

Civic Movements between Peaceful Protest and Outbreaks of Violence (August 5, 1977)

Abstract

A leading West German journalist analyzes the broad spectrum represented in citizens' initiatives, whose participants ranged from local reformers to nationalist extremists. He points out their minoritarian understanding of direct democracy and highlights their ambivalent attitude toward the use of force to compel political change.

Source

An Attack on the Parties or an Outlet for Frustration?

The Citizens' Initiatives Oscillate between Peaceful Protest and Violent Action

[...]

The popular movement of citizens' initiatives, which now probably has more members than the political parties—recent estimates fluctuate around two million—is a very diverse army. There is the massive Federal Association for Environmental Protection (Bundesverband Umweltschutz, BBU) with about 950 member organizations and 300,000 members. There is also another large organization—partially in competition, partially as a complement—the German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation (Bund für Natur- und Umweltschutz Deutschland), whose members (estimated at 40,000) belong more to the political conservatives and are considered too loyal to the state and institutions by some staunch environmentalists. And finally, to cover the other end of the political spectrum, there are various K-Groups^[1], some of which would stage an armed popular struggle if only they could, and which do not shy away from the use of violence.

In addition to these large organizations, there are thousands of initiatives that are often only known locally; they lobby for a better—or at least different—form of city planning, organize assistance for foreigners, and advocate for children's playgrounds, noise protection, aid for the elderly, the resocialization of prisoners, and much more. Some initiatives are short-lived spontaneous movements, some become traditionalist associations. Here, the romantic nature-lovers meet the radical social change-makers. As the exceptional case in the town of Bergkamen showed, there are some clever guys who let their protest be bought at a high price, and a vast majority of idealists. There are the busybodies who crave the recognition that they don't get elsewhere, and many, many people whose commitment and sense of political responsibility is unsurpassable—citizens who want to keep democracy alive.

Getting on One's Nerves

How to categorize this crowd, how to classify it? The most helpful study is still the one conducted a few years ago by the German Institute of Urban Affairs, which examined 1,400 citizens' initiatives. Of those, 16.9 percent were concerned with environmental protection; 15.8 percent with daycare facilities and playgrounds. Traffic issues were the focus of 11.8 percent, followed by schools (8.1%), urban development (8.0%), and marginal groups (7.1%). There were even some purely commercial initiatives (2%). Citizens' initiatives active in environmental and urban planning issues have proved particularly prone to conflict. Most other issues, on the other hand, are only likely to cause conflict to a limited extent. When it comes to the construction of daycare facilities and playgrounds or assistance for marginal groups, there is sometimes some trouble with the administration or with party politicians, but a

reasonable dialogue is usually possible and is often sought by both sides.

Thus there is a large group of citizens' initiatives that should be of no concern to even the most fearful advocates of representational democracy. These are the social self-help organizations, which make up at least one third of all citizens' initiatives. Anyone who checks them out a little will be reminded of the grassroots democracy in the United States: when self-assured citizens become active right at the points where the large state organization failed or created undesirable developments. Very often, one meets intelligent and assertive women in these initiatives, often with rigorous professional training.

Of course, now and then these initiatives get on the nerves of the established institutions—because of their doggedness or their expertise, sometimes also on account of a certain group egotism and know-it-all tendency. All in all, though, they are as necessary as they are helpful. A public administration that wants to regulate every branch of the welfare state will quickly reach its financial and organizational limits, as recent years have shown, and will stifle humanity. Wherever citizens' initiatives take up such tasks, which cannot or should not be completely resolved by the state, we can really only be grateful to them. No unsolvable, fundamental problems arise. Nonetheless, even these citizens' initiatives have their troubles. They, too, are now suspected of being part of that new, violent popular movement. The mood toward citizens' initiatives has become hostile, and it is getting more difficult for them to work together with the administration and parties. Patrons and donors have withdrawn.

The organizations doing social self-help are very far removed from using violence, and they are certainly not a popular movement in the sense that they are united by a common, greater goal. Many other initiatives as well, which are fighting against a freeway or urban planning, campaigning against this or that local or regional problem, can hardly be considered a popular movement. Of course, their indignation toward the administration and the established parties is so clear that one could indeed speak of a unifying, common political motivation.

The citizens' initiatives for environmental protection are definitely a popular movement, and in recent years they have grown far beyond the initial participation rate of 17 percent. At their emotional and political core is the struggle against nuclear power, and their mood is similar to that of the student rebellions in the 1960s. They are profoundly disappointed in the establishment and see the ugly face of the system everywhere.

“Internal party disputes and intrigues, scandals and affairs caused by party politicians, nepotism, public confrontations between parties in pretty much all areas. . . ,” is how Hans Günter Schumacher, deputy chair of the BBU, paints the political parties. His assessment of the ability of the political parties to take up the problems of the citizens is scathing. “The word ‘people's party’ is unlikely to apply to either the CDU/CSU or the SPD at present. The constitutional obligation of the parties to contribute to articulating the political will of the people has been distorted. This ‘contribution’ has turned into a claim to power in many cases. The oft-claimed closeness to the people has been increasingly exposed as a distance from the people, even a hostility toward them. Current examples such as regional reforms, the pension debacle, the closing of railroad lines, the cost explosion in health care, the lack of any strategy as regards energy policies, and many more, clearly show how bureaucratized our public life has become, how self-important our state and its authorities have become. . . .”

Like the members of the student movement, environmentalists also have a very strong sense of belonging to an elite. This can be partly explained by the fact that many committed idealists actually do gather in the initiatives. At the same time, however, there is often the elitist conviction that they have seen through the political system and recognized its main danger: it is slipping, leaderless, into the realm of nuclear civilization. The decision for or against nuclear energy is for some environmentalists the difference between false or correct consciousness, and this certainty of being in the right leads to a missionary zeal.

A third similarity to the extra-parliamentary opposition (APO) of the 1960s is very obvious. The certainty of having recognized the truth leads to an unwillingness to compromise. Compromise is inevitable in political affairs and it even makes normal politics possible in the first place, but it is totally underdeveloped among the environmental citizens' initiatives. From this inability to compromise comes a tendency to violate legality in the name of a higher legitimacy. The boundaries with violence get fuzzy, and some particularly militant groups do not acknowledge these boundaries at all anymore.

When Does Resistance become a Duty?

Also similar to the student movement, exceptional rights are grounded on the basis of an unusually higher moral aim. Back then, a free society served as the justification to go beyond limits; now it is the protection of life, the first and most significant basic right, which justifies almost any means. When policies fail to uphold this basic right, they must be fought—and this is a conviction that marks not only the loud, violent radicality of the K-Groups, but also the silent fanaticism that has grown out of righteousness. And anyway, the motto for the draft of the BBU action catalog is: “When justice becomes unjust, then resistance becomes a duty.”

Widespread in the citizens' initiatives is the certainty that they represent the most important instrument of grassroots democracy, that the people have a voice through them. It does not matter that this is a minority at the moment (depending on the survey, between 20% und 40% of the population is opposed to nuclear energy). When the scales finally fall from people's eyes, when they see through the stupefying propaganda, then the movement will become a majority in this country. This is the argumentation that is used, and here again a similarity with the student movement shines through.

The most important distinguishing characteristic within the environmentalist movement is the attitude toward violence. The former head of the BBU who recently resigned, [Hans-Helmut] Wüstenhagen (he was criticized from the right because he was close to communist circles thirty years ago; and from the left for using federal funds for a research project at the Institute for Environmental Sciences), was primarily attacked because of his (relatively) nonviolent politics. There was hardly a large event organized by environmentalists in which K-Group representatives did not charge Wüstenhagen (and thus the entire BBU leadership) with a lack of solidarity. Recently in Frankfurt, for example, a young communist stepped into the fray as St. Joan of the nuclear power plants and accused Wüstenhagen of distinguishing between those for and those against the use of violence. “Who is the divider here?” she asked with piercing logic. “We do not use the issue of violence as a divider.”

As earlier with the APO, a distinction was also made here between “violence against property” and “violence against persons.” Violence against persons, which was sought or tolerated by some K-Groups in Brokdorf and Grohnde, is rejected by the vast majority of citizens' initiatives. Illegal actions, on the other hand, civil disobedience that does not rule out violence against property, are included in the recently approved draft of the BBU action catalog.

[...]

A “Hot Autumn” Looms

With respect to the party groups in the Bundestag, there is a clear-cut difference between opposition and government coalition, and in the government parties in turn a distinction is made between grassroots and leadership. CDU/CSU members are more likely to be found in “well-behaved” organizations, but their participation in citizens' initiatives is generally very low.

The coalition parties are a different story. Here there are far more nuclear energy opponents than in the CDU, and the participation of SPD and FDP members in the environmental movement is correspondingly greater. Especially the parties' youth organizations seem to have discovered, albeit late, the subject of

nuclear power. Many young environmentalists, however, are totally dissatisfied with the parties. As in the late 1960s, a large segment of the younger generation seeks its political refuge outside the established organization of political parties. This time they are motivated by their opposition to nuclear power and a civilization of growth, and inspired by radically democratic ideas. And it is by no means certain that the parties can again succeed in doing what was still possible under [Willy] Brandt and [Walter] Scheel: to channel the major part of the movement back to the parties. The SPD presently registers the greatest loss.

[...]

Environmentalists have long ago stopped being a single-purpose organization. Their opposition to nuclear energy is their emotional benchmark, but their political considerations extend far into other areas, especially energy, growth, and economic policies. They are not yet a party, and the vast majority does not want to become one, but they are definitely a strong political force. They are hard to control, a combination of extra-parliamentary student opposition and antinuclear movement, of radical democratic anger and skepticism toward civilization, of civic virtues and anti-party attitudes, unfathomable for career politicians, hard to maneuver—a potential for immense, even violent, change.

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NOTES

[1] K-Groups: communist groups—trans.

Source: Rolf Zundel, “Anschlag auf die Parteien oder Ventil der Verdrossenheit,” *Die Zeit*, August 5, 1977. Republished with permission.

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