

Realizing Property Rights

**Speech by Prof. Dr. Georg Kohler,
Chair of Political Philosophy of the University of Zurich, Switzerland**

**Conference of the University of Zurich on the launching of the Swiss Human Rights
Book “Realizing Property Rights”**

Zurich, 23 June 2006

Since the people have gathered here today to discuss an important issue and since scientific discussion always implies that each of the participating members is equally master or mistress of his or her own word, please allow me to address you in the democratic-theoretically as well as liberal-philosophically correct manner: Ladies and Gentlemen!

There are two points I would like to make by using this short address: Firstly, there are good reasons to start a discourse on human rights with property rights. And secondly, “the” Human Rights – however one might define them – are never simply a fixed factor as are the stars in the sky; we need to continue redeveloping, defending, reasserting, in short: *realizing* them – always and everywhere.

With regard to the first point, I noticed when preparing this symposium that many people seemed to consider the short statement “property rights are human rights” to be a provocation. This is a remarkably interesting fact and one which in itself deserves to be reflected on. Yet, that is not what I would like to do now. Instead, I want to draw attention to the fact that both from an idea-historical as well as from an argumentative-systematic perspective the concept of private property and the notion that one is “the owner of one's self” and thus has power over and is responsible for one's actions undeniably belong at *the very beginning* of a modern theory of human rights.

In order to confirm the historical statement I have just made, all one has to do is mention “John Locke”, the name of – let us say – the ghost-writer of the American Declaration on Human Rights. And as far as the systematic aspect is concerned, one merely needs to point out that without assuming the right to a clearly defined space of unrestricted material authority, a right every person is entitled to, we – under the current circumstances of modern civilisation – are unable to coherently develop the concepts of individual as well as collective autonomy (or democracy, respectively).

Of course – and that brings me to my second point –, one has to continually re-evaluate and debate these very general statements in the concrete context of a specific situation; for instance, with regard to the question where to draw the line between private rights of disposition and public-law interests. However – much as one acknowledges the possible spectrum of the respective definition of human rights in general and property rights in particular –, the awareness that those rights only have a normative reality if we keep striving to reassert them practically and in terms of content is essential. Understanding that we have to make a continuing effort to realize those rights in an ever-changing world is vital. And that is what we are here for today.

Thank you.