

Consensuses Could be Reached for Different Reasons An Outline

Tong Shijun

(Department of Philosophy,
East China Normal University)

“Consensus” is perhaps one of the most frequently used words these days, and very possibly just because there is a serious lack of consensuses both in international and domestic politics in our times. Since so many people are talking about consensuses, however, we may have already got some level of consensuses or some kind of consensuses, because people can reach consensuses in quite different ways.

A consensus differs from a “convention”, a “convergence”, not to speak of a “coercion”. Consensuses are typically reached by people with each other willingly, self-consciously and on the basis of reasons.

Reasons are inherently connected with consensuses, and that is why consensuses are different from conventions and so on.

Consensuses are very often reached among different people on the basis of same reasons. The most typical case here is the consensuses reached among scientists on scientific problems: they can be said to agree with each other not only when they accept a certain conclusion, but also when they draw the conclusion from same premises. In social life consensuses are also very often reached in this way. The period of opening and reform beginning in late 1970s in China, for example, was started when Chinese people of all walks were generally aware of the necessity of eradicating the ideological and institutional elements that had led to the disastrous period of the Cultural Revolution.

But a certain consensus can also be reached among different people on the basis of different reasons, and this can be said in the following cases.

Firstly, different people can reach agreements on different types of issues. People can reach agreements on issues concerned with their interests, on issues concerned with their values, or on issues concerned with their identities, and these three types of issues are different because people care about interests, values and identities in quite different ways. It is relatively easy for people to reach consensuses on how much they are paid, but it is less easy for them to reach consensuses on how fair they are treated, and even less easy for them to reach consensuses on how well they are respected. The problem of “peasant workers” in China, for example, will not be totally solved simply because those who are thus called are paid and served in the same way as the legally permanent urban residents are paid and served; it will not be totally solved until they are called or named the same way as the latter group of people are called or named. That is to say, the problem of “peasant workers” is not finally solved until the phrase “peasant workers” is dropped altogether as a social and even legal term.

Secondly, different people can reach agreements on a certain issue in different forms. They can reach agreement on issues of interests either in the form of mutual yielding or in the form of mutual benefiting, and a more justifiable interest-relation between two parties is a mutual benefiting one. They can reach agreements on issues of values either in the form of mutual tolerance or in the form of mutual understanding. A more justifiable value-relation between two parties is a mutual understanding one. They can reach agreements on issues of identity either in the form of co-existence or in the form of solidarity, and a more justifiable identity relation between two parties is one based on solidarity instead of mere co-existence among people with different particular identities.

Thirdly, a certain social project can be accepted by people from different perspectives. Take for example the project of “socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics” in contemporary China. This project can be accepted by those who are more appealed to by the vision of reviving the Chinese nation, or by those who are more attracted by the idea of modernizing the Chinese society, or by those who are more interested in the ideals of the socialist movement, as well as by those who accept all. The so-called “China Model” should be called the “China Story”, with richer, more dynamic and more unfinished implications, and this story contains three major themes: the national revival, societal modernization and the socialist revolution. The most successful part of the “China Story” so far lies in the fact that Chinese people of different interest positions, different value orientations and different ethnic/cultural identities have been working together rather harmoniously under the same banner of a socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics. And the most challenging part of the “China Story” in the future lies in the task of keeping or updating the consensus among hundreds of millions of people in a country that is getting richer and richer not only in material terms, but also in social and spiritual terms.

Fourthly, a certain conclusion can be reached from different premises. Take for example Mencius and Xun Zi: they both argue for the importance of learning, but they argue from different premises: human beings are good according to Mencius, and human beings are evil by their nature according to Xun Zi. While Mencius teaches us to learn in order to keep what is good by nature in us from being shadowed and polluted by elements that we share with other types of life under the Heaven, Xun Zi teaches us to learn in order for us as ordinary folks to live up to the standards established by our sacred ancestors in the remote past. Similarly, the idea of human rights can be supported both by a humanist on the basis of the idea of human dignity, and by a Buddhist on the basis of the idea of *ahimsa*.

Fifthly, different people can try to reach an agreement again and again even if they may never be able to reach it. Every year so many people from so many countries, regions and cultures come together to attend so many UN conferences and activities, including those organized or supported by UNESCO, like the one we are now participating in. They may depart from each other at the end of each of these conferences and activities without any substantial agreement being

reached, but they are in agreement with each other on one point and one very important point: they are all making their efforts in reaching agreements with each other on particular issues. People come to convene with tongues instead of fists, though in rare cases fists do replace tongues. Conferences are activities governed by rules, and in most cases these rules are decided in advance or at least in the first session of a conference. To the degree that various parties accept these rules, they have reached an important consensus. International conferences, especially but not exclusively multilateral conferences, are in principle open to outsiders sooner or later, and this kind of openness or publicity provides a threshold that all parties have to go through willy-nilly in proposing themes for a conference, expressing views on a certain issue, and providing arguments for their views. It should not be too much to say that this kind of threshold is also a kind of consensus.

In a society that is fundamentally pluralistic, characterized by a serious lack of consensus as we mentioned in the beginning, the fact that consensuses could be reached for different reasons or on the basis of different reasons is somehow comforting and encouraging: we do not have sufficient reasons to be pessimistic and defeatist after all.