

## **New Modes of Governance and the Irish Case: Finding Evidence for Explanations of Social Partnership\***

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### I INTRODUCTION

This paper applies insights from governance and multi-level governance (MLG) studies to the analysis of Social Partnership in order to: (1) outline a methodological approach for the study of Social Partnership over time; and (2) to provide neutral framework for analysis that will facilitate the collection of empirical evidence that may contribute (either positively or negatively) to the theorising of Social Partnership as a new form of governance. The proposed methodology focuses on the extent of policy integration (and/or disaggregation) between policy interests in the Social Partnership model in order to ascertain how inclusive Irish Social Partnership is. This is considered to be important, given the variety of claims made for Social Partnership as an instrument of direct and participatory democracy.

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## II COMPARATIVE POLITICS AND THE GOVERNANCE TURN

Across Europe, the process of policy change has been beset by developments along two dimensions. The first, or vertical dimension, refers to the shifting levels of policy authority and influence between international, national, regional and even local levels of government or administration. The second, or horizontal dimension, refers to the shifting competencies of policy actors and agencies arising as a consequence of new interpretations of government's role in the organisation and administration of public policy. In an attempt to locate Social Partnership within this broader context of policy change, this paper incorporates two central concepts from the recent literature on changing patterns of governance. The first, multi-level governance, which has its origins in studies of European integration, addresses itself most directly to the vertical dimension of policy change associated with the increasing "Europeanisation" of domestic politics.<sup>1</sup> The second, policy networks, is primarily (though not exclusively) concerned with the horizontal dimension of policy change associated with the replacement of conventional direct governmental action by a more complex system of policymaking and implementation, involving new sets of actors and relationships between them.

Ironically, the literatures on governance and MLG were separately developed by different groups of academics working on different sets of empirical data. As a result, *Multi-level governance* was concerned with studies of European Integration and characterising the extent of integration between alternative policy actors that emerged as a result of this process. The *governance* literature was primarily concerned with studies of public policy and state theory. The development of the governance idea in relation to public policy studies in Britain by Rhodes and others (1994, 1996, 1997), led to its clear association with policy disaggregation and the rise of so-called *network governance*.

Whilst the trend in EU studies has been to incorporate a range of ideas and concepts from other areas of political science (such as comparative politics, international relations and public policy approaches) in order to develop more analytical approaches to characterising the precise terms of change and the impact of EU involvement in the policymaking processes of member state political systems (Andersen and Eliassen, 2001; Goetz and Hix, 2001; Heritier *et al*, 2001; Knill, 2001). The diffusion of ideas the other way – from EU studies to state theory and domestic politics – has been much more constrained (Adshead, 2002; Pierre and Stoker, 2000). This is unfortunate,

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the concept of Europeanisation, see: Adshead, (2005); Andersen and Eliassen (2001); Goetz and Hix (2001); Heritier *et al*. (2001); Knill (2001).

since although they are both concerned with identifying and characterising new patterns of governance from quite different perspectives, they are both primarily concerned with assessing the levels of integration and/or disaggregation of policy interests in state policymaking processes.

The point of this paper is to draw lessons from the application of governance concepts elsewhere in order to develop a framework for analysis of Social Partnership. The framework proposed will outline a means of describing the difference between alternative national agreements that have since become recognised as “Social Partnership” in terms of the level of integration achieved between policy actors within the process, and provide a means to “measure” this integration in terms that will facilitate a case by case comparison of different partnership agreements. Only when this is achieved can the really interesting arguments – about the changing nature of the state since the advent of Social Partnership – begin.

### III FINDING EVIDENCE FOR EXPLANATIONS OF SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP

To date, academics interested in the governance of the Irish state have been offered a limited set of choices: basically you can characterise the Irish state in any way that you want, so long as you include some reference to corporatism. Still, the suggestion that Ireland could be classified as straightforwardly corporatist (Lawlor, 1982) has been rejected (Hardiman, 1984, 1988; Regan and Wilson, 1986). Despite an acknowledgement of shifting attitudes *towards* a more corporatist policy style (Hardiman, 1992), the predominant view is that some moderated version of corporatism might be more apt. In this respect, the debate has tended to focus on whether we have neo-corporatism or competitive corporatism (Roche and Cradden, 2003) – though the difference between the two seems to be largely in the content and parameters of the topics considered under the arrangements, not in the substantive modes of governance. It is argued, for example, that whilst *competitive corporatist* arrangements are broadly similar to *neo-corporatist* arrangements, in that they “... involved tripartite agreements concluded jointly by unions, employers and governments” (Roche and Cradden, 2003, p. 73), they differ because:

*During the 1990s, they began to focus on pay deals consistent with the enhancement of national competitiveness; on competitively sustainable levels of public expenditure, involving the reform of tax, pension and social security systems; and on promoting measures to increase the flexibility,*

*skill and sometimes the quantity of the labour supply* (Roche and Cradden, 2003, p. 72).

An attempt to comment on governance structures, as opposed to the content of arrangements, was put forward by O'Donnell and O'Reardon (2000, p. 252, see also: 1997) when they argued that the "... Irish case might assist the formulation of a new concept of post-corporatist concertation" which is better able to portray arrangements emerging in several European countries. *Post corporatist concertation* is characterised by "deliberation" and "problem-solving" between a wider range of interests than the traditional confederations of capital and labour and where "the capacity to shape and reshape parties' preferences are seen to be prominent features of the dealings between the social partners, interwoven into a process that also involves 'hard-headed' bargaining"(O'Donnell and O'Reardon, 2000, p. 250).

More generally, the problem that might readily be identified with all of these approaches is that the evidence cited for each is mostly the same. This is a difficulty already conceded by Roche and Cradden (2003, p. 86) when they critique the post-corporatist concertation analysis of Social Partnership provided by O'Donnell and O'Reardon (2000), suggesting that:

*[-], the stress on dialogue and problem-solving as key attributes of social partnership neglects the degree to which attributes such as these are long-familiar and indeed quite banal features of negotiations under neo-corporatism (Schmitter and Lehmbruch, 1979) – as indeed they were under pre-corporatist and non-corporatist arrangements of various kinds.*

Rejecting the "post-corporatist" interpretation on the grounds of lack of evidence, Roche and Cradden (2003, pp. 85-7) argue that: "... the onus must be on those committed to such an interpretation to report empirical evidence consistent with their viewpoint". Still, the central difficulty remains, that if the evidence for corporatism, neo-corporatism, competitive corporatism and (in some dimensions at least) for post-corporatism is all the same, how might this be done and what – if any – additional benefit might governance concepts brings to the collection of evidence?

#### IV USING THE GOVERNANCE LITERATURE TO CHARACTERISE GOVERNANCE SHIFTS

Simply put, policy network analysis is a means by which to depict the relations between different policy actors in a given policy area without resorting to idiosyncratic descriptions of country – or policy-specific

institutions and agents. Instead, network analysis allows us to map out the “key players” in a given policy area by referring to their particular structural, associational, or personal relations to each other. The explanatory utility of this approach is subject to debate. For some, it provides a neat way of representing complex policy arenas and policymaking processes into a few key groupings that provide a ready framework for analysis. Thus a network approach to the explanation of policymaking may, instead of providing long descriptive passages about the case study in question, refer instead to a range of key specified interests (governmental, bureaucratic, public, private or voluntary and so on) and the nature of their interactions with each other (Dowding, 1994,1995).

For others, this approach to policy explanation is more than simple description, since by emphasising the importance of certain sorts of relationships in the policy arena over others (be they financial, professional, personal, institutional and so on), they claim to have added a qualitative distinction to their analysis (Richardson and Jordan, 1979; Rhodes, 1981; Wilkes and Wright, 1987; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992). Much of the work using network analysis in Dutch and German academia goes still further by suggesting that networks represent a new form of governance, one where central government has either lost or else substantially revised its omnipotent status in the policy process (Mayntz, 1994; Klijn, 1997; Kickert *et al.*, 1997). Some even treat networks as an alternative more significant model for the ordering of interests than hierarchies or markets (Kenis and Schneider, 1991).

In order to impose order on a proliferating variety of network definitions, Rhodes and Marsh (1992) constructed a typology based on the distinction between policy communities and issue networks using “policy network” as a generic term. The typology proposes a continuum, marked at each end by an ideal-type – at one end, the policy community and at the other, the issue network (see Table 1). The positioning of individual studies in relation to either ideal-type is a matter for empirical research. According to the Rhodes and Marsh typology, an ideal-type policy community has the following characteristics: a limited number of participants *with some groups consciously excluded*; frequent and high quality interaction between all members of the community on all matters related to policy communities; consistency in values, membership and policy outcomes which persist; consensus, with the ideology, values and broad policy preferences shared by all participants; all members of the policy community have resources so the links between them are exchange relationships. As a result of this last criterion, the basic interaction in the policy community is one involving bargaining between members with resources. Rhodes and Marsh propose that in the ideal type policy community there is a balance of power which is a positive-sum arrangement, even if all

Table 1: *Marsh and Rhodes Typology of Networks*

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Policy Community</i>	<i>Issue Network</i>
<i>Membership:</i>		
No. of participants	Very limited number, some groups consciously excluded.	Large.
Type of interest	Economic and/or professional interests dominate.	Encompasses range of affected interests.
<i>Integration:</i>		
Frequency of interaction	Frequent, high quality, interaction of all groups on all matters related to policy issue.	Contacts fluctuate in frequency and intensity.
Continuity	Membership, values and outcomes persistent over time.	Access fluctuates significantly.
Consensus	All participants share basic values and accept the legitimacy of the outcome.	A measure of agreement exists, but conflict is ever present.
<i>Resources:</i>		
Distribution of resources within network	All participants have resources; basic relationship is an exchange relationship.	Some participants may have resources, but they are limited, and basic relationship is consultative.
Distribution of resources within participating organisations	Hierarchical; leaders can deliver members.	Varied and variable distribution and capacity to regulate members.
<i>Power:</i>	There is a balance of power among members. Although one group may dominate, it must be a positive-sum game if community is to persist.	Unequal powers, reflecting unequal resources and unequal access. It is a zero-sum game.

members do not benefit equally. They suggest that the structures of the participating groups are hierarchical, so that leaders can guarantee compliant members. Rhodes and Marsh's characterisation of an ideal-type issue network is in many instances the extreme opposite of the policy community: many participants; fluctuating interaction and access for the various members; limited consensus and ever-present conflict; interaction based on consultation rather than negotiation or bargaining; and finally, an unequal power relationship in which many participants may have few resources, limited access to decision-making fora and scant influence over it.

The Rhodes and Marsh (1992) typology presents a useful set of organising concepts for comparison because the network concepts described above can be applied in different states and/or policy areas, with different policy making institutions, organisations and actors. It not only facilitates uniform characterisations of policy processes in different states and/or policy areas, but also allows a range of comparisons along the five suggested dimensions of network analysis: the number of participants and the type of interests they represent; the relations between policy actors in terms of the frequency, quality and continuity of their interactions; the distribution of resources amongst them, in terms of the finances, status, access to information or authority; and the distribution of power or policy authority between key policy actors and institutions (Adshead, 2002).

From the brief review above, we can see how a network approach to analysis of Social Partnership might work. Nevertheless, critics argue that the difficulty with networks is that once they have been used to characterise the policy process, their explanatory utility is exhausted. Dowding (1994) argues that they are "merely a set of metaphors" created for the study of British and European politics (see also, Keohane and Hoffman, 1990). Networks, he argues, can add nothing new to characterisations of the policy process because all that they offer are models of policy processes that still resort to standard macroeconomic or political theories in order to explain their existence:

*The network protagonists have tried to answer empirical questions by definitional dogma rather than constructing theories – which often already exist – to explain their empirical observations. Conversely, they try to resolve theoretical disputes by reference to evidence compatible with both theories. Essentially the conflict between Jordan and the Rhodes-Marsh acolytes is over the nature of the state. Both sides use their versions of network theory to try to secure their position, but the empirical evidence they cite is exactly the same (Dowding, 1994, p. 66).*

Ironically, this is precisely the problem that has consistently beset Irish academics attempting to interpret the Irish state since the advent of Social

Partnership. It points to the fact that if network concepts are to be employed successfully for policy analysis, they must be underpinned by an appropriate explanatory theory. An appropriate theory should be constructed in such a way that the evidence collected cannot be claimed by opposing theoretical viewpoints and should also be one that does not resort to macro-level explanations of the state in its construction (if this were the case, we would run the risk of differentiating networks according to different interpretations of the state and the heuristic utility of networks would be lost).

## V USING MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE LITERATURE TO CHARACTERISE GOVERNANCE SHIFTS

Whilst there is little doubt that "... the continuing consolidation of the European Union and the devolution of political power within the state entail changes in institutional relationships that challenge our traditional understanding of those relationships" (Peters and Pierre, 2003, p. 75); locating the Irish system of Social Partnership within these changing patterns of governance necessitates first a clear conceptualisation of what those changes are in order to assess whether the Irish case fits into a general pattern, or if the Irish system of Social Partnership is unique. It is in this respect that the multi-level governance (MLG) concept has been offered as a means of acknowledging the multi-layered and complex nature of the policy process, through its emphasis on the *shared*, *collective* and *interconnected* roles of different states, policy arenas and policy actors in domestic and EU policy processes.

MLG analysis is based on three main assumptions. First, decision-making competencies are *shared* by actors at different levels rather than monopolised by state executives. Second, collective decision-making between member states implies some loss of control by individual state executives. And third, political arenas are interconnected rather than nested. The MLG literature seeks to avoid two traps: state centrism and the treatment of the EU as only operating at the European level in the institutional arena of Brussels and Strasbourg (Rosamund, 2000, p. 110). Thus, whilst MLG approaches do not reject the notion that state executives and state arenas are "the most important pieces of the European puzzle", they nevertheless assert that states have lost their monopoly – both over European policymaking and over the aggregation of domestic interests (Marks, Hooghe and Blank, 1996, p. 346).

In its attempt to understand the role of the European Union in national policymaking the multi-level governance idea represents the first attempt to accommodate different levels of analysis in its account of the policymaking



process. Although multi-level governance is conceptually very useful in this regard, it is nevertheless methodologically limited. First, because it provides no clearly defined expectations that can be used to evaluate integration, and second, because it does not make clear how changes at different levels of analysis relate to each other and why. These problems have been acknowledged by the MLG theorists themselves:

*If ... competencies have slipped away from central states both up to the supranational level and down to the sub-national level, then, ceteris paribus, one would expect greater interaction among actors at these levels. But the details remain murky and apart from a generalised presumption of increasing mobilisation across levels, they provide no systematic set of expectations about which actors should mobilise and why (Marks, Nielsen et al., 1996, p. 41).*

Whilst multi-level governance postulates a “set of overarching, multi-level policy networks”, in which “political control is variable, not constant, across policy areas” (Marks, Nielsen *et al.*, 1996, p. 42), it fails to identify the origins of these networks. Nor does it explain the connection between the formation of these new policy networks and the decline of national government control over policy. This raises a third limitation with multi-level governance. In the absence of organising concepts that can be used for comparison between different states, and without a set of hypotheses about change, multi-level governance is only a statement of belief that is not susceptible to verification or falsification.

## VI TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP

Thus far, the discussion has shown that both governance and multi-level governance concepts offer insights into processes of policy change. Still, however, both approaches are flawed. Multi-level governance presents a series of propositions about policy change without any account of how to marshal evidence in support of its claims. Policy networks present a typology of organising concepts for case study analysis without any supporting theory to explain the differences found between cases. The utility of using both governance approaches in support of each other is an obvious conclusion: but how may this help us to better understand the phenomenon of Social Partnership?

According to the Marsh and Rhodes’ typology, we can begin to see that various iterations of Social Partnership come closer to the ideal type “policy

community” than others. Clearly, by their very nature policy communities have, under the terms and conditions of their establishment, a greater propensity towards higher levels of horizontal and vertical integration between policy actors whereas issue networks by their very nature present a non-integrated policy network. This is because the members of a policy community can deliver their membership into agreements, guarantee their compliance, develop a lasting consensus over policy aims and ambitions and are generally supportive of negotiated policy outcomes. By contrast, the closer a policy network is to the ideal type issue network, the less likely are the chances of its supporting integration. This is because the membership of an issue network is large and unwieldy where contacts between members fluctuate in intensity and frequency and are usually conditioned by the need to compete for scarce resources thus inhibiting co-operative or integrative action amongst network members.

If we accept that it is possible to think of various partnership arrangements as alternative forms of policy networks, we can further think of analysing them in terms of the level of integration (or disaggregation) achieved between interests operating in each of the partnership arrangements. However, in order to differentiate the degree of policy integration (or disaggregation) evident in one network study of Social Partnership from another, or to chart changes in one network study of Social Partnership over time, we need a set of hypotheses about change.

*Neofunctionalist Propositions as Indicators of Integration in Policy Networks' Studies of Social Partnership*

Taking their name from earlier functionalist approaches by Mitrany (1966), the “new” functionalists or neofunctionalists were concerned with explaining the conditions necessary to develop European integration. Neofunctionalism concerned itself with two main concepts: functional spillover and political spillover. Functional spillover refers to the idea that as states integrate one sector of their economies, technical pressures will push for the integration of other sectors. It hinges upon the belief that because modern industrial economies are made up of interdependent parts, it is not possible to isolate one area from the rest. Political spillover, thought to be the more powerful of the two, refers to political pressures pushing for further integration. It hinges on the view that once one area of the economy is integrated, the interest groups operating in that sector will begin to exert pressure to pursue further integration. It assumes that once these groups switch the focus of their activities to new integrative policy arrangements and mechanisms, they quickly realise the benefits of integration (as well as the remaining obstacles) in their sector, and consequently become advocates for

further integration. At the same time, their acquiescence to the process of integration prevents the government from retreating from the level of integration thus far achieved.

The suitability of neofunctionalist theory as an indicator of change in policy networks arises for three reasons. First, although neofunctionalist integration hypotheses may be positively or negatively proven in different networks, they cannot be used to support alternative propositions about policy making processes that are unrelated to the process of integration. Because of this, the deployment of network analysis does not fall prey to the major criticisms over its explanatory utility (Dowding, 1994). Second, the use of neofunctionalist integration hypotheses enable us to place the study of Irish Social Partnership in comparative context (with other states and between different iterations of Social Partnership within the state) where the differences noted between networks are in relation to integration instead of (or at least in addition to) differences between state systems and/or policy environments within which the policy networks are located. In other words, they facilitate an evaluation of policymaking processes that does not concentrate solely on how state policymaking processes differ, but why that might be so in relation to integration. Third, because neofunctionalist hypotheses may refer to changes in individual policy networks at sub-national level, or to policy relations between sub-national and central government levels, or to policy developments taking place between sub-national, national and EU levels in the policy process, they are able to embrace different levels of analysis in the study of policy influences and outcomes. Used in this way neofunctionalist hypotheses provide a framework to examine the nature and extent of multi-level governance (or more simply – the level of integration) in policy networks.

The revival of neofunctionalism for studies of policy change might, on first sight, seem destined for trouble. To date neofunctionalism is primarily associated with studies of European integration where it has been regarded by many as a “failed theory”. It is argued here that the alleged “failure of neofunctionalism” arises because of the theory’s extensive misuse as a macro level predictive theory of change throughout the 1950s to the mid-1970s. During this time neofunctionalism dominated European Community literature and found favour not only in academic circles but also amongst policy practitioners seeking to deploy its insights to affect change. The common acceptance of neofunctionalism as a means of explaining the origins and development of the European Community led many to believe that it could also predict the future. The attitude, prevalent amongst many Europeanists, was summed up by Groom (1994, p. 113) who stated that “European experience suggests a further aspect of neofunctionalism, that it is both a

conceptual framework and a plan of action. In the former guise it purported to describe what was happening, while in the latter role it pointed to what should be done to further the process". Initially convincing, the neofunctionalist paradigm was soon to fail in this respect.

In deploying a neofunctionalist framework for analysing changes in the composition and dynamics of policy networks, this research framework avoids the predictive failings of the genre by adopting Lindberg's definition of integration (Lindberg, 1963, 1965, 1966). Lindberg made a distinction between the notion of political integration as a *condition* and as a *process*, and having adopted the latter perspective, he stopped short of identifying an end-point in the process. This is significant in relation to the proposed study of Social Partnership, since it is important that the hypotheses do not specify the outcome of the integrative process. Thus far we have considered some modified forms of corporatism, but there is no reason to assume that these are the only potential explanations for the evidence we find.

Lindberg suggested that if the process of integration were taking place, it would be manifest in four main ways: first, there would be some form of institutional development of a kind that facilitated further policy integration; second, there would be what Lindberg termed "elite activation", referring to the changing behaviour of key policymakers in favour of integration; third, the government would provide continuing support for integrationist measures; and fourth, functional and political spillover would lead to the creation of "inherently expansive tasks", whereby "a given action, related to a specific goal, creates a situation in which the original goal can be assured only by taking further actions, which in turn create a further condition and a need for more action, and so forth" (Lindberg, 1963, pp. 1-11). These propositions provide a good basis from which to derive a set of integration hypotheses or indicators that are able to relate the differences found between policy networks to different levels of policy integration.<sup>2</sup>

## VII APPLYING GOVERNANCE INSIGHTS TO THE IRISH CASE

The potential utility of governance concepts for Irish policy studies seems apposite, since it appears that the manifestation of social partnership comprises both vertical and horizontal dimensions of policy change.

<sup>2</sup>A full exposition of the operationalisation of these hypotheses in one policy area, compared across three EU states is developed by Adshead (2002) in relation to regional policy and changes in sub-national governance in Germany, Ireland and Britain.

*Vertical Dimensions of Policy Change*

In relation to the former, whilst European integration did not introduce partnership government to Ireland, it did provide the back-drop and context within which Ireland was able to develop this form of economic management. After the 1988 reform of the Structural Funds and the Treaty on European Union in 1992, European Union membership provided Ireland with both a limited range of policy choices and a clear set of policy objectives (Fitzgerald, 2000). Taken together, it is argued that "... the crisis during the 1980s, the response of the elite to this and the role of the European Union as an agenda-setting agency combined to provide the basis for the political and social consensus that reinforced economic success during the 1990s" (Fitzgerald and Girvin, 2000, p. 281). More specifically, a series of EU reforms to the structural funds (CEC, 1989; 1990; 1993; 1998) both introduced and promoted partnership as a key principle in the management and delivery of EU policies. Given the significant and widespread impact of Structural Funding to the Irish economy, it is perhaps not surprising that the opportunities they brought to promote new methods of formulating and implementing EC programmes and initiatives contributed to other horizontal dimensions of policy change (Adshead and Quinn, 1998). In particular, the conditions attached to the delivery of many EU sponsored programmes has led to a more broadly held emphasis on the creation of partnership structures at sub-national level, bringing together actors from statutory, voluntary, public and private sectors in a manner which has gained international recognition (Sabel, 1996).

Thus, in Ireland the move "from government to governance" has been viewed as a relatively positive experience (Adshead and Quinn, 1998; Adshead, 2002). Whilst there *has* been a limitation of the scope and form of public intervention, and a loss of functions by both central and local government departments to alternative delivery agencies; in many cases, these changes have been seen positively as a move towards more participatory democracy and subsidiarity in policymaking (Crowley, 1998). The increasing interest taken by the European Union in public policy has not been viewed as a threat to central government's authority, but rather as an excellent opportunity to develop pilot programmes and receive additional funding. New legislation affecting the management and operation of the public sector in relation to deployment of EU funding has been widely accepted as necessary changes to a system long in need of reform (O'Donnell, 2000). The Irish government's willingness to share and/or devolve policy authority to new sets of actors, and to foster new sets of relations between them – despite making the policy arena a little more complex – has meant that the move from government to governance is not perceived simply as a diminution of government control, but rather as a positive redefinition of its role. This

positive take on the advent of network governance, developed further by a number of Dutch scholars (Kickert, 1997; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000; 2004) and subsequently labelled “the Dutch School” reflects perhaps a different, continental European approach to policymaking that is largely alien to British politics and policymaking (Rhodes, 1996, 1997).

### *Horizontal Dimensions of Policy Change*

Using network typology, we might begin to classify and compare the manifestation of different iterations of social partnership arrangements from their first incarnation in 1987 to their most current and contemporary evolution. This would of course necessitate a detailed empirical study, but we can begin at least to sketch the content.<sup>3</sup> The first Social Partnership arrangement of 1987, for example, comprised a very limited membership. The genesis of the arrangement began when the then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, called together representatives from business and trades unions in an attempt to solve the economic crisis. Despite their differences, government, trades union and business leaders were bound together by a shared consensus over the need to tackle the economic crisis and in terms of resources they all had something to contribute (tax restraint, wage restraint and working hours respectively). More importantly, all could deliver their members into the agreement because all participants could see some benefit from it. This resulted in a positive sum power relationship that approximates more closely to ideal type policy community. Subsequent arrangements for a second and third agreement attest to the strength of this community.

The inclusion of a “Community and Voluntary Pillar” in the 1996 *Partnership 2000* agreement represented a watershed for Social Partnership. With a larger, more unwieldy membership comprising radically diversified interests, the Community and Voluntary Pillar’s inclusion presented a challenge to established arrangements (Meade, 2005). Certainly, the history of the National Women’s Council and the Community Platform’s inclusion in the process provides testimony to fluctuating access, frequency and intensity between network members which serves to challenge the established community’s basic values.<sup>4</sup> As a result, whilst a measure of agreement exists, tensions are ever present. A further challenge for Community and Voluntary Pillar representation relates to their capacity to deliver their membership into

<sup>3</sup> This brief review is informed by fifteen elite interviews with leading actors from the government and each of the four pillars of current Social Partnership arrangements, which constitutes the Irish part of a broader piece of comparative research led by Rory O’Donnell, as part of the EU 6th Research Framework on “New Modes of Governance”.

<sup>4</sup> Both groups publicly withdrew from the negotiations for *Sustaining Progress* shortly before its conclusion. For details see: CWC, 2003; NWCI, 2003.

agreements in the manner that older established network members can. Moreover, since the resources of the Community and Voluntary Pillar are extremely variable this often results in uneven capacity, reflecting unequal resources: as a consequence outcomes for this pillar are more often than not zero-sum arrangements. Interestingly, however, whilst the Community and Voluntary Pillar itself more closely approximates an issue network in its constitution, the relative institutionalisation of pre-existing policy community does not seem seriously challenged. Instead we see a dichotomous parallel development of Social Partnership interests, where the Community and Voluntary Pillar is “grafted on” to the process, but denied access to policy community (Murphy, 2002, p. 87).

One clear conclusion from this might be that so long as the Community and Voluntary Pillar highlights the organisational difficulties associated with issue networks, it equally reinforces the strong policy community features associated with the other three pillars. It is perhaps this final insight from a network analysis of Social Partnership that begins to contribute to a clearer view about the nature of the state and by extension, whether or not Social Partnership constitutes a new form of governance. On the one hand, if you accept the current construction of Social Partnership arrangements at face value, that is embodying four pillars of diverse interests – agriculture, business, unions, the community and voluntary sector, plus the government – then Social Partnership is self-evidently neither pure corporatism, neo-corporatism, nor competitive corporatism. Current institutional set ups would suggest quite simply that there is more to Social Partnership than can be explained by any of these approaches.

On the other hand, if you are more discriminating about the evidence you select and point to the existence of long-term well-established policy community, establishing a clear consensus between three major interests – government, business, unions (and agriculture) – then you might be equally swayed by neo corporatist or competitive corporatist definitions. In doing so, you will however, be implicitly confirming that the status and condition of the fourth pillar does not warrant attention. In this respect, the normative assumptions underpinning the empirical focus of such studies are perhaps just as revealing as the conclusions they draw. That is, the difference in the interpretation depends on the selection of evidence and/or the empirical/political perspective of those charged with its collection.

### *Synthesising Governance Approaches in Neofunctionalist Theory*

To recap the arguments and issues raised already, we can ask three main questions about the utility of network analysis (Adshead, 2003, p. 126). First, what is its heuristic utility? Second, does its deployment add any new insights

into the analysis? Third, does its deployment give us any greater insight into the nature of the state?

In relation to the first point, it is clear that a network characterisation of the range of actors and organisations involved in Social Partnership arrangements does make for a relatively easy explanation which obviates the need for detailed historical narrative. Moreover, the relative parsimony of this approach does serve to highlight the significant structuring of the policy arena, despite its impermanent and (superficially) *ad hoc* appearance. This relates to the second issue about network utility. It could be argued that a network approach to Social Partnership highlights the structural conditions that need to be considered in relation to the organisation and implementation of various Social Partnership arrangements. For example, it draws attention (for both existing and would-be participants in the process) to the challenges and constraints that the inclusion of the Community and Voluntary Pillar raises for Social Partnership process.

More generally, however, the explanatory utility of a network approach is still subject to debate since there remains the problem of how to relate the differences found between alternative networks to a common independent variable, for if this cannot be done the comparative utility of network analysis is lost. In relation to the Irish case, for example, there is little use in pointing to the different manifestations of Social Partnership arrangements without any attempt to explain why they might be so. It seems then that using policy networks to describe Social Partnership may well tell us something about the politics of the agreements, but still falls short of explaining the broader process of changes in governance. It is this issue of finding and defining key independent variables in order to explain network differentiation that left network approaches most vulnerable to criticisms over their explanatory utility. In order to remedy this, we need to choose an appropriate theory: one which is constructed in such a way that the evidence collected cannot be claimed by opposing theoretical viewpoints; and one that does not resort to macro-level explanations of the state in its construction. If this were the case, we would run the risk of differentiating networks according to different interpretations of state and the heuristic utility of networks would be lost. The following examples illustrate how neofunctionalist hypotheses might be operationalised in relation to studies of Social Partnership.

*Hypothesis one proposes that if integration is taking place, there will be some form of institutional development that facilitates integration.* This hypothesis has two dimensions. At state level, a network analysis of national Social Partnership agreements could point to the development of new national institutions, such as the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCP) or the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF). Such a study



would need to explore both their functional and political status: are they acknowledged by network members as successful institutions? Do they have the resources (technical, legal, administrative, financial) to carry out their task? How inclusive are they? At sub-national level, policy network studies could evaluate the extent of organisational engagement between policy actors at sub-national level and national partnership institutions and question whether the institutional configuration of current Social Partnership arrangements facilitates effective engagement throughout the member organisations? Additionally, one might ask how the institutions of national level Social Partnership impact upon sub-national level? In doing so, evidence of the continuing institutionalisation of Social Partnership at national and sub-national levels may be taken as a positive sign of integration between actors in the policy network. If this is not the case, we may see evidence of moves towards new institutional frameworks that are more inclusive of different policy interests. If so, then we may take it as a positive sign of *moves towards* integration between alternative levels of government in the policy process.

*Hypothesis two concerning “elite activation” proposes that if integration is taking place, it will be manifest in the changing attitudes and behaviour of key network members in favour of further integration.* These may be reflected in their own positive opinions about Social Partnership, or in the strategic development of either their own or their organisation’s interaction with the actors and/or institutions of Social Partnership. If integration is occurring, then an increase in both of these developments can be expected to lead to a positive consensus regarding the future of Social Partnership. Certainly there is already a range of evidence to suggest that this is the case with business and TU members of Social Partnership arrangements (Thomas, 2003). Perhaps in this regard, the more interesting question is whether more recent members of the process share this positive view (Meade, 2005).

*Hypothesis three proposes that if integration is taking place, it will be manifest in government support for continuing integrationist measures.* The level of government “enthusiasm” for policy integration may be gauged by examining not only whether the government enables Social Partnership or not, but also the degree to which they attempt to facilitate and support it. If government is non enthusiastic, it may give only minimal support in order to avoid the charge of obstruction or presiding over policy failure. If government is enthusiastic, however, it may wish to develop the organisation of policy in such a way that it actively supports further integration. On the one hand, the Irish government’s support for Social Partnership is evidenced by their desire to promote it as a policy instrument for the resolution of issues other than work and pay, including new issues as diverse as migrants, work/life balance,

affordable housing and the hidden economy (Meade, 2005, p. 356). On the other hand, the government could be accused of giving only minimal support to this diversification of Social Partnership through their rather cynical funding of some Community and Voluntary representatives over others (CWC, 2003; Regan, 2004, 2005). From this perspective, an examination of alternative government and/or party approaches to Social Partnership would provide a worthwhile investigation by: first, demonstrating the pivotal position of the government in Social Partnership arrangements (thereby refuting the interpretation of governance as self-organising networks); and second, challenging the notion of an Irish governmental consensus about Social Partnership (when quite clearly different governments have shown different attitudes to different Social Partnership arrangements).

*Hypothesis four proposes that if integration is taking place, it should – as a consequence of both functional and political spillover – lead to the creation of “inherently expansive tasks” which will both cement the level of integration achieved and push for further integration where possible.*

In many ways, this hypothesis represents a composite of the previous three. For example, the logic of functional spillover suggests that if an initial form of institutional development that facilitates Social Partnership proves successful, it should create greater pressure for similar developments in other aspects of the policy process (the establishment of NESF in 1993, perhaps?). Alternatively, according to the logic of political spillover, if there is a convergence of elite attitudes in favour of integration and government support for it, this should lead to an increase in political activities that support Social Partnership. Once more, we might expect this hypothesis to uncover the variable levels of policy integration between different participants in Social Partnership, reflecting the varying perceptions of its functional utility as an effective policy instrument. Naturally, however, it would take a more detailed empirical study before we might begin to speculate on the conclusions we could draw from this analysis – about either the institutional and procedural arrangements of Social Partnership, or the theorising of the Irish state.

## VIII CONCLUSIONS

The proposed methodology for the analysis of Social Partnership is a relatively simple one. It uses a functionalist definition of integration to outline the process by which policy integration can be identified. It presents policy network analysis as a neutral model with which we can compare policymaking processes between different Social Partnership agreements and/or between different policy fields under the same agreement. It hypothesises Lindberg’s

four integration propositions as evidence of positive integration in policy networks and assumes that the higher the incidence of positive integration indicators, the higher the level of integration between policy actors and institutions in the network.

Applying neofunctionalist propositions about integration as indicators of change in policy networks allows us to outline the different kinds of relations that are possible between policy actors in different policy networks *without resorting to macro-level theories of the state*. This is important because it enables us to disentangle the idea of Social Partnership (if only temporarily) from alternative conceptualisations of the state. In other words, it enables us to identify different aspects of network structure and network actors' behaviour that give rise to different network configurations and to relate these differences to the incidence of policy integration achieved – rather than ascribing this difference to a particular state form (such as corporatist, neo-corporatist, competitive corporatist, or post-corporatist), since to do so would be to suggest that each Social Partnership arrangement was so unique that it could not be compared to another.

The advantage of this framework is that it allows us to study Social Partnership as it is manifested in different levels of analysis (sub-national, sectoral and so on) in Ireland; and also enables us to place the case of Social Partnership into a broader cross-national comparative context. In relation to the former, we can assemble evidence regarding the "depth" of the process within participating organisations at regional and local levels as well as the "breadth" of Social Partnership in terms of whether or not it represents uniformly held values and attitudes to policy making (which one might expect of a new mode of governance). In relation to the latter, we can compare Irish Social Partnership with social pacts in other states arising as a consequence of different mixes of institutional, political and policy-related variables in the policy networks of alternative policy arenas. In other words, we can look at the incidence of Social Partnership in Ireland as but one policy response in one state to the changing external environment described by multi-level governance propositions across all European states. This raises the possibility of interpreting Social Partnership in ways that have not yet been considered at all.

The above discussion has laid the foundations for the argument that corporatist, neo-corporatist and competitive corporatist approaches do not adequately describe the changes in governance associated with Social Partnership since they fail to take account of the full range of actors and organisations involved in current manifestations of Social Partnership. For the moment, this appears to leave only O'Donnell and O'Reardon's (2000) post corporatist concertation approach in the frame. A third option might be a

further re-definition of corporatism (Schmitter, 1982). Neo neo-corporatism? Post neo-corporatism? Though of course, it could be argued that this is what O'Donnell and O'Reardon (2000) have already done by proposing post corporatist concertation. In any event, none of these explanations are particularly useful if they only present new ways of describing the Irish case that have no explanatory purchase over other cases. In other words, if post corporatist concertation only described and explained Irish social partnership, what would be the point in its creation. We might as well just continue describing "Irish Social Partnership" without the burden of a new term. Presumably, then our task is to find ways of collecting evidence about Social Partnership that can be just as easily deployed in the Irish case as any other and in so doing create evidence about whether the Irish manifestation of Social Partnership is a new and unique mode of governance or something quite similar to new forms of governance elsewhere.

To conclude, current debates about "... what state form most clearly depicts the Irish state since the advent of Social Partnership" put the cart before the horse. Instead of characterising the state and using the advent of Social Partnership to support this characterisation; we should first characterise Social Partnership. By developing a means of characterising Social Partnership independent of state form, we can begin to collect the evidence necessary for further theorising of the state. The framework for analysis outlined in this paper represents a first step in that direction.

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