

On saying „NO“ to the Prison system*

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I wish to congratulate the people in the "Initiative für eine bessere Kriminalpolitik" for the organizational initiative they have taken. Especially to-day, it is terribly important that organizations of this kind are being established; organizations which forcefully express a loud and clear "NO" to the prison system. There are three basic reasons why I think the establishment of such organizations is of the utmost importance today.

First of all you have the reason which the two representatives of the "Initiative" themselves gave. That is, the increasing frustration they and we feel by going into the system and thereby refining it, so to speak subtilizing it, rather than changing it fundamentally. The frustration over this was experienced in exactly the same way by the Norwegian organization KROM when that organization was established some 13 years ago. And it constitutes an important reason in itself for organizing against — simply against — the prison system as a system in our society.

Secondly, the establishment of organized efforts such as the "Initiative" is particularly important today because of the present growth and development of the total official control system of European societies, and of Western societies generally. We are confronted by a situation in which the police — the internal security force of the society — is growing by leaps and bounds — not only in terms of man power and weaponry and so on, but indeed also in terms of technology: we all know the significance of the enormous increase in technological control performed by the police alone. Simultaneously, other kinds of official control systems outside the prison — so to speak encircling and enveloping the prison — are also developing by leaps and bounds in our time. And, finally, the prison system itself is certainly not shrinking or withering away. Rather, also this part of the control system is expanding — in terms of number of prisoners, in terms of control technology, and so on. To repeat, this general growth and development of the control system is the second basic reason why it is so important today to organize against the system, or parts of the system. Organizing in this fashion was important in the late sixties and early seventies, when we started and developed our organization in Norway. However, it is even more important today, when we are facing the eighties and the nineties.

The third reason why organized efforts of the kind we are speaking about are so important now is, of course, that the control system is increasingly being put to political use. We see how the police and the prison system, which may have had as their original function and purpose that of controlling relatively harmless types of deviance in society, are increasingly receiving the function of performing control

in a political sense. For this reason also, the loud "NO" is important in the prison context.

The notion that we should organize to express a loud and clear "NO" to the prison system could in my view become a concern not only to the political Left, but indeed also a concern of a wide spectre of political parties and groups far towards and into the center of the spectre. In more detail: on this very podium this evening we are nine or ten people, from various walks in life. We as individuals, and you down there in the audience as individuals, can obviously do very little about the prison situation. And this, indeed, is the tradition: It is the academic tradition, it is the tradition of the criminal policy system, and it is the general bourgeois or liberal political tradition, that we should and are allowed to attack and criticize for example the prison system as individuals. If all or at least some of us on this podium, and in this audience, *organized* against the system, focusing on the opposition we have in common as a crucial minimum common denominator, we would be all the stronger. In more general terms, what I am stressing is the importance of something approaching a network of organizations, from a variety of political vantage points, against the prison as a part of the control system. Maybe we are seeing something of this kind developing now in Germany.

Now, let me move on to say a few words about how one should confront the prison system in such an organized fashion. I base what I have to say on Scandinavian experience, but I think much of it is transferable to the German situation and other situations.

It is tempting, of course, simply to say in general terms that the prison system should be *abolished*, and to stop there. And I think it should be abolished. This is simply my view, and there are a number of reasons why I think so. In fact I have, however briefly, just stated some of them. But in political practice it is of course not enough, even from a podium like this, simply to say in a generalized way that the prison system should be abolished. It clearly won't be abolished only by my saying so. The first basic point I wish to make in connection with the practical policy of implementing the "NO" to the control system in general and the prison system in particular, is this. We have to work in a very concrete way against given concrete parts of the control system, or even given parts of the prison system. That doesn't mean that we do not want all parts away. It just means that we select priorities and that we begin by working particularly hard against particular, given components. Otherwise, our work will simply be inefficient. Let me briefly give you a couple of examples:

In the beginning of the 1970s, the Norwegian organization KROM, which I belong to, worked very hard to have a particular Act against alcoholic vagrants abolished, an Act which put the vagrants into prisons in Norway for periods of up to three years at a time, so that literally thousands of Norwegian alcoholics spent years and years in prison. Now, this particular goal was selected by the organization as a goal which was viable. That is, it seemed attainable at some future in terms of legitimacy, ideology and practice: this was a relatively weak part of the system. And we worked terribly hard, and in a concentrated fashion, against this particular part of the system — by writing books, by writing newspaper articles, by organizing public meetings like the one we are attending this evening as well as other kinds, and by combining books, articles and meetings, using them all at once to create a public concern through the various media that reach the political decision-makers. Thus, we worked indirectly towards the political system, we worked via a larger “audience” to create pressure on the political system. And this had at least moderate success: this particular Act was abolished in 1970. There were many reasons why it was abolished; one contributing factor was, I think, our activity. Several other Scandinavian examples of concrete work against selected parts of the prison system may be mentioned, like the work against the youth prison system, the detention centre system, etc. But I just mention these in passing as systems which also are abolished today. My first point in this part of my talk, then, is that our general “NO” to the prison system is terribly important, but that in our actual political policy we have to concentrate on specific parts of the system. And be concrete about those parts, and work concretely against them. We are not really dangerous when we are general, when we are abstract, when we in the abstract say simply that the prison system should be abolished. We are becoming dangerous and we are becoming a threat when we are specific and work concretely. And the specific selection has to be made in view of the particular systemic and political context of the country concerned.

The second issue which I would like briefly to address, is the question of whether those of us who develop an ideological “NO” to the prison system, should or should not enter the prison system as workers there. Should sociologists, or social workers, or others enter the system and work there? Clearly the danger is terribly great that those who do, are co-opted, that is, absorbed by the prison system, and that they after a while, perhaps a short while, become the greatest defenders of the prison system. We see how new roles are created for us when we enter the system. We see how we become supporters of the system

and finally — at best perhaps — radical alibies for the system. The question of entry is a dilemma which we are confronted with in practice — and also by people who don't like us. My reply to the dilemma is again that we have to be concrete about it. I think there are many situations in which you should not enter the system, because of the danger of absorption. But I think there are some, perhaps a fairly large number, of situations where you should enter, because the danger of absorption for practical reasons is smaller. In other words, internal organizational variations may create variations in your degrees of freedom.

But you also have to be highly specific and concrete about the *conditions* on which you enter the system, if you enter. I think there are two or three basic conditions which simply have to be fulfilled, if you decide to enter the system and work there.

The *first* condition is that you have to be organized on the outside. You have to have almost compulsory membership in the "Initiative" or something like that. If you don't, you are extremely vulnerable to the absorption forces on the inside, and despite internal variations you stand in great danger of becoming a defender of the system — perhaps without knowing it when it happens. So the first condition for entering is that of organization outside, membership in a critical organization outside. The *second* condition is that of bringing information out through using your experience on the inside: bringing information out to those organizations which work against the system — for example your membership-organization. And there are many kinds of information which are vital to critical organizations on the outside: organizations on the outside easily become isolated from practice, and therefore continually need a broad spectre of information. Now, there are many types of information which are privileged: that is, secret according to law. But they are perhaps not the most important types of information. There are series of other types which are not secret by law, which you can bring out and which are badly needed by the organizations on the outside. The *third* condition is that of seeing to it that your stay in the system is of a relatively short duration. Don't *stay there for ever*. If you do, even your organizational membership and your internal activity won't be enough to help you. So specify your time. Perhaps one year, perhaps two, depending on your organization, your strength and the general situation, but in any case try not to remain forever, and be concrete to yourself about the time involved. This means that you have to face the fact that you may have to change system. Because all of our work places are systems.

In brief: organizations outside, information to the outside, limited duration — three conditions for participation. So that the workers inside do not remain inside, and at the same time, so that the work outside is not isolated from what is going on inside.

The third main point which I want to raise briefly, is this: our adversaries, the people who don't like us, frequently confront us with the statements: wait for the *alternatives*;

wait until the alternatives come; you must not do anything, you must not rock the boat, you must not rock the system, before you have alternatives. Now, the question of how to approach the issue of alternatives is a long story. It is a complex story. But very briefly, the general point I wish to make here is this: Don't listen to them when they make statements like this. Don't listen to them, because they are saying what they are saying in order to prevent the abolition of parts, however small the parts, of the system. There may be times when we shall have to look for alternatives. Certainly. But don't look for them when they ask for them. Because they ask for them in a rhetorical way — in order to make their system or idea survive. Let me exemplify:

Right before Norway, in 1972, decided against becoming a member of the European Common Market — this was decided by the majority in a national referendum in the country — and as the public opinion polls gradually changed and showed that Norway went against membership of this capitalist community, the conservative newspapers started to ask more vehemently than ever for alternatives. What is your alternative, if we don't enter the Common Market? Well, the alternative was simply "NO" to the Common Market. And we voted "no" and we will still live. And perhaps we even live slightly better than we would have done *in* the Common Market. Another example: In Northern Norway there is a river called the Alta river, which some of you may have heard of. The Government has decided to use the river for electricity. It is planning to build a big dam, 110 meters high, and to flood parts of the valley, dry out other parts, and destroy the feeding land for the reindeer belonging to the Lapps (and the places where the reindeer get their babies, whatever that is in English or German). Now, the Alta issue constitutes a big struggle in Norway today, with demonstrations involving large numbers of people and police and so on far north of the Arctic Circle. And again the question has been raised: What is your alternative to flooding parts of this valley? The northern part of Norway needs electricity. Would you want to go back to the candle? Unless viable alternatives are presented, the plan for producing electricity presumably has to go ahead. In this particular case, alternatives do in fact exist. But the trouble is that the authorities alone define what is a "viable" alternative. And they always define our proposals as non-viable. It is therefore fortunate for the movement struggling against the "electrification" of this particular valley and river, that it so far has not made its case depend on viable alternatives, though it has of course indicated clearly the various alternative routes which may be taken. Independent in this sense, it has stuck to its "NO": This is where you stop, you have ruined too many rivers and valleys already, we will manage somehow without this one being ruined too, there is flexibility enough in the system, we will take the details of that later on. I think this is a very important reply when the question of alternatives is raised as a rhetorical question by the adversary — to press you to say that you need really the system or plan which you are working against and trying to dispose of.

The fourth and final issue which I wish to raise, again on the concrete level, is the question of who is to be involved in political action of the kind we are discussing. Which groups are to be involved? Returning now to the question of the prisons, some people ask: Can we really involve the

prisoners in this? First of all, they are under the authority of the prison system and the state. Secondly, they are criminals. Can we, in view of this, involve them? And with respect to the Alta issue in Northern Norway: Can we really involve the Lapps? The Lapps are fine people, to be sure, but they herd reindeer. That's their job, and how do you expect them to do anything sensible within our political system? In the Common Market struggle in 1972, precisely this attitude manifested itself: The Norwegian farmers don't know anything about this, many adherents of the Common Market said. The economists have knowledge about this, especially the Government's economists know much about it, the state bureaucrats have knowledge about it. And they have to decide. The farmers and others don't know about it. This is a terribly dangerous attitude. If the opposition listens to it, it splits the group which, when united, may challenge the system. It is terribly important to rely on and use the information, the experience, the background of those who are in fact inflicted by the system, whether it is the prisoners in the prison or the Lapps in Northern Norway or the farmers in the Common Market struggle. Because they have a peculiar and detailed knowledge of the situation which nobody else possesses. And above all, they are the interested parties, they are the ones concerned — among others. This does not mean that I recommend sliding all the way over by saying that it is *only* their issue, only the issue of the prisoners, the Lapps, the farmers. I think such a sliding over is equally false and dangerous, because it, too, splits the potentially oppositional groups by excluding given categories. It is an attitude which is especially frequent in relation to academic people. "You are a professor, and the politics of prisons is therefore none of your business". Keep to your teaching. This is a stigmatization of the academia which is just as paralyzing as its polar opposite.

The point is to have both sides included, those inside as well as those outside. The two forces have to be combined. If we combine them, it is my experience that we will in fact have a chance, also in actual practice, of saying "NO" to at least parts of the system. I would think this would be an important point in connection with the question, here in Frankfurt, of how to organize a protest against the new prison which is being planned in Hessen. I think the "Initiative" is doing a very important job in organizing precisely against this plan: If this is not the political time for having prisons abolished, it may at least be the time for having some of the new prisons prevented. And a main point is to utilize both sides, protesters inside as well as protesters outside. (. . .)

In short: These four points — concentrated efforts ot have

concrete, if necessary small, parts of the system abolished; participation in the system on given crucial practical/political *conditions*; refusal to wait for the alternative when the system representative rhetorically *asks you* to wait; and *combining* inside and outside forces in political work – seem to me to be four general and very important strategic considerations in a „NO-organization“ against the development of the modern control system in our society.

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