

Laudatio Rokkan Prize 2016

The 2016 Rokkan Prize for Comparative Social Science Research has been awarded to Stanislav Markus in recognition of his book *Property, Predation, and Protection: Piranha Capitalism in Russia and Ukraine*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2015. The central ambition of Markus's book is twofold. First, he seeks to understand the nature of threats to the property rights of business owners in modern developing states, with an empirical focus on post-Soviet Russia and the Ukraine. Second, he asks how property rights can be secured against these threats. Markus develops the answers to these two central questions through a comparative analysis that is exceptionally well designed; conceptually innovative; impressive in its empirical scope and the range of sources on which it draws; and equally rigorous in both theoretical and methodological terms. As such, the book constitutes a "very substantial and original contribution in comparative social science research", as stipulated as the main criterion for the award of the Stein Rokkan Prize.

Property, Predation, and Protection advances three core arguments. The first centers on the nature of the threats to the property rights of business owners in developing states. Markus conceptualizes this threat as "agent predation" as a sign of "piranha capitalism". It is not necessarily the rulers at the top of the state that pose the central threat to property rights nor are they principally challenged through petty corruption. Rather, low-level bureaucratic agents of the state aggressively undermine not just income rights, but ownership itself. Thus, it "is not the bully in the penthouse but the termites in the basement that often undermine the edifice of secure property". Predation is carried out by "piranhas", lethal state agents that act individually and attack ownership itself: "Predation in modern developing states is often conducted by high-powered mini-beasts: policemen, party functionaries, local administrators, directors of state-owned enterprises, tax collectors, or the agents of any of the myriads of departments with the power to halt productive activity".

In view of this partial reconceptualization of the threat to business owners' property rights, the conventional strategies advocated in much of the literature, namely to tame to "principal", i.e. executive elites, are also, in Markus's view, at least partially ineffective. The second core argument developed in the book is that constraints put on rulers, whether through "reputational restraint" or "state commitment", are ineffectual under conditions of piranha capitalism. Neither formal business associations nor institutional constraints on the discretion of the executive will be of much help under conditions of highly effective attacks on property rights by low-level state agents.

How might property rights be secured in such a context? As Markus argues, the answer lies in bottom-up initiatives by the – potential – victims of property rights violations. In his third major contention, Markus suggests that "non-oligarchic companies can hold the state accountable through alliances with their stakeholders, including foreign actors, local communities, and labor (...). A firm's allies can punish state predators through negative publicity, local electoral pressure, labor strikes, and other mechanisms". As a result, "the costs of a potential expropriation" increase dramatically "from the aggressor's point of view".

Markus's book stands out in several respects. It asks questions that go to the heart of the nature of post-Soviet capitalism, the forms it takes and the forces that have shaped it. Its findings do not just call into question conventional accounts of what imperils business ownership rights and how they may be better protected. Markus's analysis also has practical implications in that his findings suggest how strategies may be designed "from below" that focus on alliances spanning both capital and labour. His analysis is a model of comparative scholarship: his cases have been carefully selected; it allows observations over time (from

2000 to 2012); it shows a masterful command of the related literatures and skilfully identifies their biases and blind spots; it is conceptually innovative, notably as regards "agent predation"; it draws on an impressive range of interviews and a survey conducted by the author; and it adroitly weaves together theoretical, conceptual and empirical threads to produce an account that is both sweeping and nuanced. This book has been truly composed and it is beautifully written.

The members of the Rokkan Prize Committee taking part in the final deliberations on the 2016 prize winner – Klaus H. Goetz, Alberto Martinelli, Manfred G. Schmidt and Per Selle – were unanimous in their decision.