

## Introduction

### *Why Communism? Why Ownership?*

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The history books of modern economic thought are disturbingly incomplete. They are missing a potentially vast chapter covering the evolution of collectivist economic ideas. Western types of collectivist thought such as Ricardian socialism, the concept of capitalist war economy, theories of corporatism, or some statist doctrines of *Soziale Marktwirtschaft* have not prompted intellectual historians to suggest much in the way of refined schemes of classification (Marxism being an exception). The largest gap within this unwritten chapter has emerged due to a widespread neglect of the varieties of collectivism under communism.

With the unfolding of the recent global financial crisis, collectivist/interventionist ideas reemerged across the world—ranging from concepts of a sharing economy, basic income, community financing, workers' cooperatives, and special taxes on the rich, through doctrines of the *developmental* and *entrepreneurial* state, to the claim of nationalizing utilities or Occupying Wall Street. Meanwhile, even the heterodox schools of economics in the West remained dominated by the *end of history* mood of 1989. It seems as if the revolutions in Eastern Europe resulted in the final victory lap of private ownership and the market, and thus the century-long debate on the rationality of "economic calculation in a socialist *Gemeinwesen*" (Ludwig von Mises) could be terminated. Undoubtedly, with the help of new institutional, evolutionary, and behavioral schools among others, neoclassical economics has developed a more balanced and nuanced view of ownership and the market process during the past few decades than what was suggested by classical Austrian thinkers. Nevertheless, the end of communism<sup>1</sup> in Eastern Europe has not ceased to serve as a trump proving the superiority of capitalism. During the past decades, even the communist party-state in China has allowed private property to control a large segment of the economy and

nurture markets, suggesting to many that this kind of ownership is indispensable (therefore, invincible). Accordingly, it cannot be a relevant research problem in economic theory for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, state interventionism, even *dirigisme*, is on the rise in Eastern Europe, while Chinese governments have not yielded as much of their power as their counterparts did in the former Soviet Bloc in the early 1990s. In a number of ex-communist countries from Hungary to Russia, that is, in alleged strongholds of neoliberalism, a huge part of property is still in the hands of members of the ex-communist *nomenklatura* while other forms of private ownership that emerged after 1989/91 are losing ground once again. Large banks, utility companies, and pension funds are being renationalized, private firms are being subjected to discretionary regulation by the government, and new state-owned firms are being established. Foreign investors suffer discrimination, price controls have been reintroduced, and income redistribution by the state is increasing. Where business and politics seemed separate, and where this separation seemed to be safeguarded by the rule of law, they became intertwined again in informal ways. Both state capture and its opposite, when government conquers business life and accumulates assets, are fundamental features of this old-new political economy. In some countries society is ruled by a quasi-monoparty. Cronyism, kleptocracy, feudal privileges, and the like are all clear signs of both surviving and emerging regimes of organized corruption, reminding observers of the *South* rather than the *West*.

In the West, private property rights are currently being challenged from below by leading experts, rising social movements, and nascent parties on the *new new-left* like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, with the aim of renewing capitalism and democracy on the basis of *horizontal* (civic, grassroots) collectivism. This challenge is growing and has ceased to be the privilege of the Greens. It also has found its way into the programs of other established parties like the Labour Party in the United Kingdom or the Democratic Party in the United States. Here, some of the collectivist projects (like the nationalization of railways) are meant to be implemented under civic control and the rule of law. *New collectivism* has a different philosophy and mode of operation on the other side of the former Iron Curtain. A number of top leaders of authoritarian/populist conviction have worked hard, almost since the collapse of the *ancien régime*, to retain or revive state ownership (combined with private gains for the mighty) and to craft a mixed economy burdened with a bloated public sector and operating under strong government control on behalf of an illiberal state. Collectivism is exercised from above *vertically* along hierarchical/bureaucratic lines—a temptation for the extreme right as well.<sup>2</sup> The apologists of these new statist regimes find it convenient that, due to a deep lacuna in economic history-writing, their opponents cannot

just reach for a number of books on the shelf, which would evidence the dangerous disadvantages of similar attempts at hybridization in the reform-communist past.

## FILLING THE SHELF

An important reason for launching the series *Revisiting Communism: Collectivist Economic Thought in Historical Perspective* was exactly to produce such books. Illiberal regimes of today think similarly to their predecessors when approaching an imaginary middle from the opposite side. Communist reformers<sup>3</sup> softened state ownership whereas the current rulers have decided to sap the strength of private ownership. Both presume that such a middle-of-the-road position is not only feasible but also optimal.

Our research group starts the series with this comparative volume on ownership, perhaps the most important issue of political economy<sup>4</sup> under and after communism.

The productive forces of our country, especially in industry, were social in character, the form of ownership, on the other hand, was private, capitalistic. Relying on the economic law that the relations of production *must necessarily conform* with the character of the productive forces, the Soviet government socialized the means of production, made them the property of the whole people, and thereby abolished the exploiting system and created socialist forms of economy. Had it not been for this law, and had the Soviet government not relied upon it, it could not have accomplished its mission. (Joseph Stalin 1951)

Privatization of the state-owned economy is not yet on the agenda. We cannot do it immediately; my colleagues would not agree to it. But we must put all forms of ownership on an equal footing immediately and let different types of ownership compete with the state firms. (Václav Klaus 1990)

As these two quotations suggest, we will present a wide spectrum of ideas that range from radical nationalization (and provisional toleration of small-scale private property) through cooperative, communal, and managerial ownership as well as workers' self-management. We continue all the way down to the blueprints of—first informal or simulated, then real but half-hearted—privatization. Exactly this half-heartedness will help explain why statist patterns of collectivism are being accepted so widely in the former communist world today. Importantly, these patterns did not have to reemerge because they never completely vanished after 1989. Here, our volume goes against the grain, challenging a widely held view of a massive neoliberal breakthrough in economic thought during the late 1980s—even if the rhetoric



of some luminaries of the postcommunist transformation borrowed libertarian catchwords.

It is exactly the tremendous inertia of state-collectivism that may justify the *commemorative* character of this volume and its *never again* message. The lengthy experimentation full of trials and errors which economists had to pursue in order to get out of the dead-end street of pervasive nationalization and other forms of collectivization demonstrates the risks of vertical collectivism. Under certain circumstances (such as the monopoly of a party-state, a communist world power, and a ruling collectivist worldview), it can crowd out both horizontal collectivism and individualism in economic thought, paralyzing even the dissenters' imagination. This is a serious warning about the *stickiness* of collectivist doctrines especially when their horizontal variants have not been tested *en gros* on the societal level. Such a test would not be free of risk. As the history of communism proves, one can start as a grassroots collectivist and move to hierarchical collectivism without much ado.<sup>5</sup>

### A CONTRIBUTION TO INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

Our study of ownership concepts<sup>6</sup> under communism is not rooted in the mere ambition to warn the reader about the dangers of a collectivist revival. Also, we do not want to fill a gap in the history of economic thought just because it is there. Our research group is convinced that—although the ownership theories to be presented in this volume frequently did not reach the scientific level required by contemporary economics in the West—one can identify a fair number of original ideas of social property and its mixes with individual ownership, the value of which cannot be confined to their *exotic beauty*. The Conclusion will display eight attempts at such kinds of invention. Referring to them, we promise to present a few *hidden treasures* of economic scholarship, reintroduce unjustly forgotten authors as well as reveal the internal dynamics of local research communities and their transnational linkages which otherwise would remain imperceptible for outsiders. However, even many of the not-quite-original ideas were unique in terms of their ferocity and size of real-world experimentation.

To take the example of the concepts of state, cooperative, and communal ownership, many early Western prototypes were reinterpreted (distorted) and put into practice during the communist period. In addition, the experiments were carried out simultaneously in a great number of countries and for many decades. It is of equal importance that the critique of these forms of ownership,<sup>7</sup> which resulted from the repeated tests performed in the gigantic laboratory of communism, produced a wide range of scholarly arguments of empirical relevance. If translated into the formal language of modern

economics, these arguments may be able (a) to enrich the standard literature of government failure with specific types (e.g., extreme versions of fuzzy/blurred property rights, principal-agent relationships, rent seeking, incomplete contracts, etc.) in new institutional economics; and seen from a broader perspective, (b) to support the Mises-Hayek thesis of the impossibility of rational calculation under collectivist rule excluding private ownership. (It is perhaps the scholarly critique of the theory of workers' self-management that earned the greatest recognition in both fields.<sup>8</sup>) However, even if the arguments remain in their original verbal/historical form, they provide new insights in the *old institutional* analysis of property relations that was initiated by Marxists, members of the German Historical School, American institutionalists from Thorstein Veblen to John Galbraith, and Ordo-liberals. Finally, since some excellent Western scholars achieved much of the empirical results in studying ownership practices under communism (as discussed subsequently), revisiting the evolution of ownership concepts could rehabilitate them by challenging the stigma of Kremlinology.

Although it may seem absurd to take sides in the grand debate about the comparative virtues/vices of economic individualism and collectivism without evaluating the *progress reports* of the communist laboratory, this is exactly what has been happening in the profession since 1989. Neither did economic historians analyze the experiments in a systematic fashion nor did historians of economic thought waste too much time with the conceptual background, a subject that primarily intrigued our research group. What could illustrate this more lucidly than the discontinuation of the Socialist Calculation Debate in the mainstream of economic science? The collapse of the Soviet empire served as final proof of the impossibility thesis—an approach Friedrich von Hayek, who witnessed the end of communism in Eastern Europe, did *not* take. In this way, an undoubtedly strong piece of practical evidence, the simultaneous implosion of communist regimes, is substituted for a detailed investigation of the failures of a durable collectivist experiment, by both economic and intellectual history.<sup>9</sup>

This allowed the skeptics much room for maneuver in refuting the thesis as well as looking for old-new collectivist solutions again. Arguments such as “the collapse had political rather than economic reasons,” “it was due to the lack of markets rather than that of private property,” “capitalism cannot also do without public ownership,” and “economic calculation by private owners may also be irrational,” started mushrooming at the margins of standard economic knowledge and triggered new projects located somewhere between the concepts of market socialism and the social market economy.<sup>10</sup>

During the past quarter of a century, collectivist ideas of ownership under communism and their scientific critique have seldom attracted careful scrutiny, neither in the respective national histories of economic thought nor as a



subject of transnational comparison. Yet, as archival materials rapidly erode and key eyewitnesses pass away, this is the last occasion when a conceptual reconstruction of economic ideas under communism can be accomplished with both empirical precision and intellectual empathy.

### GOING BEYOND THE STATE OF THE ART

Until now, a reader interested in the fate of ownership regimes under communism and their intellectual history could only find a small number of insightful studies in economic history, sociology, political science, and law discussing the evolution of certain really existing institutions of communist economies including ownership. Moreover, the development of economic ideas is not the focus of these works.

The literature portraying the evolution of ownership concepts in the economic thought of the individual communist countries will be presented in the national chapters of our volume. In that literature one looks for thematic monographs in vain, and will find at best a few articles dealing with theories of ownership. However, usually these lack a comprehensive research agenda. As regards the few comparative works such as Kornai (1992), Berend (1996, 2009), Bruszt and Stark (1998), Roland (2000), Janos (2000), and Aslund (2002), they do not focus on ownership *per se*, and when they do bother to discuss property relations, they examine institutions and policies rather than ideas, and/or cover only a few countries and periods in depth. Even a concise history of Eastern European or Chinese economic thought in the 20th century, which might contain a brief chapter on ownership theories, has not been written yet. Moreover, to our knowledge, no edited volume has been published (either in English or in other languages) that would rest on a series of coordinated country studies on the evolution of economic concepts of ownership. In this field even *ad hoc* conference volumes are missing. Memoirs that would include the author's ideas on relevant property issues are also rare (see Kornai 2008).

The proliferation of comparative research projects on postcommunist privatization in the 1990s did not really help fill this gap because their participants also were interested in practices rather than ideas, and used the communist period only as a point of departure to explain the postcommunist transformation (see, for example, Major (1993); Frydman and Rapaczinski (1994); John Earle et al. (1994); Ira Lieberman et al. (1997)).

Works such as these replaced promising research programs developing in the West from the late 1950s. Understandably, the pioneers of these programs wanted to comprehend the institutions of ownership by means of neoclassical models (e.g., Benjamin Ward, Evsey Domar, and Jaroslav Vaněk) or industrial or sectoral case studies (e.g., Joseph Berliner, David Granick, and

Gregory Grossman) instead of methodically tracing the evolution of local concepts. The case studies were complemented by other *old-institutionalist* inquiries and a growing number of *new-institutionalist* ones (cf. Murrell 1991). The former were primarily cultivated by scholars active in the field of Comparative Economic Systems (CES) such as Morris Bornstein, William Duffy, Paul Gregory, Helmut Leipold, John Michael Montias, Egon Neuberger, Alec Nove, Frederic Pryor, Robert Stuart, Hans-Jürgen Wagener, and Peter Wiles, many of whom studied ownership theories and applied a transnational frame of analysis. The latter offered more precise instruments of institutional explanation of property relations but were less attentive to ideas of ownership, and usually relied on incomparable case studies (see the works of Maxim Boycko, Bengt Holmström, Peter Murrell, Mancur Olson, Svetozar Pejovich, Andrei Shleifer, Robert Vishny, etc.). Thus, despite the fact that CES was challenged by New Comparative Economics (Djankov et al. 2003), anyone interested in ownership thought has had to be content with the results of the former. As time passed, the systems theorists increasingly focused on technical details of governance (decision-making, information, motivation, coordination, etc.)<sup>11</sup> rather than on the conceptual features of property regimes, and refrained from dynamic comparison. They built quite a few static (cross-sectional) typologies that overemphasized national specifics, and after a while these became boringly repetitive.

Of course, issues of ownership also intrigued economic sociologists and social anthropologists (such as Michael Burawoy, Elizabeth Dunn, Chris Hann, Caroline Humphrey, Martha Lampland, Alena Ledeneva, Kálmán Rupp, David Stark, Iván Szelényi, Katherine Verdery, Janine Wedel, and Suava Zbierski-Salameh) who launched valuable research projects on property structures, particularly in the informal economy and the countryside. Industrial sociology also started flourishing in some communist countries (e.g., Tardos 1983; Wasilewski 1990). However, they examined popular rather than scholarly ideas of ownership, and their results were rarely subjected to international comparison. Yet, as will be pointed out in the Conclusion, their supply of exciting new research perspectives and metaphors speeded up the radicalization of reform economists. True, the bulk of empirically grounded reference, for example, to feudal (oligarchical, clan-based, etc.) or communal rules of ownership and their blends came too late to contribute to a profound economic *cum* legal analysis of the really existing property regimes, especially of what could be called *nomenklatura ownership* prior to 1989.

Legal researchers such as George Armstrong, William Butler, Ferdinand Feldbrugge, John Hazard, Olimpiad Ioffe, Murray Raff, Norbert Reich, and William Simons also followed closely the evolution of property law in communist countries, and the interest of many of them grew with the advance of postcommunist privatization. Nevertheless, with a few exceptions



such as Damsa (2016), Heller (1998), and Mattei (2000) the ideational and comparative aspects of regulating ownership have been overshadowed by technical case and country studies of law-making. In these studies, however, some basic ideas appeared which reflected the ways in which economists were approaching the notion of ownership in the communist era, oscillating between preferences for formal or informal rules, disentangling mixed property rights, or picking and choosing from their bundle.

As for indigenous economic research on concepts of ownership in Eastern Europe and China, leading reform economists like Aleksander Bajt, Włodzimierz Brus, Branko Horvat, János Kornai, Kazimierz Łaski, Tibor Liska, Ota Šik, Márton Tardos, Xue Muqiao, and Wu Jinglian published thought-provoking conceptual works on communist property relations from the early 1960s. The country chapters of this volume will enumerate many of these. As mentioned, the arrival of new institutional economics was delayed in Eastern Europe, but its property-rights school had some followers in the region by the late 1980s (see Kovács 2012).

However, attempts at a potential synthesis of these kinds of research perspectives were swept away by the 1989 revolutions. The first projects that looked beyond the *oeuvre* of leading reformers and sought to rehabilitate less famous but equally talented experts (including those working on ownership theories) as well as writing a comparative history of economic ideas under communism have remained without followers during the past decades (cf. Kovács and Tardos (1992); Wagener (1998); Kaase and Sparschuh (2002)).

Some of those who resumed working on the intellectual history of communism are inclined to portray the evolution of economic ideas in the context of an international consensus among (conspiracy by) neoliberal theorists (see Bockman 2011; Damsa 2016). For a diametrically opposite approach, see Grosfeld (1992) and the case studies on the reception of new institutional economics in Eastern Europe in Kovács and Zentai (2012). See also Mihályi (2005), Avramov (2007), and Aligica and Evans (2009).

All in all, if economic concepts of ownership were studied at all, then the authors tended to presume that

- by the mid-1950s, the Marxist-Leninist hybrid of *social ownership*, a unique species in ownership theory, was incorporated in the Stalinist canon of communist political economy based on (a) the duality of state and cooperative property (postulating the internal harmony of the former and its superiority over the latter), (b) the harmful nature of private property (a toxic relic of capitalism), and (c) the negligible role played by communal ownership, self-management, and by what was called *personal property*;
- for many decades, this canon, elevated onto the level of national constitutions, managed to crowd out the concept of private ownership from

economic theory as well as other concepts of social ownership grounded in local traditions (with some exceptions such as China and Yugoslavia);

- if one nonetheless insisted on constructing a typology of ownership projects around the ideal type of social property, then they could be best compared with the help of their national real types such as the Yugoslav theory of workers' self-management, the idea of managerial ownership in Hungary, or the model of Chinese communal property;
- these concepts notwithstanding, it was the Soviet pair of nationalization and collectivization that counted as the only major innovation in ownership theory under communism; its opposite, privatization, and the intermediary doctrines between them were essentially a result of imitation, that is, production of low-quality copies of the Western originals instead of local invention;
- both nationalization/collectivization and privatization won a sweeping victory in the economic research community in most communist countries in the 1950s and 1980s, respectively;
- the evolution of ownership concepts was a steady move away from the initial doctrine of social ownership to attain a wide acceptance of the program of privatization under late communism; during this journey, the ways in which economists thought about ownership grew more and more sophisticated.

In other words, it was tacitly supposed that, in relating the above narrative, one could safely ignore that:

- the Stalinist canon was (a) not innovative inasmuch as, by postulating the duality of state and cooperative ownership, it prolonged the old socialist/communist dilemma of vertical versus horizontal collectivism; (b) unstable because it contained *poisonous* material—cooperative and personal property—that encouraged the theorists to think about the non-statist ingredients of these ownership regimes, and ultimately, to touch upon the taboo of the prohibition of private ownership; and (c) incomplete because it proved unable to respond to three recurrent challenges in the sacred territory of the state economy, which were posed by powerful claims of managerial ownership, workers' self-management, and communal property, respectively; these challenges provoked some introspection into the behavior of the state economy, and made the thesis of internal harmony questionable;
- beneath the surface of an alleged Soviet hegemony in political economy, a large variety of stimulating economic ideas were to be found, which strove to identify some of the *real* subjects of social property, and which provided original solutions in ownership theory in terms of both social and individual property and their combinations;



- many of these solutions were home-grown, stemming from local tradition and invention rather than the emulation of Western patterns; ironically, emulation often resulted from an East-East exchange of ideas, in which the share of mandatory Soviet supply of ownership projects was diminishing; furthermore, until the conservative turn of the 1970s, economists in the West kept sending a great many collectivist signals to their colleagues behind the Iron Curtain;
- methodological nationalism may prove to be a proper device in defining the real types of ownership projects (e.g., Yugoslav-style self-management) but it puts the evolutionary variants of that particular type in the shade (the *Yugoslav style* was different in the 1950s and the 1980s), or other possible real types in the same country (e.g., the concept of private agriculture in Yugoslavia); moreover, it disregards the national varieties of the same real type (like, for example, the Hungarian or Polish versions of self-management, or their combination transformed by Soviet economists in the *perestroika* period), which resulted from a multilateral communication between economists in the communist era;
- ownership concepts exhibited evolutionary patterns, different from a clear, unilinear path leading from nationalization to privatization, which were messy and uneven in both time and space, including in-built obstacles to development, forgotten and recurrent ideas, as well as long phases of setbacks and advances, deceleration and acceleration;
- ownership theories evolved as much along the lines of political radicalization as along those of scientific refinement; ownership was poorly examined by economists in legal terms; they paid at most lip-service to property-rights theory in new institutional economics, and also their analysis of the relationship between property and basic sociological and political categories such as power, class, and interests was rudimentary;
- it was difficult to unearth the anatomy of the party-state by reading what economists wrote about ownership; the Trotsky-Djilas hypothesis of the *new class* was long available but its main pillar, *nomenklatura* ownership, lacked both empirical foundation and theoretical elaboration (even the term was not in general use) until the collapse of communism, or even later.

### IN SEARCH OF PRIVATE OWNERS?: A KEY ASSUMPTION

The above reservations reflect the working hypotheses with which our research group embarked upon its comparative inquiry. Here, they are formulated in a sharp opposition to the state of the art to make the goals of our study appear clear. Hopefully, the individual chapters and the Conclusion will

justify most of the major assumptions. Their key—and probably most surprising—constituent, however, deserves special attention before the reader, without being informed about the purpose of its title, starts immersing in the volume. A few words about normative ambiguities are due, particularly concerning private ownership, the main enemy demonized by communist political economy. Interestingly enough, uncertainty was transparent in theorizing all kinds of ownership from the very outset of communist rule. Although initially, with the exception of the first years of New Economic Policy (NEP) in the Soviet 1920s, a radical drive for nationalization dominated official economic discourse in the whole communist bloc following both 1917 and 1945, social property was not meant to become exclusive in the short and medium term, and “social” was not synonymous with “state-owned.” Many economists interpreted nationalization as a natural continuation of governmental regulations in war economies and/or as socialization in its original Marxian sense. Statist-centralist preferences, no matter how strong they were, competed with those of cooperative and communal ownership as well as self-management which could not be eradicated entirely in most communist countries, or actually emerged there. Moreover, some years after the communist takeover in Eastern Europe, a series of crucial adjustments took place in ownership theory, making it even more inconsistent, fragmentary, and even self-contradictory. The adjustments, rooted in the dysfunctional behavior of “social owners,” resulted in experimentation (*bricolage*) based on tradition, emulation, and invention. Nevertheless, the changes did not necessarily offer private owners more freedom.

Frequently, only the emphasis on state property was shifted on to other regimes of social ownership. The idea of private property was like a river that had been forced underground by nationalization and collectivization, but from time to time, it floated to the surface in a large variety of forms: full and partial, formal and informal, quasi and real. Ironically, as radical as the beginning of the story of ownership concepts had been, by the end it became tame and half-hearted. At the twilight of the system, social ownership was not replaced by private ownership in economic theory with the same passion as at the dawn of communism when private ownership was usurped by the state.

This volume’s working title had been “From Radical Nationalization to Moderate Privatization.” Yet, however important it would be to stress the cautious nature of the Eastern European privatization projects prior to 1989, and to offset the image of a neoliberal breakthrough, such a working title would wrongly suggest an incessant and intransigent will of the economic profession to make private property legitimate again. The phrase “Populating No Man’s Land” seems a better solution because it refers to a desperate search for flesh-and-blood owners (or representatives of owners) who could efficiently cultivate that alleged public territory created by nationalization



for everybody (hence, nobody).<sup>12</sup> The number of economists who wanted to see genuine private owners as *new settlers* was insignificant. The simulation of private ownership, that is, the quest for identifying quasi-private owners,<sup>13</sup> was all the more popular. Slowly but steadily, it became obvious that nobody's property actually meant somebody's property: it was the communist ruling elite that—under the pretext of representing everybody—had already populated a large part of the no man's land, expropriating (or preying on) it informally. Hence, re-populating would be a more accurate phrase to use. However, demanding the reestablishment of non-simulated private ownership seemed too great a leap forward to most economists for a long time.

Leaving behind the Stalinist canon that celebrated social property controlled by a rather faceless party-state, the advocates of ownership change wanted to set the stage for an army of colorful and relatively independent economic actors who try and err, succeed and fail. By suggesting various property regimes, they never lost their faith in collectivism completely, and even near the end of communism strove to elaborate Grand Designs of *capitalism without capitalists*. Many of them hoped that the new—non-private or quasi-private—owners fabricated in their *Hexenküche* would be able to dump not only social property but also informal private ownership emerging in the niches of the planned economy.

After the frenzy for nationalization ebbed in the 1950s, more and more economists started working out ways of populating the no man's land of social ownership with a well-defined group of business-minded (rational) actors who are interested in using the assets at their disposal (*usus*) more responsibly as well as drawing income from them (*usus fructus*). In the end, some of the proposals included limited rights to buy and sell the assets, but not bequeath or inherit them (*abusus*). Governance seemed to the economic profession a cardinal issue but full ownership less so. Personifying the social owner, and establishing its relative independence from central authorities were the crux of reforming the Stalinist canon of ownership—a gigantic experiment in social engineering, in which the re-creation of a proprietary class of private individuals featured not even as a secondary goal. If it nonetheless seldom did, private property was either conceived as some kind of workers' (citizens') shareholding, as a means of *nomenklatura* buyout, or as individual ownership with severe limitations concerning size, asset specificity, citizenship of the owner, and the like almost until communism took its last breath, and often even thereafter. In addition to simulation, *pluralization*, that is, ensuring a *peaceful coexistence* of different regimes of ownership and, ultimately, putting them on an equal footing (cf. Klaus's motto), were a much more popular claim among economists than privatization as such. True, at the time, it was unimaginable in Eastern Europe that communist ruling elites could accept large-scale private ownership and still remain capable

of sustaining a communist dictatorship—today a platitude in the wake of historic changes in China.

Was moderation with regard to private ownership due to self-censorship combined with ignorance and a lack of fantasy or due to a never-ending trust in the socialization of ownership? Even years after 1989, one could not detect but a handful of leading economists in Eastern Europe who stood against the half-collectivist consensus and advocated unambiguously non-collectivist procedures of privatization (*ad absurdum*, selling any state-owned asset to anybody on the free market). This stance points the way in which the above question can be answered. (More on this in the Conclusion.) No doubt about it, the economic profession tipped over during the 1990s. However, looking back from the 2010s, and knowing the current skepticism regarding liberalism in the ex-communist countries, one may suppose that when the communist and the postcommunist periods are taken together, the general acceptance of large private property by the economic profession has been the exception while moderation has been the rule.

## METHODOLOGY: SHOOTING SPARROWS WITH A CANNON?

Researchers intending to cut a path through virtually unexplored territory had best be conservative when choosing their techniques of inquiry. The authors of this volume subscribed to this rule of thumb. In challenging the state of the art with new working hypotheses, we decided to combine well-established methodologies in writing the history of economic thought under communism. They range from Kuhn's concept of scientific revolutions and the theory of Lakatosian research programs to the discursive approach of the Cambridge School of the history of ideas, Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* or the *histoire des mentalités* of the Annales School, and we also borrow from micro-history and *histoire croisée* (entangled history). This—hopefully healthy—eclecticism did not originate in an *anything-goes* attitude to writing intellectual history but in a desire to make our research methods fit for studying our somewhat peculiar field. To put it bluntly, we had to reckon with the fact that, for a long time, economic ideas on ownership were developed through speeches held at party congresses rather than scholarly conversations in faculty clubs.

If science is forced to evolve under severe ideological and political constraints, such as the monopoly of a particular worldview, cultural isolation, or censorship, then the externalist techniques of history-writing may be more helpful than, say, looking for the *hard cores* and *protective belts* of scientific research programs, presuming, in the spirit of Imre Lakatos, that in the first



place, inner academic choices and rational drivers determine the evolution of economic ideas. Forcing an internalist explanation would mean shooting sparrows with a cannon (Kovács 2013). Discursive methods, however, may prove very fruitful because political regimes with totalitarian or authoritarian intentions tend to replace critical reflection with word magic and coded language of indoctrination. In our case, good examples are the use of “state property,” “people’s property,” “socialist property,” and “social property” as synonymous terms in official rhetoric as well as hiding de facto state ownership behind the term of cooperative ownership. At the same time, it would be futile to experiment with a *marketplace of ideas* model to comprehend the diffusion of economic knowledge. Supposing even a semi-free competition among ownership concepts would be a grave exaggeration, with the exception of the last few years of communism in certain countries. Neither the glorification of social ownership in the Soviet Bloc nor the partial decomposition of the Stalinist canon followed the logic of market choice in scientific production. Focusing on the long-term inertia of mentality, as defined by Annales scholars, however, helps the historian understand why it was so hard for economists of collectivist persuasion to accept private ownership even when the *Zeitgeist* turned to liberalism/conservatism in the West during the 1970s. And, on the contrary, the idea of paradigm change (scientific revolution) may be essential in explaining the sudden acceptance even of radically liberal projects of privatization in some of the ex-communist countries during the early 1990s. Finally, we thought that entangled history could help discover the hidden relationships between scholars in different countries in an empire, the intellectual life of which was supposed to be governed from Moscow.

Assembling the constituents of these methodologies, it was not easy to cope with their frictions, but one thing was clear: the emerging blend of research techniques would make us immune to the temptation of both celebrating, in a Whiggish manner, that economists in the communist era finally managed to reach an ideal (liberal) consensus in ownership theory, and reproaching them, with a presentist arrogance, of having been too slow in revising their *collectivist fixations* and taking over, say, cutting-edge concepts of property rights from the West.

To avoid fabricating a methodological patchwork in a capricious fashion, a volume like ours needs a solid background. The book the reader holds in his/her hand is the first result of a long-term research program launched by the editor in the Vienna Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in 2014.<sup>14</sup> The program’s title, *Between Bukharin and Balcerowicz. A Comparative History of Economic Thought under Communism*, indicates the symbolic boundaries of our research. By the October Revolution, the young Bolshevik thinker Nikolai Bukharin had turned his back on his professor, Eugen Böhm-Bawerk in Vienna, and started writing a book on the *Economic Theory of the Leisure*

*Class*, which challenged the marginalist paradigm as a whole and marked the beginning of what proved to be a long detour from the history of Western economic thought. The end of the digression can be represented by the young Solidarity advisor Leszek Balcerowicz’s turn to neoclassical economics and free-market ideas in the second half of the 1980s.

However, locking in our research efforts between the 1917 and 1989 revolutions would arguably result in oversimplification by excluding both the antecedents and the repercussions of scientific change. Simply put, Bukharin might have been more tolerant toward *hedonistic individualism* in the theories of marginal utility if he had not stood under the influence of collectivist doctrines represented by German and Russian social democracy and the model of the war economy during the First World War. Similarly, Balcerowicz would perhaps be less devoted to laissez-faire if he had not had to face the tenacity of certain collectivist ideas during the agony of communism and after.

Our research program covers almost all ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe (in its traditional Cold War sense, including the Soviet Union) and—unlike sporadic comparative ventures in this field—does not ignore China;<sup>15</sup> it concentrates on the transformation of economic ideas but does not tear them out of their contexts in economic, political, and social/cultural history (thereby combining *internalist* and *externalist* methods of intellectual history-writing); and examines how East-West dialogue affected the development of economic thought under communism but does not overlook East-East communication.

We focus on the ideas not only of those economists who lived and worked in the selected countries but also of their émigré and foreign colleagues who studied similar issues. Besides the *high culture* of economic thought, including eminent scholars, their schools, and scientific discoveries, our program also examines the *mass culture* of economic knowledge (e.g., university textbooks, documents of the communist party, articles in economic newspapers, and so on). In this way, we may be able to explore, to twist Quentin Skinner’s phrase, the “importance of small texts” as the context of the few *great texts* emerging in the communist era. For similar reasons, ample room is devoted to key problems in the sociology of knowledge, ranging from an institutional history of leading research centers and university departments, through the advisory and political activities of economists, all the way down to the political control of economic research and education, and the rules of censorship. The research methods go beyond a *close reading* of scientific texts to include archival research, in-depth interviews, case studies, and the like.

We apply five main research perspectives (chronological, thematic, qualitative, sociological, and methodological) in writing the history of economic thought under communism. Following an overview of the consecutive stages of the evolution of ideas, the researchers turn their gaze upon a selection of



essential themes characteristic of economic research programs in the communist period. Then they cover the life work of a few (certainly fewer than Schumpeter's ten) great economists in each country, and examine the underlying sociological/political conditions of changes in economic ideas. In the end, the monographs tackle some fundamental methodological issues (e.g., origins and diffusion patterns of economic knowledge under communism, the relationship between local traditions, emulation, and original discoveries, etc.) as well as asking the Big Question: how do the scientific costs and benefits of the historical detour initiated by scholars like Bukharin relate to each other?

For the nine ex-communist countries under scrutiny here, prominent local economists and their research teams<sup>16</sup> are preparing sizeable national monographs that will be subjected to a detailed comparative analysis. A thematic volume like this is an indispensable intermediary product in preparation for both. Here, by selecting a crucial field of political economy, ownership, the authors can experiment with the other four research perspectives and the techniques of comparison. Our volume consists of three parts. Following the Introduction, nine country chapters observe the logic of the *Between Bukharin and Balcerowicz* program in order to ensure a considerable degree of comparability without straitjacketing the authors (and annoying the readers with repetitions). The Conclusion offers a comparison of the ownership concepts both across countries and along the research perspectives, experimenting with evolutionary types and highlighting the difficulties caused by the failure to define *nomenklatura* ownership.

## NOTES

1. One of the most difficult linguistic tasks was for us to decide whether we would designate the system/era/countries to be studied as *socialist* (relying on local and early international discourse) or *communist* (relying on much of the relevant literature). Our decision remained two-sided even after phrases like "state socialism," "real socialism," "really existing socialism," and "Soviet-type society" had been excluded. We chose *communism* despite the fact that, according to its representatives, it was yet to come, and retained *socialism* only when we wanted to refer to how the local actors of the time used the word (e.g., *socialist ownership relations*).

2. In this volume we apply a broad definition of economic collectivism, including all kinds of doctrines that emphasize the priority of society/community/nation, and idealize group (and criticize individual) ownership. (Party-)state intervention, central planning, in-kind distribution, militarization, and so on—that is, essential constituents of real-world collectivism under communism almost until its collapse—are not necessarily considered to be part of the definition. The question of what is to be meant by group ownership has no clear answer in the literature. In principle, certain forms of

*structured ownership* or *co-ownership* such as a corporation or a partnership of three private owners also could be regarded as group ownership. For the property rights of the members of cooperatives, communes, and self-managed firms, that is, of dominant institutions of group ownership, see the Conclusion.

The terms of "public," "common," "collective," and "communal" property, that is, customary concepts describing capitalist societies, have also multiple interpretations in current sources all over the world (cf. communalism versus communitarianism). Also, due to the fact that—as unfortunate as it may be—economists normally did not indulge in legal argumentation in the communist era, the reader will seldom encounter in the country chapters regular categories of property law (such as *usus*, *usus fructus*, and *abusus*) or fine distinctions between ownership and possession, different forms of exclusion/inclusion, and so on.

In our case, it seems helpful to depart from the concept of social ownership, as defined in official communist discourse, and focus on four types: state, cooperative, and communal property as well as workers' self-management. Then, individual (personal and private) ownership is to be examined, together with their numerous combinations with these types of social property. This is just a first approximation. For further details, see the table of ownership terms in the Conclusion.

For the sake of simplicity, the authors apply the words "ownership" and "property" interchangeably unless we expressly want to refer to property as the object of ownership. For the risks of conflating the two notions, see Mattei (2000).

3. This volume focuses on the academic background of communist reformers (reform communists), that is, on the research programs of the so-called reform economists (reform-minded economists, market reformers, market socialists). Their research communities included, besides economic (legal, sociological, etc.) theorists and historians, also a few policymakers, company managers, and journalists. Cf. Kovács (1992).

4. Our notion of ownership follows the textbook definition offered by new institutional economics that describes ownership as a bundle of property rights (and duties) over physical and intellectual objects of property, pertaining to its acquisition, use, disposal, control, income, transfer, liquidation, loss, and so on, as well as to the exclusion of other owners and the enforcement of all these rights (see Demsetz 1967; Furubotn and Richter 1998). Similar taxonomies were suggested by authors such as Wesley Hohfeld, Tony Honoré, and Jeremy Waldron. The well-known triad of possession, use, and disposition also could have been applied. But for students of communist property regimes, the Achilles heel of which is the *abusus* of capital the "*usus (ius utendi)*—*usus fructus (ius fruendi)*—*abusus (ius abutendi)*" typology of Roman law seems the most convenient.

5. For similar "traps of collectivism," see the Conclusion.

6. Hereafter, the terms "concepts," "theories," "ideas," "projects," "doctrines," and "designs" of ownership/property will be applied as synonyms.

7. The terms "forms," "institutions," "types," or "regimes" of ownership/property will be used interchangeably in the volume.

8. Of course, it would be too much to say that, for example, the new-institutionalist theory of property rights was invented in Eastern Europe but—as will be shown below—the ongoing debate on the Yugoslav system of self-management did



contribute to the theory at its early stages of evolution, and the experience of stormy institutional changes in and after 1989 led to its consolidation. The latter opened the eyes (unfortunately, too little, too late) of leading Western scholars such as Ronald Coase, Douglass North, and Oliver Williamson to the problems of ownership in a communist economy and for its institutional legacy (Franičević 2012; Kovács 2012).

9. In cherishing the memory of economic theorists who took part in the Socialist Calculation Debate, Peter Boettke's series on *Socialism and the Market* (2000) deserves the greatest appreciation. Historians of economic thought owe special thanks to Tadeusz Kowalik and Jerzy Osiatyński for publishing the works of Oskar Lange and Michał Kałeci, respectively. After the first anthologies edited by Nicholas Spulber (1964) and Alec Nove and Mario Nuti (1972) had been published, no similar works appeared in English. Edited volumes came out from time to time that included a few contemporary articles (e.g., Jones and Moskoff 1991), and some prominent authors were rediscovered (e.g., Barnett 2011; Toporowski 2013). As for the postcommunist period, the supply of English-language works coming from the ex-communist countries is understandably much larger, and there is less need for anthologies. An important example for a well-edited collection is provided by Hare et al. (1997).

10. See "Discussion on Socialist Market Economy" (1989), Nuti (1992), Bardhan, and Roemer (1993), Roosevelt and Belkin (1994), Roemer and Wright (1996), and Bockman (2011). See also the sharp debate of Pranab Bardhan and John Roemer (1992; 1994) with Andrei Shleifer and Robert Vishny (1994) in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. The latter authors answer Roemer's question "Can there be socialism after communism?" with a resolute "no." For a somewhat hesitant answer, see Stiglitz (1994).

11. See, for example, Neuberger and Duffy (1976). János Kornai (2000, 2016) returned to the comparison of communist and capitalist systems to stress the importance of ownership among the comparative variables.

12. Interestingly, the metaphor of no man's land, expressing an old truism about the communist economy from the Soviet 1920s onward, today reminds the observer of the parable of the *tragedy of the commons*, though it has never been modeled as profoundly as that. Yet, as suggested by Elinor Ostrom (1990) in her theory of common-pool resources, the latter could have offered at least a partial solution in the framework of horizontal collectivism to economists who wanted to insist on projects of social ownership that could avoid free riding and the overuse of resources. For the inadequacy of the parable to describe what was really happening in no man's land, see Heller (1998). Probably, the fundamental difference was that, while in principle the owners of the commons have equal access and power, social ownership was exercised, in the last analysis, by the *nomenklatura*, and the majority of society had to be pleased if they were allowed by the ruling elite to informally expropriate (steal) a tiny part of *people's property*. Of course, *within nomenklatura* ownership the overuse of public resources due to the competition between various groups of elites was a frequent phenomenon.

13. In looking for an appropriate adjective, "quasi-private" appeared to be a good compromise between "pseudo-private" and "surrogate."

14. For more information on the research objectives and techniques as well as the participants of the program, see <http://triple-b-project.net/>.

15. We conducted research on nine countries (Bulgaria, China, Czechoslovakia, German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia). The non-inclusion of other communist states from Albania to Vietnam was not due to any scientific preference but to the lack of research funds and academic links.

16. The team leaders are Oleg Ananyin, Roumen Avramov, Shitao Fan, Julius Horvath, János Mátyás Kovács, Jože Mencinger, Bogdan Murgescu, Maciej Tyminski, and Hans-Jürgen Wagener. They are assisted by the scientific advisory board of the program. Its members are Peter Boettke, Vojmir Franičević, Jerzy Osiatyński, Pekka Sutela, and Chenggang Xu.

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