



THE FAILURE OF CONSENSUS BUILDING

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The world wants peace. It may be achieved by an agreement but not by building consensus, which does not provide a set of clear legally binding terms. The problem is contained in the very meaning of the word consensus. It derives from Latin and indicates a vague, abstract, and common feeling, an atmosphere which is shared. It is neither a fact nor a deed. Such a common feeling is apparently not vague enough: we are now in the habit of building consensus. We do not decide but step towards a common sentiment. It may feel good, but it is baffling to onlookers. It is also difficult to explain those who have not taken part in this shared ritual.

If someone commits a crime, the law prescribes a punishment. The ancient law codes are written in this way: if x does a crime, x is punished.



Consensus is a byproduct of institutional and bureaucratic meetings. Achieving it allows those who share the same good feeling to set up another meeting to achieve a further step in the world of unicorns. That is building consensus. It is a wonderful feeling in a closed mutual admiration society where it shares the same emotion about a problem. It does not allow an outsider to understand or even take part in such an apparently meaningful emotion.

Diplomacy is not the art of feeling good and patting one another on the back. It is the art of negotiating with rivals or even enemies. Good feelings can be left to philosophical speculation. Indeed, the Greek translation of the Latin word consensus means the perceiving of different sensations at the same time: ‘synaesthesia’ (‘συναίσθησις’). It is a purely abstract notion. As such it is employed by the Neoplatonist Plotinus (Ennead 3.8.4)

The opposite of consensus is what Plato called ‘homología’ (‘ὁμολογία’) an agreement (Republic, 443a). Those who agree, sign a document. It is a sort of contract with specific terms which must be followed and may be breached. It is more inclusive to have signed documents where the signatories openly agree to the terms written out in what they have signed.

In Eastern Europe, people were so baffled with the term consensus that they did not translate it but simply presented the same word in another alphabet. That is the case of Russian and Ukrainian which both have the word консенсус (‘consensus’). It is not a good sign if a word is considered so foreign it is not even translated.

The term agreement in Russian is ‘соглашение’ (‘soglasheniye’) or ‘договор’ (‘dogovor’). In Ukrainian, one may find ‘угода’ (‘uhoda’) and ‘договір’ (‘dohovir’). Both languages indicate the notion of ‘homología’ and ‘συμφωνία’ (‘symphonía,’ which means ‘saying the same thing,’ not ‘feeling together’). Both terms are present in Plato and in Byzantine legal terminology. Slavic languages tend to translate component elements of the original Greek. These are technically calques. Many words in the first Slavic languages are formed in this way. The closest word to consensus is the Russian ‘согласие’ (‘soglasiye’, ‘agreement’), a calque of the Greek ‘symphonía’.



Consensus has baffled the Slavic mind. It is a concept found typically in western Europe, where Latin was dominant. In Eastern Europe, such difficult notions to grapple with are part of the mentality represented by latinophrones (‘λατινόφρονες,’ ‘those who think in Latin,’ a term popular in Constantinople since the 14th century)

The Romans understood the difficulty of international peace treaties. Agreements and contracts within a legal system are rather straightforward. They said they were within Roman Civil Law. The problem is the agreement between countries with different systems. Peace treaties are between parties under international law. It is even more important that the terms be written out and signed clearly. International law is not a place to express psychological fears and aspirations by building consensus.

The first peace treatise in recorded history was between Egypt and the Hittites in 1274 BC. It is a document with clauses and conditions to which both parties agreed. No consensus building on the horizon.

Ramses II peace treaty with Hittites



(South Wall of Great Temple of Karnak line 13 Leipsius)

There shall be no hostilities among enemies for ever.

There is a universal consensus that peace is desirable and necessary. The belligerent parties have not agreed to the terms of peace. Weapons will not be lowered by consensus but only by a peace treaty.