

VARIA

Taming a regressive utopia, shaping its dystopian history? Corporatist theory and practice across the 1945 divide

Victor RIZESCU

Abstract: *The article surveys segments of the scholarship devoted to the evolution of the corporatist devices of interest representation, pointing to the difficulty of bridging the gap between the treatments of the postwar neo-corporatist practices associated with the growth of the welfare state institutions in stable democracies and those targeted at the understanding of (primarily pre-1945) authoritarian corporatist experiments with a right-wing orientation. The danger of entrenching an idealized history of corporatism over the long run derived from the post-1945 domestication of the notion as a heuristic instrument suited for the understanding of democratic politics is underscored, and the Romanian case is indicated—on the basis of previous researches—as a testing ground for the interpretations in the field.*

Keywords: *corporatism, welfare devices, intermediation, authoritarianism, right-wing politics*

An influential strand of contemporary scholarship devoted to the phenomenon of corporatism in historical perspective likes to employ the notion as to describe a stage in the evolution of “intermediary institutions”, themselves defined as “interfaces located in-between two or more societal spheres, which are simultaneously oriented towards internally stabilizing the spheres in question, and increasing the external compatibility of these societal spheres through the construction and

enforcement of overarching frameworks”. Focusing on the “neo-corporatist institutional set-ups, which structured the relationship between the economy and politics, as well as areas such as education, health and social security within (western) European welfare state frameworks in the immediate post-war era”, as well as on their gradual replacement by governance practices since the 1980’s—in conjunction with the “reconfiguration of the set-up which frames substantial parts of society [...]

through increased liberalization, privatization and deregulatory and reregulatory measures”—, the approach in question nevertheless recovers as a highly relevant part of the historical process reconstructed the “corporatist institutions [which] were an important social phenomenon from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century”¹.

However recently it has been coined, the discourse of the sort resonates well with older ones, featuring in the field over the period indicated above as marked by the burgeoning growth of neo-corporatist devices and of the theorizing meant to vindicate their use and legitimacy. They can be found eager to “argue corporatism to be capitalism’s most optimal face”—acting in such a way that “the public and civil order largely coalesce, politics becomes ‘depoliticised’, solidarity emphasized, harmony generalized, the value of co-operation universally infused, and discord and dissent normatively disavowed”—, also tracing “corporatism’s main historical roots” to the “theories and social realities of feudalism, the *Ständestaat*, fascism and guild socialism”, placing the “inter-war years [...] within the context of countervailing pressures and subsequent corporatist decline” and pointing to Britain as to a special context “where despite universal ideological disavowing, corporatism has not only established more incisively integrated roots, but has furthermore experienced virtually unbroken progression”². In a related

fashion, they can be discovered as concerned to “survey the changing ways in which modern societies mediated among collective interests”, thus tracing “the pressures under which parliamentary aggregation of interests in an era of mass suffrage, international economic rivalry, and an emerging labor movement might have to be supplemented by direct mediation among producer groups” and making clear that, in connection to this, “the major role of corporatist arrangements has been to settle competing claims among classes and interests that tended to overburden traditional institutions” (after underscoring how, over a “century of collective interest mediation”—which means up to the 1970’, when the intervention here cited was elaborated—“corporatist recourses have served interest groups directly, authoritarian leaders, bureaucratic administrators, and democratic political parties”)³.

It is undeniable that such positive assessments of the social and institutional arrangements shaped (mostly in western Europe) during the decades following the end of the Second World War that could be placed under the headings of corporatism or neo-corporatism—and issuing, eventually, into a partial historical revaluation of their pre-1945 antecedents—came to the fore rather abruptly, against the background of previous treatments of the topic, understanding the corporatist tradition—primarily associated with the politics of the Right and heavily

compromised by its connection with fascism—as intrinsically nefarious, and by the same token rejecting the tendencies pointing to its reincarnation in different garbs as insidiously perverse⁴ (some such rejections resting on the argument that, although “corporatism is thought of as being a fascist theory”, in fact “historically it arises as a socialist idea”, with the implication that “its [postwar] liberal incarnation [...] is only an extension of this phenomenon”⁵; some others claiming, in a more conventional way, that “corporatism is fascism with a human face”⁶). The 1974 article of Philippe C. Schmitter entitled “Still the Century of Corporatism?” has been consecrated quasi-consensually as marking a dramatic watershed in the domain of studies involved, staying at the origins of the entire body of literature whose thrust the present paper set up to disclose in the beginning⁷.

Dissociating between an authoritarian version of the phenomenon—functioning most often as an engine of accelerated modernization in peripheral areas and paradigmatically envisioned by Mihail Manoilescu’s *The Century of Corporatism* of 1934—and another one compatible with democratic life and traced back—through Andrew Schonfield’s *Modern Capitalism* of 1965—to John Maynard Keynes’ slight pronouncement on the topic in his essay “The End of *Laissez Faire*” of 1926, the article defined corporatism by focusing “on a set of relatively directly observable,

institutionally distinctive traits involving the actual practice of interest representation”⁸. The model is understood as a more realistic approximation of the relations forged between interest groups and the state than the “pluralist” one—discovered as “of little utility in describing the likely structure and behavior of interest-group systems in contemporary developing polities”, and possibly (at the time) “no longer [...] of much utility when applied to the practices of advanced industrial polities”⁹—, being further related to the “monist” (Soviet-style) and the “syndicalist” (still an utopian) models for the representation of interests. By comparison to the stark defenders of pluralism, the (somewhat stoic) upholders of corporatism are ready to promote the compression of interest groups into “a fixed set of verticalized categories each representing the interdependent functions of an organic whole”, further advocating the “controlled emergence, quantitative limitation, vertical stratification and complementary interdependence” of such entities¹⁰. Sometimes defined as amounting to a form of “liberal corporatism”, the set of arrangements delineated by the followers of Schmitter has been acknowledged as blurring “the classical liberal distinction between state and society”, moreover implying that “the voluntary character of membership in large interest associations due to strong social pressures may often become rather a fiction”¹¹. These shortcomings have been seen as compensated by the

benefits coming from the institutionalized “tripartite bargaining between government, labor and capital on a national basis”¹², which came to constitute the core of the neo-corporatist arrangements.

Intended as an ideal typical model likely to cover the various forms of mediation between interest groups and state power prevalent across the globe in the constellation of the Cold War—thus somewhat de-dramatizing the divide separating the arrangements of the sort emerging in affluent societies and those obtained in developing nations—“Still the Century of Corporatism?” was keen to rehearse the body of modern corporatist theorizing produced up into the age of fascism only in order to show it as able to serve virtually all ideological programs and political regimes and to finally dismiss it as irrelevant for understanding the continuing force of the factors leading to corporatist institutional outcomes (even arguing that “all detailed empirical inquiries of corporatist praxis have shown its performance and behavior to be at considerable variance—if not diametrically opposed—to the beliefs manifestly advanced by its verbal defenders”¹³).

One can detect, nevertheless, an implication stretching through the classical article to the extent that the regressively utopian facet of the corporatist design—prone to take inspiration from the hierarchically ordered and organically fused types of interest representation dominant in pre-modern times for redressing the

divisiveness of capitalism, enhanced by the factionalism of class-based syndicalism—was domesticated and prepared for the use of both the western democratically settled and the non-western (slowly) democratizing politics of the post-war era. Moreover, reading the piece anew with a view to evaluate its impact upon the further development of historical studies surveying—more or less scratchy—the corporatist phenomenon across the threshold of 1945, one can hardly avoid asking ourselves whether this vindication of having the corporatist view (better recalling the name of Manoilescu than the figure of Keynes, for sure) recovered as a social science heuristic instrument is not likely to turn into a tendency of projecting back into the past the blessings of neo-corporatist intermediation such as to make unintelligible the established accounts of the corporatist involvement with the radical Right or its functioning over the same decades as the watchword of a muddled right-wing anti-democratic camp reluctant to assume the stance of radicalism.

The relevance of this question emerges in full light when comparing the trend of scholarship originated with Schmitter with other approaches designed to delineate the status and characteristics of recent corporatist practices by making recourse to long-term historical views of the phenomenon. We are offered, in this case, interpretations staying plainly apart from either the temptation of lessening the divide between corporatism and liberal-democratic

politics predicated on a full-blown capitalist economy—placing the former firmly, that is, within the category of authoritarianism conjoined with truncated capitalism, however taking seriously the claims of its representatives of striking a middle ground between communism and the western democratic model all throughout the Cold War period¹⁴—, or the inclination to take the 1945 moment as separating between two well defined ages in the evolution of the corporatist advocacies and arrangements. Certainly the most influential perspective of the kind, formulated at the same time with Schmitter's, has taken the Iberian and Latin American political tradition—with a special emphasis on its ideological dimension—as best exhibiting the tenets of a “system in which the political culture and institutions reflect a historic hierarchical, authoritarian, and organic view of man, society and polity” and where “the government controls and directs all associations, holding the power not only to grant or withhold juridical recognition [...] but also access to official funds and favors without which any sector is unlikely to succeed or survive”, thus not only regulating “all associations and corporate bodies”, but also seeking “to tie those that have earned their place in the existing system into a collaborative effort for integral national development”¹⁵. Despite of being later broadened such as to cover “a variety of corporatist forms and practices relating both to the history and culture

of the various countries and to their special sociopolitical and institutional arrangements”¹⁶—eventually even establishing a weak link with the literature built around the neo-corporatist adjustments of the western-style welfare states—the respective theory never wavered over its characterization of corporatist politics as essentially nourished by intellectual currents of long standing and markedly different from the mainstream of western Enlightenment liberalism.

No matter how vast the academic production issuing from Schmitter's refurbishment of the notion of corporatism and meant to give account of developments in Europe and the world after 1945 was proven to be by recent overviews¹⁷, no systematic research has been done so far regarding the relevance of the 1970's departure in the field for stimulating retrospectively a large-scale refashioning of the welter of interpretations targeted at the pre-1945 embodiments of the model, thus bridging the gulfs among the various branches of the scholarship and elaborating a language suited for treating under the same (multilayered) rubric all the stages and settings marking the evolution of the phenomenon. Researches into the connection between fascism and corporatism over the interwar years tend to communicate only sporadically with the other domain of study mentioned¹⁸. The pluralist political thinking of the time produced outside the headquarters of the traditionalist and the radical Right and laying down

blueprints for institutional constructions grounded on the constitutional recognition of group differentiation has been related more systematically, by contrast, to the political sociology of neo-corporatism¹⁹. An occasional perspective taken on the interplay between the (early) New Deal flirtation with corporatist schemes—anticipating the postwar appropriation of the same schemes within the democratic camp—and the fascist ideology discovered the former as insidiously indebted to the latter, instead of evolving on a different typological path (thus raising doubts regarding the validity of the entire enterprise of typology formation)²⁰. Maybe of greatest relevance in this connection is, however, a pleading advanced as part of a strenuous effort of demolishing the credentials of the “corporatist myth” coming from the fascist years within the Italian culture, and keen to warn against any possible fascination with the model of corporatism that could arise by contamination from the school of comparative studies inaugurated by Schmitter²¹. Should this sound as a warning with resonance in other national contexts participating to the elaboration of the same (trans-national) interwar myth?

Up to the present, the case of Romania has rather been established as unable to offer a significant clue for an overall reconstruction of the history of corporatism. It might be said that Schmitter himself has contributed to this more than any other authority in the field, by his description of

Manoilescu’s works as nurtured overwhelmingly by foreign trends of thought and addressed primarily to external audiences, without roots of any depth in the cultural and ideological life of the country²². An impressive historical account dealing with the Romanian context of Manoilescu’s theory of economic protectionism for the sake of comparing it with the Latin American context of dependency economics has done very little for filling this gap, in so far as it did not proceed to contextualize *The Century of Corporatism* in the same manner²³. With only one exception²⁴, local fascism has been depicted in the comparative surveys as basically unaffected by corporatist ideas²⁵. No matter the central place ascribed to Manoilescu (as an international figure of the interwar Right) in Schmitter’s revolutionary piece of 1974, it seems that it does not make much sense to beware from the danger of deriving from the same piece and the literature it has inspired an inclination of shaping an idealized image of the functioning of corporatist institutional designs and social practices in Romania of the pre-communist period.

In spite of all these, it might be argued that the Romanian interwar setting is more appropriate than the Italian one as a ground for testing systematically the historical heuristic value of the theoretical model of corporatism elaborated by reference to the postwar neo-corporatist arrangements (and to their sequels of the governance variety). The theory of

Manoilescu has recently been discovered as more deeply intertwined with the other strands of the Right than it was previously considered²⁶, only in order for the entire welter of right-wing corporatist advocacies to be identified as emerging (unlike the Italian experiment of top-down and ideologically driven attempt at building a corporatist state) from within a large segment of the local movement of the professional associations, with a white-collar predominance, originally exposing ideological views of a liberal kind, employing the corporatist view for attaining objectives of the sort and even fighting over the 1930's a rearguard battle against the nationalist authoritarian interpretations of the same design (including Manoilescu's)²⁷. As part of this account—and although the local post-communist didactic treatments of the welfare state provisions and mechanisms have not made room for the notion of corporatism as a designation of the devices of interest intermediation between capital, labor and the state²⁸—, the model of Schmitter has proven of use as a support for taking a departure from the entrenched interpretation of the growth of welfare institutions in the pre-communist period, thus shedding light on the participation of the corporatist

idea—alongside the syndicalist one—to the process surveyed²⁹.

For reasons already alluded to above, this partial historical validation of the 1974 model built by reference to Manoilescu that appears to come from a closer research of his context is most likely to go together with blurring the distinctions—constitutive to the model—between the “societal” (or liberal, and primarily western) and the “statist” (or authoritarian, and quintessentially developmentalist) versions of corporatist practices (to the extent that grass roots, bottom up incentives towards corporatism were present in the Romanian setting, taking precedence on the theory indicated by Schmitter to exhibit best among all those recorded by the history of ideas in the field the tenets of the rival variety). This must not hide to us, however, the stark divide existing here between the syndicalist and the corporatist designs—each of them connected with specific interests within the associational world of professional representation—that makes hard to fit the case into a loosely defined evolution of “intermediary institutions” stretching smoothly—and across the 1945 divide—from the emergence of corporatist institutional devices to the spread of governance practices.

Note

¹ Paul F. Kjaer, “Introduction”, in Eva Hartmann, Paul F. Kjaer, eds., *The*

Evolution of Intermediary Institutions in Europe. From

- Corporatism to Governance*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015, pp. 1-2.
- 2 Otto Newman, *The Challenge of Corporatism*, Macmillan, London, 1981, pp. IX-X.
 - 3 Charles S. Maier, "'Fictitious Bonds... of Wealth and Law': on the Theory and Practice of Interest Representation", in *In Search of Stability. Explorations in Historical Political Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 225-226 (the article first published in 1981).
 - 4 Raoul Audouin, P. Lhoste-Lachaume, *Le corporatisme, pseudo-remède contre l'étatisme*, Editions SEDIF, Paris, 1962.
 - 5 Hal Draper, "Neo-corporatists and Neo-reformers", in *New Politics*, Fall 1961, p. 100.
 - 6 R. E. Pahl, J. T. Winkler, "The Coming Corporatism", in *Challenge*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1975, p. 30.
 - 7 Wolfgang Streeck, Lane Kenworthy, "Theories and Practices of Neo-corporatism", in Thomas Janoski et al., eds., *Handbook of Political Sociology. States, Civil Society and Globalization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 441-460.
 - 8 Philippe C. Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?", in *The Review of Politics*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1974, p. 93.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
 - 11 Gerhard Lehbruch, "Liberal Corporatism and Party Government", in *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1977, p. 92.
 - 12 Wyn Grant, "Introduction", in Wyn Grant, ed., *The Political Economy of Corporatism*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1985, p. 4.
 - 13 Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?", p. 88.
 - 14 Howard J. Wiarda, *Corporatism and Comparative Politics. The Other Great 'Ism'*, M. E. Sharpe, New York, 1997.
 - 15 Idem, "Toward a Model for the Study of Political Change in the Iberian-Latin Tradition: the Corporative Model", in *World Politics*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1973, p. 222.
 - 16 Idem, "The Political Sociology of a Concept: Corporatism and the 'Distinct Tradition'", in *The Americas*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2009, pp. 99-100.
 - 17 José Luís Cardoso, Pedro Mendoça, "Corporatism and Beyond: an Assessment of Recent Literature", *ICS Working Papers* 1, 2012.
 - 18 Antonio Costa Pinto, "Fascism, Corporatism and the Crafting of Authoritarian Institutions in Interwar European Dictatorships", in Antonio Costa Pinto, Aristotle Kallis, eds., *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014, pp. 87-117.
 - 19 Cécile Laborde, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000.
 - 20 James Q. Whitman, "Of Corporatism, Fascism, and the First New Deal", in *The American Journal of Comparative Law*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1991, pp. 747-777.
 - 21 Gianpasquale Santomassimo, *La terza via fascista. Il mito del corporativismo*, Carocci Editore, Roma, 2006, pp. 248-250.
 - 22 Philippe C. Schmitter, "Reflections on Mihail Manoilescu and the Political Consequences of Delayed-

- Dependent Development on the Periphery of Western Europe”, in Kenneth Jowitt, ed., *Social Change in Romania, 1860-1940. A Debate on Development in a European Nation*, University of California, Institute of International Studies, Berkeley, 1978, pp. 117-139.
- ²³ Joseph L. Love, *Crafting the Third World. Theorizing Underdevelopment in Rumania and Brasil*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996, pp. 71-98.
- ²⁴ A. James Gregor, *Faces of Janus. Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, pp. 176-178.
- ²⁵ Costa Pinto, “Fascism, Corporatism and the Crafting of Authoritarian Institutions in Interwar European Dictatorships”, p. 105.
- ²⁶ Victor Rizescu, “Developmental Ideology or Regenerative Nationalism? Competing Strands of the Romanian Right before World War II”, part I: “Corporatism between Liberalism and the Right”, in *Revista istorică*, vol. 25, nos. 5-6, 2014, pp. 557-592.
- ²⁷ Idem, “Social Policy and the Corporatist Design: a Romanian Experience of Reluctant Intermingling”, in *Sfera politicii*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2016, pp. 22-30.
- ²⁸ Șerban Beligrădeanu, Ion Traian Ștefănescu, *Dicționar de drept al muncii*, Lumina Lex, București, 1997, pp. 184-186.
- ²⁹ Victor Rizescu, “De la emanciparea muncii la protecția socială: politica reprezentării profesionale în România la începutul secolului XX”, in *Polis. Revistă de științe politice*, vol. 4, no. 4 (n. s.), 2016, pp. 175-184.

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