

The Role of Distribution in Enforcing Social Control under Authoritarian Regimes

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Abstract

By the end of WWII, the distribution of consumer goods in authoritarian regimes—Soviet Union, Maoist China, and Eastern Bloc satellites—transcended its economic role to operate as a strategic instrument of social control and political legitimation. Centralized planning combined quotas, hierarchical store networks, and subtle surveillance mechanisms to shape citizen behavior, organize daily routines, and enforce compliance with ideological objectives. While ensuring political stability, these mechanisms generated structural rigidities and inefficiencies. Comparative analysis of Soviet, Chinese and North Korean trajectories reveals how distribution systems adapted to economic constraints, striking a precise balance between controlled openness and consolidation of central power. Logistics functioned as a decisive lever, modulating public behavior, reinforcing legitimacy, and enhancing organizational performance far beyond conventional convenience good allocation. The historical and ideological specificity of authoritarian regimes highlights contextual limitations yet offers a framework for analyzing contemporary distribution practices. An interdisciplinary approach integrating history, managerial economics, and political science demonstrates how distribution simultaneously advances economic, social, and political goals. These lessons provide concrete benchmarks for designing resilient distribution systems in highly regulated environments.

Keywords: Authoritarian regimes, Distribution, Logistics, Convenience good allocation, Social control

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1. Introduction

In the 20th century, distribution systems within authoritarian regimes served a strategic function that extended far beyond the mere allocation of goods, operating as instruments of political and social control. Centralized planning of flows enabled States to regulate citizen loyalty and legitimize authority, transforming logistics into a powerful tool of governance. Unlike market economies, where supply adjusts to price signals and consumer preferences, centralized planning imposed ideological priorities that determined access to essential products (Ofer, 1987). In this article, the focus is placed on what may be defined as “*convenience goods*,” understood as standardized and high-frequency consumer products essential to everyday life (e.g., basic food items, clothing, and household necessities), which constitute the primary interface between State-controlled distribution systems and population behavior. Hanson (1964) notes that, even in the early Soviet decades, the structure and organization of retailing and wholesaling explicitly reflected the regime’s political objectives, making distribution a mechanism of social control. This perspective highlights how distribution can function as a lever of power and social influence, an aspect largely overlooked in supply chain literature (Starling, 2007). Case studies from the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and North Korea illustrate how logistics structured daily life and directed behavior, integrating economic, political, and social constraints, as exemplified by Siegelbaum (2011) in his analysis of automobile distribution. By moving beyond a purely economic framework, this approach interprets distribution as a multidimensional instrument that articulates planning, social control, and political legitimation, offering fresh insights into both authoritarian regimes and the management of operations in highly regulated commercial contexts.

The question under study carries substantial theoretical and practical significance for historical research. Theoretically, it enriches the understanding of distribution by incorporating social and political dimensions, which classical models of efficiency and economic performance often overlook, particularly in relation to physical distribution (Simchi-Levi *et al.*, 2021). Practically, it equips top managers with conceptual tools to navigate environments characterized by severe institutional constraints or rigorous control of strategic flows, as observed in defense industries. Examining the interactions among planning, convenience good allocation, and

population behavior clarifies the mechanisms through which distribution influences resilience, organizational performance, and social compliance. Authoritarian regimes, with their quotas, queues, and hierarchical retail systems, provide a compelling setting to observe how logistical constraints and implicit incentives shape daily life and reinforce conformity. By framing distribution not merely as an economic instrument but as a lever of social control, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature. It further opens a transdisciplinary avenue, combining historical analysis, managerial economics for decision-making, and political science, surpassing the limits of a strictly operational perspective that has long dominated logistics management scholarship (Slack *et al.*, 2022).

The primary objective of this exploratory article is to analyze how the centralization of flows and the hierarchical organization of stores shaped population behavior and reinforced social control in authoritarian regimes. The study employs a comparative approach, drawing on historical archetypes to highlight both convergences and divergences in distribution strategies under conditions of heightened surveillance. Each research question is anchored in documented examples, ensuring alignment between the problem, the conceptual framework, and the anticipated findings. The analysis underlines that distribution extended beyond a mere economic function, functioning as a strategic lever of governance that integrated supply management, control mechanisms, and political legitimization. This perspective further seeks to extract lessons applicable to contemporary management of organizations operating in highly regulated environments, illustrating how planning, flexibility, and oversight can be balanced to optimize performance while respecting institutional and social constraints. Finally, the article underscores the necessity of incorporating political and social dimensions into the study of distribution systems. Recognizing their strategic role requires moving beyond purely operational considerations, understanding that the circulation of goods can operate as an instrument of collective organization and a vector of power, thereby transforming the analysis of distribution into a lens for interpreting mechanisms of social and political regulation.

Ugwukah (2016) emphasizes that the boundaries among history, international relations, and political science remain highly contested. Historians frequently treat international relations as an integral part of historical study, whereas scholars of international relations often regard history merely as a contextual backdrop for analyzing contemporary events. Some political scientists, in turn, incorporate international relations within their discipline, creating an analytical continuum in which the three fields mutually inform one another. This diversity of perspectives demonstrates that, while each discipline maintains its own methods and objects of study, all benefit from interdisciplinary contributions when analyzing complex phenomena. Ugwukah (2016) further argues that such exchanges are essential to enrich research and overcome the limitations of strictly disciplinary approaches, particularly in the study of power dynamics. Applied to the analysis of distribution systems in authoritarian regimes, this perspective encourages a cross-disciplinary reading: history documents concrete practices and developments; political science illuminates structures of authority and mechanisms of control; and managerial economics clarifies the material organization of flows and their impact on populations. By adopting this integrative lens, the article reinforces the understanding of distribution not merely as an operational activity, but as a strategic instrument of political governance. In order to ensure transparency and analytical rigor of the interdisciplinary approach, a dedicated methodological box is provided below, detailing the comparative historical framework, case selection criteria, and analytical procedures adopted in the article.

Methodological Box

This article adopts an exploratory qualitative methodology grounded in comparative historical analysis. Its objective is not to test hypotheses in a strictly positivist sense, but rather to uncover recurring organizational patterns within centralized distribution systems in authoritarian regimes. The approach aligns with the tradition of comparative historical analysis (Thelen, 2010), which emphasizes the examination of institutional trajectories through contextually embedded empirical configurations. Case selection follows a purposive sampling logic based on three criteria: (1) the centrality of distribution systems within the political economy of the regime under study; (2) the availability and reliability of secondary academic and historical sources; and (3) the capacity of selected cases to capture distinct yet comparable institutional trajectories (Soviet Union, Maoist China, North Korea). These cases are treated as analytical archetypes rather than statistically representative observations, enabling theoretical generalization at the level of underlying mechanisms rather than empirical frequencies. The empirical material is drawn primarily from peer-reviewed scholarship, seminal monographs in economic history, and established works in political science, ensuring both triangulation of sources and interpretive robustness.

The analytical framework combines institutional analysis with a structured comparative design. Drawing on the principles of process tracing (George & Bennett, 2005), the study seeks to reconstruct the mechanisms through which distribution systems translate planning logics into instruments of social and political control. Each case is examined along three analytical dimensions: operational flows, organizational architecture, and mechanisms of social control. This structure enables systematic comparison across regimes, highlighting both functional convergences and institutional divergences. The analysis is further informed by a “*most-similar systems design*” (Przeworski & Teune, 1970), allowing comparison among regimes characterized by strong economic centralization yet differentiated political trajectories. Overall, the study adopts a controlled interpretive approach that combines comparative rigor with sensitivity to underlying socio-political dynamics. Within this framework, distribution systems are conceptualized as socio-political infrastructures through which governance mechanisms are embedded in material flows. This perspective integrates insights from operations management, political science, and institutional history, while ensuring the analytical transparency and traceability of the advanced interpretations.

2. Organizational Dynamics of Centralized Distribution

In 20th-century authoritarian regimes claiming a communist identity, the distribution of goods went beyond a simple economic function to become a strategic instrument of social and political management. The organization of flows, inventories, and retail networks reflected State priorities and shaped citizens’ daily behavior. **In the Soviet Union, for instance, official estimates and archival reconstructions suggest that chronic shortages affected between 10% and 20% of consumer goods categories at any given time, while excess inventories simultaneously accumulated elsewhere, illustrating systemic imbalance (Kornai, 1986b).** Analysis of these systems reveals that centralization not only regulated access to convenience goods but also enabled the collection of detailed consumption data, guided behavior, and strengthened social cohesion. By the end of the 20th century, economic pressures and geopolitical changes prompted some regimes to gradually introduce market mechanisms and a degree of decentralization, improving the satisfaction of needs while maintaining State control over strategic sectors. These adjustments highlight the ongoing tension between operational efficiency and political objectives and illustrate the adaptability of rigorously planned systems. Distribution thus positions itself as a lever of power, articulating planning, flexibility, and legitimization. Understanding the logic behind it allows us to better understand how it goes beyond a simple utilitarian function to become an instrument of governance, confirming Tauber’s (1972) seminal analysis regarding the distinction between a utilitarian perspective and a hedonic perspective. This approach also demonstrates that centralized planning was not fixed: it integrated tactical adjustments aimed at reconciling ideology, satisfaction of needs, and social control.

2.1 System Architecture and Operational Flows

During the Cold War (1948–1989), authoritarian regimes in the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and Eastern Bloc satellites implemented fully centralized distribution systems to align consumption with ideological objectives and reinforce social control (Ericson, 1991). The means of production were exclusively State-owned, while Party administrations determined convenience good allocation with authoritative precision. Stores and cooperatives formed hierarchical networks in which centrally set product quotas regulated access to goods and guided social behavior. Ideology dictated distribution more than individual preferences, aiming to reduce inequalities and ensure “fair” access. Centralization enabled close monitoring of the population but also produced structural inefficiencies, generating persistent shortages and surpluses (Kornai, 1986a). **In major Soviet cities, access to**

basic goods frequently required waiting times of several hours, and often repeated visits over multiple days, reflecting the structural mismatch between planned supply and actual demand (Hessler, 2004). Analyses of flows, inventories, and consumption furnished authorities with crucial data to adjust production and shape behavior, demonstrating that distribution transcended its economic function to operate as a tool of governance and political legitimization. Archival evidence from Stalin's era further highlights the ideological dimension of distribution, where each store and quota served as a strategic lever to maintain social cohesion and reinforce Party authority (Gregory & Harrison, 2005).

A striking example of the dual economic and ideological function of distribution is provided by the Shanghai No. 1 Department Store (see Picture 1). For many years, this store was the largest in Asia, featuring the only operational escalator in all of China. While offering a broad array of products, its organization reflected centralized planning and strict quotas, guiding consumer access and daily behavior. **The image itself reveals a highly structured retail environment: dense but orderly crowds, standardized counters, limited product interaction, and a central escalator channeling movement, all of which suggest controlled circulation flows and supervised access to goods rather than autonomous consumer behavior.** Beyond its utilitarian role, the store also functioned as a vehicle of State propaganda: the layout, displays, and presentation of goods conveyed messages of progress, modernity, and Party benevolence, promoting ideological loyalty while normalizing centralized control in urban life. This aligns with Howlett's (2021) analysis, which shows how new democratic ideals in early 1950s Shanghai were mediated through commercial and public spaces, blending practical economic functions with ideological objectives. Customers were not merely purchasing goods—they participated in a ritual of State supervision, internalizing norms about what, how, and when to consume. Even though the store now serves as a luxury cosmetics department, the historical image captures how retail spaces blended operational efficiency with propagandistic messaging, illustrating the interplay between logistics, social control, and ideology in Maoist urban distribution networks.

The practical organization of stores reflected this extreme hierarchy, integrating production, storage, and distribution to maintain State control at every stage, in sharp contrast with market economies, where supply continuously adjusts to price signals and consumer preferences. In China, beginning in 1978, gradual reforms introduced market mechanisms into distribution channels while preserving centralized oversight and extensive social surveillance, demonstrating the adaptive capacity of a rigidly planned system (Garnaut & Song, 2012). **During the Maoist period, urban residents depended on ration coupons that limited grain consumption to approximately 150 to 250 kg per capita per year, depending on region and political status (Riskin, 1987).** Across Eastern Bloc satellites, many regimes progressively shifted toward hybrid systems that combined public regulation with market logic following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. North Korea, by contrast, remained an exception, retaining a strict State monopoly over distribution, used both to regulate access to convenience goods and to exert direct political control over the population (Lankov, 2007). **The North Korean public distribution system has historically provided between 300 and 700 grams of grain per person per day, with significant fluctuations during periods of crisis, directly affecting nutritional outcomes and social stability (Haggard & Noland, 2009).** Comparative analysis of these systems confirms that distribution functioned as a central strategic lever, enabling authoritarian regimes to coordinate planning, social surveillance, and political survival, and emphasizes the inherently *ideological dimension* of convenience goods circulation within centralized economies.

Picture 1. Shanghai No. 1 Department Store: A Tool of State Propaganda



Source: © Shanghai Huapian Chubanshe.

2.2 Adaptation and Economic Shifts

Faced with economic constraints and internal pressures, authoritarian regimes gradually reconfigured the organization of distribution to reconcile population needs with political objectives. In China, economic reforms in the late 1970s introduced partial decentralization across economic activities, including distribution, while maintaining State control over strategic sectors such as energy, transport, and heavy industry (Qiao *et al.*, 2008). Local markets and private enterprises began to coexist with centralized structures, fostering supply chain diversification and improving urban populations' access to convenience goods (Mok & Wu, 2013). The transition toward “market socialism” proceeded gradually: the State retained command over major economic policies and set sectoral priorities, while competitive mechanisms, financial incentives, and enhanced local autonomy progressively transformed the organization of flows and distribution systems (Chow, 2004). These changes increased production, diversified available goods, and improved the satisfaction of population needs without undermining political authority, which remains firmly entrenched under President Xi Jinping. This example clearly demonstrates how an initially rigid system can adapt to economic constraints while preserving its ideological objectives, confirming the strategic flexibility inherent in centralized control.

In the Soviet Union, economic stagnation during the 1970s and 1980s exposed the limitations of fully centralized systems, which failed to meet population needs and stimulate production effectively (Miles, 2021). Perestroika, initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, introduced reforms aimed at integrating select market mechanisms into distribution, granting increased autonomy to certain local businesses and cooperatives (Hanssen & Song, 2019). These limited experiments generated some competition and flexibility in price setting, gradually altering the logic of coercive planning. Nevertheless, bureaucratic inertia, ideological constraints, and distrust of private initiative constrained both the scope and pace of transformation, highlighting the difficulty of reforming a centralized system without compromising political control (Azimbayeva, 2017). By contrast, North Korea has preserved a strictly centralized organization, with the entire distribution network controlled by the State alongside military and Party structures. Even when limited market mechanisms emerge, they are carefully framed by the regime to reinforce political authority and extract rents. The presence of a shadow economy further reveals informal flows of goods that shape citizens' daily lives, reflecting the logistical undercurrent of the totalitarian system (Joo, 2010; Park, 2013). This configuration demonstrates the capacity of authoritarian regimes to balance economic adaptation with the preservation of political power, confirming that distribution functions as a central strategic lever. Table 1 provides a concise overview of the main distribution approaches in authoritarian regimes, detailing their defining features, instruments, and social effects.

Table 1. Distribution in Authoritarian Regimes

Distribution logic	Key characteristics	Tools/mechanisms	Effects on population	Historical archetype
<i>Centralized</i>	State-determined allocation and uniform quotas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchical store networks • Stock planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homogenized consumption • Recurring shortages 	Soviet Union until 1989
<i>Surveillance-driven</i>	Detailed monitoring of flows and inventories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ration cards • Quotas • Administrative reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavioral control • Population dependency on the regime 	Eastern Bloc satellites (1950s–1970s)
<i>Economically adaptive</i>	Partial market mechanisms introduced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local autonomy • Financial incentives • Mixed markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversified supply • Improved access to goods 	China after 1978
<i>Ideologically driven</i>	Distribution used as a political symbol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileged channels • Reserved goods • Social hierarchy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power legitimization • Enforced social cohesion 	North Korea

Source: The Author.

3. Social Control through Convenience Good Allocation

The distribution of convenience goods in authoritarian regimes extends beyond a mere economic function to serve as a central lever for social structuring and the orchestration of collective behavior. Controlling access to convenience goods shapes citizens' daily practices through rules and incentives embedded in the distribution system, rendering each act of consumption an instrument of subtle governance. The material organization of flows demonstrates that economic conditions profoundly shape social and political consciousness (Khasawneh, 2018). This perspective underscores the strategic dimension of logistics, capable of achieving political objectives without overt coercion. Distribution systems simultaneously deploy control and enable adaptation: centralized regimes implement mechanisms to monitor, incentivize, or restrict certain deviant behaviors, such as participation in black markets, while permitting dynamics to emerge from interactions between citizens and institutions. In doing so, distribution modulates conformity, influences social behaviors, and guides collective interactions in nuanced and effective ways. Positioned at the intersection of economic planning, social regulation, and political consolidation, the daily circulation of goods functions as a tool of enduring influence, offering a novel lens for analyzing power strategies and the indirect mechanisms of control that structure authoritarian regimes.

3.1 Political Leverage

In authoritarian regimes, access to convenience goods functions as a direct instrument of political power, closely tied to Party loyalty and affiliation, creating a complex system of privileges for compliant citizens and penalties for those deemed politically suspect (Bandiera *et al.*, 2026). In the Soviet Union, ration cards exemplified this mechanism: essential commodities such as bread, sugar, and dairy products were allocated based on political alignment and individual reputation, reinforcing social surveillance and fostering disciplined behavior (Lagunoff, 2025). **In practice, ration entitlements could vary significantly across occupational categories, with industrial workers often receiving higher allocations than other groups, reinforcing both productivity incentives and political hierarchies (Filtzer, 2008).** This system established a network of patronage, transforming distribution into a lever for securing loyalty and absolute obedience, while promoting self-censorship and conformity in daily life. In China, despite the gradual introduction of economic reforms, the State long maintained strict control over the distribution of convenience goods, conditioning access on political performance and adherence to local directives, thereby reinforcing citizens' political subordination. In certain Eastern Bloc satellites, including Czechoslovakia, *voluntary shortages* were deliberately engineered to gauge political support, restricting access for groups considered potentially dissident and turning consumption into a mechanism of political pressure (Chilosi, 1980). Across these contexts, the distribution of convenience goods operated as a tool of direct social control, capable of shaping collective behavior without constant reliance on overt coercion.

The practical organization of stores and cooperatives reflected the political control induced at each level of the distribution chain. In the Soviet Union, Torgsin stores allowed the exchange of rare products for currency or

precious objects in a tolerated but closely monitored system, creating a dynamic where access to certain goods depended directly on commitment and compliance (Fitzpatrick, 1994) (see Picture 2). The image highlights a highly controlled transactional environment: customers stand at a distance from the goods, separated by counters and service windows, while written signage imposes strict conditions of exchange, illustrating both restricted access and the formalization of purchasing rules. The presence of intermediating staff handling all transactions further suggests that acquisition was not a free-market act but a supervised and conditional process, reinforcing asymmetries of information and power between the State and consumers. Constraints and quotas then forced citizens to plan their purchases, anticipate recurring shortages, and develop circumvention strategies, such as bartering or the black market, which became increasingly integrated into daily life. In China, rural cooperatives evaluated local political performance while distributing essential goods, with village committees acting as intermediaries between the State and the population (Naughton, 2007). Queues, quantitative limitations, and differentiated distribution of goods constituted a subtle system of rewards and sanctions, directing behavior toward conformity and reinforcing Party authority. North Korea applied this model more strictly, using the State distribution network to condition access to convenience goods on social and political position, notably through the *songbun* system (Chen & Lee, 2007). This structuring illustrates how logistics, far from being neutral, served as a central lever for shaping political adherence and daily practices in authoritarian regimes.

Picture 2. Interior of a Torgsin store, circa 1935



Source: © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

3.2 Surveillance and Enforcement

It is now widely recognized that the tightly controlled distribution of convenience goods functioned as a complementary surveillance mechanism alongside State security forces, with well-documented manifestations such as the Stasi in East Germany, the Securitate in Romania, and the Politikai Rendőrség in Hungary (for a detailed analysis, see Thomson [2024]). In the Soviet Union, targeted shortages affected regions or populations deemed politically undesirable, transforming food supply into a tool of social pressure and providing indirect intelligence on local political support (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). These restrictions applied to both scarce and common foodstuffs, reshaping purchasing behavior and reinforcing State-imposed self-censorship. In China, rural cooperatives and rationing systems not only regulated access to essential goods but also empowered village committees to monitor behavior, detect deviant practices, and apply subtle sanctions (Edin, 2003; Landry, 2012). In North Korea, distribution remains tightly controlled through the *inminban* system, neighborhood units led by *inminbanjang*, tasked with monitoring residents, organizing community labor, and collecting information on nonconforming behavior (Lankov, 2007; Gause, 2013). Interviews with North Korean defectors confirm that, despite social changes linked to marketization and information flows, the regime maintains comprehensive control, adapting official norms and institutions to new practices without diminishing central authority (Dukalskis & Joo, 2021). In all these contexts, distribution combined regulation of goods with implicit social control, transforming daily life into a strategic lever that consolidates the power of authoritarian regimes (Armstrong, 2013).

Beyond carefully calibrated deprivation, distribution functioned as a subtle instrument for disciplining populations. In the Soviet Union, access to some imported goods—such as Levi’s jeans or Adidas sneakers—

depended on participation in youth organizations and workplace collectives, transforming consumption into a visible marker of loyalty to the regime (Hosking, 2011). In China, rationing systems and food bonuses tied to villages that fulfilled agricultural quotas reinforced political participation and compliance with collective norms (Vogel, 2011). In Eastern Bloc satellites such as Poland, urban cooperatives within the Spolem network allocated specific products according to membership in local associations and the political reputation of individuals (King, 1986), thereby fusing material provision with implicit surveillance. In North Korea, the *songbun* social ranking continues to determine access to essential goods, granting privileges to families deemed reliable while restricting those classified as politically suspect (Armstrong, 2013). The requirement to account for ration card use transformed each act of consumption into a mechanism of oversight, illustrating the sophistication of social control and its ability to shape daily life without constant reliance on police coercion (Byman & Lind, 2010). To capture how distribution systems operated as instruments of social and political regulation, Table 2 provides a comparative overview of the mechanisms, tools, and behavioral targets employed across major authoritarian regimes.

Table 2. Social Control through Distribution in Authoritarian Regimes

Country	Key mechanisms	Tools	Population targeted	Outcomes
<i>Soviet Union</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political leverage • Surveillance 	Ration cards, quotas, targeted shortages	Citizens loyal vs. politically suspect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforced Party control • Promoted conformity • Monitored population behavior
<i>China</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political leverage • Incentives 	Rationing systems, village committees, food bonuses	Villages, local officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged compliance • Integrated local adaptation • Reinforced Party authority
<i>Eastern Bloc satellites</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political leverage • Surveillance 	Quotas, local cooperatives	Groups considered potentially dissident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tested political loyalty • Limited flexibility • Maintained regime oversight
<i>North Korea</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political leverage • Surveillance • Ideological ranking 	<i>Songbun</i> classification, <i>inminban</i> , preferential access	Entire population stratified by political reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintained strict social hierarchy • Ensured high compliance • Access tied to loyalty

Source: The Author.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study of distribution systems in authoritarian regimes extends far beyond a strictly economic or technical lens, revealing strategic, social, and political dimensions often underestimated in academic literature. The circulation of goods, their allocation, and the organization of retail outlets were not merely matters of operational planning; they functioned as powerful levers for structuring behavior, reinforcing institutional legitimacy, and translating social control objectives into the routines of everyday life. History shows that distribution is never neutral: it generates multidimensional effects, fostering social conformity, institutional cohesion, and even resilience among populations confronted with persistent constraints. Authoritarian regimes skillfully exploited these mechanisms to steer behavior without constant reliance on coercion, underscoring that distribution occupied a central place in governance, particularly within the ideological landscape of the Cold War. This perspective opens an interdisciplinary field where history, managerial economics, and political science intersect to illuminate the societal reach of distribution, while demonstrating how seemingly operational decisions could carry profound consequences.

4.1 Theoretical and Managerial Contributions

Distribution is never a neutral activity: it creates dependence on political authority, consolidates support for regimes, and embeds ideology in everyday life. Contemporary Russia illustrates this logic with its “food diplomacy,” where exports of grain, dairy products, and meat are used to strengthen alliances and secure geopolitical influence (Wegren, 2024). Historically, the Soviet Union had already exploited distribution as a political lever: during the NEP, the State Department Store (GUM) turned acts of consumption into instruments of indoctrination (Hilton, 2004). Today, technological change expands these mechanisms. Digital infrastructures allow diffuse surveillance and subtle regulation of behavior, reinforcing political control without requiring overt coercion (Daminov, 2025). At the same time, large logistical projects—transport corridors, port zones, and strategic hubs—anchor authoritarian State capitalism, consolidating both domestic authority and international projection of power (Kinossian & Morgan, 2023). China provides another example, where campaigns against

food waste reveal how the regulation of consumption practices serves social discipline and ideological alignment (Feng *et al.*, 2022). Distribution and logistics thus stand out as decisive strategic levers, at the crossroads of governance, control, and political consolidation.

From a managerial standpoint, these practices offer strategic insights for designing and managing distribution networks in highly regulated or centralized environments. They underscore the critical balance between control and flexibility in organizing flows, a balance that directly determines the performance and resilience of supply chains. Quotas, queues, cooperatives, and State-run stores in the Soviet Union and China illustrate the strengths and limits of centralized coordination: while effective in achieving short-term political objectives, they also produced rigidities and inefficiencies that undermined consumer satisfaction (Albrecht, 2025). Analyzing such mechanisms helps managers pinpoint where central oversight and flexible practices can coexist to adapt distribution to demand fluctuations and operational constraints. Systems of rewards and sanctions further highlight how social and political factors shape organizational performance. Urban and residential transformations in transitional socialist contexts, such as North Korea (Choi & Park, 2025), reveal that even limited market reforms and reconfigured collective spaces can directly influence behavior, showing the deep connection between spatial organization and everyday governance. An interdisciplinary perspective thus equips decision-makers to view distribution as a strategic instrument for enhancing sustainable network performance, particularly in contexts of tension or crisis (Wankmüller & Reiner, 2020).

4.2 Limitations and Perspectives

Several important limitations warrant consideration. The systems analyzed are highly contextual, embedded within authoritarian regimes and specific ideological frameworks, which constrains the applicability of lessons to different market economies or institutional settings. Available documentation often remains fragmentary or incomplete, frequently biased toward contemporary accounts or the subjective reports of defectors, complicating precise and impartial evaluation of distribution practices, social control mechanisms, and the actual implementation of decisions on the ground. Emphasizing the political dimension can overshadow other critical factors, including local economic constraints, convenience good availability, infrastructure geography, and adaptive strategies driven by necessity rather than central directives. Measuring the real impact of surveillance, coercion, or implicit sanctions on citizen behavior remains challenging, given the complex interplay of cultural, social, institutional, and historical influences shaping daily life. Even within highly centralized systems, individuals circumvent or negotiate constraints, further limiting the generalizability of conclusions regarding distribution, consumption dynamics, and the subtle exercise of political and social power.

These conceptual limitations, however, open promising research avenues and encourage more in-depth, comparative analysis. An approach comparing other contemporary authoritarian regimes, as well as flow control situations in humanitarian or post-disaster contexts, would provide a better understanding of distribution as an instrument of power and social regulation. A detailed examination of the interactions between structural constraints, institutional incentives, and population behaviors could thus lead to the development of more realistic models for managing distribution systems capable of reconciling operational efficiency and adaptation to local needs. It is also essential to fully integrate ethical and sociopolitical dimensions into supply chain analysis, to assess not only organizational performance but also the impact on individuals, communities, and society. Future research could explore how authoritarian regimes adapt to or resist digital technologies and surveillance platforms, which profoundly transform the modalities of control. These perspectives confirm that distribution constitutes a strategic lever with multiple dimensions, requiring a global approach to fully grasp all the issues and inform the design of resilient and responsible exchange networks.

4.3. Strategic and Societal Insights

In conclusion, distribution in authoritarian regimes extends well beyond mere operational efficiency. Centralized planning mechanisms, quotas, and hierarchical networks not only secure supply, but also foster compliance, reinforce ideological norms, and maintain subtle social control without relying on overt coercion. These findings emphasize the critical need to incorporate social and political dimensions into the design and management of distribution systems, particularly in highly regulated or institutionally constrained contexts, where every operational decision carries multidimensional consequences. The analysis demonstrates that distribution shapes not only the operational performance of convenience goods circulation, but also social cohesion, public loyalty, and the perceived legitimacy of the regime. Such insights are highly relevant for designing ethical systems in regulated markets, humanitarian logistics, or digital networks. Recognizing the strategic scope of distribution allows managers to gauge its impact on populations and guide decisions that combine performance, control, and

responsibility, confirming that operational choices generate lasting societal implications far beyond immediate economic and financial outcomes.

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