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

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

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

“The citizens triumphed over the authorities” was the headline of a morning paper in Hamburg this summer. It was about an inner-city highway, a so-called feeder road to the prospective western freeway bypass around Hamburg, which also includes the new tunnel under the Elbe. The route for a connection with the urban road network would had to have been 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 ultimately modeled on other citizens' initiatives. In the end, the success of this local protest movement was not limited to the planned route alignment 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 far along.

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, corresponding to the wishes of the relevant 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.”

### **The Ottensen Case**

This sounds less like resignation than a willingness to rethink procedures. Exemplary among other similarly successful protest actions, the Ottensen case is interesting in view 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 in districts with socially weaker structures. Up to now, an Ottensen district spirit would have been described more negatively.

The authorities responded to the surprising solidarity of the community in favor of the old established residential district with a sign of positive interest in this long neglected district. Planned office space was decreased by 40 percent. Modernization of numerous prewar buildings, especially in the vicinity of the Altona train station, is to be supported in order to retain the character of a traditional residential area. But this, too, is part 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 agitational competition.

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 ideological 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 wider segments of the population, not just through "Red Dot" actions.<sup>1</sup> 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 preparliamentary 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 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 tally 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."

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<sup>1</sup> *Roter Punkt* actions started out protesting fare increases for public transportation, in which participants marked their cars with a red dot that signified they would pick up passengers in an effort to boycott the fare increase – trans.

If people regard the Red Dot action in Hanover in 1969 as the first substantial example of a citizens' initiative, then it is no coincidence that protests against traffic plans marked the beginning of this local citizens' rights movement. The year 1969 also marked 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 concentrated – not entirely, but largely – in conurbations, and a city-state offers some of the most fertile ground: because of the density of communications in a major city, in connection with the fact that in a city-state it is easier to have a direct influence on parties, parliament, and the administration.

With respect to the role of citizens' initiatives, the transformation in Hamburg's traffic planning is an instructive example and at the same time a borderline case. Its much-heeded 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 received the blessings ("Individual traffic must be pushed out of the city center") of an SPD state party congress. Although the Young Socialists [SPD youth organization] 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. Especially the Young Socialists pursued a "dual strategy" in this regard, often being active in the citizens' initiatives as well.

This could be clearly observed in the local actions protesting plans for city freeways in residential districts such as Harvestehude, Winterhude, or 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 become an area that many young people are moving to, citizens' initiatives have organized, among other things, to protest the plan to use the Isebek canal for a freeway route.

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

The stance of the party caucuses to the activities of citizens in the lead-up to political or administrative decisions can generally be described as "reserved interest." It is no coincidence that corresponding statements by the heads of the party caucuses of the CDU and SPD in Hamburg largely agree.

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Political scientist Professor Udo Bermbach at the University of Hamburg views such actions as a necessary element of uneasiness and healthy questioning vis-à-vis the technocracy's tendency toward rigidity and corruption. 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 the American single issue movements, are radically democratic groups, basically with a single

purpose that a particular initiative could pass on 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 sound results in an analysis of citizens' initiatives in the Federal Republic and West Berlin.

They too confirm the officially weak participation in citizens' initiatives by communists. Of the three party caucuses, the FDP has a disproportionately high share, as could also be observed in the Hamburg examples. The Free Democrats occasionally refer to themselves as the "party of the citizens' initiatives," which can in part be explained by their lack of a global program; this is an essential characteristic of citizens' "single purpose movements," and by the sociological constitution of many initiative groups. Here as well, the Berlin study offers some evidence on presumptions mentioned earlier that citizens' initiatives often recruit their members exclusively from the upper middle class, with a large share of young families. "Most citizens' initiatives are made up of 25- to 40-year-olds," according to the study, whereby the almost 50 percent share of those in free professions is just as marked as the large share of educational professions (about one third). "There was not a single case of a blue-collar worker in the informal leadership circles."

Source: "Die Bürger wehren sich. Partizipation oder: Die einzige Alternative? Bürgerinitiative am Beispiel Hamburgs" ["The Citizens Strike Back. Participation or: The only Alternative? Citizens' Initiatives and the Hamburg Example"]. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 27, 1973.  
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