

Origins, Motives, and Structures of Citizens' Initiatives (October 27, 1973)

Abstract

When local politicians started making controversial decisions that compromised citizens' quality of life—like building superhighways through residential neighborhoods—citizens began to form single-issue protest movements in the hopes of forcing politicians to abandon misguided urban development projects.

Source

The Citizens Strike Back. Participation or: The only Alternative? Citizens' Initiatives and the Hamburg Example

“The Citizens Triumphed over the Authorities.” So read the headline of a morning paper in Hamburg this summer. It was about an inner-city highway, a so-called feeder road to the future western freeway bypass around Hamburg, which also includes the new tunnel under the Elbe. The route for a connection to the city road network would have had to cut through the densely built-up residential area of Ottensen. There had been protests for a long time. Resistance to the intentions of local politicians was finally organized along the lines of other citizens' initiatives. In the end, the success of this local protest movement was not limited to the planned route and not even to urban traffic planning in general. The feeder will not be built as planned. There is still no substitute for it—although the western freeway bypass is already well underway.

Nevertheless, this is not merely a matter of the authorities capitulating. Ottensen, a district built in the early twentieth century, with narrow streets, mostly poor building materials, and a relatively large amount of industry, is an urban redevelopment area. In addition to not building the feeder road, the building authority approved the appointment of a redevelopment commissioner in accordance with the wishes of the responsible district assembly. In the future, the commissioner will negotiate between the individual citizens' initiatives and the authorities. Building Senator Cäsar Meister also expressly promised the Ottensen citizens' initiative that they could participate in the redevelopment planning. A Hamburg official commented that “without the participation of the residents, development plans can no longer be implemented today.”

The Ottensen Case

This sounds less like resignation than a willingness to rethink procedures. The Ottensen case, as one example among other equally successful protest actions, is interesting in terms of the emergence and development of such citizens' initiatives. The population of Ottensen is largely lower middle class, with a considerable proportion of blue-collar workers. The rebellion against the freeway feeder offers a rare example of citizen involvement even in districts with socially weaker structures. Up to now, Ottensen's neighborhood spirit would have been described in more negative terms.

The authorities responded to the surprising solidarity of the community and its support for the established residential neighborhood with signs of positive interest in this long-neglected district. Planned office space was decreased by 40 percent. The modernization of numerous prewar buildings, especially in the vicinity of the Altona train station, is to be encouraged in order to retain the character of a traditional residential area. But the following, too, was one of the results: In early July, an Ottensen

Action Community continued to protest against the city planners with a march, banners, and slogans. “There were mocking rhymes about Mayor [Peter] Schulz and Building Senator Meister,” reported the *Altonaer Nachrichten*. A spokesperson for the citizens’ initiative distanced the group from its competition in such agitation.

Their actions and behavior have been judged in different ways by Hamburg sociologists who are studying the phenomenon of citizens’ initiatives. Some observers see signs of a growing reorientation of citizens’ initiatives in the sense that they no longer focus on a concrete aim but represent an ideologically leftist strategy. Their hypothesis is that the German Communist Party, in lieu of a strong base among the masses, is trying more and more to use citizens’ initiatives to reach broader segments of the population, not just through Red Dot actions.^[1] The upcoming city assembly elections in Hamburg, it is assumed, will clearly reflect this strategy for the first time.

Up to now, in Hamburg, too, there was little to be said for any kind of motivated interest (in any case, among the ultra-left) in citizens’ initiatives as a relatively new form of pre-parliamentary participation. In an introductory comment to the Fischer paperback *Bürgerinitiativen – Schritte zur Veränderung?* (*Citizens’ Initiatives – Steps to Change?*), editor Heinz Grossmann wrote two years ago “that the legitimation of citizens’ initiatives is increasingly disputed—by the Left.” They [the sociologists—trans.] evidently see them only as undesirable, sporadic means of deflecting a bottled-up collective uneasiness, as safety valves of the “system” or orientation guides for the “Establishment.” . . . “Since the political activities of the Left created essential preconditions for possible actions by citizens, it is not trivial to ask how this left wing will react to citizens’ initiatives in the future.”

Another question is how the authorities subject to party influence will respond to the citizens’ initiatives, for instance, in Hamburg. In early 1972, at the anniversary celebration of a district assembly, Hamburg Mayor Schulz, who was relatively new to his office, still found it “necessary to say a word about the phenomenon of citizens’ initiatives because it triggers confusion or at least raises questions.” For example, why are existing institutional options for citizen participation not fully taken advantage of? The same applies to options offered by the political parties. “Some citizens’ initiatives have uncovered and voiced certain problems whose magnitude and urgency had not attracted the notice of the public administration But we must make sure that we maintain effective and strong instruments and means by which to hear and implement citizens’ wishes. We must also recognize that there might be some people who create loud noises in the political landscape outside of the parties and then count it as a true success if elected bodies, as a result of such noise, overturn decisions that had been carefully deliberated and made on a solid basis.”

[...]

It was not by chance that protests against traffic plans heralded the beginning of this domestic citizens’ rights movement if the Red Dot action of Hanover in 1969 is to be regarded as the first widely observed example of a citizens’ initiative. At the same time, this date indicates the proximity to the student movement, the boom of the extra-parliamentary opposition of the preceding years, thereby pointing to the successor function of the citizens’ initiatives. Since then, they have been established—primarily, but not entirely—in metropolitan areas, and a city-state offers some of the most fertile ground. This is because of the denser communication possibilities in a metropolitan area, combined with the fact that it is easier to exert direct influence on parties, parliament, and administration in a city-state.

With respect to the role of citizens’ initiatives, the transformation in Hamburg’s traffic planning is at once an object lesson and a borderline case. Its much-publicized rejection of the “automobile-friendly expansion of the inner-city area” of the 1950s also brought the renunciation of other urban freeways, at least for the immediate future, in favor of public transportation. A corresponding concept of the SPD state executive committee (“Individual traffic must be pushed out of the city center”) received the

blessing of an SPD state party congress. Although the Young Socialists were not able to assert their ideas on the issue of fares for local public transportation, they did make considerable headway with their “anti-car” traffic concept. The contribution of the citizens’ initiatives is substantial here, albeit difficult to assess in detail. The Young Socialists, especially, are also often active in citizens’ initiatives as part of their “double strategy.”

This could be clearly observed in the local actions protesting plans for city freeways in residential districts such as Harvestehude, Winterhude, and Eppendorf. These protests had a totally different structure than those in Ottensen, where the freeway feeder was originally planned to be built. In Eppendorf, which has recently seen a strong influx of younger residents, citizens’ initiatives have formed against, among other things, the plan to use the Isebek Canal for a freeway route.

[...]

The problem that becomes clear here suggests the question that keeps coming up in the discussion about citizens’ initiatives: whether sometimes, or even most of the time, such actions are guided by pure self-interest. SPD member [Helmut] Bilstein described this “probably most significant negative potential”: “Because their members are often recruited exclusively from the upper social strata, citizens’ initiatives can take up issues that lie only in the traditionally bourgeois sphere of interest; their success serves only the group interests of the already privileged propertied class.”

The stance of the parliamentary parties toward citizens’ activities in the run-up to political or administrative decisions can generally be described as “reserved interest.” It is no coincidence that corresponding statements by the Hamburg parliamentary group leaders of the CDU and SPD largely coincide.

[...]

Political scientist Professor Udo Bermbach of the University of Hamburg views such actions as a necessary element of uneasiness and healthy uncertainty vis-à-vis the tendency toward rigidity and corruption within the technocracy. Bermbach himself was involved in the “Hamburg 13” citizens’ initiative. He judges the future and the overall political effectiveness of this citizens’ movement rather skeptically. Citizens’ initiatives, according to Bermbach, in the sense of American single-purpose movements, are radical democratic groups that can pass on a particular initiative to the parties or the public administration. Yet they lack the conceptual prerequisites for more far-reaching strategies. In the most recent issue of *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen*, the journal for parliamentary questions for which Bermbach is an editor, a research group at the Free University of Berlin came to similar, empirically proven conclusions in an analysis of citizens’ initiatives in the Federal Republic and West Berlin.

They, too, confirm the officially feeble participation of Communists in citizens’ initiatives. Of the three parliamentary parties, the FDP has a disproportionately high share, as could also be observed in the Hamburg examples. The Free Democrats occasional declarations that they are the “party of citizens’ initiatives” are attributable, among other things, to their lack of a global program, which is a constitutive feature of bourgeois “single-purpose movements,” and to the sociological composition of many initiative groups. Here, too, the Berlin study provides some evidence for earlier assumptions that citizens’ initiatives are recruited primarily from members of the upper middle class, with a strong proportion of young families. “Most citizens’ initiatives are composed of 25- to 40-year-olds,” according to the study, with the liberal and educational professions being over-represented to a striking extent—members of liberal professions account for nearly fifty percent of citizens’ initiatives, and members of educational professions account for about one-third. “There was not a single blue-collar worker in the informal leadership circles.”

NOTES

[1] The Red Dot (*Roter Punkt*) actions started out as protests against fare increases for public transportation. Participants marked their cars with red dots to show their willingness to pick up passengers in an effort to boycott the fare increase—trans.

Source: “Die Bürger wehren sich. Partizipation oder: Die einzige Alternative? Bürgerinitiative am Beispiel Hamburgs,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 27, 1973. © All rights reserved. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung GmbH, Frankfurt.

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Recommended Citation: Origins, Motives, and Structures of Citizens’ Initiatives (October 27, 1973), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1112>> [September 17, 2024].