they want to participate. They value time commitment as a currency for how committed people are to activism generally. It is my sense that activists express

their commitment to the cause by spending a lot of time in meetings. Therefore, they struggle to understand others who are not able to do the same.

Style Does Not Address Alienating and Exclusionary Aspects of Consensus Decision-Making

The sections above describe the group style of activists who use consensus decision-making. When questioned directly, activists expressed concern about the ways consensus can be alienating to newcomers and people who are marginalized, although they did not see the issues as being black and white. Some activists I spoke with identified ways that consensus is exclusionary to working people or caregivers. They described how their organizations make certain accommodations to address these issues. However, these efforts only provided superficial solutions to the problems. Ultimately, the activists did not fundamentally alter, nor did they even consider altering, how they make decisions. In these two cases, style allows for them to acknowledge the problems and address them in minor ways, while ultimately maintaining unaltered fundamentals of consensus. In the case of consensus alienating or excluding people, revisiting consensus decision-making through the lens of style reinforces rather than debunks scholars' criticism.

Activists' personal experiences with consensus render them unable to empathize with people who have different reactions to these problems than they, themselves, have had. They may have originally found consensus to be off-putting, but they eventually became familiar with it. Similarly, activists who become really involved in consensus do so because they are very committed. As a result, they expect others to be committed enough to participate in consensus regardless of how time-intensive it is. Activists who are exposed to consensus and continue with it are more likely to appreciate its benefits more greatly than take issue with its faults. Understandably, their perspective of consensus and their willingness to change it is affected by

their unique relationship to consensus-based activism. Their lack of awareness or understanding of how consensus decision-making alienates or excludes potential participants inhibits their ability to address these problems.

Style is difficult to change if activists are invested in the element of consensus that is problematic. For example, the features of consensus decision-making that can be alienating, such as hand signals and process-heavy discussions, also serve a purpose—they facilitate communication among group members. An added benefit is that the internationally recognized hand signals serve the additional function of creating a uniform process that movement organizations use when they come together to form coalitions. Additionally, consensus decision-making excludes working people and caregivers because meetings tend to be very lengthy and endure late into the night. Still, the lengthy meetings serve a purpose, activists say: they allow groups to take their time making decisions thoughtfully and horizontally, and they allow groups to make decisions in response to pressing political opportunities. Activists are unable to alter consensus decision-making to make it more palatable to newcomers or accessible to working people without sacrificing something that is valuable to their group.

Another reason why activists do not take sufficient action to address these issues is that activists attribute blame for these issues outside of their organizations. Rather than address the ways that their own organizations exclude working people, they adopt an anti-capitalist framework. The activists believe that capitalism is at fault when it comes to working people not being able to participate in consensus. Any aspect of style is difficult to change if activists do not see it as a problem. This is another example of how group style can serve to mask an issue rather than enable transformation. They adopt language around multiculturalism and “awareness” of oppression, but they do not address the ways their groups may be alienating newcomers and people

of color. Their ideological and rhetorical stances do not result in actual inclusion. They engage in certain activities to try and make their organizations more accessible, like offering tutorials or creating ways for people to be involved without attending meetings. However, none of their approaches involve them reflecting upon these problems and considering directly making changes to consensus decision-making processes, directly. Instead, they expect newcomers, outsiders, and working people to adjust and adapt to consensus.

CONCLUSION

Why Group Style Resolves Some Dilemmas of Consensus but Not All

During my interviews with activists in the US and Germany, I first asked open questions about consensus decision-making, including what they appreciate about consensus and what makes it challenging. Activists volunteered their perspectives about one of the scholarly critiques of consensus: they readily shared stories and opinions about how consensus decision-making can be arduously inefficient. However, they did not discuss the other two scholarly critiques of consensus by their own volition. Only when I directly questioned them about those themes did activists share their experiences or perspectives about how consensus decision-making has the potential to alienate newcomers and marginalized people, or to exclude working people and caregivers. When I asked activists about those two latter topics, they often asked me to repeat the question, and then took a moment to formulate their answers. This apprehensive way of responding differed from the unprompted and effusive response activists had when discussing the inefficiencies of consensus.

The ways activists discussed these issues reflect the distinct relationship they have to them. Activists are very much aware of the inefficiencies of consensus, but not so much about the ways that consensus can be alienate or exclude potential members. Activists are less likely to be able to

adjust or respond to a problem if they are not aware of it or if they do not see it as a significant problem. Activists are acutely aware that their meetings can be arduously long because they, themselves, have to endure them. They are aware of the potential to miss political opportunities because many of them have been in meetings in which their group simply cannot reach consensus. Activists are less aware of the ways that consensus decision-making can alienate or exclude perspective participants. Additionally, they perceive this to be less of a problem than the inefficiencies of consensus. They have their own experiences with being an unfamiliar outsider of consensus and then acclimating to understand and appreciate its nuances. They also have their own experiences of having busy lives but prioritizing activism. Activists' personal experiences prevent them from empathizing with the experiences of people who find consensus decision-making to be excessively off-putting or prohibitive. They acknowledge these two issues, but they do not perceive them as warranting a change in their group style.

In order to change an issue, activists must first see it as theirs to fix. In the case of consensus decision-making excluding working people and caregivers, activists blame capitalism rather than their own organizational structures and behaviors. When it comes to the issue of the eccentricities of consensus being alienating to newcomers, activists conclude that consensus is simply not for everyone. Additionally, activists believe that their ways of addressing these issues are sufficient. They believe that offering tutorials that introduce activists to consensus decision-making is a sufficient method for orienting newcomers. They also believe that working people and caregivers can simply engage in movement activities to the degree they are able. Another way that activists address these issues is by adopting discourse around inclusion, with talk about anti-racism and anti-capitalism, but falling short of actual inclusion. Activists find ways to either deflect there being a problem in the first place or find minor ways to address it.

Table 4.1: Conditions for Improvement of the Dilemmas of Consensus Via Group Style

When Group Style Leads to Improvement of the Dilemmas of Consensus (i.e. Inefficiencies and Stalemates)	When Group Style Does Not Lead to Improvement on of the Dilemmas of Consensus (i.e. Alienation of Newcomers and Exclusion of Working-Class People)
If members of an organization are aware of a problem, they are more likely to address it reflexively	If members of an organization are not aware of a problem, they are unlikely to address it reflexively
Activists see a problem as significant enough to warrant making a change	Activists do not see a problem as significant enough to warrant making a change.
Activists believe that the problem is theirs to fix	Activists do not believe that the problem is theirs to fix
Activists acknowledge that they are not sufficiently addressing the problem	Activists believe they are already doing enough to address the problem.
Activists engage in reflexivity	Activists do not engage in reflexivity
When the pitfall is not exacerbated by reflexivity	The pitfall is exacerbated by reflexivity
Group members are able to engage several different scene styles	Group members are not able to engage several different scene styles
The group style does not mask the problem	The group style masks the problem

Factors that affect the way group style engages with the dilemmas of consensus decision-making are summarized in Table 4.1, above. Lichterman and Eliasoph’s (2014) notion of *scene styles* holds that a group can have more than one style, as styles can vary by social contexts. Activists make decisions in many different scenes: larger meetings, working groups, coalition meetings, informally, etc. In response to these varied scenes, activists adapt their styles of decision-making. Activists find that they are more able to accommodate working people and caregivers’ schedules in working groups and organizations with fewer members. Smaller groups are more capable of accommodating group members with more restricted schedules. In those groups, activists use an alternative scene style, one that schedules meeting times around group members’ particular availabilities, rather than expecting participants’ schedules to accommodate group meetings. Notably, this accommodating scene style is challenging to transfer to large

organizations. Scene styles enable activists to remedy a problematic aspect of consensus decision-making because some scenes may be more accommodating, less off-putting, or more efficient than others.

The Benefits and Limits of Reflexivity

Lichterman (2006) postulated that groups have the potential to make adaptations to their group styles through *reflexivity*. By thinking critically about their group styles and their relationships to society, groups are able to adjust their styles to be more in line with their intentions. Thus, reflexivity has the potential to support groups in dealing with undesirable aspects of their group style. Without a practice of social reflexivity, groups are less likely to be able to remediate problems with their group styles. A group's tendency toward reflexivity has the potential to either support or discourage them to identify a problem with consensus decision-making and address it.

Reflexivity has the potential to enable organizations to address problematic aspects of their group styles. However, reflexivity has limitations. Firstly, as I have identified, there are a number of conditions pertaining to an issue that must be met for a group to reap the transformational benefits of reflexivity. If members of an organization are not aware of a problem, they are unlikely to address it reflexively. Also, activists have to see a problem as significant enough to warrant making a change. They have to believe that the change it warrants is theirs to fix, rather than something that is caused by factors beyond the purview of their group. They have to acknowledge that the things they are already doing to address the problem are not sufficient. Secondly, Blee (2012) found that reflexivity could be helpful for addressing issues within groups, but very few groups engage in dialogue about their group processes. Even if reflexivity is a potential remedy, very few groups do it. Third, reflexivity requires groups to talk about group processes, and

according to Leondar-Wright (2012), too much processing can be time and patience exhaustive. Too much reflexivity could possibly exacerbate the problem of alienating newcomers and excluding working people rather than improve upon it. Lastly, considering that group styles are a durable element of culture, groups are not able to “create them from scratch” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Therefore, activist groups are not always entirely capable of customizing their group style to address problematic aspects of consensus decision-making, even if they try.

Reflexivity can potentially work when groups are aware of the problem and when groups engage in reflexive dialogue. My interviews with activists reveal that groups are more likely to apply reflexivity when they feel responsible for a problem and when they can improve upon the issue without fundamentally altering their decision-making structures. However, simply being reflexive is no guarantee that reflexivity will actually resolve the issue. For these reasons, activists are more likely to address and resolve the critique of consensus being inefficient, and less likely to resolve the critique that consensus alienates newcomers and marginalized people, or that consensus excludes working people and caregivers. In order to be reflexive in the way that can lead to new practices, activists have to be genuinely willing to confront the problems their current practices are creating. The activists I interviewed were certainly reflexive, but there were many self-justificatory loops in their reflexivity. Indeed, activists’ anti-racist and anti-capitalist ideological commitments and their pragmatic style sometimes enable them to reflexively broach these limitations of consensus. Other times, however, their style masks their awareness, preventing them from acknowledging and acting on the ways they perpetuate these problems.

The activists’ pragmatic style is evidenced in how they prize consensus decision-making for the way it supports them to accomplish their strategic goals. In some ways, their style facilitates their reevaluation of how they practice consensus decision-making. In other ways, their style

serves as something of a mask, one that prevents them from making the modifications that would be necessary to *actually* resolve problematic aspects of consensus. Reflexivity is effective when activists are able to acknowledge a problem *and* confront the aspects of their consensus that create that problem. Looking at activists' style illuminates both the possibilities and the potholes that activists face in addressing problematic aspects of consensus.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Scholars and activists tend to see consensus as a uniform process, yet consensus has taken many forms over time. This study has examined how activists in distinct eras and nationalities have understood the purposes and mechanisms of consensus differently. Whereas activists in the 1960's and 70's enthusiastically embraced the prefigurative potential of consensus, believing that their own experiments with radical democracy would democratize society, activists today are more apprehensive about the broad impact of consensus. Contemporary activists are motivated to practice consensus due to the pragmatic ways it enhances their organizing efforts. In Chapter Two, I identified similarities and differences in how activists in the US and Germany understand consensus. They shared a pragmatic style of practicing consensus, but they differed in their orientation to conflict and ideological diversity. These differences highlight the fact that consensus can take many forms and open up the question of why it takes the form it does in different settings.

Throughout this study, I have explored the nuances of group style by observing how consensus decision-making has evolved over time, how consensus is practiced by activists in two countries, and how activists are able to respond to the problematic aspects of consensus. Style is the varied ways that activists understand the meaning behind consensus and enact it. Style is a useful lens for looking at groups' practice of consensus decision-making because it captures culture in interaction. Style encompasses many aspects of group life, including expectations for how group members relate to one another, how group members are expected to speak, how group members relate to others outside their group, and how groups make claims about social issues. The lens of style captures the dynamic nature of consensus by highlighting the many ways activists animate at different places and points in time.

Style is a more apt lens for studying consensus than ideology and strategy. Style affords activists flexibility in how they enact their ideological commitments. Ideological consistency is essential to a group's ideology, which is why ideology does not efficiently explain activists' adaptability. Additionally, if activists were to practice consensus for purely strategic reasons, then its utility would be paramount. Activists would embrace majority voting and abandon consensus if it proved inefficient. Seeing consensus as a style helps to explain why groups practice it with little reflection as to whether it is the most ideologically consistent or strategic method. It also explains why activists are able to use consensus fairly flexibly, adapting it to their needs.

Looking at consensus decision-making through the lens of style is helpful for understanding the inconsistencies between what activists say and do, and how they see themselves versus how they actually are. Group style is a shared way of doing things with a basis that is not often reflected upon. Instead, activists justify it as "the way we have always done things." Activists' group style is performative, which helps to explain why activists insist on the effectiveness of consensus even though, in actuality, its effectiveness is not really why they use it. This is apparent in the way they adapt their practice of consensus to some extent and stress the strategic benefits of consensus, yet they do not consider abandoning it when it is not proving especially effective. Additionally, activists talk a great deal about anti-oppression and anti-capitalism, but they ultimately fail to consider the ways their own practices alienate or exclude people of color and working-class people.

THE STYLES THAT ACCOMPANY CONSENSUS CHANGE OVER TIME

Chapter Two was guided by the question: How have activists' styles of consensus decision-making change over time in the US and Germany? By comparing different eras of consensus decision-

making, we can observe how activists' practice of consensus has developed. Compared to activists of prior eras of participatory decision-making, contemporary activists in the US and Germany hold unique perspectives about notions of their prefigurative impact, equality within their organizations, and way of relating to one another.

Activists of the 1960's and 70's believed their experiments with radical democracy would foster a more democratic society. Activists today hold a more conservative notion of the prefigurative impact of consensus decision-making. They dismiss the idea of governments adopting consensus decision-making as "magical thinking." Instead, they cautiously believe that consensus *may* have a greater social impact from a "ripple effect" resulting from individual participants' personal growth. The activists also profess that consensus contributes to social change because it supports them in reaching their goals in practical ways. Activists of the 1960's and 70's fulfilled their commitment to equality with the intention of giving every group member an equal voice. However, they were not sensitive to power differences among group members. Contemporary activists emphasize that equality among group members goes beyond giving members equal say; for them, equality means actively confronting oppression and challenging power differentials within their groups. Lastly, activists in each of the eras held characteristically different ways of relating to one another. Activists of the 1940's and 50's related to one another in insular circles of religious fellowship. Activists of the 1960's and 70's came together through friendship ties. Today, activists discuss their relationships in terms of finding common ground across differences in perspective and identity.

My analysis identifies two mechanisms through which activists' group styles have developed over time. Firstly, activists learn from past embodiments of consensus decision-making. They attempt to address the problematic aspects of consensus that the previous eras encountered,

sometimes by overcompensating. Secondly, their group style responds to changes in their socio-political context. During times of political repression, activists were more cautious about the prefigurative impact of consensus decision-making than were activists in the 1960's and 70's. This process of learning and responding has cultivated contemporary activist's pragmatic style of practicing consensus. These conclusions about how styles change are not intended to imply that activists are always cognizant as they adapt their style of consensus. Like other elements of culture, activists are not always aware of their group style, nor are they always able to modify their style with agency.

Activists today, unlike those in the 1960s and 1970s, insist that they use consensus because it is practical rather than because its prefigurative. They also acknowledge, however, that it is extraordinarily time-consuming, and often fractious—not exactly practical. Even when consensus decision-making falls short of efficient, activists do not ever consider abandoning it. To make sense of this paradox, I treat activists' practice of and rationale for consensus decision-making as a style. Their style privileges being practical, effective, and experimental, and it is critical of a stance of ideological purity. This allows activists to be flexible in their use of consensus. At the same time, insofar as their practicality is a performative style, it coexists with a strong and incontrovertible ideological commitment to consensus. Thus, paying attention to style helps to illuminate how activists can perform their ideological commitments in different ways.

This study contributes to theoretical understandings of group style by further investigating how style and procedure work together. Comparing contemporary activists' style for practicing consensus to past eras, across nations, and to scholarly critiques of consensus generates new developments for the notion of group style. Style enables groups to be flexible in their enactment of otherwise rigid procedures and practices. This demonstrates that groups have the potential to

adapt their embodiment of organizational practices, even when they are unable or unwilling to abandon them. The same practices and procedures can be enacted in various ways, as expressed through group style. Even perceivably rigid structures are performed through style. Through style, activists are able to remediate issues with their practices, to an extent, and respond to the unique circumstances of their socio-political contexts. This is not to say activists are always capable of intentionally adapting their group style. Given that activists are not always aware of their style, that is not necessarily the case. Regardless of activists' intentions, style does modify consensus.

By adapting group style, activists have more than a single option for embodying their ideological commitments. Over the years, activists have practiced consensus decision-making as an expression of their ideological commitments to horizontalism, democracy, and equality. Activists have common ideological motivations, yet their practice of consensus decision-making has varied by era. As I have demonstrated, activists are not bound by their ideology to a rigid set of practices. Over the course of history, to an extent, activists have demonstrated flexibility to practice shared ideologies in diverse ways. Given that style diversifies how ideology is expressed, scholars who study consensus decision-making—along with other ideologically motivated practices—ought to keep style in mind in order to avoid making generalizations that fail to acknowledge the many ways activists put their ideologies into practice.

HOW STYLES OF CONSENSUS SPREAD INTERNATIONALLY

Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003), theorized that group styles can be shared by many groups, movements, and nations. My dissertation provides the first case study of a group style that is shared transnationally. My comparison of activists in the US and Germany reveals that, in many respects, they share a group style, but not all.

The activists I interviewed in the US and Germany were similar in terms of their political attitudes and the issues their movements targeted. They also had similar procedures of practicing consensus, such as meeting structures, lingo, and hand signals that characterized their decision-making. They were also similar in terms of the attitudes that accompanied their practice of consensus. Activists in both countries valued consensus for the way it fosters equality among group members and for the opportunity it provides activists to hear one another's perspectives and to be heard. They emphasized the practical ways consensus supports their organizations in reaching their goals. Consensus, the activists told me, supports their efforts to build solidarity and commitment, make better decisions, and foster equality.

Still, German and American activists have certain differences in their group style. Activists from Germany were more enthusiastic about skilled facilitation than American activists. Unlike activists in the US, they felt empowered to improve upon issues in their group process by using structured facilitation activities. They also differed on their orientation toward conflict and ideological homogeneity. Activists in the US embraced ideological diversity and valued the conflict it often brings. Conversely, activists in Germany were more vocal about their appreciation of group dynamics that are harmonious. For that reason, they preferred to work with others who are ideologically similar.

I trace the commonalities in the group style of German and American activists' styles of consensus to their common roots in the Global Justice movement, which had a strong presence in both nations. Activists' pragmatic style and thoughtful efforts to level imbalances of power originated in the Global Justice movement, as did the specific intricacies of their consensus-based procedures, such as progressive stacks and commonly used hand signals. The main source of the differences between German and American practitioners of consensus is the Occupy movement,

which had a greater and more lasting influence on activists in the US. The Occupy movement coalesced without a predetermined set of goals, which resulted in great ideological diversity and high levels of conflict (Juris 2013). These same group dynamics are still visible in American activists' group style and are notably absent from German activists' group style.

Group style is not taught formally but learned informally. This contributes to why it has diffused by way of networks of progressive activists. People learn by doing, and along with the practice of it, they learn, implicitly, the rationale for it. Through style, activists develop common ways of communicating with one another, behaving in activist spaces, and connecting with other organizations (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Shared style also gives activists common approaches to framing social issues and claims making (Dasgupta and Lichterman 2016).

As I have demonstrated, the activists I interviewed shared elements of group style internationally. The benefit of shared group style between the US and Germany is that activists are able to easily join together in trans-national movements because of their shared framework for interaction. According to Juris (2008) contemporary movements are "locally rooted, but globally connected." Group style affords activists the opportunity to practice consensus decision-making with a common framework for interaction shared internationally. Still, style affords activists the flexibility to retain styles of consensus that are responsive to their local contexts.

CAN ACTIVISTS ADDRESS THE DILEMMAS OF CONSENSUS WITH STYLE?

Scholars have extensively critiqued consensus decision-making. At times, activists think they are doing one thing, but the result is not what they intend. Activists who use consensus decision-making claim to do so in order to foster equality among members, but scholars have found that consensus decision-making actually reproduces inequality (della Porta 2005 and 2013; Freeman

1973; Leondar-Wright 2012). Scholars have found that consensus excludes people with less availability (Leondar-Wright 2012; Treloar 2003) and alienates newcomers (Polletta 2005; Juris 2013), which conflicts with activists' intentions to be inclusive. Scholars critique consensus decision-making for its inefficiencies that result in missed political opportunities (Mansbridge 1983; Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002), yet activists profess that consensus is the most efficient way to make decisions. Regardless of all these critiques, activists believe consensus is *the only way* to make decisions. Every single study participant told me that they would only participate in social movement organizations that use consensus decision-making. Even when activists are frustrated with consensus, they do not consider trading it for a different decision-making approach—yet another indicator of activists' staunch commitment to consensus, regardless of its shortcomings.

Scholars tend to see consensus decision-making as a straightforward process where one person has veto power over decisions. But this view misses the variety of ways in which activists have practiced consensus, and the many different goals that have motivated their practice. As I have demonstrated, contemporary activists practice consensus decision-making with a style that is quite different from that practiced in the 1960's and 70's. Activists have managed to overcome some of the difficulties that scholars have wrongly seen as intrinsic to the form. Paying attention to activists' styles illuminates differences in the practice of consensus over time and across regions. In Chapter Four, I asked whether paying attention to style could shed new light on three critiques that long been seen as standard dilemmas of consensus. I found that activists' ability create distinctive styles of consensus has made them less vulnerable to certain critiques but not all.

Scholars have critiqued consensus decision-making for its potential to be inefficient to the point of missing political opportunities (Mansbridge 1983). My analysis of interviews with activists from the US and Germany reveals a group style that employs flexible modes of decision-

making that extend beyond the limits of formal consensus decision-making. They make decisions informally, in working groups, with select “core leaders,” and during direct action. Sometimes they intentionally avoid making a formal decision all together to circumvent the inefficiencies of consensus. They are more pragmatic than dogmatic in their approach to decision-making, and that affords them the flexibility required to make decisions efficiently when necessary. Activists vary their decision-making approaches in distinct settings, another reason why activists are able to make decisions more efficiently than scholars would expect. For example, when activists are in the midst of direct action, they interact differently than how they typically do during meetings. They are less inclined to thoroughly discuss a decision from every angle and are more inclined to give participants license to make individual behavioral choices rather than to act collectively.

Activists’ personal experiences make them well-aware of consensus’ potential for debilitating stalemates, thus opening the opportunity for activists to take measures to address its inefficiencies. Another reason why they are able to effectively address this issue is that they can do so without undermining their commitment to consensus-decision processes. Formally, activists’ organizations are consensus-based, yet informally they engage a variety of decision-making approaches. Activists are able to maintain their ideological commitment to consensus *and* their identity as a consensus-based group, while still employing a wider range of decision-making practices.

Scholars have critiqued consensus decision-making for alienating newcomers and people of color with their eccentric processes. Scholars have also critiqued consensus for excluding working-class people, and people who have other responsibilities that limit their availability, such as parents and other caregivers. My interviews with activists revealed that they were able to discuss these issues, but only when I questioned them pointedly. They were able to identify ways that their

organizations may alienate newcomers and exclude working people, but they did not offer any examples of how these issues had been remediated.

I have identified several reasons that explain why activists' group style does not enable them to correct issues of alienation and exclusion. Activists are not able to resolve these issues because they are not fully cognizant of them. For example, these issues did not personally prevent the activists I interviewed from participating, and they were less compelled them to address them. Activists may have initially felt apprehensive of consensus, but they eventually came to be comfortable practicing it. For that reason, activists' analysis of these issues focuses on how individuals can adapt *to* consensus, rather than adapting consensus, *itself*. Lastly, activists' analysis of what causes some people to be unable to participate in consensus places the onus on capitalism, rather than on their own organizational practices. They blame structural forces for preventing the participation of working-class people and caregivers, rather than looking at the ways to make their own practices more accessible and inclusive. Their analysis of the problem does not result in their being inclined to seek ways to modify their decision-making practices.

With reflexivity, activists are able to discuss and reevaluate certain aspects of their group style to improve upon their group processes and outcomes (Lichterman 2005). However, as my findings demonstrate, reflexivity cannot remediate issues when group members are not aware of the issues, when they believe they are already doing enough to address the issues, or when they believe outside forces are responsible for the issues. Additionally, activists generate new dimensions of their group styles in tandem with their scene settings. Therefore, problematic parts of consensus are more likely to be resolved if activists vary them in different settings. Using the lens of group style, I have revealed that activists have the potential to identify and rectify the ways

that consensus falls short of their values and intentions through reflexivity, but that does not mean they will.

The contradictions between activists' intentions of equality, accessibility, and effectiveness and scholars' criticisms highlight a crisis of values in consensus-based movements. The activists' group styles include a norm for activists to communicate about equality, anti-oppression, and radical inclusion. Yet, activists' practices continue to exclude people of color, newcomers, working-class people, and caregivers. In this case, their group styles appear to actually prevent activists from acknowledging a problem and using reflexivity to experiment with solutions. The group-style lens provides insight as to why contemporary activists are able to remediate certain pitfalls of consensus and why they are unable to remediate others.

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Juris (2008) and Castells (2015) attributed the connectedness of international movements to digital networks. Activists I spoke with incorporated technology in their decision-making through emailing, texting, or conference calls. However, none gave any indication that their group style is spread through technology. None of the activists in my study reported that technology influenced their organizations to adopt consensus. Given the discrepancy between scholars' and activists' perspectives, further investigation of the role technology plays in how groups make decisions and how consensus decision-making is spread between movements and nations would be valuable. Questions worth pursuing: In what ways has technology changed activists' group style? How has technology played into the sharing of style? Does technology enable activists to resolve certain criticisms of consensus more than others?

According to Lichterman (2005), group style can influence coalition building and claims making (Dasgupta and Lichterman 2016). Applying the lens of group style to coalition-building and claims-making in consensus-based organizations will yield further insights into the way style influences social movements. I anticipate that group style and consensus decision-making work together to enable groups to work together by creating a basis for coalitions with shared behaviors and protocols. Additionally, group style influences how organizations make claims, so shared style may contribute to a basis for shared goals and tactics. Consensus has been criticized for infringing upon effectiveness of the organizations that use it, and it has been criticized for impeding the building of coalitions. Using the lens of style, I expect that consensus decision-making actually enhances the potential of consensus using organizations to work in coalition, and their effectiveness when they do.

Lichterman and Eliasoph's (2014) concept of scene style theorizes that groups hold a collection of styles that coordinate with different settings and situations. Group members collectively navigate their repertoire of scene styles. Findings from Chapter Four indicate that activists adapt their decision-making styles in different settings, in meetings, during direct action, or by avoiding a decision all together. Using different approaches to decision-making in different settings seems to enable activists to make decisions more efficiently. Ethnographic research is necessary to further explore the potential for scene styles to improve upon problematic aspects of consensus decision-making. Additionally, scene styles may affect how to compare contemporary movements to past movements, as the contexts that groups and movements inhabit have changed over time.

Further directions of this study include investigating additional samples. For example, what findings could be drawn by adding other nations into this study, particularly non-Western nations?

Would further research on the social movement field in the US and Germany reveal more complexities in group style? Additionally, this study would benefit from talking with people who are newcomers to consensus decision-making, including people who have decided to discontinue their participation. Likewise, it would prove interesting to apply group style to decision-making processes in different settings, such as political parties, movements on the right, policy makers, and professional organizations.

This study took on the question of whether activists are able to adapt consensus decision-making as they progress from prior generations, share consensus among other movements, and address the shortcomings of consensus. In the context of a plethora of scholarly critiques and activists' frustrations, activists breathe new life into consensus decision-making with their group styles. Still, the question remains: activists may be able to re-interpret consensus decision-making through their group styles, but should they? Leondar-Wright (2014) urges activists to reconsider using consensus decision-making altogether for the sake of including working-class people. Several activists I interviewed indicated that they would be open to making decisions differently, but they did not know of an alternate decision-making model. What would it look like if groups started making decisions differently? Future research can further explore how activists can either bring consensus decision-making into alignment with their ideals, or how new models of decision-making can be identified and spread across international activist networks.

This study provides the first assessment of consensus decision-making through the lens of group style. Group style provides a conceptual framework to analyze and compare different manifestations of consensus decision-making. In this case, the framework of group style united my comparisons between different activist eras of consensus, and between activists in the US and Germany. Looking at consensus through the lens of style and making these comparisons

illuminates the fact that organizational practices and procedures are comprised of interaction. Viewing consensus decision-making as a set of interactions highlights its fluid rather than structural nature. Doing so creates novel approaches for studying and analyzing consensus, which in turn leads to new findings. Group style provides insight into the cultural reproduction of consensus decision-making, such as why activists continue to use consensus and the extent to which they are able to modify it.

Group style can be applied to other forms, tactics, and norms of social movements and other civic organizations. The same questions that have animated this study can be used to investigate the role that style plays in other forms of civic life. Using group style as an investigatory framework can provide insight into how organizational practices develop and spread. The group-style lens can be applied to identify ways that activists address shortcomings of those forms, features, or tactics, or to understand why certain shortcomings are not being remediated by activists. Style provides insight into how movements address shortcomings and adapt to an ever-shifting political context.

TOWARD THE NEXT ERA OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

With group style, activists practice consensus decision-making with a common framework for interaction that is shared internationally, *and* also responds to local circumstances. Through my analysis, I document an essential contribution that global movements make—one that outlasts the movements, themselves. Mass global movements develop shared cultures of interaction that prove to be vital when activists coordinate further movement activities.

This study's findings provide evidence that activists have the potential to address the dilemmas of consensus decision-making. It also offer insight into what prevents them from

addressing the dilemmas of consensus. The many critiques in the literature on consensus can give the impression that it is doomed to fail. The literature often portrays activists as fanatical ideologues who will inevitably reproduce inequality in their organizations and miss political opportunities. My findings tell a different story, one that shows activists as constantly adapting and improving upon consensus. Although activists have not remedied every problematic aspect of consensus, they certainly demonstrate a desire to reflexively perfect their practice of consensus.

During my interviews I learned that although activists were not open to using hierarchical decision-making practices, they are open to alternative methods of practicing horizontal decision-making. Their pragmatic and experimental approach to practicing consensus means that activists are constantly innovating their group processes. Consensus decision-makers are not absolutely bound to repeat the same dilemmas of consensus of prior generations. Not only are they open to alternative forms of consensus decision-making, they are also actively engaging in reflexivity about their current practices.

The lens of style serves as a ‘looking glass’ of sorts by giving activists more tools to understand themselves, their organizations, and their movements. My findings help activists to identify inconsistencies between what they say and do, so that they may more authentically embody their intentions. My many conversations with activists about consensus indicate that they are very open to taking a critical look at consensus decision-making. They are exceptionally capable of being reflexive about how they practice consensus. I hope that through my own scholar-activism, I can supply activists with discourse and tools to use as they have constructive conversations about their own group styles and decision-making practices.

My study deepens our understanding of the cultural connectedness of activist

communities across issues, movements, and borders. By further developing the construct of reflexivity, my research supports activists in identifying blind spots that may inhibit their organizations from remedying the problematic aspects of consensus. Ultimately, my hope is that my study contributes to building stronger and more inclusive social movements.

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