

Short Story – “Partially Owned”

Julius Westerbarkey

Seminar: Blockchain Economics and Radical Markets

Lecturer: Dr. Stefano Balietti

Semester: Summer 2021

Sofia could hear the doors of the metro close behind her. She caught this one just in time and therefore still had a chance to arrive at work on time. She was not used to using public transport at rush hour, but considering that she had lost her bike over the weekend, she had no choice really. Sofia lived in Copenhagen and had opened her own small pastry shop a year ago.

About eight years ago, the EU decided to implement a partial common ownership economy including almost all goods. It was supposed to combat economic stagnation and improve social mobility and was met with both heavy criticism as well as exuberant enthusiasm, when it was first introduced. In the end neither the critics nor the supporters were completely right. While it did drastically accelerate the mobility transition and the expansion of infrastructure such as railway, it could be very annoying at times. Sofia remembered what had happened to her beloved bike: last night she met some friends at a lake just out of town. They had a great time and stayed until the middle of the night. Just before Sofia was getting ready to head home however, her bike got bought by some random guy who spent his night in a similar fashion. Bikes, like most other things did not have turnover delays, so before she knew it Sofia was 800€ richer but had to rethink how she would get home. She had invested much time and love into her bicycle and while she could of course buy a new one, giving it to a random drunk person at 2 a.m. did not seem like the appropriate way to let go of it.

The train arrived at Nørreport station where she had to get out. The fact that she could afford a small shop in the city center with 28 years, was one of the accomplishments of the partial common ownership system, she thought. Before, small businesses like hers had a much harder time finding suitable properties and financing them. Sure, she had to take out a large mortgage, but if things did not work out, she could just sell the shop and the mortgage with it. Because everyone was now confronted daily with a tax they could actively influence, a vast number of tax tricks surfaced and Sofia felt like strategies to keep the COST low were one of the main topics in many conversations, especially amongst young people. She herself was no exception to this: She chose the largest mortgages she could on her shop and her apartment to minimize the taxed price. She had also traded her apartment between her and her ex-partner every three months, to set a low price, while also preventing others from buying it. Not only was this practice banned a few years ago, it also backfired when she and David broke up, because he refused to sell her apartment back to her and she had no legal grounds to challenge that. The hope that partial common ownership would reduce the administrative burden turned out to be false. Policymakers had to constantly review and ban new tax loopholes. As Sofia crossed the street, she could observe another example of this: The possessor of a house right by the

sidewalk had decided to paint it in green and yellow stripes. Legally this was not considered damaging the property, but it would surely drive the price down and therefore also the COST.

“Great, a circus tent is really going to help keeping the city pretty” she thought.

Hopefully other house possessors would not follow this example.

The COST system also introduced another new phenomenon, that was however rarely talked about in public: COST avoidance. By not listing belongings, people could save the COST on them altogether.

This was however rather difficult to pull off, as new items were seamlessly tracked and monitored.

“Gray items”, as they were sometimes referred to, were thus mostly inherited or originated from the time before the partial common ownership system, like the large grandfather clock Sofie’s friend Carla had in her living room. The tax office was quick to investigate when households missed key

belongings like a stove or a computer. It was also difficult to sell them, as virtually all legitimate transfers happened through the Cadappster app and you could not just create items out of thin air. All of this made COST avoidance through the hiding of belongings, a rare but existing phenomenon.

Sofia arrived at her shop an hour before opening and she decided to use that time to check the Cadappster app for any changes. The price for her kitchen equipment had increased over the weekend, due to the automatic price adjustment she had set up. You had to be careful that your equipment was not found on the cheap end of the spectrum or else you had to expect that your baking oven was suddenly gone. Although businesses were given time until the next business day to comply with such a purchase, so they would not have to close in the middle of the day, it was a still an upsetting circumstance. Luckily, she had never experienced that herself. After making sure no further adjustments had to be made for her equipment and shop, Sofia started to prepare the first batch of dough for the day.

It was 6:50 p.m. and Sofia was getting ready to close her shop, when Carla came in.

“Hey Sofi, how was your day?” Carla asked.

“Hi Carla, the shop was busy today, but I forgot how hard it is to get up early and catch a train”

“Still mad about your bike?”

“You bet I am. It’s going to take ages to find a new one that even comes close. Anyway, how was *your* day?”

“Work was good, but now I’m on my way to deliver our stupid fridge to some family in the south of town. I’m telling you, that thing is heavy.

“I told you should hire delivery contractors for stuff like that. Is Mike not there to help you?”

“No, Mike has to help his parents out in Germany. His dad accidently entered one zero too few into Cadappster and some bot instantly bought their car. They’re trying to figure out if they can

legally challenge that. Also, I still need to buy a new fridge, but contractors would've probably been nice. Too late now though"

"Well, if there is something that can give you strength to carry a fridge, it's some freshly baked sweets by yours truly. What can I get you?"

"I'll just take three of your Éclairs today."

"Coming right up."

"Thanks Sofi, don't work too long."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Yeah right, bye."

"See you, Carla."

Just as Sofia was done cleaning up and getting ready to leave, she received a call from her brother Alejandro.

"Good morning to my dear sister." She heard through the phone.

"Sure, I'm looking forward to go to bed, but good morning to you too I guess."

Alejandro was living in California, where he managed OpenTrac, a company that was building a network of supersonic trains.

"Did I catch you in a bad mood?"

"No, my stuff just keeps getting bought at the most annoying times, that's all"

"Oh, it's not your bed again is it?"

"No, my bike."

"Man, that thing was fancy, who would buy something like that on a short notice?"

"I don't know, I guess that guy just really needed to get home, and had too much cash."

"Damn that sucks Sis, but speaking of cash, I just made the biggest purchase in my career: an over 500-kilometer-long strip of land connecting L.A. and San Francisco."

"Wow, that does sound expensive. I still need to ride one of your rocket trains, when is it done?"

"Well it's hard to say, right now we have a problem, because some assholes bought our patented machines for building the vacuum tubes, but I hope we'll figure that one out soon."

"My big brother, always involved in some shady business shenanigans."

"Who was it again, that bought a complete pastry shop from some innocent grandma who wasn't used to pricing her whole life's work in an app."

"Hey, I told you a million times it wasn't like that. She was getting a little too old, the shop suffered and she couldn't pay a high enough COST. I bought my pastry shop fair and square."

"Mhm, that's not what the angry grandkids said when they came to you."

"It's water under the bridge, we all had to get used to the new system. Anyway, congrats on your purchase, I'm sure you'll get that Hyperloop connection running in no time."

“That’s all I wanted to hear. I gotta go Sis, but one more thing: I just gave you the possession rights to your birthday present, be sure to set up your pricing, otherwise it would have been a short-lived gift.”

“Will do big brother.”

“Great, take care Sofia.”

“Bye.”

Alejandro was right of course, if the lamp he bought her was hers now, she had to price it, before the gift status expired or else an automatic price would be set, which is usually pretty low. She checked her app and entered a reasonable price, as well as some automatic inflation adjustment. Then she picked up her things, closed her shop and headed to the metro station.

On her way she noticed how many people were walking their dog. Sofia felt like more people were out with their dog at this hour than people walking alone, or with others. The sudden influx of pets has been a public discussion for years and it probably had two reasons, both having to do with the introduction of partial common ownership. Firstly, people had more money to spare, as the economy accelerated quite a bit because of the new system and secondly pets were not part of it, making them exempt from the COST tax as well as something that accompanied people over longer periods of time, which has become rarer. When Sofia arrived at the station, she remembered how annoying it would have been, if she also had to pay for public transport. Luckily, one of the biggest selling points of the partial common ownership system had been a free, dense and high frequency network of trains, subways and busses all across Europe, which even the biggest critics could not dismiss. Over the course of just a few years this drastically changed the face of many places with much more and bigger stations and far fewer cars, as they were now subject to a very high COST due to environmental reasons.

As she thought about it like this, the system was actually a very subtle way to nudge people. She, like many others, would have never given up her car for public transport, before the COST system, but as owning cars became a costly habit, she reduced the price of hers one too any times and it was bought. Initially she wanted to buy a new one, but being forced in the meantime to ride public transport, showed her that it was not really necessary. By now the transport network was so good, that she saw no reason to own a car anymore.

As Sofia was getting cozy on her couch and looking for something to watch on Netflix, she received a buy notification from the Cadappster app. Someone had just bought her washing machine. This was not the first time. Things from her household were bought at least weekly, so she just went through her routine: First she found some contractors to deliver the machine, she was not as crazy as Carla and would not try to move that thing on her own. They agreed to pick up the washer before work tomorrow, so that problem was solved. The next thing to do was to buy a replacement, but this was not hard either. She scrolled through Cadappster and found so many potential options, that she was kind of

annoyed that hers was bought out of all. Nevertheless, she found a suitable alternative, which would be delivered to her, when she got back from work tomorrow, so she would not really be without a washer for long. Transactions were not always this easy: last year, shortly after Sofia moved in to her new apartment, a couple bought almost all her kitchenware, because they needed it for a wedding. Buying all those things back took her weeks and the first few days she had to eat every meal from a giant salad bowl and drink straight from the tap.

As she browsed through the app, she saw all kinds of items some of them common items, like pens, shoes, USB-Sticks or clothing others rarer or even intimate, like an antique chess set or a book about Kama Sutra. It has been much easier to own things no one else should now about before partial common ownership. Now that almost everything had to be catalogued one always felt watched and judged. Even though the listings on Cadappster were mostly anonymous of course. There had been a few stories of people getting associated with their listings, like people finding out about an affair of their partner by seeing an unknown possession photographed in their own bathroom, or politicians being publicly embarrassed for something that they possessed, found out by some clever computer wizard.

She was deep in thought when she saw it: her beloved bike. Listed just a few minutes ago. As far as she could see it was still as she had seen it last, no scratches or worse modifications made by some idiot.

“You really just needed an overpriced Uber, didn’t you?” She whispered.

The listing priced it at 800€, the same price she got paid and Sofia was not going to argue with that. With two taps she bought the bike and was presented with the delivery options: She could wait until tomorrow to have it delivered to her home or she could pick it up herself tonight. It was just a 25-minute walk and she was very eager to be reunited with her bike, so she decided to pick it up.

“Looks like my plans for tonight have changed.” She thought, got dressed and went outside with a smile on her face.