Consensus decision-making has been used in its current form since the 1960s and 70s, which are often credited as the birthplace of consensus. However there were many forms of participatory decision-making in use long before then - historical groups, peoples and communities who have had an egalitarian ethos and approach to decision-making. These are not consensus as we discuss it in our Guide to Consensus Decision-Making, but they have recognisable connections and shared qualities which have fed into and inspired consensus decision-making.

**Indigenous consensus**

Examples of indigenous cultures cited as using consensus-like processes include the Aymara of the Bolivian Altiplano, the San bushmen of the Saharan region, and the Haudenosaunee first nations people of modern day USA. Whilst these cultures were all hierarchical, at least in the sense that some leadership roles were allocated to specific individuals, there was (is, in some cases) a real sense that the will of the community prevailed through discussion and debate. Any leaders were seen only as first amongst equals. Disagreements might lead to one group taking autonomous action with none of the resentment such a ‘division’ might have in our mainstream culture.

**The spirit of consensus**

There are also a number of religious denominations with a more radical interpretation of their faith that have chosen to use consensus-like decision-making. Quakers and Ahabaptists are notable in this regard, but not alone. These groups tended to use (and still use in the case of Quakers and Anabaptists) a unanimous model of decision-making.

Researcher Ethan Mitchell writes:

> “The consensus process used by the Society of Friends (Quakers) has been in use for three and a half centuries. It is a highly specific political mechanism, with its own vocabulary, ideology, and traditions. It has to be strongly emphasized that Quakers themselves are very reluctant to describe their consensus process in political terms. Rather, friends tend to view their decision-making process as an integral part of their religious experience...”

> “...the heretical and revolutionary movements that we now refer to as the Anabaptists developed a similar principle: the “rule of sitting down”... When a group of people meet together and agree unanimously on something, the Anabaptists argued, they are expressing the Divine Will. The first concrete appearance of this on the historical stage seems to be at the Martyr’s Synod in 1527.”

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**The Aymara**

In Emily Hedin’s paper *Voices from the Bolivian Altiplano: Perspectives on empowerment amongst Aymara women* she quotes a local NGO worker as saying: “There are certain characteristics of Bolivian culture that make us distinct... we see the community as an entire whole. Community includes everyone. The process of dialogue and consensus is important. Everyone participates in the decision-making process”

Hedin then goes on to write: “Claims of consensus in community participation must not be accepted uncritically... Nonetheless this perception of community consensus building as an Aymara cultural trait emerged during interviews as women articulated their idea of empowerment as closely related to an already-existing tradition of collective action.”
Other notable examples of consensus-like processes and values include: the Hanseatic League; Pirate ships; the development of Sociocracy; and the Dutch Polder Model.

The Hanseatic League
The League was a 13th–17th century economic alliance of trading cities and merchant guilds along the coast of Northern Europe. It operated with high levels of both autonomy and collaboration. Whenever members wanted to organise a venture, they would discuss it and those that wanted to participate took part, whilst those that did not simply stood aside from that particular venture. There was no need for centralised control of each and every decision, and no need for unanimity. Nor, it seems, did this autonomous organising cause resentment – a common problem in some groups doing consensus process without consensus state of mind. In James C. Bennett’s The Anglosphere Challenge he writes:

The Hanse was a coalition of the willing. It never required unanimity for action, nor did it act by majority vote. Those parties that felt a need to do something consulted each other and upon reaching consensus, proceeded to execute the decision, while those who remained outside the consensus disassociated themselves from it. Often Hanseatic communications would list those cities that exempted or disassociated themselves from the matter at hand.

The only common institution was the Hanseatic Diet, which was strictly a forum for mutual discussion and the formation of suballiances to accomplish specific tasks. However, a consensus would emerge from the Diet that effectively shaped Hanseatic policy. Some cities seem not to have attended a Diet at all in the five hundred years of the Hanse’s existence, though they were considered to be Hanseatic cities in good standing; most attended sporadically.

Piratical consensus
Against the popular stereotype, there is historical evidence that, the dynamics of pirate ships worked according to values that have something in common with consensus. Decisions were taken in favour of the good of the whole community. Any leadership positions, including that of captain, were held only with a mandate from the wider group. Captains were given unilateral decision-making power for the duration of the chase, but could be deposed by popular consensus should they be seen to be failing.

“historical pirates displayed sophisticated organization and co-ordination...Pirates could not use government to enforce or otherwise support co-operative arrangements between them. Despite this they successfully co-operated with hundreds of other rogues. Amidst ubiquitous potential for conflict, they rarely fought, stole from, or deceived one another.” An-aargh-chy: Peter Leeson

Pirates even went as far as developing written constitutions well before the governments that are famed for such documents. These grew out of ‘articles of agreement’ originally relevant to a specific crew, but eventually becoming a common code shared amongst the wider pirate community.

“Articles of agreement required unanimous consent. Consequently pirates democratically formed them in advance of launching pirating expeditions.”

Our image of pirates is often of a tyrannical pirate captain ruling by fear and force. Leeson suggests this is more common on merchant or naval vessels. Pirate captains were elected, “the Rank of Captain being obtained by the Suffrage of the Majority” according to one historical source. Leeson goes on:

“The historical record contains numerous examples of pirate crews deposing unwanted captains by majority vote or otherwise removing them from power through popular consensus”
Sociocracy
Kees Boeke (1884-1966) was a Dutch educationalist and peace activist, and one of the founders of sociocracy a close cousin of consensus decision-making. He grew up in a Mennonite family and became a Quaker. Given the contribution of these two denominations to consensus perhaps it’s not surprising that he explored models of consent based decision-making and democracy. He was critical of existing European democracies:

“We are so accustomed to majority rule as a necessary part of democracy that it is difficult to imagine any democratic system working without it. It is true that it is better to count heads than to break them...but the party system has proved very far from providing the ideal democracies of people’s dreams” Sociocracy: Democracy As It Might Be. Kees Boeke 1945

His adaptations of the ideas of sociocracy developed by his predecessors brought it much more in line with consensus. He tested his theories in the school he founded. The school was self-governing community of almost 400 adults and children working on Quaker principles:

“There are three fundamental rules underlying the system. The first is that the interests of all members must be considered, the individual bowing to the interests of the whole. Secondly, solutions must be sought which everyone can accept: otherwise no action can be taken. Thirdly all members must be ready to act according to these decisions when unanimously made.”

The Polder Model
The Dutch Polder Model is a three-way collaboration between state, employers organisations and trade unions designed to keep industrial relations working effectively through talks in the Sociaal-Economische Raad (SER). The SER serves as the central forum to discuss labour issues and has a long tradition of consensus, often defusing labour conflicts and avoiding strikes. The modern day version of this can be said to have started with the Wassenaar Accords of 1982. But, although there is no agreed historical staring point, there are antecedents going back as far as the Middle ages.

“One explanation points to the rebuilding of the Netherlands after the Second World War...Another explanation points to the dependency of the Netherlands on the international economy. The Netherlands is a small state and...cannot afford protectionism against the unpredictable tides of the international economy, because it is not an autarkic [self-sufficient] economy. Therefore to cushion against the international economy, the Dutch set up a tripartite council which oversaw an extensive welfare state. A third explanation points to a cultural tradition in the Netherlands of consensus decision-making. Some point to the Middle Ages, as in those times it was necessary for farmers, noblemen, cities, and others to cooperate in order to maintain the polders [areas of low-lying land] from getting flooded. Without unanimous agreement on shared responsibility for maintenance of the dikes, the polders would have flooded and everyone would have suffered.” Bookrags

Contemporary Consensus
And back where we started – the 1960s and 70s – in the 60s many groups and movements had engaged with theories and practices of participation and anti-oppressive culture. But by the 70s there was a move back towards more hierarchical structures. In his article Anarchism and the Movement for a New Society, Andrew Cornell takes up the story:

“Radical pacifists created the Congress of Racial Equality in 1942 and were important conduits of participatory deliberative styles ... to leaders of the civil rights movement ...and members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Meanwhile, the Beat culture, incubated by anarchists in the 1940s, fed into the more explicitly political counter-culture of the 1960s. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) drew on SNCC’s participatory structure and the ethos of the counter-culture to formulate two of the defining demands of the New Left: the implementation of participatory democracy and the overcoming of alienating culture. Yet, in the later 1960s, both the Black Freedom movement and the student movement, smarting from repression on the one hand, and elated by radical victories at home and abroad on the other, moved away from this emergent, anarchistic, political space.
... Many civil rights organizers took up nationalist politics in hierarchical organizations, while some of the most committed members of SDS returned to variants of Marxist-Leninism and democratic socialism.”

The feminist movement sought to maintain the practice of participatory democracy. As part of the struggle to keep these values alive, Cornell tells us that the Movement for a New Society, a radical Philadelphia based network popularised consensus:

“If participatory democracy and cultural transformation could, together, be seen as a ball about to be dropped, the Movement for a New Society was one of the most important groups diving for it, working hard to keep it in play. The emergent women’s liberation movement likewise placed a premium on developing egalitarian internal relationships and making changes in daily life; not surprisingly, then, feminism left an enduring impact on MNS.”

MNS is credited with:

“developing and teaching a formal model of “democratic group process” which drew on the Quaker tradition in which many were steeped as well as the conflict resolution techniques some early MNS members practiced as professional mediators. Beyond adopting a formal consensus procedure with delineated roles, MNS drew on “sensitivity training” techniques, “role playing...listening exercises, and trust games” to increase awareness of group dynamics and challenge members to excise oppressive aspects of their traditional patterns of behavior.”

Lessons for consensus today?

These are just some of the examples that can be used to illustrate a long heritage of autonomous and egalitarian decision-making around the world. Today’s consensus decision-making might not be identical to any of them, but it shares much with them. The state of mind for consensus is present in one way or the other in all of these examples. They illustrate how:

- the will of the wider community (including all stakeholders) is paramount;
- leadership roles, where they exist, are service roles and are fulfilled with a mandate from the community which can be reversed as easily as it's granted;
- the individual's will is less important than the will of the community – individuals can achieve more together than alone;
- there can be autonomy to act without needing the agreement of the whole group, though the group does consent to that autonomy;
- in many cases there is a strong shared group identity – religious denomination (often a persecuted minority), pirate crew, tribe and so on;
- there is a shared desire for equality throughout the community.

A longer version of this guide can be found in 2 parts on the Rhizome blog:

Part 1: http://rhizome.coop/blog/2011/06/18/a-brief-history-of-consensus-decision-making/


Footnotes:
1 http://www.peterleeson.com/An-arrgh-chy.pdf
2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polder_Model
3 http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Polder_Model

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