Voluntariness in a Global Perspective: A Conversation with Silke van Dyk, Matthias Ruoss, and Tilo Wesche

Stefanie Büttner and Jürgen Martschukat

Silke van Dyk is a Professor of Political Sociology at Friedrich Schiller University Jena. She has published widely on voluntary work and is a Principal Investigator in a Research Unit on "Voluntariness," funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). **Matthias Ruoss** is Interim Professor of Modern History at the University of Bern. He is co-leader of a research project on "Gendered Volunteering" and a public history project on "The History of Volunteering in Switzerland," both funded by Swiss National Science Foundation, and, most recently, the co-editor of a special issue of *Historische Anthropologie* on the "Dialectics of Volunteering." **Tilo Wesche** is a Professor of Practical Philosophy at Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg, author of a book on the rights of nature, and also a Principal Investigator in the DFG Research Unit "Voluntariness." **Jürgen Martschukat** is the speaker of this Research Unit, **Stefanie Büttner** its Academic Coordinator. Both work at the University of Erfurt.

Jürgen Martschukat: Thank you very much for being here and thank you for taking the time for this interview. In the first round of questions, I would like to talk about the relevance of voluntariness to your research, also from your respective disciplinary perspectives. We have three different disciplines represented here—philosophy, sociology, and history—and on this basis, I would like to introduce each of you and your research and bring the different disciplines into conversation with each other. I'll start with Tilo: Your latest book on *The Rights of Nature*[1] deals—if I may summarize it this way—with

1 Tilo Wesche, *Die Rechte der Natur. Vom nachhaltigen Eigentum* (Suhrkamp, 2023).

Comparativ | Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung 35, no. 5 / 6 (2025): 597–610.
DOI: 10.26014/j.comp.2025.05-06.07

the relationship between humans and nature. As a practical philosopher, where do you see the position of voluntariness in this context?

Tilo Wesche: I have dealt with the numerous cases of the rights of nature worldwide, the so-called ecological property rights. Two things can be said: Firstly, that ecological issues are always political issues, a) because civil society movements have of course initiated the recognition of such ecological property rights. And b) because ecologically sustainable changes are always socio-political changes. Production and consumption relationships, property rights and interpretations of property are changed to achieve sustainability goals. Ecology and politics are therefore intertwined. Secondly, it is striking that the examples of ecological property rights illustrate the double meaning of voluntariness. On the one hand, there is the problematic meaning that is often associated with the concept of neoliberalism—as we also discuss in our research group. Voluntariness is seen as the opposite of state regulation or legal coercion and means freedom of choice. This is linked to the assumption that climate-friendly, ecological, sustainable action must be voluntary and must not be imposed by the state. However, on the other hand there is also a positive sense of voluntariness. After all, it was social movements and civil society initiatives that led to the rights of nature being institutionalized. This socio-ecological commitment is based on voluntariness. It is important that voluntariness also has a positive meaning here, in the sense of self-activation.

Jürgen Martschukat: There were a few keywords here that lead us to Silke and her field of work. Not so long ago, Silke, you wrote a book together with Tine Haubner in which you coined the term *community capitalism*.[2] In it, you discuss the restructuring of the welfare state over the last few decades. To what extent or in what way does the sociological view of voluntariness help to problematize this restructuring?

Silke van Dyk: I come from the field of political sociology and in my research, very roughly outlined, I am interested in the relationship between capitalism and democracy—and against this background, in voluntariness as a resource in the restructuring of the economy and the welfare state. This ties in directly with something Tilo just said, namely the tension between voluntary action on the one hand and legally codified action on the other. We are currently observing an activation of civil society, in that voluntary engagement is substituting for social rights—in other words, it is acting as a kind of default resource for an increasingly selective welfare state. The importance of volunteering is also increasing in socially sensitive areas of society such as care, family support, refugee aid and childcare, i.e. wherever either welfare state services and social rights are being reduced or where they are not keeping pace with growing social needs in the light of demographic change and changes in gender and family relations.

2 Silke van Dyk and Tine Haubner, *Community-Kapitalismus* (Hamburger Edition, 2021).

It is an important point in this dynamic—and here I can also follow on from Tilo—that the activation of civil society is not about strengthening its protest and critical function as a corrective to welfare state in action, but about using civil society engagement and voluntary resources to solve problems that are no longer addressed by public services. In my view, this difference is of great importance when we talk about voluntariness in contemporary capitalism: civic engagement is increasingly becoming an instrumental resource and not a resource for the democratization of society. Against this background, it is interesting to look at the conceptual history of volunteering and how it is extremely positively charged. If we look at the social discourse, we can even see that voluntary social engagement has become synonymous with volunteering per se, which means that we lose sight of the fact that people can do highly problematic things voluntarily. This revaluation also amounts to a sacralization of volunteers, who are often literally celebrated as angels or heroes. Their voluntary commitment is so positively charged that the downsides of voluntary help fade into the background. However, when we talk about sensitive areas of social participation, securing livelihoods and services of general interest and look at people who are dependent on help and support, e.g. people in need of care, children, refugees, or vulnerable families, we see that the highly praised voluntary work is not so unproblematic: it is precisely the essence of voluntary work that people have the opportunity to refrain from an action, which conversely makes the situation extremely precarious for those who are existentially dependent on help. People in need of care must be able to rely on social rights and professional help. Whether a volunteer is always dependable and whether it suits him/her to show up today is a completely different story... The reversal of perspective would therefore be to ask: Under what conditions does volunteering become so precarious that it actually endangers the foundations of solidarity and participation?

Jürgen Martschukat: Yes, because not being able to come as a helper is inherent in the principle of voluntariness. We can use some of these keywords to bring Matthias into play here, too. Matthias, as a historian, you have dealt with voluntariness, especially voluntariness and gender. The sacralization of voluntary action and, above all, the flip side of this is one of the central themes, I suspect. What is your interest as a historian when you look at voluntariness and gender?

Matthias Ruoss: Yes, these are indeed important keywords for my research. I understand voluntariness as a practice—that is also described as such a practice. It is important to emphasize this understanding, because it allows us to derive the historically relevant question of how action and the concept have mutually shaped and developed. We can start from two current observations that Silke has already indicated: Firstly, voluntariness is almost exclusively an external attribution in Western societies. The phrase "I am active as a volunteer in this or that area" has no discursive place. Secondly, volunteering today has positive connotations all around. What interests me as a historian is the question of

why or when volunteering became so charged and how this semantic content manifested itself in practice.
As a historian, I generally assume that the social invocation, valorization or implementation of voluntariness has a history that can be examined. This history did not begin in the 1970s but started with the gender-specific development of capitalist economies and their socially reproductive foundations in the early 19th century. There are various historical perspectives from which to analyze the history of volunteering: One can look at the history of organized charity and philanthropy, one can look at the gendered social division of tasks or one can examine the development of the welfare state and the mixed economies of welfare.
However, I find another approach more exciting, which can be described as an immanent critique of voluntariness. This is less about asking how the cultural hegemony of voluntariness functions, but rather where it produces contradictions and reaches its limits. These tensions and boundaries can be identified and explored in various ways. On the one hand, you can ask who is voluntarily active but is not considered as such. I am thinking here, for example, of those involved in helping refugees or providing abortion services, both in history and in the present day. Both are areas of criminalized voluntariness that can be examined from the margins. On the other hand, these margins of cultural hegemony can be examined by asking how the concept of voluntariness was claimed by others and against the social order: Voluntariness not as a service to society, but as a critique of it. There are various examples of this. Anarchist circles around 1900, for example, used the concept of voluntariness in a completely different way from mainstream society. They understood it as an autonomous, domination-free medium with which they attempted to transform the social order in a spirit of solidarity and without state assistance. It's precisely these kinds of battles over the interpretation of voluntariness that interest me.

Jürgen Martschukat: Thank you. What I have noticed across the disciplines is that you are very keen to formulate a critique of voluntariness. Perhaps we can try to explore this in more detail. Why is a critique of voluntariness so important to you? For example, against the background of the sacralization that Silke mentioned, or the voluntariness at the margins that Matthias just pointed to, or in the confrontation with hegemony or with the neoliberal context that Tilo elaborated on.

Tilo Wesche: I think that voluntariness became an issue in political philosophy with the introduction of individual rights. This applies not only to the development of civil law in the eighteenth century, but also to the emergence of political rights, democracy for example, or the bourgeois revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Voluntariness has an emancipatory meaning here, because we cannot conceive rights without voluntariness. Anyone who has a right is also entitled to exercise or not exercise this right. Otherwise, it would not be a right. There is an analytical unity between rights and voluntariness; and this can rightly be called an emancipatory meaning of voluntariness.

The problem here can be seen very clearly when this tradition of individual rights, which originated more from natural law, is reinterpreted by contractarianism, in particular by Thomas Hobbes. Here, voluntariness takes on the problematic meaning of freedom of choice. In the state of nature, we have the choice to join a society or not. However, this idea is a falsification and abstraction because, as it were, the background that forces us to join a society, for example, or to perform certain tasks, is hidden. The meaning of voluntariness as freedom of choice gives the arguably false impression that it is up to us whether we carry out socially necessary tasks, either privately or publicly.

Silke van Dyk: From a sociological perspective, we need a critique of voluntariness that asks what function voluntary action has under certain contextual conditions and is not satisfied with voluntariness as a normative ideal. This leads me back to the tense relationship between capitalism and democracy and the question of voluntariness as an economic and political resource that is embedded in it. In the field of research that interests me, we ask in the broadest sense "How does production and, above all, social reproduction function under capitalist conditions?" We can see that the characterization of activities as voluntary leads to their re-framing as commitment, as love, as a gift, as community building, even though they are work-like. This is where a critique of voluntariness must start, not to fundamentally problematize the principle of voluntariness, but to look at the extent to which the labelling of activities and tasks as voluntary serves to hide their economic implications—so that there is no longer any talk of labor rights and remuneration. This is precisely the flip side of the sacralization of volunteers: Those who speak of angels and heroes want to remain silent about exploitation and precariousness, insecurity and a lack of professionalism. In this sense, we also need an ideological critique of volunteering.

The gender-specific implications are also important for this discussion. I find it extremely interesting that both feminist research and feminist social movements have an elaborate critique of care work as a supposed labor of love. An important slogan of the second women's movement was "They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work." This made it possible in the first place to understand precisely these unpaid care activities, often attributed to the supposed female nature, as work and to make the exploitation rooted in them visible. To this day, I am surprised that this very elaborate critique of unpaid work, which makes love and care the subject of economic analysis, is not taken up in the numerous publications and analyses on volunteering and civic engagement. Although the questions are very similar, this critique of female reproductive work is not used to analyze engagement. With the sacralization of volunteering, there is also a narrowing of democratic politics that should not be underestimated: the more volunteering becomes an economic and social resource, the more it is controlled and incentivized and the more it loses its stubborn, resistant, critical character rooted in civil society, on which liberal democracies depend.

Matthias Ruoss: I find this aspect very exciting. However, I would like to point out that the women's movement not only criticized volunteering, for example with regard to female reproductive work. Especially in the nineteenth century, circles within the bourgeois women's movement also demanded and reflected on the opposite, namely the step out of the home into the field of voluntariness and thus into the public sphere. Volunteering always offered women opportunities and possibilities—without having to radically question the role ascribed to them as housewife, mother and wife. It seems important to me that we recognize both aspects: the disciplining and the potential for liberation inherent in voluntariness. As historians, we decide whether we are writing a history of assignment or a history of emancipation—or both. I would like this to be understood not only in the sense of a heuristic responsibility, but also as a plea for a historical-critical analysis of voluntariness. A central concern of historical research is to historicize circumstances and conditions in order to show how they can be changed. This also applies to voluntariness. The social organization of volunteering has a multifaceted history—and an open future. Another concern is to draw attention to the internal contradictions of power and the inherited conditions. Above all, this includes the fact that the social use of voluntariness has always been contested.

Jürgen Martschukat: Would you want to react to each other again?

Silke van Dyk: I would like to pick up on a point that Matthias raised: the question of whether voluntariness is a self-attribution of those involved or a labeling of the actions of others. For the development of a critical view of volunteering, it is important to consider how volunteering is controlled and 'governed' under conditions in which volunteering is a social resource. This perspective is becoming increasingly important as the call for voluntary contributions to the community grows louder in times of social cuts and growing gaps in care. In our sociological research, we can see that in this instrumental sense, it is often vulnerable groups that are targeted, and are primarily to be won over with expense allowances. In fact, we are currently witnessing a certain split into a caring civil society and a shaping civil society: on the one hand, the more economically precarious volunteers, who are activated as a care resource that is compensated for expenses, and on the other hand, the more distant, politically oriented engagement, which continues to be a refuge for those with more resources and education. This leads us to the question of the conditions under which it is actually a privilege to be able to act voluntarily. What resources do I need, for example, to devote a lot of energy and time to a political commitment? We are particularly interested in this in the current, second funding phase of our research group. We are discussing what we call the backstage of voluntariness, which is of course also strongly gendered. What do I have to be relieved of in order to be able to get involved politically or socially beyond paid work and beyond everyday caring activities? These are two very different perspectives that differentiate between voluntariness in the sense of control and in the sense of an actually lived mode of action. That, however, always raises the question of at what price and at whose expense conditions of voluntari-

ness are created. This often becomes apparent in the research material when it comes to domestic and care work. Many of the interviewees, especially the female respondents, emphasize that their actions cannot be consistently classified on a scale of voluntariness, as the activities are simply necessary and therefore no decision can be made for or against them. However, we now know—and this is both historically and currently extremely well documented empirically—that men were very often able to opt out at a very low threshold; that they had a choice because they were able to delegate the necessary issues of social reproduction. The question of the necessity of an activity therefore implies power and hierarchies and is central to the debate in gender-specific terms. Who can opt out? Who can decide?

Jürgen Martschukat: Voluntariness and costs is perhaps a connection that we can use to turn the screw a little further, so to speak, in order to include global perspectives on voluntariness—the focus of this theme issue of *Comparativ*. To what extent does the global or perhaps even the planetary—if anyone of you adopts this concept—play a role in your work on voluntariness? I'm thinking, for example, of global environmental effects, the globality of care chains or a global dimension in research on debt.

Tilo Wesche: Yes, in climate policy you can of course clearly see the global importance of voluntary action. Climate protection cannot be pursued individually by nation-state actors. Climate is something that affects our entire planet. We need a cooperative climate policy that can only be achieved by states working together. This finding alone is a strong counter argument to the emphasis on voluntariness in relation to climate policy that we find in many places today. According to utilitarian reasoning, this can mean that climate policy must be economically worthwhile. The argument is that market decisions of companies are and must be voluntary, and that these decisions would then also have a positive climate protection effect. In this context, utilitarianists are also talking about voluntary compliance with sustainability standards in consumption or a moral concept of voluntariness when it comes to voluntary renunciation in consumption. Here too, as Silke said, voluntariness is used as a kind of control medium that is decoupled from the state's steering power. Climate policy is supposed to be organized through voluntary action in these very different segments of the market, but also in the private sphere of consumption. However, what is striking about climate policy is that political power is necessary to implement effective climate policy control. It is interesting to note that the international cooperation required for this does not take place at state level, but particularly at the level of NGOs. Voluntariness is therefore used here in a positive sense: as a resource, but as a stopgap measure. A task of states is handed over to private, civil society actors. The state is thus relieving itself of very costly climate policy tasks.

Jürgen Martschukat: So here we are actually seeing very similar developments to the area that Silke is focusing on.

Silke van Dyk: Thinking about voluntariness from a global perspective challenges us to question the concept of voluntariness. Is it a concept that is genuinely limited to liberal democracies, or is it a concept that can be generalized? Different approaches are also evident here in the interdisciplinary discussion, e.g. between sociologists and historians. Do I work with voluntariness as a term in the sources and do I look at contexts and practices in which the concept of voluntariness is actually used either in self-attribution or in attribution to others? Or do I look at how voluntariness can be characterized as a mode of action to ask whether and where it also appears in contexts that are not conceptually defined as voluntary? The term voluntariness, as we know it from a European perspective, is very closely linked to civil society and is often even equated with civic action. This is a charge that should not be prematurely universalized. The exciting question that arises from this is how voluntariness as a source term perhaps took on a completely different meaning in other contexts. According to our criteria, would we also find voluntary action where it does not even bear this label? In the research group, we also discussed intensively whether voluntariness is a concept that is necessarily linked to democracies. We can answer that with a no. In fact, voluntariness can also be found at very different levels in dictatorships, but with different implications than in democratic contexts. From a sociological perspective, it is also not just a question of identifying voluntary action in specific social and historical contexts. It is also much more far-reaching to look at voluntariness as an inherent component and mode of governance, as an overarching mode of control and leadership, which is indeed a very different perspective.
Following on from Tilo, I would like to pick up on one point that is very important to better understand voluntariness in the here and now and from a global perspective. It is extremely important, especially in the global structure, to take a closer look at the connection between voluntariness and externalization, whereby the dynamics of externalization have a spatial, a personal and a temporal component. I previously introduced the concept of the backstage of voluntariness, which implies the externalization of tasks and responsibilities to other people: it is a central prerequisite and necessary relief for voluntary action, for example in the form of time-consuming political commitment. Of course, there is also externalization in terms of time, which is particularly evident in the example of climate policy. This means that not only are the *conditions* for voluntary action created in the backstage sense by delegating tasks, but the *consequences* of unsustainable voluntary action are also outsourced to future generations.

Matthias Ruoss: I would like to agree with this and emphasize the distinction between voluntariness as a source term and voluntariness as an analytical concept, especially with regard to historical or current global developments. This is heuristically necessary, whereby a kind of double movement can be observed in this respect. On the one hand, I think I can observe that the much-discussed, morally-economically charged mode of political control, in which voluntariness is a resource, is being globalized. Something like an imperialist vector can be found in it. One example of this is the so-called Year of Voluntary Action, such as the International Volunteer Day on December 5, which has

been organized by the UN since 1985 and on which volunteering is popularized on an international stage. On the other hand, it is not enough to view globalization as a one-way street, because Western societies are undergoing massive change at the same time. If we look at the material backstage of voluntariness mentioned by Silke, it becomes apparent that we can hardly afford it anymore and that socially reproductive functions are being delegated instead. I am thinking here, for example, of the high number of illegalized workers doing these jobs, in Switzerland they are called "Sans Papiers." This is a new element in the social division of tasks that should not be viewed in isolation from global developments.

Jürgen Martschukat: I'm sure Silke will want to say something about that, but first Tilo.

Tilo Wesche: Yes, I would also like to emphasize once again how important it is to really differentiate between the meanings of voluntariness here. To describe a specific case, we can look at New Zealand. On the one hand, New Zealand pursues a very neoliberal climate policy in which voluntary market decisions, voluntary renunciation of consumption, etc. are intended to achieve climate protection. It is a prime example of the externalization of climate policy tasks I described above. On the other hand, there is a Maori movement that is working towards giving nature its own rights, additionally to this neoliberal climate policy; and these rights were ultimately granted by the New Zealand parliament. This is now a matter of voluntary action in the sense of self-activation, because no one has been forced by the state to initiate these rights of nature. The decisive factor in this self-activation is that it has nothing to do with freedom of choice, as this no longer exists in the face of ecological crises such as climate change, species extinction, global pollution or resource depletion: We have no choice, the world will change anyway. The relevant question is whether we are merely adapting or whether we are voluntarily acting to shape it. In this case, we can see very clearly that, on the one hand, voluntariness has the problematic meaning of freedom of choice and serves externalization, and on the other hand, it has the emancipatory meaning of voluntariness in the sense of self-activation, which can lead to climate policy changes.

Silke van Dyk: Yes, this exciting point leads us even further in the direction of distinguishing between different modes of voluntary action, especially if we understand voluntariness as a genuinely liberal, democratic mechanism of action and contrast it with voluntary participation under authoritarian or dictatorial conditions. When it comes to voluntary participation under dictatorial conditions, we are talking about a very clearly defined framework for action, but where it is assumed that those affected have the option of deciding whether to participate—a freedom of choice between predetermined alternative courses of action. If I have understood Tilo's explanations correctly, however, this is something completely different from voluntary self-activation, through which actors become active on their own initiative and possibly also in the form of resistance, with their own goals. The decision is not made between predetermined alternatives for action,

which seems to me to be a very important difference and draws attention to the critical potential of voluntariness. Nevertheless, it would of course be too narrow to contrast voluntary action in the context of dictatorship solely with critical, resistant self-activation in liberal democracy. We have already seen that voluntariness can also be exploited or be a privilege in liberal democracies and that voluntariness as a mode of governing also restricts the conditions of self-activation. In view of the care crises in liberal democracies, the call for voluntariness often addresses and activates particularly vulnerable people as a social resource, while at the same time political self-activation has a lot of prerequisites, also in terms of time and educational resources.

Jürgen Martschukat: One question I would like to ask at this point is whether the global perspectives can also show us alternatives to Western liberal governing through voluntariness. Tilo has already mentioned this with the example of New Zealand, but perhaps we want to emphasize it a little more. Do global perspectives create an opportunity to recognize other forms of organizing the relationship between humans and nature, for example, or to observe and examine other forms of lived solidarity? To what extent do we need to pay attention, be sensitive or perhaps open our eyes to the diversity of social forms of organization, of which completely different ones can become visible on a global scale?

Matthias Ruoss: In this context, I find it interesting to ask how identifying and distinguishing oneself as volunteers can be a form of resistance in the case of people who are not usually referred to as volunteers. Voluntary work has a system-stabilizing, transformative or revolutionary effect not only in practice. It is also a question of the discursive acceptance of this attribution. Doesn't it have critical potential if, to be specific, for example, refugee aid workers on Lesbos, who see themselves as activists, suddenly identify as volunteers?

Silke van Dyk: That's an exciting idea. Problem-centered, qualitative interviews with volunteers, which we conducted in a previous project on the instrumentalization and exploitation of voluntary work, show that there are volunteers in many areas who see themselves as volunteers or emphasize the voluntary nature of their commitment. However, it is interesting to note that not all volunteering is described as such: The closer people's involvement is to politics, the less they see themselves as volunteers and the more they see themselves as activists. This is interesting because, of course, it also tells us something about the load of the term, because political engagement is of course, from a purely formal point of view, just as voluntary as social engagement. However, this is precisely the problem: what is framed and affirmed as voluntary in a positive sense in our society is usually resource-related activities. This can be seen very clearly in the example of volunteer support for refugees, in which many people were active in the years after 2015. The volunteers who offer language courses and advice on a daily basis, organize neighborhood parties and leisure activities in shelters, translate when going to

state agencies or take care of daycare and school places for refugee children were and still are highly praised. At the same time, however, those who help refugees or organize anti-deportation protests are criticized and often even criminalized. Here we see this instrumental approach to voluntariness in liberal economies, which is then reflected in the self-classifications as activists or volunteers. And we also see that the characterization of social engagement as voluntary engagement often prevents the downsides of engagement from being highlighted and problematized. In refugee support, family assistance or care, we find many volunteers who say "Yes, of course the state needs to spend less resources now because we are doing the job. But I do it voluntarily. I can stop at any time, so I can't be exploited." This is a central problem of volunteering: problems are very rarely addressed collectively, as the individual exit option is usually chosen, voting with one's feet, so to speak. Thus, apart from rare exceptions, the politicization of volunteering tends to fail to materialize.

Tilo Wesche: I wanted to pick up on Matthias' point about self-attribution again. This finding can also be interpreted critically in terms of language to show how strongly this concept of voluntariness has been hijacked. It has taken on a meaning of freedom of choice or freedom in general, which has established itself as the opposite of coercion, paternalism and state regulation. The example of South Africa during apartheid also makes sense in terms of voluntariness. Many people were involved in anti-apartheid politics and resisted the racist regime, despite a debate among the oppressed as to whether it would be better to conform. A recurring argument was "No, we have to get involved and we do it voluntarily." You can see the same thing with climate policy. We have to do something, but these actions are voluntary because they are not organized by the state. This is a meaning of self-activation that is not in contrast to a necessity, but actually includes the necessity to act. It is still voluntary because it is not organized by the state, but it is nevertheless necessary. There is an almost urgent need to be active in climate policy. Such self-activation is also anchored in certain resources that must be taken for granted. Self-activation does not exist in a vacuum. It is not a given natural constant, but self-activation must also be made possible by particular social or cultural contexts in which self-activation of voluntariness can occur in the first place. My point is that voluntariness is often reduced to a concept that stands in contrast to necessity. If we take a closer look at what actually happens, i.e. how social movements or climate policy engagement etc. come about, then we see a meaning of voluntariness that includes this very necessity in the form of necessary prerequisites or urgency.

Matthias Ruoss: I absolutely agree. You are referring to the discursive struggles for voluntariness that I mentioned, which can be analyzed historically. Voluntariness is never just assignment and discipline, but also emancipation and self-activation, as you put it. This can also be seen in other, related terms such as "civil society." The concept of civil society has been used in Eastern European countries as a counter-concept to state-authoritarian power, which has always served to legitimize opposition. Civil society as a

concept was then adopted relatively quickly by Western societies, both analytically and politically, and incorporated into the mode of governing.

Silke van Dyk: I would like to hook up to Tilo with one more point. Once again, an observation from our empirical research: we interviewed a number of volunteers, particularly in the area of voluntary refugee aid, who made it very clear that they do not believe that they are volunteering, for example when it comes to medical care for people without residence status that is not guaranteed by the state. With their commitment they are, so the argument goes, forced to close a serious gap in care, which is existentially necessary. It is an interesting question as to which concept of necessity we are operating with here. I would agree that necessity and voluntariness are not necessarily in tension. But I would question whether it is not because there is no objective necessity, but only a social necessity that the people who get involved identify and evaluate as such based on their own values, norms and aspirations. Because even if refugees are not provided with medical care or if we know how serious the consequences of climate change are, I also can choose not to get involved in this area – which is what the majority of people do. Against this backdrop, it is very interesting that committed people say that their involvement is not voluntary, but necessary. According to our criteria, their decision to make this commitment is nevertheless a voluntary one. Here, however, it is definitely worth taking a closer look at the concept of necessity, because it also makes sense to me that those involved feel individually compelled by the existential nature of the need they are addressing through their involvement. It is an interesting question as to whether the possibility of choice, and with it voluntariness, lies in the definition of necessity. This would be a very social concept of necessity.

Tilo Wesche: I will now continue to take on the role of climate policy. Ulrike Herrmann often talks about voluntary climate protection. However, she always emphasizes that the climate, our planet, will change anyway. The only question is whether we should simply adapt, not intervene or help shape it voluntarily. This shows that voluntariness is not beyond necessity. Another example: even if I sign an employment contract voluntarily, I am in the context of reproduction and must take on work. This is always ignored, as it introduces a strict antagonism. In our project within the research group, we are trying to show that voluntariness in the sense of self-activation is not to be thought of as antagonistic to necessity.

Jürgen Martschukat: I would now like to move on to a third area that I would like to talk to you about. Perhaps it can be described as the current political developments. It has already been mentioned from time to time that voluntariness is a very complex force within political struggles. We have already talked about the mobilization of voluntariness and the political developments of recent years. In my opinion, the resurgence of right-wing parties and widespread enthusiasm for supposedly strong leaders in particular raise various questions about voluntariness. One could almost speak of a form of voluntary

submission that is currently taking place. A first question would be whether this observation of a crisis of democracy is also a crisis of voluntariness, in the sense that people ultimately feel overwhelmed in many cases by neoliberal invocations to decide for themselves, to have to activate themselves voluntarily again and again, and therefore perhaps adhere to authoritarian figures who promise simple solutions. Recently this was particularly evident in the US election campaign in autumn 2024. It seemed to me that the simpler the answer, the more it catches on. The second question points in the direction of political mobilization through voluntariness: in this case, isn't voluntary and resistant engagement, as Matthias emphasized, now more in demand than ever as a central form of political action? I know that's a very big question… How do you see voluntariness in the current political constellation?

Tilo Wesche: The answer to both is a resounding yes. The way you have described the situation, there is little to add. To a certain extent, autocracy is a reaction to neoliberalism. Due to the withdrawal of the state's problem-solving powers, citizens are simply overwhelmed in the face of everyday challenges, but also global problems. To a certain extent, it is an understandable reaction that people want to relieve themselves of this excessive burden and leave this problem-solving competence to a strong authority. People are satisfied with simple answers. The genesis of this turn to autocracy is like a pendulum, so to speak. Initially, neoliberalization takes place, the state withdraws, and a great deal is controlled within society and the private sphere on a voluntary basis. This leads to excessive demands and a reaction, namely the acceptance of simple answers and strong men, and in the case of Italy, also a woman. It is now a very important point that voluntariness is given a positive, attractive face again in relation to civil disobedience, as Matthias has already said. Something, where we mobilize ourselves, call upon ourselves—and I don't just mean "ourselves" in an individualistic sense, but also in a collective sense, as a group. This is the paradox of voluntariness: we have to get involved voluntarily and voluntariness has to be thought of together with the strong urgency of necessity.

Silke van Dyk: I would like to take up Tilo's first point and think in a different direction. In the current discussion about the causes of the rise of right-wing forces, which in any case has a lot to do with change fatigue, there is also a problematic side to it. The turn to the right is often analyzed as self-defense on the part of the lower classes—also using precisely this terminology. As I said, there is a plausible core to this, but if the explanation is narrowed down in this sense and framed as self-defense, it also implies that there are no real alternatives to this reaction. In my view, this refuses to recognize that many people voluntarily choose a highly racist or misogynistic offer, because the self-defense thesis is all too quickly used as an exculpatory argument. The many surprised comments that Trump or the AfD would do nothing for the poor and less privileged, but that this would not cost them any support, can only be understood against the backdrop of this narrow view of social self-defense. In response, we have to say: No, but that was never

the point of right-wing political proposals. The promise is the exclusion of others and the detour of top-down issues into a nationalist or even nationalist inside-outside issue. On a second level, we can see that voluntariness is constitutively dependent on the fact that something can be different than it is and that there is not just one possibility of action and reaction. I believe that in the debate about the rise of right-wing forces and the current threats to democracy, it is too often neglected that under neoliberal conditions precisely this ability to shape social conditions has been suspended. There is a failure to recognize that the talk of the lack of alternatives to market decisions or the constraints of austerity and social cuts, which has characterized neoliberal governing for years, has its roots in the neoliberal constellation, which then calls for authoritarian alternatives. If you think it through to the end, this paradigm of no alternatives also undermines or makes voluntary, resistant self-activation more difficult.

Matthias Ruoss: I would like to add that this topos of the crisis of voluntariness also has a history. This can be traced back to the late 1970s. At the time, crisis was a widespread contemporary signifier: there was talk of a crisis of the welfare state, a crisis of the working society and a crisis of voluntariness. In retrospect, the crisis rhetoric, which continues to this day, not only marked breaks perceived at the time, but also prepared the ground for a renegotiation of the social division of labor. In addition, the crisis of voluntariness has counter-mobilized and continues to do so. In the 1970s, the new social movements created a force that incorporated and used voluntariness to transform social conditions. We are seeing this again today. The global women's movements, the climate-organized youth or Black Lives Matter also operate with voluntariness. I would therefore—once again—speak of an ambivalent development. The crisis of voluntariness is a discursive ploy to renew the mode of governing and stabilize the social division of tasks. But the crisis of voluntariness is also a moment when social movements come onto the scene.

Jürgen Martschukat: Thanks so much! Our conversation showed me once again what an exciting topic voluntariness is and how incredibly stimulating it is to work with you—or to have to work with you, because it means that I always have to question myself anew. Thank you very much.