

Book Reviews

Peter J. Williamson: *Corporatism in Perspective*. London: Sage, 1989.

This could be described as the work of a friendly critic of the corporatist contribution to, and potential for, the political analysis of modern Western industrial society. Williamson provides an extensive and lucid review of the main strands of corporatist thinking and a sound treatment of the major debate between corporatism and pluralism, as well as the shifting focus of attention within corporatism itself – from the macro level to the meso and micro levels of the political economy. He highlights major weaknesses in the literature, for example the excessive early focus on the macro level – the nation state; lack of empirical studies linked to theory; inconsistent definitions and applications of the concept; and in particular the lack of a developed view of the role of the state and its relationship to civil society.

Williamson attempts to address some of these weaknesses, especially the last point, and to provide what he sees as a more coherent model for future reference. Before bringing together the elements of his analysis for this task he guides us through the development of corporatist political theory and analytical methods with full references to key writers. Williamson shows how corporatism grew out of a growing dissatisfaction with the pluralist method and model of analysis of the political economy, in particular the place of organized groups in the modern polity. He also deals with the pluralist rejoinder to these criticisms.

Williamson then fully discusses the different interpretations of corporatism, focusing particularly on the interest in group representation and in intermediation between organizational interests and the state. Moving away from the general focus in the literature on the politics of production, that is the interaction between key economic interest groups and the state, he explores the application of a corporatist analysis to the politics of welfare and the power of professional groups and their relationship with state bureaucracy.

There is very little with which to take issue in all of this. It is when the author begins to develop his own model that doubts begin to arise. Starting with a lesser criticism, his discussion of micro-corporatism seems to be unduly limiting in alerting the reader to the potential utility of this concept or level of analysis. Whilst there are undoubtedly problems in applying a tight corporatist definition to bilateral relationships between individual firms or producers (which in effect is what seems to be at issue since organized labour appears to be missing from this level of analysis) and the state, we can distinguish certain forms of interaction from market or pluralist and state bureaucratic forms of intervention and policy making.

The key issue may be to what extent the firm enters into an agreement which limits managerial autonomy in making critical commercial decisions, but which falls far short of nationalization or state direction. The firm enters the relationship in order to secure certain benefits and advantages that would not accrue to it from market competition, while the state is able to negotiate and to influence key

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economic decisions in line with some broader public-policy objectives, for example increased investment in training or new technology. Organized labour may well be a party to these arrangements – the concept of planning agreements during the Labour government's industrial strategy in the 1970s and more recently a local version of such agreements as part of the economic development policies of certain Labour local authorities in England. These examples show how some form of micro-corporatism may develop, although the practice of planning agreements has been very limited due to wider systemic constraints on state intervention which seeks to circumscribe managerial freedom or alter the balance of power between capital and labour within a market-based economy.

The second, more significant, criticism concerns the role of interest groups. Williamson, while rightly criticizing some corporatist writers for adopting loose definitions of corporatism so that it becomes an all-embracing concept, that is to say that every state-group relationship becomes corporatism, is in danger of providing an unduly restrictive basis for his model. The degree of hierarchical control, monopoly of power and state influence which he appears to be stipulating as key features of corporatism would render most interest associations in liberal democracies incapable of being viewed from a corporatist perception in theory or practice. The capacity of leaders of associations to control members; enter into agreements with the state which would be rejected or opposed by members; and the notion of ever-increasing state control through licensing seems to fit badly with the practice of producer groups and their relations with government, at least in the UK. Yet the role of many of these organizations in the policy making *and* implementation process in key areas of economic life renders a pluralist analysis extremely dubious. In other words looser criteria may still be consistent with a corporatist view of voluntary agreements and state-approved self-regulation.

Thirdly, and most problematical, is Williamson's view of the state. Whilst he again finds good grounds for criticising the weakness of corporatist theory of the state and the interest of state actors in entering corporatist arrangements, he is in danger of seeing corporatism from an unduly state-centred perspective. In essence what Williamson appears to be arguing is that corporatist arrangements arise out of the interest of state actors in gaining a level of influence over key socioeconomic groups but which they would be unable to control by mobilising the coercive powers of the state. Thus, corporatism becomes a means of (re)asserting state control within the limits of a market capitalist economy where power is dispersed but nevertheless concentrated in the hands of a limited number of key groups representing producer interests.

The state is simultaneously strong enough to dominate the corporatist arrangements it sponsors, but too weak directly to control the groups through bureaucratic channels without ceding some measure of responsibility for policy making and implementation. This seems to place too much emphasis on the state with a distinctive set of interests articulated by key political and administrative personnel in office. Whilst there is a good argument for saying that state actors can have interests which are distinctive from societal groups, Williamson does not seem to address the possibility that state interests and the use of corporatist arrangements may also be the product of, or at least significantly influenced by, the interests of the organized groups. In a market-based economy corporatist arrangements are developed within the framework of capitalist economic structures. In other words a neo-Marxist interpretation of corporatism as developed by Colin Crouch, Leo Pannitch or David Coates would see the state as an important actor but structurally constrained in its actions by the interests of capitalist modes of production. There

is scope for state actors to interpret what this interest is at any specific juncture or issue. Organized labour would be viewed as a junior partner, either being duped into such arrangements which superficially offer formal equality of power, or may enter into such arrangements because they genuinely offer the best prospects of securing important advances and subjecting capital to some form of political control.

In other words, there is a high degree of bargaining between the different parties to the corporatist arrangements where state actors may or may not be able significantly to control the actions of the organized interests. Williamson's theory seems unduly state centred, where the balance in the relationship is in favour of the state pursuing distinctive interests (which are never satisfactorily explored).

In conclusion, Williamson's book is a valuable contribution to the corporatist literature. It provides a coherent review and incisive critique of corporatism while arguing that as an approach or middle-range theory it has much to offer. This is convincing given the limits of pluralism as a realistic model of state-society relations in a modern industrial capitalist liberal democracy. It is when Williamson moves on from this lucid yet sophisticated treatment of his subject to map out a corporatist model which places the state at the centre that he becomes less convincing. The degree of bargaining between state and organized interests becomes very much viewed from a statist perspective, and one which seems to be abstracted from its socioeconomic context.

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Norman M. Bradburn & Seymour Sudman: *Polls and Surveys. Understanding What They Tell Us*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988, 249 pp.

Survey research has in the recent decades emerged as a major approach in the social sciences as well as in applied fields. The extensive use of surveys and polls has created a demand for studies that assess the various methodological and political problems of surveys and their use. The book by Bradburn and Sudman, both well-known survey scholars and authors of books on similar topics, gives an overview of some of the most important controversies of survey research. The book covers four major topics: the history of survey research, how surveys are done, errors in surveys and the social and political impact of polls.

The antecedents of modern public-opinion polling are the straw polls of newspapers, market research and the early social surveys. The history of the straw polls goes back to the early nineteenth century when they were used to predict presidential elections in the USA. The use of straw polls by newspapers proliferated in this century with the *Literary Digest* poll as the most prominent case. The major weakness in this and other polls was the introduction of sample bias. This derived both from the use of mailing lists that did not reflect the social and political composition of the electorate and from self-selection bias among those who actually returned the questionnaires. The failure of the *Literary Digest* poll to predict Roosevelt's victory in 1936 is a landmark event in modern survey research in that it demonstrated the failure of the straw polls and at the same time provided an opportunity for George Gallup to promote his newly founded Gallup poll. Gallup, as well as Roper and Crossly, all correctly predicted Roosevelt by a substantial margin. Moreover, what made the successful predictions more impressive was the