

New Forms of Ownership

Workshop

LMU Munich, Center for Ethics and Philosophy in Practice (ZEPP)

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The question of ownership must stand at the centre of political and social philosophy, even though its prominence has varied over time. After several decades in which it receded from view, the issue of ownership has now forcefully returned to philosophical debate. For good reasons: property and ownership shape how power, resources, and decision-making are distributed within a society, and they affect our understanding and practice of freedom, justice, and collective self-government. Think of the following rough list of layers and dimensions in which structures of ownership intersect with central issues in ethics as well as social and political philosophy:

- *Freedom and dependence*: Liberal thinkers often view property as a foundation of personal independence, while republican and critical approaches emphasize that concentrated ownership can produce forms of dependence that undermine genuine freedom.
- *Democratic sovereignty*: Although modern democracies rest on the idea of popular rule, the actual exercise of power frequently follows patterns of ownership rather than formal political procedures. Those who control land, capital, or infrastructure make decisions with far-reaching consequences, and their influence often extends beyond any democratic mandate. When ownership is highly concentrated, the sphere of life subject to democratic oversight becomes correspondingly narrow.
- *Workplace hierarchies*: The tension between property and democracy becomes especially visible in the ownership of productive assets. Corporate structures give shareholders and owners authority over the internal life of firms, which creates hierarchies that structure working conditions and limit the scope for employee participation. Workplaces thus function as privately governed domains in which democratic principles rarely apply.
- *Distributive justice*: Debates about redistribution and pre-distribution highlight how ownership structures shape economic outcomes even before states intervene through taxation or welfare systems. Efforts to broaden access to productive assets or to democratize firms aim to address structural imbalances rather than merely compensating for them after the fact.
- *Systemic domination*: Social theorists argue that private control of productive assets in market economies produces systemic pressures toward accumulation

and expansion. These pressures may operate independently of individual intentions and can shape the direction of economic development as a whole.

- *Ecological concerns:* Patterns of ownership further complicate property debates in light of environmental limits. Private control of land, natural resources, and ecosystems raises the question of whether existing ownership regimes are compatible with long-term ecological sustainability.
- *Digitalization and AI:* Technological change adds yet another dimension. Ownership of digital platforms, data infrastructures, and algorithmic systems concentrates power over information and communication, making control over digital property a central issue for democracy and personal autonomy.

Against this backdrop, this workshop focuses on new forms of ownership, both with regard to business corporations and with regard to land, natural resources, and social infrastructure. It also concentrates on questions of transformation and transition, namely, how to develop practical pathways for introducing and establishing new models of ownership.

A range of alternative ownership models has gained prominence. Employee or cooperative ownership enables workers to hold ownership rights in the firms where they work. Steward ownership ties companies legally to long-term missions and ensures that control remains with actors committed to these missions rather than external shareholders seeking short-term returns. Public ownership at municipal, regional, or national levels can place essential infrastructure, such as water systems, energy grids, or land and housing, under democratic oversight. Commons-based governance, in which communities collectively manage shared resources through agreed rules and mutual obligations, offers yet another model that departs from the conventional dichotomy between private property and state control.

Related to this is the pressing task of identifying practical pathways for transforming private property into new forms of ownership. At one end of the spectrum, some initiatives emerge rather quietly, establishing commons in social niches and urban peripheries, or digital communities, where experimentation with shared governance can reveal new models of collective management. Other approaches push for more structural reforms, for example by advocating for political, legal, and fiscal measures supporting employee buyouts or cooperative conversions. More radical approaches raise questions about socialization by means of expropriation in the service of the public good.

These debates are not only about what is possible, but also about what is desirable and legitimate. They tackle questions of democratic legitimacy, practical feasibility, and strategic effectiveness: which approaches are most likely to mobilize support, align with broader norms and values, and sustain themselves over time? They also force a reckoning with the social, economic, and cultural conditions that enable or inhibit such transformations.

The workshop organized by the Centre for Ethics and Philosophy in Practice (ZEPP) addresses these and related questions concerning the concept of property and explores new forms of ownership in concrete terms, as well as practical pathways for establishing these innovations.