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“Equalization of Burdens Means Equalization of Wealth” (1948)

The equalization of burdens was a topic of much debate. At the end of the 1940s, West Germans discussed models that relied not on confiscations and the redistribution of existing wealth, but rather on payments based on future economic productivity. This commentary in the magazine *Der Leuchtturm* opposed this concept and appealed to those who had caused the war to take responsibility, rather than burdening future generations with the consequences.

Equalization of Burdens Means Equalization of Wealth

[. . .]

The war has cost a great deal. It was madness, and everyone together, the entire community of fate of the nation must finally come to a reckoning and pay for it to the very last penny, so that at least in the future there won't be a few madmen who will be tempted, once again, to launch a war in the certain expectation that, in the end, not they but rather the broad masses will have to pay for it. And so if the last war is said to have cost us 80% of our national wealth, then everyone must contribute 80% of his wealth to pay for it. Therefore, only a general, fair equalization of wealth within the framework of Germany's bankrupt assets can be called an equalization of burdens in the true sense. But some claim that precisely this is “economically” unacceptable. Those who make this claim, however, simply prefer not to provide proof.

Of course, if one wants to insist on solving the problem according to capitalist recipes, as was always the case in history, simply by shifting it onto others in order to preserve one's own assets – this time by shifting it to the future productivity of the national economy – then the problem is naturally unsolvable, then there will only be crumbs and charity, meager pensions, lentil dishes. Incidentally, who gives the compromised owners of material assets the right to simply dispose over the future production? [. . .] The future production belongs solely to those who will work for it in the future. We have no right to burden a future generation to achieve an equalization of burdens. The costs of the war must be borne by the living, without any kind of shady tricks. Only a coward and a crook would shirk the responsibility that everyone within the fabric of the nation's fate must bear at some time.

[. . .]

Backed into a corner, some representatives of “property” now believe that they can dismiss the necessary burden sharing as communism. We must warn most emphatically against such pathetic arguments, all the more so if Christians are using them, since in this way they insult, in outrageous fashion, the popes, in whose admired social encyclicals the equalization of burdens also finds its justification. The equalization of burdens does not destroy private property; on the contrary, it solidifies it. The popes, however, do not ask for admiration, but rather for deeds, especially from Christians, so that, through a timely social reform, the storm from the East can perhaps still be stopped. It is not the equalization of burdens that is communism. However, torpedoing it will most certainly call forth despair and communism, which so far has not managed to gain a foothold in West Germany only because all too many of those hit the hardest, the refugees from the East, were forced to get to know it in its truest form all too well. However, one must not be deceived: in the long run it can be kept at bay only at the price of a just, general equalization of wealth as the final reckoning of the war’s costs, the theoretical justification of which is undisputed. It is as much a demand for strict commutative justice as for genuine Christianity and a true socialism.

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Source: “Lastenausgleich heißt Vermögensausgleich!” [“Equalization of Burdens Means Equalization of Wealth”], *Der Leuchtturm*, 1948, no. 5, 66f; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945-1990. Texte und Dokumente zur Sozialgeschichte* [The Divided Land. Life in Germany, 1945-1990. Texts and Documents on Social History]. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993, pp. 106-07.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap