

Hans Katzer on the Acquisition of Property among Workers: “The Promise Must be Kept...” (1959)

Abstract

In West Germany, the social market economy was supposed to offer an attractive social alternative to both East German Socialism and unregulated capitalism. In 1959, CDU social politician Hans Katzer solicited public support for an important component of this concept – namely, state support for the formation of wealth by broad segments of the population. The state program included various forms of long-term savings, among other things for houses and old-age provision, as well as the *Volksaktie* [people’s stock], which for the first time would offer the average worker the opportunity to become a co-owner of a business.

Source

The view propagated time and again in this publication – that it is necessary to pursue a deliberate and active social policy – has increasingly taken hold.

This just became evident again when the CDU/CSU parliamentary faction of the German Bundestag voted unanimously for the savings bonus law, even though there were some substantial differences of opinion on the issue itself. The fact that, with this law, a social policy goal is being met was crucial for the decision of the parliamentary group.

[...]

Without a doubt, the most recent decisions by the federal government and the *Bundestag*, which favor a broad diffusion of property through measures to promote savings, demonstrate the serious socio-political will of the CDU. However, it should be emphatically pointed out that the solution to the “property question” is not exhausted by “privatization” or “the people’s stock [*Volksaktie*],” no matter how much these measures should be welcomed as the necessary path toward a reordering of property conditions. The road via savings, premium-account saving, home loan savings contracts, life insurance savings, and pension savings, in combination with privatization and *Volksaktie*, is only one path toward the broad formation of property in the hands of employees; that means, in hands – and this should not be overlooked – that today receive an average income of DM 420 every month. Apart from the fact that the *Volksaktie* is only one possible solution, the following conditions should be met so that the socio-political expectations that are placed upon it will materialize: small denominations of DM 100 as a bearer instrument, social bonus graduated by income, a prohibition on selling, and a limitation on maximum voting power, as well as some arrangement to exercise the rights of small shareholders.

The second crucial path, that of workers sharing in the success of the company, is still open. Here, the social committees have presented a draft of co-ownership that envisions voluntary agreements on the basis of a framework of state laws and tax breaks for the companies. A path that, as is described in detail in this issue, is now being embarked upon in France. In addition, the so-called Häussler Plan proposes employee participation in company profits through the setting aside of a portion of salaries and wages for investment. In all proposals of this kind, any state coercion is rejected as emphatically as tax benefits are demanded.

[...]

If it was noted just now that the two central starting points of our reflections concerning a new social order are “property” and the “distribution of power,” it is likely that in addition to a reform of stock law, the path of participation is the only possible way that has emerged thus far to allow the question of property to actually arrive at its crucial socio-political goal; for a broad diffusion of property without an effective form for representing small property in the organs of society leads naturally to a greater concentration of power in the hands of the largely propertyless managers if the crucial wealth of economic production is excluded from the program of a broad formation of property.

After 1945, the Federal Republic, as a part of Germany and in deliberate opposition to both the National Socialist past and the Soviet colonial order in central Germany, developed its own political and socio-political profile. It claims to be a free, social state under the rule of law [*Rechtsstaat*], and with this it has entered into an inalienable obligation – toward itself but also toward the unfree part of Germany – to make this free “social *Rechtsstaat*” a reality. An indispensable component of such an order, in which the greatest possible freedom of the individual must be placed into a balanced relationship with society’s interest in the common welfare, is a real solution to the property question. It must guarantee the individual the possibility of acquiring personal property according to the degree of his application of capital or work, it must not interfere in personal property, but it must also ensure that within the framework of the overall economy no imbalance of power arises on account of property, power that eliminates smaller property from its functions.

[...]

Source: *Soziale Ordnung* 5 (1959), p. 77; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann, ed., *Zwei Staaten, eine Nation. Deutsche Geschichte 1955–1970*. Göttingen, 1988, pp. 486–87.

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