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Ownership Societies, Fake and Real

Kevin Carson

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Gar Alperovitz mocks Bush's counterfeit version of the "ownership society"...

President George W. Bush's "ownership society" is a seductive idea: who wouldn't want to become the owner of their home, health care, retirement, and destiny? From the "home on the range" to the adulation heaped on high-tech entrepreneurs, the concept is rooted in the American experience. No other nation places more value on the importance of individual autonomy. Ultimately, however, Bush's promise of an ownership society is an empty one. In exchange for ownership, we receive increased risk while the wealthy and corporate interests benefit, as in his Social Security privatization plan. In Bush's world, everyone gets a little piece of the pie, but at the cost of giving the wealthy extremely large helpings...

...and proposes a real one.

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Although the redistributive door is largely closed, the ownership door is, in fact, open. Not ownership in Bush's skewed sense, but rather ownership in a democratic sense through the possibility of community-based investment in, and control over, wealth creation. Employees, companies, non-profits, cities, and states are using diverse and innovative strategies to create community wealth. It is wealth that improves the ability of communities and individuals to increase asset ownership, anchor jobs locally, expand the provision of public services, and ensure local economic stability, rather than just boost corporate profits and shareholder fortunes. A common thread runs through the employee-owned firms, community development corporations, and even the traditional co-ops: the idea that real wealth equality can only be built by communal involvement in the means by which that wealth is produced. Such approaches provide ownership for millions of Americans—in many cases, through a tangible asset that can appreciate and be passed on to subsequent generations. Others create community wealth by enabling businesses and jobs to stay in the United States.

But more than that, these ownership strategies give people a real stake in their community, strengthening the bonds of citizenship and the connections between people, institutions, and places. These are not incidental by-products of a progressive ownership society; they lie at its core. A country where more people have a tangible stake and believe they can create better lives for themselves and their children is a strong

society—and a strong democracy. “Necessitous men are not free men,” Franklin Roosevelt urged. Or as an earlier President, John Adams, reminded a young nation: “The balance of power in a society accompanies the balance of property.”

I don’t like, to put it mildly, Alperovitz’s reliance on government as a lever for achieving his vision. But a version of economic justice that emphasizes distributive ownership of property, rather than the corporate state redistributing part of the income from concentrated wealth, is a refreshing one. It’s certainly at odds with the usual approach of managerialist, big government liberalism. As Alperovitz writes,

the idea of using investment strategies to benefit non-elites has been difficult for some progressives to grasp—it sounds too much like the other side’s programs.

The guild socialist G.D.H. Cole argued, in some article or other, that the Crolyites and Fabians preferred leaving corporate industry intact, either nationalizing it or redistributing its income, rather than putting workers directly in ownership and control of production. The reason was that the latter scheme, unlike the mixed economy of nationalized industry and the welfare state, would have left precious little need for the technocratic New Class to administer it. And as the distributist Hilaire Belloc pointed out, the managerialist “socialists” were pretty flexible about giving up their egalitarianism and their paper-thin loyalty to the working class, so long as the owners of industry would maintain them in comfort. So in practice, the mixed economy wound up being a case of what Gabriel Kolko called “political capitalism”: the New Class acting as hired overseers for the owning classes, rationalizing the economy through the state, and protecting corporate profits from destabilizing competition.

As for the ownership approach taken by the Bush junta and its pet neocon intellectuals, it's like the neocons' counterfeit of all the other American symbols they've appropriated: fake, fake, fake. Despite Bush's populist rhetoric about widespread ownership, and cutting taxes on "hard-working Americans," there has been a concerted effort to shift taxes off of the returns on accumulated wealth, and onto the wages of labor and on consumption by working people. At the national level that means eliminating categories of taxation that affect mainly the rich (capital gains and inheritance), while cutting income taxes "across the board" (i.e., mainly on the super-rich). Locally, it comes in the form of fake populist campaigns to abolish property taxes on large landholdings, and replace it with a sales tax on poor people's groceries.