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problem child „civil society“

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12.03.2025

In a 32-page small question to the voted-out federal government on February 24 – i.e. immediately after election day – the CDU/CSU leaders wanted to achieve three things: Firstly, they wanted pure revenge on those thousands of committed people who had organized protests against the alliance with the fascists through their respective associations. Secondly, the CDU/CSU wants to reach out to the AfD – with the pretext of cutting them off – and embrace them. Thirdly, the curtailment of freedom of expression is entirely in line with the authoritarian-conservative policies advocated by Friedrich Merz and his circle of power.

Freedom of expression is curtailed because the direct or indirect co-financing of civil society associations, organizations and NGOs does not result in a ban on the expression of political opinions. It is certainly a matter of political and legal interpretation as to what the so-called “neutrality requirement” actually means for such institutions. According to previous opinion and practice, however, it does not follow that one may not democratically criticize an alliance with fascists. And this is what happened when hundreds of thousands of people marched in circles in outrage for democracy at the beginning of February.

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The following article comes from the German-language blog paradox-a.de, was translated with the help of deepl.com and therefore contains inaccuracies.

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Over 2000 academics signed an open letter to protest against the CDU/CSU parliamentary group's request.

The relatively surprising all-round attack not only indicates where the authoritarian-conservative circles want to go – it is also aimed at directly disciplining so-called civil society. Among others, BUND, Campact, CORRECTIV gGmbH, Omas gegen Rechts Deutschland, Attac, Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, Peta, Animal Rights Watch, Foodwatch, Dezernat Zukunft, Deutsche Umwelthilfe, Greenpeace and Netzwerk Recherche are named. All in all, we are dealing with a whole range of well-known associations with which a lot of people are likely to identify.

In this respect, civil society is not an ominous magic word, but a multitude of institutions that form a buffer zone between the population and the state. On the one hand, they convey state concerns to the population and, on the other, their ideas and demands back to the state. If you take Antonio Gramsci, who prominently addressed this “bulwark of the state”, seriously from an anarchist perspective, you will not find much worth defending about civil society. To put it bluntly, it could even be argued that the corporatist network is intended to prevent society from organizing itself. Because instead of people taking responsibility for their environment, their community and themselves, they push this off to associations with reference to civil society, one of which must already be responsible for topic and problem XY.

Historically, the welfare state was installed in a similar way: With state social security (pensions, health and accident insurance, unemployment benefits, limits on working hours), firstly, the water was cut off from socialist movements in order to prevent them from gaining state power themselves. Secondly, the workers were thus represented and integrated into the state, which enabled a much more stable system of rule. Thirdly, productivity and resource distribution in the working class could be much better controlled by the state. The difference between

the welfare state and civil society is that the latter must maintain greater independence from the state in order to be able to represent citizens vis-à-vis the latter.

Anarchist-minded people who take a more nuanced approach to the issue and are committed to changing society know that a blunt rejection of so-called “civil society” means ignoring the situation of people in many rural areas. There are often few to virtually no democratic structures and practiced democracy. But you don’t have to be a fan of democracy to realize that there are far more problematic issues. The civil society actors mentioned above at least show some ways of participating, inform people about their rights, support minority groups and so on. And in some cases, they also oppose right-wing extremists and other misanthropes. — Anyone who wants to do without this across the board should make other suggestions on how to reach people in rural areas.

In their defence of civil society and in their outrage at its disciplining, left-wing actors reveal their dependence on it and thus their dependence on state legitimization and funding. It is completely understandable that interests are also being defended — but it would be fair to name them. After all, the democracy that the majority of the associations listed above advocate seems to be very different from the democracy that brought us Chancellor Merz — and which he is striving for.

In other words, it is commendable and worthy of support when numerous active members of civil society take a stand, refuse to be regulated and instead want to get involved. The fact that they are disciplined for this by an increasingly authoritarian state is in some ways an honor for many civil society associations. Interestingly, they believe in democracy and want to communicate this to people. In the long term, however, they will probably have to submit to the strict interpretation of the neutrality requirement or lose their status as incorporated elements. The conservative-authoritarian state is trying to free itself from the problem child of civil society, which the

social democratic-mediating state has created in order to enable political participation, integrate emancipatory forces and de-radicalize them.

The logical response to this would be for the outcast sections of civil society to organize themselves and become more combative. However, this will not work in Germany for one simple reason: The expansion of civil society and the aforementioned corporatism have created dependencies and habits among people who now believe that someone else must always be responsible. Representation prevents real democracy – and therefore fulfills a domineering purpose. This can be named without resorting to conspiracy thinking. Anarchists must also name it in order to be able to ask the question of how to deal with this problem. However, the moment familiar democratic institutions break away, a gap becomes visible that emancipatory forces cannot simply fill... Therefore, the topic must also be discussed further from an anarchist perspective.