CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	We hate it here, please let us stay! Irish social partnership and the community/voluntary sectorâ€™s conflicted experiences of recognition
Authors	Meade, Rosie R.
Publication date	2005
Original Citation	Meade, R. (2005) 'We hate it here, please let us stay! Irish social partnership and the community/voluntary sector's conflicted experiences of recognition', Critical Social Policy, 25(3), pp. 349–373. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018305054076
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0261018305054076 - 10.1177/0261018305054076
Rights	© 2005, Critical Social Policy Ltd. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018305054076
Download date	2026-11-06 22:44:47
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16804



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Meade, R. (2005). We hate it here, please let us stay! Irish social partnership and the community/voluntary sector's conflicted experiences of recognition. *Critical Social Policy*, *25*(3), 349-373. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018305054076

We hate it here, please let us stay! – Irish social partnership and the community/voluntary sector's conflicted experiences of recognition.

Rosie Meade

Abstract

This article critically assesses the outcomes of community and voluntary sector participation in the partnership processes that have dominated the Irish social policy scene for the last decade. As community organisations have embraced the state sponsored corporatist project in both its local and national manifestations, they have been given official recognition by government as de facto representatives of the socially excluded. State policy discourses have celebrated this development as evidence of its own enablement of civil society and as reflective of participatory democracy in action. However, because the state has taken such an instrumental role in the initiation, funding and direction of community organisations at the local level, the actual autonomy and independence of the community sector has been grievously undermined. At a national level, community and voluntary organisations have found that because they lack economic clout – the basis of political influence in Ireland's neo-liberal climate – they have been granted only a marginal influence over the substance of policy decisions. The article concludes by urging that community organisations begin to cultivate alternative alliances outside the state controlled sphere of social partnership, in order to challenge neo-liberalism's hegemony and to promote the political interests of those they claim to represent.

Keywords: corporatism, civil society, participatory democracy, state

Introduction

This article attempts to contextualise and explain the hegemonic status of corporatist values within Irish social policy discourses. In Ireland, where corporatism is more usually described as social partnership, since the mid 1980s the state has secured the participation of divergent interest groups in a cyclical process of negotiating, agreeing and obeying agreements that determine the development agenda for the nation as a whole. The willing collaboration of farming, employer and trade union groups within this process – and more recently the involvement of community and voluntary sector organisations - has ensured that a consensus imperative now dominates policy debate. This social consensus, along with Ireland's compliance with the rules of the global capitalist market, is credited with creating the conditions necessary for ongoing economic growth. However, I argue that recent economic success has bred an almost pathological fear of dissent within government circles. Irish citizens are persistently warned that nothing can surpass our current approach to development: to suggest otherwise is to endanger our future economic security.

The expansion and institutionalisation of the state sponsored corporatist project has been presented as proof that Irish governments are now committed to the development of a more participatory model of democracy and to the recognition of previously marginalised interest groups. Against this I argue that with its involvement in national social partnership the community and voluntary sector[i] has become preoccupied with the business of the state. This business is conducted in forums that have been manufactured by the state in order to generate outcomes that, despite the best intentions of the community and voluntary sector, are predictably consistent with the state's economic agenda. This article draws on evidence, including public commentaries by community and voluntary participants, that rebuts some of the more grandiose myths that have surrounded social partnership – specifically the suggestion that it democratises the policy process. The potency of these myths has deepened as the state has busied itself with the 'enablement' of civil society. However, I argue that central government, through the provision of increased funding, the introduction of a brace of local development initiatives and with efforts at enhanced co-ordination of community based provision, has created the illusion of a vibrant civil society that is accommodated within a supportive policy framework. A more critical appraisal of these interventions reveals the 'disablement' of the sector as it is brought within the ever-tightening control of the state. Indeed, it is now extremely difficult to distinguish between an 'autonomous' community organisation and a state dependent anti-poverty vehicle. The implications of these developments for the independence of the community and voluntary sector are considered in this article.

Ultimately this article argues that the community and voluntary sector's objective of securing participation within state policy making structures has been counter-productive. The sector has been afforded a tokenistic form of recognition: a presence shorn of influence, participation without power. The chapter concludes by suggesting that community and voluntary organisations might usefully seek alternative forums in which to voice their social critique. They might also experiment with more confrontational forms of political expression. Such tactics may generate their own costs and may even deny the sector privileged access to the institutions of the state, but it is clear that sticking with Ireland's cosy consensus is proving to be a demoralising experience.

Global pessimism and the triumph of recognition:

Since the 1990s the withering away of allegedly 'communist' state systems has precipitated, at both the level of ideology and of economic practice, an apparent global consensus that only capitalism - and by association neo-liberalism, western visions of representative democracy and relentless consumerism - fits the developmental imperatives of an avowedly post-socialist world (Coulter, 2003: Fraser; 2000; Giddens 1994). The simultaneous emergence of a resurgent communitarianism, explicitly referenced in political constructions of a so called 'third way', has urged that voluntary organisations and community groups be permitted to make a contribution to economic, social and political development within the new world order (Hughes, 1996; Keane, 1998; Wainwright, 2003). Residual loathing of the bureaucratic character of socialised states fuels a conviction that state intervention, particularly in the realm of welfare provision, is an outmoded strategy. As states move from being givers of public welfare to co-ordinators of its distribution there is greater scope for alternative providers to resolve and mediate

social need. Vigorously applauding such trends, communitarian ideology confesses to some of the potential shortcomings of unfettered capitalism, specifically the likely ascendance of excessive individualism, social atomisation and alienation. Conservative authors such as Etzioni (1993) with his anxiety at the diminution of civic pride and responsibility and Putnam (2000) with his optimistic belief in the healing power of social capital, assert that community based sociability can help to alleviate and overcome these 'worst' aspects of capitalist globalisation. Political debate and imagination no longer pre-occupied by competing grand-narratives, now dedicates itself to the less fundamental but more immediately pressing question of the optimal allocation of roles - to the state, capital, communities and individuals - in the management of a world dominated by capitalism.

It is against such a political backdrop that critical social theorist Nancy Fraser (2000; 107) locates the general decline in claims for egalitarian redistribution; 'once the hegemonic grammar of political contestation, the language of redistribution is becoming less salient today'. She regrets, that this displacement of a politics focused on economic equality by one focussed primarily on identity is occurring at precisely the historical moment when capitalist globalisation is at its most rapacious and economic polarisation is becoming most acute (2000; 108). Fraser (2003) is somewhat sympathetic towards political mobilisations around recognition claims, which she identifies as worthy appeals[ii] for reciprocal respect. Our human subjectivity necessitates that we recognise in others and that we have recognised in turn, our co-existent singularity and equality. Honneth (2003; 144) explains that mis-recognition is an injury to justice, that may be felt in the intimate sphere of personal relationships, in the legal/institutional or policy making sphere and in the social sphere where individuals and groups are differentially allocated public esteem. A right to participate more actively in the institutions of the state or to secure public acknowledgement of the particularity of their interests and aspirations are political demands frequently made by communities seeking recognition. Fraser (2003) explains that demands for redistribution emerge from a liberal philosophical tradition where efforts are made to integrate the seemingly contradictory principles of liberty and equality. She (2003; 96) writes that redistribution can encompass 'both "affirmative approaches", which seek to alter economic outcomes without changing the underlying mechanisms that generate them, and "transformative" approaches, which seek to alter the underlying mechanisms'. The primary focus in both cases is the economic system and its failure to judiciously redistribute income and welfare rights among citizens. Clearly, the thesis that recognition now carries more political import than redistribution alerts us to a social reality where material needs are assumed to be less pressing than those related to status or cultural value. This is a controversial thesis and authors including Fraser (2003), Young (1990), Honneth (2003), and Philips (1997) continue to deliberate upon whether or not it represents a politically progressive state of affairs, the extent to which it has a global relevance and if in practice recognition and redistribution claims can or should be polarised.

'Recognition's' current celebrity may well be indicative of its resonance with the actual concerns of social movements internationally. The work of theorists such as Hardt and Negri (2000) reminds us that even within progressive socialist circles, an abiding tendency to privilege over all other alternatives, the language of class and the practice of labour-struggle, has negated the potential contribution of other social and cultural configurations

(see also Mahlotra, 2001; Shukra, 1997). Likewise, the pain associated with mis-recognition within and by the state has been evoked in the self-naming of Irish activist groups who speak, for example, of 'Gay Pride', 'Traveller Visibility' and 'Independent Living'. However, the rising fortunes of recognition may be traced to other less politically desirable origins. A predominant emphasis on recognition as a site of struggle might also be the inevitable consequence of the dismal and self-fulfilling TINA (there is no alternative) prophecy (Sklair, 2002). Where the capitalist economy claims transcendent status and actually does appear to be beyond regulation by individual states, it may seem impossible to resolve economic contradictions. Therefore the dominance of recognition politics may be symptomatic of a deep political pessimism regarding the future of economic justice. In Ireland community development organisations have been sold recognition within national and local social partnership processes as a cheaper alternative to redistributive justice. As we will see, they have been permitted to participate in social and economic planning forums, but denied a real influence over the outcomes of those deliberations.

The Irish economic miracle and the forging of consensus.

Much in the way of in the way of hagiography (Coulter, 2003) has been written about Ireland's economic transformation of the 1990s. This was an extraordinary period of growth, where improved volumes of trade, rising levels of employment, ever more frenetic consumer spending and expanding GDP all signalled that at last Ireland would take its place among the modern nations of the earth (Kirby, 2002; O' Hearn, 2003). Readers will be familiar with the image of the virile Celtic Tiger, a shorthand representation for how Ireland swapped its identity as one of 'Europe's economic and social laggards' (Kirby, 2002; 1) for international recognition as one of the fastest growing and most globalised economies in the world. Conventional explanations of this economic turnaround have attributed success to the triumph of the values and practice of development as economic modernisation. Particularly trumpeted has been our successful seduction of Foreign Direct Investment, identified by the Industrial Authority of Ireland as 'a key driver of the economy', accounting for 80% of exports and credited with employment of some 130,000 workers (IDA, 2004). Boasting that Ireland is the fourth most popular destination for US investors Taoiseach Bertie Aherne has explained the roots of economic development as follows;

> 'Faced with any number of low-cost economies or countries offering far larger marketplaces, US multinationals continue to choose Ireland. They do so because we offer *a pro-business climate, a talented workforce and policy credibility* (My italics Aherne; 14.06.04)

Ireland's pro-business climate is typified by low corporate taxes, a highly educated and computer savvy population and the promise of industrial peace afforded through continuation and extension of the social partnership model (Allen, 2000; 2003; Kirby, 2002; O'Hearn, 2003). At the core of Ireland's economic triumph appears to be our willing compliance with the dictates of neo-liberalism, where flexible, unstable and low paid employment is increasingly the price of profit[iii]. Mary Harney (25-07-02), Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment has celebrated the national capacity for swift and pragmatic adaptation to global change and claiming,

> 'Irish companies and Irish workers operate in a global marketplace. The pace of change in that marketplace is extraordinarily rapid…Those who respond to change can prosper; those who don't fall by the wayside'.

It is precisely this conformity to market ideology that has outraged critics of the Celtic Tiger, critics who alert us to the many guilty secrets of the economic miracle (Allen; 2000; Coulter; 2003; Kirby, 2002; O'Hearn; 2003). Writers such as O'Toole (2003) and Wren (2003) have documented the superficiality of an economic success that is not bolstered by enhanced social and welfare rights. Their detailed critiques reveal that housing and health have become such expensive commodities that even the lower middle classes now struggle to access private provision. Over-subscription, incoherent policy, mis-directed funding and political neglect paralyse the public systems of housing and health, the means tested alternatives for the poor. Although official figures indicate a reduction in consistent poverty, the Combat Poverty Agency (2003)[iv] identify an increase in relative income poverty and significantly locate Ireland as one of the most unequal countries in Europe. Meanwhile, cultural critics (Cronin, 2002; Gibbons, 2002; O'Carroll, 2002) have identified in Celtic Tiger Ireland the successful hegemonisation of consensus, optimism and consumerism in characterisations of the public mood. Indeed Gibbons (2002) argues that complaint – begrudgery as it is begrudgingly termed – has been displaced by buoyant celebration as the key ingredient of popular culture. As mainstream culture exiles the tormented self-loathing Irishness of pre-modern Ireland to the shadowy margins of memory, it dodges its responsibility to deconstruct the social costs of inequality and materialism. O' Carroll (2002) has identified a related and even more acute problem in Irish political discourses where critique is not just evaded it is explicitly demonised[v]. Our relentless pursuit of consensus as an end its own right - encapsulated in O'Carroll's (2002) comical refrain 'dat's outside de terms of d'agreement' - renders the public sphere impoverished and sanitised. As will be shown in the following section, the formalisation throughout the 1990s of social partnership as a model of governance reflects the successful insitutionalisation of this consensus ideology in Ireland's political structures and within civil society.

In service of the economy, the emergence of Irish corporatism.

While it has been within the last twenty years that partnership has become institutionalized as a model of economic planning, there is evidence that previous governments also flirted with corporatism. Historically, the Catholic Church had championed corporatist approaches to governance at both the local and national level, identifying such partnerships as a bulwark against unseemly class conflict and as a vital protective against excessive state intervention. Despite the Catholic hierarchy's profound influence over Irish political and cultural life at the time, the church sponsored corporatist experiments of the 1930s/40s were tokenistic and undermined by an absence of broad based political commitment (O'Donnell and Thomas, 1998). By the 1960s, however, the Irish state's budding romance with partnership became perceptible as Taoiseach Sean Lemass, initiated a system of 'tripartism' in relation to public policy[vi]. However, it took the economic crisis of the 1980s to confirm corporatism's status as a political and fiscal imperative. As Emmett O'Connor (2002; 165) observes, an unwelcome coincidence of parliamentary instability, chronic

indebtedness, spiraling emigration and unemployment forced government to abandon an industrial relations policy based on 'threats and cajolery' in order to take the emergent process of social partnership 'across the Rubicon in 1987'. In that year the evocatively titled 'Programme for National Recovery' became the first in a series of six national development programmes[vii] buttressed by negotiated cross-sectoral consensus. The words of former Taoiseach CJ Haughey encapsulate the logic underpinning this policy making approach,

> The Programme for National Recovery showed what can be done when we work together to improve our standard of living and social equity. A small trading economy cannot prosper with divisive and competing interests... (PESP, 1991; 5)

Tempered demands on public spending and wage restraint have been among the compromises secured by union, industry, employer, farming and government spokespersons. As the partnership process has matured, the range of issues brought within its ambit has also expanded. For example the most recent agreement Sustaining Progress (2003) includes sections on migrants, work/life balance, affordable housing and the hidden economy. Critics such as Seamus O'Cinneide (1998/99) have linked the extension of corporatism and its intensifying influence over the lives of citizens to a diminution of the policy making role of backbenchers and opposition TDs. Meanwhile a host of un-elected interest groups take their places at the table of partnership. One of the most painful ironies associated with this development, has been the extravagantly optimistic suggestion that it somehow deepens democracy (DSW, 2000). In truth, the right to participate in national social partnership is gifted by central government to its favoured interest groups, negotiations take place away from the public gaze, and it is primarily professional workers, policy experts or senior managers who participate in discussions (Allen, 2000; O'Cinneide, 1998/99). For those insider organizations privileged enough to be accommodated, partnership promises a form of recognition that is prized in contemporary politics. As the legitimacy of their identity and interest claims is accepted by the state, partners are afforded 'participatory parity' (Fraser, 2003) in key policy making structures. For those individuals or organizations not directly involved, there is a duty to abide by the national agreements and their outcomes, but no direct right to either influence or disavow them. This is an interesting form of participatory democracy, one that sharply discriminates between the engaged and the estranged and that allocates recognition through obscure means.

The Irish Government has not been satisfied to treat partnership as a purely national phenomenon and the second national agreement, 'The Programme for Economic and Social Progress' (PESP, 1991) provided for the development of pilot 'partnership companies' to co-ordinate local responses to the crisis of long-term unemployment. This scheme set in motion the construction of an elaborate infrastructure of community based partnerships across the country. These include 'Community Development Projects', 'Area Based Partnerships', 'Money Advice and Budgeting Services', 'Local Drug Task Forces', 'RAPID' and 'CLAR' initiatives, and 'City/County Development Boards' that operate within the local government system (Task Force, 1998; Tovey and Share, 2003; Walsh et al, 1998). Mimicking the structure of national partnerships by incorporating state, trade union, employer and community delegates, the local programmes have a 'social inclusion'

focus and have prioritised issues related to unemployment, educational disadvantage, poor quality local amenities and urban/rural regeneration. Although initially quite distinct from each other, since 1999 central government has demanded a closer integration of local government and local partnership structures (Task Force; 1998). The creation of City/County Development Boards and the promotion of the RAPID/CLAR programmes has been the clearest indication to date of this tendency. With these programmes local government is now taking a lead role in mobilising partner organisations and in officially sanctioning development outcomes. The principal benefit for Ireland's comparatively powerless local government system is a limited expansion of its functions and an opportunity to engage itself in a more exciting range of development programmes. For the local partnerships, there is the promise of a more coherent provision of services on the ground and an opportunity to have a more formalised presence in the local government arena – witness once again the lure of recognition. On the other hand, as we shall see, the assimilation of partnerships by the local state might be read as a novel expression of state surveillance and control over community based institutions, institutions that are passed off increasingly as proof of the participatory spirit and independent contribution of civil society.

The discreet rise of the community sector.

If the 1990s was an epoch of economic transformation in Ireland, it was also the era when community development became mainstreamed. Since then, mainstreaming has taken the form of increased visibility and variety of funding opportunities for community organisations, the development of partnership structures at both a national and local level and the consistent re-articulation of community development values in government policy documents[viii]. This validation of community development has been constructed in both state and community sector discourses as representing yet further evidence of Ireland's transition towards a more participatory form of democracy (Crowley, 1998). Taoiseach Bertie Aherne contends that democracy

> is also about participating in society and making one's own personal contribution to social life, to the development of local communities or the welfare of society as a whole or particular disadvantaged groups within it' (DSW; 2000; iii).

These celebratory claims regarding the democratizing potential of civil society are indicative of what Keane (1998) designates a global trend. Within government departments, popular media and non-governmental agencies 'civil society' is now invoked as an almost sacred sphere between the market and the state, where voluntary associations can support various forms of participation by the active citizen. Conveniently, such claims are also consistent with the intermeshed tendencies towards a political third way, communitarianism and a willing accommodation with neo-liberal globalization that were described in earlier sections.

In 2000 the Irish government published a White Paper setting out the fundamental principles that will underpin the Irish state's ongoing relationship with civil society. It states,

> 'The Government's vision of society is one which encourages people and communities to look after their own needs - very often in partnership with

> statutory agencies - but without depending on the State to meet all needs' (DSW, 2000; 10).

The document identifies the role of the state as 'enabling' and 'supporting' the emergence a vibrant civil society that is capable of generating a high degree of individual and community self-help. However, only qualified financial support can be guaranteed, as community and voluntary sector agencies are urged to be mindful of economic realities – the non negotiable framework within which relationships between the state and community sector will be fashioned (DSW; 2000). Continuing this orientation towards fiscal conservatism, the most recent government policy statement on social inclusion celebrates the anti-poverty work undertaken by civil society organizations but cautions against misguided expectations of significant economic restructuring;

> 'It is the economic and fiscal policies of recent years which have made possible restrained and strong economic and social performance and…they are the basis of continuing progress (DSFA, 2002; 5).

Ruth Levitas (1996) has argued that mainstream discourses of social 'inclusion/exclusion' tend to be informed by an uncritical allegiance to the economic status quo. This allegiance is unequivocally expressed in the quotation included above. Within Irish social policy, exclusion is associated with membership of particularly 'risky' social categories or communities of interest and it is judged to be felt most acutely by groups such as Travellers, lone parents, people with disabilities and the elderly (DSCFA, 1999). Admittedly a focus on 'risks of poverty' may acknowledge real patterns of disadvantage, but it may also serve to reify exclusion as an identity category so that the character of social groups, rather than the political and economic factors determining their material circumstances, becomes the primary object of concern. This flowering of interest in the 'who' as opposed to the 'why' of poverty is of course reflective of the broader shift towards a politics of recognition, albeit a form of recognition that imputes dysfunctionality on to 'excluded' social groups. It is also reflective of a tendency to analyse poverty in micro rather than macro terms and it is no surprise that state policy now identifies community organizations as highly competent actors in resolving issues of social exclusion (CPA, 2000; DSCFA, 1999). Community development is seen as offering 'new opportunities for those lacking choice, power and resources' and as creating a space within which the excluded can be involved 'in making the changes they identify to be important and which put to use and develop their skills, knowledge and experience' (DSCFA, 1999; 4). Participation, opportunity and recognition are available to active citizens who immerse themselves in the business of their localities. But because exclusion is presented as an accident of fate rather than a predictable outcome of economic policy (Allen, 2003) – it is a status without a structural determinant - state policy casts community development in the minor role of social rehabilitator and not that of social critic.

A manufactured civil society, a dependent civil society?

Although contemporary Irish community development is rooted in the oppositional social movements of the nineteenth century and in the self-help traditions of Munitir na Tire,[ix] within the last thirty years, values such as voluntarism and autonomous struggle have been superseded by an emphasis on professional standards, a movement towards regularised organisational structures and a willingness to engage in partnership (Broderick, 2002;

Tovey and Share; 2003). Superficially this may appear to be progress -proof positive that the state is committed to enabling civil society. However, a closer reading reveals what Tom Collins (2002) identifies as a process of state building. In engineering a dense and complicated community infrastructure that is underpinned by corporatist values, the state has successfully enhanced its profile and extended its influence in disadvantaged communities - communities that are usually deeply suspicious of the state's dedication to their welfare. Another significant consequence has been a blurring of the boundaries between the statutory sector and civil society. With the state initiating and playing devoted partner within what masquerade as community and voluntary sector organisations, we are witnessing in Ireland the formation of an increasingly 'manufactured civil society' (Hodgson, 2004) and the hegemonisation of a top-down model of active citizenship (Marinetto, 2003). Hodgson (2004; 145) explains that the UK's Home Office in common with its Irish counterpart envisages itself as 'nurturing', 'strengthening' and 'developing' civil society. But there, as in Ireland, state intervention is designed to generate a particular kind of civil society - one that bolsters the neo-liberal consensus, compensates for public sector withdrawal and studiously avoids critical assaults on state power.

Maybe there is little that is distinctly novel in this tale of a constrained and dependent civil society. Mae Shaw (2003) tells us that community development organisations have always struggled to shape a distinct identity and that their contradictory desire for both security and liberty has long been a source of tension. In effect community organisations are compromised by their situation 'in and against the state'. Given that the state has expertly assimilated the language of community empowerment, yet evaded the responsibility to divest itself of its own discretionary power over community organisations, we can argue with justification that the state has positioned itself 'in' the community and 'against' an autonomous civil society. The case of the Community Development Support Programme (CDSP) offers some interesting evidence in this regard and reveals how state enablement may be experienced as domination. Within the recent history of that programme, the state has mutated from generous benefactor to stern assessor and with its reconstitution of the terms of project funding has reminded community organisations of their own vulnerability.

This CDSP programme, established in 1990, has seen the creation of community based development projects in over 170 areas of poverty in Ireland. Projects rely on the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht for core funding and the employment of project co-ordinators and administrative staff typically consumes the lion's share of projects' tri-annual budgets (DSCFA, 1999). Projects are encouraged to apply to other government funding sources for supplementary grants. The ad hoc nature of this arrangement means that projects are in a continuous cycle of fund chasing and can only tentatively plan activities. Despite these limitations projects are expected to realise quite an ambitious checklist of anti-poverty outcomes, including 'ensuring equality of opportunity and challenging discrimination, prejudice and racism' (DSCFA, 1999; 4)

An evaluation of the programme produced by Nexus (2002), found that community development projects have had, to varying degrees, success in empowering individuals through the development of education and support structures. They have also enhanced the capacity of local groups to identify and articulate community needs and have supported a

more targeted and efficient delivery of services on the ground (Nexus, 2002). Despite this quite positive appraisal the current government controversially suspended its commitment to tri-annual funding of projects in Spring 2003 when it initiated a 'review' of the CDSP. Projects were placed on interim funding and required to submit detailed work plans to the relevant government department. Arguably state agencies are entitled to demand that communities be accountable for the financial resources they consume, but the manner in which the review was declared and undertaken was unsatisfactory. Comments from project volunteers and workers, carried in 'Changing Ireland[x] (April/June 2003; 7) spoke of their fears that the review might 'threaten projects' local independence' or 'take local ownership away'. Significantly the review was announced in the wake of a budget that reduced grants for community and voluntary activities in 2003 and demanded a 19% reduction in the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht's own resources (Changing Ireland, January/March, 2003). The minister with responsibility for the programme has now directed that projects submit their work-plans to local government City/County Development Boards for endorsement. Ostensibly this measure is designed to ensure coherence in service delivery. Minister O'Cuiv (Changing Ireland, Autumn 2003; 23) asserts his department aims 'to produce a more co-ordinated engagement by the state with communities around the country'.

A more sceptical reading of the directive and the processes preceding it recognises an expression of arbitrary state power – an attempt to control the work of community development projects by bringing them into line with local government policy and institutional arrangements. As the minister seeks to develop a seamless line of co-ordination and control across the disparate strands of the community sector, local groups are reminded that notwithstanding the recognition they are afforded within state discourses and in policy documents such as the White Paper (DSW, 2000), their very survival is dependent on the benevolence of central government. In the following section we consider community and voluntary organisations experiences of national social partnership. It is apparent that despite the promise of an 'all in it together as equals' relationship between state and community actors, here too the hierarchy remains in tact. The community and sector has been granted a voice at the policy making table, but it lacks the credibility, the resources and the menace to use that voice persuasively.

Recognition at last? The community/voluntary sector in national social partnership

Although an elite grouping of community and voluntary sector organisations has now been designated by the state as a full social partner, this recognition was hard won. In truth, central government only grudgingly conceded that the sector might usefully contribute to the social policy sections of national agreements. The first step towards the integration of the Irish community voluntary sector into the macro processes of social partnership occurred, with its membership of the National Economic and Forum (NESF), established in 1993[xi]. Although the formation of the Forum has been applauded as a significant innovation in Irish policy making (O'Donnell & Thomas, 2002), its work has tended to be overshadowed by that of the National Economic and Social Council[xii], a more influential contributor to macro-economic debate and an institution from which the community and voluntary sector was excluded until very recently. The inclusion of the sector in the negotiation of national social partnership agreements finally occurred with the 'Partnership

2000' talks of 1996. At this time the sector, often referred to as 'the Social Pillar', was identified as a junior partner and precluded from the negotiation of pay and tax issues (O'Donnell and Thomas, 2002; 174). Clearly, from the state's perspective at least, community and voluntary organisations' effectiveness as a poverty lobby did not render them qualified or eligible to meddle in more serious economic matters. Responding to this exclusion in 1998, the chairperson of the Community Worker's co-op, Niall Crowley (1998; 72) bemoaned the lack of 'coherent inclusion of the community sector across the various arenas of social partnership', and the 'institutions of participatory democracy'. His comments also reflect an awareness that it is privileged access to economic decision-making that is the real prize of social partnership and that without such access, recognition is tokenistic.

Today the social partnership model survives as a model of governance and the community and voluntary pillar continues to participate in the negotiation of agreements and in related monitoring committees. However, there is a palpable sense of frustration among members of the sector who have come to doubt the effectiveness of their own participation in the process and yet who are at a loss to identify alternative approaches to political mobilisation. Mary Murphy (2002) – a former negotiator with he Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed – suggests that the primary success of social partnership from a community sector perspective is that it shields the poor, not by improving their social and economic circumstances, but by protecting them against further immiseration. It might be argued that by salvaging some basic social rights and ensuring measures such as the enactment of a minimum wage, that the country's surge towards even more pronounced forms of inequality has been restrained somewhat. More positively, involvement in partnership also offers community and voluntary organisations useful opportunities for information exchange as well as the esteem associated with having a profile where key decisions are being made. Nonetheless, despite the rhetoric of participatory democracy that surrounds community and voluntary sector participation in social partnership, it appears that the sector's primary function is a defensive one. According to Murphy (2002) the sector has had little success in expanding the scope of ideological debate, in establishing cross-sectoral alliances with other partners or in imposing its values and aspirations on national agreements. She writes (2002; 87),

> 'While there is no overwhelming case to stay in social partnership neither is there an overwhelming case to leave. The Community and Voluntary Pillar's exit from social partnership is unlikely to make front-page news nor is our departure likely to change the nature of ideological de
> bate in Ireland today. Remembering how hard it was to get a foot in the door, we know that if we leave, the door will be slammed shut behind us'.

Community and voluntary sector members, in their commentaries on the current national agreement, have reiterated this rather bleak conclusion, i.e. that there is no alternative to social partnership. Within the social pillar there has been a mixed reaction to 'Sustaining Progress' with some organisations voting to reject it, and others half-heartedly endorsing it. The Community Workers Co-operative (CWC, 2003; Editorial) – a national organisation of community workers and activists - voted against the agreement, explaining its position as follows:

> 'No member of the Community and Voluntary Pillar is happy with the agreement, the question is more about being excluded if they do not endorse it. 'Sustaining Progress' cannot be termed a 'social partnership' agreement in that there was a complete refusal to engage with the issues of the Community Platform, even when these involved no resource commitments'

Likewise the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI), an organisation that represents 169 women's groups, rejected the agreement on the grounds that it 'makes no genuine attempt to address the needs of the marginalised or socially excluded – those whose voices are outside of the employed and employing classes' (NWCI; March 6th, 2003). The organisation also stressed that because the social pillar is excluded from discussions related to pay and work, its ability to represent the interests of constituent members is severely constrained. Nonetheless, it looks likely that the NWCI will persevere with the partnership process, arguing

> 'as the national representative organisation for women, will continue to make the diverse voices of women heard in every place where the Government makes decisions regarding women's lives' (NWCI, March 6th, 2003).

A similar position is taken by the Society of Saint Vincent De Paul, a national charity with an extensive local presence and a high profile as an advocate on poverty issues. Decrying the agreement as not providing 'any "added value" in the areas of social justice', the SVDP has only 'very reluctantly decided to stay in the social partnership process for the next 18 months' (SVDP, March 13th, 2003). It asserts that this decision is based on a desire to protect and 'represent the views of those with no other voice' (SVDP, March 13th, 2003). Clearly, for the three organisations cited above, there is a strong purgatorial aspect to social partnership; it is punitive, unrewarding, impossible to escape, but offers a faint glimmer of a more hopeful future. As the Community Worker's Co-operative have explained, '[I]t appears that we should be happy just to be at the table and when everyone else has had their fill of cake, we might pick up some left-over crumbs – if we are lucky' (CWC, 2003; Editorial).

A note of unease is discernible even in the views of Social Pillar organisations that voted to accept 'Sustaining Process'. For example the Social Justice Commission of the Council of Religious in Ireland – representing the views of catholic religious communities – registered the following response to the agreement.

> 'Ireland's poorest and most excluded people would better served with this agreement in place compared to the alternative situation of not having any national agreement. The processes of social partnership will be used to hold the Government to account in the years ahead' (CORI, Nd; Np).

At the hub of this argument appears to be the understanding that the poor will benefit from the creation of a stable economic environment, even though the state has 'failed to commit adequate resources to tackling the infrastructure and social provision deficits'(CORI, Nd; Np). Consensus, it appears, can bring its own rewards. The decision of the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed to 'critically accept' the agreement reflects an ambivalent attitude towards the state. In a somewhat oblique statement the organisation (INOU, March 2003) has commented that

> 'although the new Agreement offers no clear specific actions or resources to address the needs of the unemployed, the processes and mechanisms that the

Agreement offers can be used effectively to address the issue of unemployment and poverty'.

The above comments point to the limitations of a focus on recognition as a strategic demand for community and voluntary sector organisations. While the official language of Irish social partnership implies that there is participatory parity among the partners, the reflections of community sector participants reveal a genuine concern that they are there merely to make up the numbers, or that their sole purpose is to contribute a legitimating social conscience to an overwhelmingly economic process. The sector's lowly status is exacerbated by its lack of real bargaining power. Unlike the other partners it cannot withdraw or threaten withdrawal of capital investment or labour power. At best community and voluntary organisations can justify their participation by claiming a right to vocalise the interests of excluded communities; groups such as women, Travellers, migrants and children. At worst even that assertion is rendered problematic when the legitimacy of the sector's representative mandate is disputed by local and national political figures who resent the co-option of unelected professional spokespeople within the decision making structures of the state (O'Cinneide, 1998/9; Murphy, 2002).

What is most disheartening about the above statements is the extent to which they convey a poverty of alternatives for politically minded community and voluntary sector organisations. However much they may despair at the limitations of their achievements within social partnership, these members of the social pillar believe that they cannot exit the process. This conclusion is founded on the assumption that 'being there' is itself a kind of victory; proof that the state has finally acceded to their demands for recognition. The problem with such a conclusion is that ultimately it is self-fulfilling. Community sector participants acknowledge that corporatism takes its toll, distracting their attention from other projects (Murphy, 2002; CWC). As long this energy is sublimated within the comparatively sheltered sphere of social partnership, Ireland is robbed of a potentially valuable contribution to political analysis and debate. As long as these organisations are treated as the bona fide representatives of the socially excluded classes, it is unlikely that newer and more critical voices will be welcomed within the public sphere. Finally, without an attendant transformative and redistributive aspiration, recognition for the social pillar succeeds only in reconstituting the membership of powerful institutional structures. It does not than radically restructure their agendas or force them to implement more far-reaching social reforms.

Conclusion

It would be trite, and probably offensive, to suggest that community and voluntary sector organisations can cheerily abandon the corporatist project. Groups have dedicated so much of their energy to the task of winning the ear and approval of the state, that to sacrifice those gains now would be a betrayal of the constituencies that have invested hope in this recognition strategy. Another significant obstacle to withdrawal relates to the apparent absence of alternative outlets within and through which the community and voluntary sector might articulate a more dissident political vision. As critical cultural commentators have noted (Gibbons, 2002; O'Carroll, 2002) Ireland is not exactly overburdened with radical media organisations, critical networking forums or broadly inclusive social

movements. Finally, given the actual diversity and poor resource base of organisations that constitute the putative community and voluntary sector, it cannot be assumed that groups can easily unite to construct a coherent counter-weight to the hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism. It is easy to recommend that they leave social partnership, but where to go and for what purpose, remain tantalisingly unanswerable questions.

Nonetheless, if they are to be true to their democratic values, community and voluntary sector organisations must work towards the construction of alternative political forums that will allow them to publicise and popularise their critical social analysis. Already there are some seeds of optimism. Since 2000 the World Social Forum (WSF) has brought together an eclectic range of dissidents – NGOs, guerrilla movements, community groups, social activists and every hue of socialist, feminist and green opinion – in order to deepen and popularise an anti-capitalist agenda. Although WSF gatherings tend to be quite inconclusive, they have succeeded in exposing the nature, extent and consequences of unfettered neo-liberalism and in creating a comparatively independent intellectual space wherein more progressive social experiments might be imagined. Given the general stagnation of popular debate in Ireland and internationally, this in itself is a precious outcome. The emergence of a national Irish Social Forum and the simultaneous development of Cork and South-Eastern Social Forums suggest that there is an appetite for dissent among some sectors of Irish society. It is likely that community and voluntary organisations that are jaded by the rigours and tribulations of partnership might gainfully engage with these forums. Certainly the community and voluntary sector has much to contribute in terms of critical insights into the nature of state power. Indeed it may even gain strength from sharing its painful memories of the stifling ideology and processes of social partnership.

References

Aherne, B. (14.06.04) *Speech by the Taoiseach at the American Chamber of Commerce in Ireland Business Lunch* in the Alexander Hotel, on Monday, 14 June 2004, at 12.45pm.

Allen, K. (2003) 'Neither Boston nor Berlin: Class Polarisation and Neo-liberalism in the Irish Republic' in C. Coulter and S. Coleman (eds) *The End of Irish History?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Allen, K. (2000) *The Celtic Tiger***.** Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Broderick, S (2002) 'Community Development in Ireland - A Policy Review', *Community Development Journal*, 37 (1): 101-110.

Changing Ireland (Autumn 2003) 'O'Cuiv will "Continue" all Community Programmes'. Limerick: Community Development Network

Changing Ireland (April/June 2003) "You Cannot Take Local Ownership Away". Limerick: Community Development Network.

Changing Ireland (January/March, 2003). 'Minister O'Cuiv Defends Lower Budget Allocation as "Adequate', Limerick: Community Development Network.

Collins, T. (2002) 'Community Development and State Building: A Shared Project', Community Development Journal, 37 (1): 91-100.

Combat Poverty Agency (2003) Poverty in Ireland: data from the 2000 Living in Ireland Survey. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency, Poverty Briefings Series.

Combat Poverty Agency (2000) *The Role of Community Development in Tackling Poverty*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.
Community Workers Co-operative (2003) 'Editorial', in *News and Views*, March 2003. Galway: Community Workers Co-operative.
Conference of Religious of Ireland (No Date) 'Social Partnership' at http://www.cori.ie/justice/soc_partner/index.htm
Coulter, C. (2003) 'The End of Irish History?', in C. Coulter and S. Coleman (eds) *The End of Irish History?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Crowley, N. (1998) 'Partnership 2000: Empowerment or Co-option', in P. Kirby and D. Jacobson (eds) *In the Shadow of the Tiger.* Dublin: Dublin City University Press.
Cronin, M. (2002) 'Speed Limits: Ireland, Globalisation and the War Against Time' in P. Kirby, L. Gibbons and M. Cronin (eds) *Reinventing Ireland*. London: Pluto Press.
[DSCFA] Department of Social Community and Family Affairs (1999) *The National Community Development Programme.* Dublin: Stationery Office.
[DSFA] Department of Social and Family Affairs (2002) *Building an Inclusive Society.* Dublin: Stationery Office.
[DSW]Department of Social Welfare (2000) *White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship Between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
Etzioni, A. (1993) *The Spirit of Community*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
Fraser, N. (2003) 'Redistribution as Recognition: A Response to Nancy Fraser' in N. Fraser and A. Honneth (eds) *Redistribution or Recognition?* London: Verso.
Fraser, N. (2000) 'Rethinking Recognition', *New Left Review* 3 (May/June 2000): 107-120.
Gibbons, L. (2002) 'The Global Cure? History, Therapy and the Celtic Tiger' in P. Kirby, L. Gibbons and M. Cronin (eds) *Reinventing Ireland*. London: Pluto Press.
Giddens, A. (1994) *Beyond Left and Right*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2000) *Empire.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
Harney, M. (25/07/02) *Remarks by Mary Harney, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment at the Plenary Meeting of the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*
Hodgson, L. (2004) 'Manufactured Civil Society: Counting the Cost', *Critical Social Policy*, 24(2): 139-164.
Honneth, A. (2003) 'Social Justice the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation' in N. Fraser and A. Honneth (eds) *Redistribution or Recognition?* London: Verso
Hughes, G. (1996) 'Communitarianism and Law and Order', Critical Social Policy 16(4): 17-42.
Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (2003) 'INOU Critically Accepts Sustaining Progress' in *INOU Bulletin*, (March 2003). Dublin: INOU.
Irish Government (2003) *Sustaining Progress.* Dublin: Stationery Office.
Irish Government (1991) *Programme for Economic and Social Progress.* Dublin: Stationery Office.
Irish Government (1987) *Programme for National Recovery.* Dublin: Stationery Office.
Industrial Development Authority (2004) *IDA Ireland* at http://www.idaireland.com/industry/index.asp

Keane, J. (1998) *Civil Society – Old Images, New Visions.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Kirby, P. (2002) *The Celtic Tiger in Distress.* London: Palgrave.
Levitas, R. (1996) 'The Concept of Social Exclusion and the New Durkeimian Hegemony', *Critical Social Policy*, 16(1): 5-20.
Malhotra, R. (2001) 'The Politics of the Disability Rights Movement', *New Politics* (Summer 2001): 65-80.
Marinetto, M. (2003) 'Who wants to be an Active Citizen?' *Sociology*, 37(1): 103-120.
Murphy, M. (2002) 'Social Partnership – 'Is it the Only Game in Town'?', *Community Development Journal*, 37 (1): 80-90
National Women's Council of Ireland (2003) 'National Women's Council of Ireland does not Endorse New National Agreement' *Press Release*, 6th March 2003.
NEXUS (2002) *Evaluation of the Community Development Programme.* Dublin: Department of Social Community and Family Affairs.
O'Donnell, R. and Thomas, D. (2002) 'Ireland in the 1990s: Policy Concertation Triumphant' in S. Berger and H. Compston (eds) *Policy Concertation and Social Partnership in Western Europe.* Oxford: Berghahn Books.
O'Carroll, P. (2002) 'Culture Lag and Democratic Deficit in Ireland: Or, 'Dat's Outside de Terms of D'agreement', Community Development Journal, 37 (1): 10-19.
O'Cinneide, S. (1998/99) 'Democracy and the Constitution', Administration, 46(4): 41-58
O'Connor, E. (2002) 'Ireland in Historical Perspective: The Legacies of Colonialism – Edging Towards Policy Concertation' in S. Berger and H. Compston (eds) *Policy Concertation and Social Partnership in Western Europe.* Oxford: Berghahn Books.
O'Hearn, D. (2003) 'Macroeconomic Policy in the Celtic Tiger: A Critical Reassessment', in C. Coulter and S. Coleman (eds) *The End of Irish History?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
O'Toole, F. (2003) *After the Ball*. Dublin: New Island Books.
Phillips, A (1997) 'From Inequality to Difference: A Severe Case of Displacement', in *New Left Review* 224 (July/August 1997): 143-153.
Putnam, R.D. (2000) *Bowling Alone*. New York : Simon & Schuster.
Shaw, M (2003) 'Gilding the Ghetto and In and Against the State', *Community Development Journal*, 38(4): 361-367.
Shukra, K. (1997) 'The Death of a Black Political Movement', *Community Development Journal* 32 (3): 233-243.
Society of Saint Vincent De Paul (2003) 'Vincent De Paul to stay in "Partnership" for the Next 18 Months', *Press Release*, 13th of March, 2003.
Sklair, L. (2002) *Globalisation, Capitalism and its Alternatives.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Task Force on Integration of Local Government and Local Development Systems. (1998) *Report.* Dublin: Government Publications.
Tovey, H & Share, P. (2003) *A Sociology of Ireland***.** Dublin: Institute of Public Adminisration.
Wainwright, H. (2003) *Reclaim the State, Experiments in Popular Democracy*. London: Verso.
Wren, M.A. (2003) *Unhealthy State: Anatomy of a Sick Society*. Dublin: New Island.
Young, I.M. (1990) 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference', in L.J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.

Rosie Meade is a lecturer in the Department of Applied Social Studies University College Cork. She teaches and writes on issues relevant to community development, social partnership, community education, social movements and alternative media. She is one of the organizers of the annual William Thompson Weekend, an international conference that is dedicated to the memory of the eighteenth century Irish born socialist.

---

[i] In this article I use the terms 'community and voluntary sector', 'civil society' and 'community and voluntary organisations' interchangeably. I do acknowledge that it is appropriate to debate the extent to which community and voluntary organizations share a common identity and to challenge the assumption that community and voluntary organizations are the only or most vital manifestation of civil society activity. In the interests of brevity and in maintaining a coherent argument I am not pursuing those debates here. Readers should note that when the terms 'community and voluntary pillar' and 'social pillar' are used – again interchangeably - I am explicitly referring to those organizations that have been active in the negotiation of national social partnership.

[ii] Fraser (2003) suggests that not all recognition claims are progressive and in advocating a politics of participatory parity, suggests that such claims should be evaluated according to their tendency to democratize and equalize access to the public sphere.

[iii] O'Hearn (2003; 42) writes 'rising employment in the 1990s came at the cost of Ireland having one of the most flexible regimes in Europe with low job security, substantially more workers on low wages and fewer workers' rights'

[iv] They note that the consistent poverty rates fell from 15% to 6% between 1994 and 2000, where consistent poverty refers to 70% of median income combined with basic deprivation. On the other hand the Agency notes that relative income poverty increased at both the 60% and 70% rates. In 2000 22.1% of the population were below the 60% income poverty line and 28.2% of the population were below the 70% income poverty line. This represented an increase from 15.6% below the 60% and 26.7% below the 70% income lines in 1994 (CPA, 2003)

[v] Taoiseach Bertie Aherne epitomizes this tendency. He has at intervals dismissed critics of government policy as 'creeping jesuses', 'whingers' and most colourfully of all 'dingbats'.

[vi] Elements within the Roman Catholic had attempted to generate interest in a corporatist agenda during the 1930s but this met with a deriding response from established political parties. The tripartism of the 1960s relates to the appointment of trade union and employer representatives to public bodies.

[vii] 1990 – Programme for Economic and Social Progress
1994 – Programme for National Recovery
1997 – Partnership 2000
2000 – Programme for Prosperity and Fairness
2003 – Sustaining Progress

[viii] See Department of Health and Children (2001) Health Strategy - Quality and Fairness: A Health System for You, or Department of Agriculture (1999) Ensuring the Future - A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland A White Paper on Rural Development.

[ix] Munitir Na Tire was established during the 1930s by Canon John Hayes to protect traditional patterns of rural life against the threat of urbanisation and depopulation. A system of parish based guilds, espousing a self-help ethos and a consensus model of social analysis was established around the country. Muintir was strongly influenced by Catholic social teaching and was thus very resistant to welfare state expansion and the politicisation of the rural working class. However as time went on it became increasingly attracted to a partnership model of development and pioneered the employment of paid community development workers in Ireland.

[x] The National Newsletter of the Community Development Support Programme

[xi] According to its own publicity statement, the NESF is a consultative with a partnership structure, established for the 'purposes of achieving consensus, on as wide as basis as possible, on major economic and social issues' (www.nesf.ie/about.htm)

[xii] Established in 1973 as a partnership structure incorporating the traditional social partners and expert commentators, the NESC has been instrumental in the promotion of social partnership in Ireland since 1987. It has a particular influence over the content and focus of national social partnership agreements by publishing in advance of those negotiations reports on relevant themes.