

RESEARCH PROPOSAL FOR PH.D THESIS

‘Social Partnership in the Greek System of Industrial Relations’

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INTRODUCTION- RESEARCH PROBLEM

During the last decade a significant part of the academic literature on Employment Relations has been devoted to analysing the economic and social record of Social Partnership (SP). This has been in the context of an escalating trend among enterprises towards organisational restructuring and flexibility, and the overt shift of employees' attitudes and demands towards job security and quality of working conditions. In many extreme cases some authors have identified Social Partnership as the only viable approach to contemporary industrial relations (IR), a panacea able to remedy the distortions of global capitalism and outflank the sclerotic character of neo-corporatist decision-making structures. Conversely, others have argued about the treacherous pervasive function of partnership, which constitutes a '*poisoned chalice*' for unionism and a '*Trojan Horse*' of unions' erosion (Marchington, 2000; Claydon, 1998)¹.

The current thesis aims to investigate the particularities of the conceptualisation and the practical implementation of consensual initiatives in the Greek IR context. The latter is frequently characterised as an '*immature*' IR system, mainly due to the weakness of the social partners and the relevant organised institutions to achieve a position of influence in the socio-economic development (Kritsantonis, 1998). That is, partly, a product of the historical evolution of Greek industrial relations and the profound governmental paternalism of Greek labour movement.

The emergence and evolution of the Greek IR context is tightly interwoven with the political history of the Greek State. Greece won its independence and its democratic constitution much later than other European countries and the Greek union movement was severely suppressed during long periods of dictatorships (Fakiolas, 1985). Thus, Greek unionism was unable to keep pace with the rest of West European countries, where the seeds of industrialisation bred the urge for the formation of the first trade unions from the start of 19th century². This considerable time lag, regarding the institutionalisation of the Greek labour movement, accompanied with the adherence of the state to a legalistic approach on IR issues have formed a '*legal-administrative*' environment for labour relations, which has subsequently influenced the mentality and the actions of the national IR actors (Ioannou, 1999). Repeated -and in many cases unrefined- governmental interventions have endeavoured to manipulate the entire labour movement, in order to achieve specific political, economic and social ends. The most common means for the realisation of this tactic was the legal path and a series of suppressive laws, concerning the restriction of free collective negotiations, unionisation and strike activity.

Furthermore, factional rivalry within the union movement and the considerable decentralisation of bargaining power constitute additional obstacles to the unions adopting a more '*responsible*' role in the Greek IR context. Hence, unions have often reacted destructively against the policies of employers and governments, instead of pursuing a more positive role. At present, despite the institutional and legal alignment, the Greek labour movement has not managed to be utterly transformed from a quasi-state

¹ More extensive references available upon request.

² Start of 19th century in England, mid-19th century in France, Germany, and Belgium.

organisation into an autonomous social partner, which represents a vital part of civil society (Ioannou, 1998).

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Greek industrial relations (and in particular partnership arrangements) have not been so far the object of a multidimensional and interdisciplinary scientific approach (Spiropoulos, 1998). Most of the existing studies are focused on the political or legal aspect of labour issues, giving therefore a restricted view of this multilateral field. This urgent need for an 'IR' approach on this theme becomes more intensive if we consider the idiosyncratic characteristics of the Greek IR system, which is marked by the continued presence of class politics and a segmented bargaining structure. For that reason, it would be quite interesting to be analysed and highlighted in comparison with other South European IR models. Thus, this research topic has a great potential for future investigation and analysis, shedding an original light on the dynamics of the Greek SP model and stimulating the comparative approach and study of industrial relations. Additionally, the ambition of that research is to rouse the interest of the academic community in Greek IR and subsequently to promote the further development of the field in Greece.

RESEARCH QUESTION

- *'What is the content and the mode of implementation of social partnership agreements between the Greek social partners at different levels of collective negotiations?'*

SUBSIDIARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the form and perspective of 'Social Dialogue' in the Greek context of Industrial Relations?
2. What are the core issues that have been subjects of partnership negotiations between the Greek IR actors?
3. What is the optimum level of partnership negotiations in the Greek IR system? How can be achieved and what would be the repercussions for the future structure of collective bargaining?
4. To what extent the strategies of the Greek social partners can influence the nature and future form of bargaining structures?
5. Are the social partners capable of dealing with the novel challenges of labour market restructuring, competitive pressures, 'flexible' work structures and arrangements, demographic 'greying', new skill requirements?
6. What are the central characteristics and idiosyncrasies of the Greek approach to Social Partnership?
7. What are the '*different paths*' that have been followed by the IR actors and why?
8. Is there sufficient and significant evidence regarding the implementation of partnership agreements and what are the difficulties in measuring the outcomes?
9. What is the association (if there is any) between the implementation of partnership agreements and performance requirements (at different levels of implementation)?

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

The proliferation of 'Social Dialogue'³ and consensus between the Greek social partners faces structural and functional limitations. This phenomenon is not merely an outcome of the enduring interventions of the political parties that foster the manipulation of the trade union movement. It is also a result of the limited binding ability of the central agreements *vis-à-vis* the decentralised negotiations at the lower levels, which constitute the recent trend in the

³ Primarily in cases of incomes policy peak-level negotiations.

Greek IR context. On the top of that, most of the relevant initiatives towards social partnership are focused on incomes policy issues, being always under the catalytic ‘shadow’ of government’s presence (which merely wants to ‘whitewash’ predecided governmental decisions by giving them a social consensus aroma) (Ioannou, 1998; Koutroukis and Tzekinis, 1998). The reversion of the above climate requires a mutual clarification of the relationships between TUs, the state and the political parties, followed by the ‘weaning’ of employee organisations from state financing. This last perspective, combined with the utter disengagement of TUs from their political bonds, will underpin unions’ role as an independent industrial actor and will subserve the aim of union democracy, by eliminating the gap between leadership (politically-opportunistically orientated in many cases) and the rank and file (Spyropoulos, 1998; Kouzis, 1999; Ioannou, 1999). In a nutshell, what is required is a well-articulated structure of autonomous social partners (TUs and employer organisations), who are competent and professional enough to get involved in constructive bargaining with each other and with state representatives, in order to regulate collectively certain IR issues and further the interests of their members (Ioannou, 1999; Lixouriotis, 1999).

However, during the last decade we have witnessed a series of governmental initiatives aiming at the modernisation of the IR system and the gradual emancipation of the Greek social partners. These innovative steps encompass the replacement of the obsolete⁴ system of compulsory arbitration by a newly established voluntary system of conciliation and arbitration, the institutionalisation of individual employment rights and benefits and a *priori* consultation with the social partners regarding labour legislation (Kritsanonis, 1998; Spyropoulos, 1998). Moreover, a changing process seems to be underway in the last couple of years, which endeavours to eliminate the climate of mistrust among the IR actors and to facilitate the amplification of co-operative initiatives amid Greek TUs and employer organisations. This evolution does not pursue the complete ‘ostracism’ of government’s role as a social partner. On the contrary, it cultivates a healthy and viable type of tripartism, in which each actor plays an equivalent role in the formation of a joint view of national competitiveness and of a new type of solidarity between the social partners for the accomplishment of common national objectives (e.g. development of the economy and the human resources – similar to tripartite agreements and social pacts agreed in Italy, Spain, Portugal) (Spyropoulos, 1998; 1998; 1996).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method of analysis followed is comprised of an intensive review of the relevant Greek and English literature, combined with a sufficient amount of empirical evidence. The latter will be derived from an in-depth investigation of pioneer Greek companies (in terms of partnership structures and equivalent cooperative initiatives). These case studies are combined with a parallel analysis of analogous developments and consensual agreements at higher echelons of collective negotiations, namely national and/or sectoral level. The research tools utilised in this investigation are comprised of a set of semi-structured personal interviews with trade union officials, government officials, employers’ organisation representatives, CEOs, personnel managers and individual employees, together with a detailed review of secondary data (relevant academic literature, statistical figures, research documents, databases).

⁴ The above assertion is justified by the fact that straight after the abolition of the system of compulsory arbitration there was a gradual decay of the role of arbitration as a whole, with a sharp decline in the number of industrial disputes resolved by arbitration (65.1% in 1986 – 16.6% in 1998) (Ioannou, 1999). In parallel with that, during the 1990’s there is a precipitous growth of collective agreements reached on the company and sectoral level –which were not allowed by the previous IR system-, a fact that facilitates the adjustment of central, peak-level agreements according to the needs of social partners on lower levels.