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Explaining Corruption

EDITED BY
ROBERT WILLIAMS

THE POLITICS OF CORRUPTION 1

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Edited by

Robert Williams

*Professor of Politics
University of Durham, UK*

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Explaining Corruption

The Politics of Corruption

Series Editor: Robert Williams

Professor of Politics

University of Durham, UK

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Robert Williams
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Robert Williams and Robin Theobald
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Introduction

Robert Williams

Corruption is ancient and modern. History is replete with cases of bribery and nepotism but the academic study of corruption is primarily a late twentieth century phenomenon. While historians have recorded the details of individual scandals and *cause célèbres*, the dominant perspective has been one which sees corruption as a deviant and probably transitory activity. Individual scoundrels and scandals attracted attention and lent colour to otherwise mundane accounts of economic and political history. At the same time, the rise and fall of political machines in the USA and the elimination of rotten boroughs and other forms of electoral malpractice in the UK also attracted critical attention. The supposition was that corruption, like adolescence, is a phase which countries go through before they reach maturity. Thus corruption was either linked to the demonization of particular individuals or seen as a particular stage or point on the path to modernity.

The study of corruption was transformed by the success of the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The winds of change which blew through Africa and Asia created a large number of newly independent states. The study of the politics of underdeveloped, less developed, developing countries and now the South (the nomenclature shifted over time) became a social science industry and, it was widely noted, corruption was a major problem. The key question was whether corruption in such countries was different from or similar to corruption in developed countries. The developed countries had apparently experienced corrupt phases before getting corruption under control through a combination of political, judicial and administrative reforms. From this perspective, corruption was associated with forms of political and economic immaturity which educational and social progress would overcome. But subsequent events combined to render this sanguine interpretation and prognosis both inadequate and inaccurate.

It became clear that the corruption experienced in some newly independent states was pervasive and deep seated. It was simultaneously appreciated that the 'take off' phase of economic growth seen as necessary for political and social development had not materialized. Development was seen as the cure for all manner of social and economic ills and, without it, what was once seen as a transitional phase looked more like a permanent condition. Economic 'take off' in a global economy dominated by powerful industrialized states proved more difficult than was once envisaged. It was no longer legitimate to assume that development would resolve the multiple problems besetting the South and, if development was stalled, it was necessary to tackle the specific problems directly.

But just as the perception that corruption was a major problem in developing countries emerged, confidence in its decline in developed countries began to evaporate. The incidence of political scandals was hard to reconcile with the belief that corruption was a problem which had been solved. The implosion of the Italian political system after the 'tangentopoli' revelations revealed how deep seated a problem corruption still is in some developed states.

The last bastion of self righteousness was Britain where, as late as the 1970s and 1980s, public figures ritually extolled the high ethical standards that prevailed in British public life. When scandals did occur, they were attributed to the odd 'rotten apple' in an otherwise wholesome barrel. But the 'cash for questions' affair in the early 1990s set off a chain of events which proposed substantial structural reform in British government and politics. The corruption eruption is therefore a global rather than a regional phenomenon.

The perception of corruption has radically changed. Where it was once seen as deviant, peripheral and transitory, it is now seen as common, deep rooted and permanent. But is this only a problem of perception or does it signify a decline in standards of behaviour? Are corruption scandals the exceptions that prove the rule or only the tip of an iceberg? Is the multilateral action against corruption in the 1990s evidence of a timely response to a freshly perceived phenomenon or a sign of institutional panic borne of years of policy neglect?

Like poverty, corruption has always been with us. Like prosperity for all, absolute integrity in public life is rhetorical or idealistic rather than practical and real. Eliminating corruption completely from public life is an impossible dream. But electorates and citizenry in both North and South seem increasingly intolerant of corruption and its associated costs and consequences. Allegations of corruption have demonstrated a unique capacity to generate demonstrations and riots against regimes in many parts of the world. And just as the dispossessed of the world are angered by corruption, the priority and attention it attracts in the international agencies and financial institutions have reached unprecedented heights. The World Bank, the United Nations, US Aid and the UK Department for International Development are all parts of the consensus which argues that corruption is a major cause of poverty and a serious obstacle to development. The consensus further holds that something must be done, new policies devised and programmes of action implemented. This represents a significant shift in both policy and priorities. Before the late 1980s, corruption was seen by donor bodies as something regrettable but probably inescapable. In some cases, the geopolitical role of dictators such as Mobutu in Zaire was seen as important enough to condone the massive corruption associated with their regimes. The end of the Cold War removed the need to support every anti-communist regime, however brutal or corrupt, and produced a sea change in the attitudes and policies of the World Bank and other bodies. What was once perceived as undesirable but tolerable is now seen as completely unacceptable. Governments which have not responded to international calls for firm action against corruption, for example, Kenya, have found their flows of international assistance being reduced or even cut off.

Thus we see that interest in corruption has increased dramatically in a number of ways; corruption in the South has been identified as a major problem and many governments are taking active steps to combat it. Contrary to some expectations, corruption in the North has not declined or disappeared and there are heightened levels of political and public interest in confronting it. The international donor community has now recognized corruption as a serious obstacle to development. If corruption has always been with us, it has rarely attracted the intensity of global attention it now receives.

Fatalists would say that, because corruption has always been with us, it always will be. Its causes are rooted in basic human weaknesses such as greed, and therefore attempts to control corruption are largely futile. But this ignores the fact that levels of corruption vary dramatically from country to country. Greed may be a constant factor in human life but political and economic structures and processes clearly play important roles in determining to what extent this vice

can be exercised. In terms of corruption, Denmark is very different from Nigeria but, more interestingly, so is Botswana. There can be striking differences in the incidence of corruption within continents, within regions, between adjacent states and even within states. In some states in the USA corruption is a way of life, while in others it is virtually unknown. The same observation could be made about corruption in local authorities in the UK.

Corruption not only varies from place to place but also from time to time. In every state's history, there are periods when corruption appears to be peculiarly high and others when its incidence seems to decline. The ebb and flow of corruption is difficult to predict but what is certain is that claims to have won the 'war against corruption' or to have found the cure for the 'cancer of corruption' are at least premature and probably misconceived. Corruption offers no grounds for complacency and experience of tackling corruption suggests that success is usually temporary and partial.

The 'corruption eruption' has given the subject a much higher profile in both the academic and policy-making worlds. Whereas corruption experts were once few in number and had difficulty in persuading publishers and journals to publish their research, the flow of publications on corruption has now turned into a raging torrent. It has become very difficult, even for specialists, to monitor, let alone read, everything written about corruption in newspapers, magazines, journals, books, think tank papers and the official reports, inquiries and publications of national and international governmental bodies.

This new collection of articles is therefore extremely timely. Corruption is a jungle and there is an urgent need for an authoritative guide to the flora and fauna. It would be a bold individual who laid claim to expert status in all aspects of corruption and, when invited to edit this collection, the need for specialist help was apparent. By a fortuitous piece of timing, the research group investigating corruption and anti-corruption strategies on behalf of the UK Department for International Development had just begun its work and assistance from my research colleagues, Alan Doig, Rachel Flanary, Jon Moran and Robin Theobald, was quickly forthcoming. The task was more challenging than originally anticipated because the literature is now substantial. Much of the literature is unsatisfactory in that there are significant problems of gaps, overlaps and duplication. In terms of geographical coverage, corruption has been extensively researched in some countries, patchily studied in others and hardly considered at all in still others. In dividing the material, it was difficult to arrive at criteria that allowed a clear demarcation between the volumes. Corruption seems to be a subject which invites varying mixtures of theory and empiricism, micro and macro analysis, explanation and prescription, and case studies and comparative analysis.

The first volume in this collection, *Explaining Corruption*, is more conceptual than empirical. But despite the giant lava flow of publications from the 'corruption eruption', the literature on this aspect of corruption still generates more heat than light. Many contributions appear ideological in character and corruption remains a highly contested concept. We still lack firmly grounded theories of corruption and the shortage of analytically informed empirical inquiries continues. Too many participants in the contemporary corruption debate content themselves with resurrecting tired clichés about the topic or with slaying long-dead dragons. In selecting material for this collection, two criteria have been employed; first, the contributions say something important, different or interesting about corruption. This is not to say that the editor necessarily agrees with what is said but rather indicates that the articles are intellectually provocative and stimulating and should be read by all serious students of corruption. The

second and related criterion is that the article marks a particular point or phase in the study of corruption or has influenced the ways in which academics and policy analysts have subsequently thought about corruption.

The volume is concerned with the different ways in which scholars have sought to understand corruption and the range of theories and perspectives they have used to explain it. Thus it includes articles on definitions, on conceptual classification and distinctions, and on the salience of particular disciplines to the key explanatory problems posed by corruption. Such articles address a variety of deceptively simple questions: What is corruption? What form does it take? How can it be distinguished from similar or related concepts? What are its principal causes? What are its major political and economic consequences? In seeking the answers to these questions, scholars display a spectrum of rival and apparently incompatible theoretical frameworks and analytical approaches. In their attempts to understand and explain the concept, corruption has become something of a disciplinary football to be kicked backward and forward. It began life as a political or philosophical concept but was subsequently given a legal character before being appropriated successively by sociologists, anthropologists and, most recently, by economists. The issue remains of how to judge the outcome of this interdisciplinary competition for conceptual ownership.

This intellectual competition mirrored changes in broader political and ideological struggles. The collapse of the Soviet Empire had profound implications for the international order and patterns of political support. But while the perception of corruption has been dramatically reshaped by these international changes, the ground was already laid in changes in the internal politics of the USA and the UK. Ideological shifts in the USA and UK in the 1980s had implications not merely for the domestic policies of those nations but also for their perceptions of the external world and its problems. Thus, when President Reagan observed that 'government is not the answer to our problems, it is the problem', he pithily encapsulated a cluster of attitudes, ideas and policy strategies. This perception was brought to bear not only on the US budget deficit but on the debt crises of the South. The perceived need to limit the role of the state, to 'downsize' the federal government and to elevate the market and promote the virtues of individual responsibility and self reliance all made their impact on the ways in which international institutions conducted their affairs. Such institutions became more receptive to certain kinds of neo-liberal message which were incorporated into institutional thinking and policy making.

The intellectual ascendancy of neo-liberal thinking and the political dominance of Reagan and Thatcher helped ensure that the new forms of conditionality introduced into foreign assistance programmes would reflect the view that government was often the enemy of development and the prime source of corruption. To some, corruption was the unpleasant but inevitable by-product of the unwarranted distortion of markets by governments. The logic suggested that when the size and role of government were reduced, the opportunities and incentives for corruption would similarly decline. But this framework of analysis ran into a number of problems. In many contexts, there is an absence of other competent players ready to take up the roles previously performed by government. It seems that, if some activities or services are to continue, there is often no alternative to the government performing the role. The key policy prescriptions of neo-liberalism were privatization and de-regulation, and they brought their own crop of corruption-related problems. In many cases, privatization amounted to little more than the licensed theft of state property. To those unable to secure

basic services without making an illicit payment, the issue of public or private ownership is largely irrelevant.

There are obvious indications that neo-liberalism has passed its political zenith and, while economists are still prominent in the contemporary corruption literature, their prescriptions have been modified in the light of privatization and de-regulation experience. Some current research suggests that, while corruption is obviously linked to the role and performance of the state, a more appropriate and effective response is not rolling back the state but reforming it. The debate goes on but it is clear that, in different periods, contrasting paradigms have dominated both academic and political discourse.

The first volume is therefore intended to set the scene for the volumes that follow. It identifies the evolution of the theoretical debates, their points of agreement and disagreement, and considers how corruption can best be understood. The range of contributions suggests that corruption is not a simple phenomenon susceptible to monocausal explanation. The intention here is not to resolve the debate but to expose more clearly its origins, development and current parameters.

The second and third volumes offer a global perspective on corruption. *Corruption in the Developing World* includes some selections that are intended to convey how thinking about corruption in such contexts has evolved. Some early contributions sought to explain corruption in terms familiar to students of American politics. Comparisons were made with political machines and with spoils and patronage politics. Max Weber's hitherto neglected concept of patrimonialism was re-discovered and subsequent analysis has conclusively shown that the social and political costs of patrimonial forms of politics have been extremely high for less developed countries. Most of the articles in this volume have been chosen to illustrate the dismal consequences for citizens, governments and the economy of the pervasive illegal appropriation of public resources. In extreme cases, the ravages of corruption have been so damaging as to culminate in acute civil strife and state collapse. The volume begins, however, with an article which demonstrates the scope and potential for corruption by presenting a peasant's eye view of the world and its dangers.

The other readings offer a representative range of case studies as possible given that Latin America is under-represented in the literature in English on corruption. But, even here, the selection illustrates the characteristic problems of institutionalized corruption, drug-related corruption and the transition from dictatorship to democracy, as well as an overview of the continental issues. In comparison, African states are relatively new entities and their political origins render their institutional structures particularly susceptible to abuse and, in extreme cases such as Zaire, this can lead to the effective privatization of the state. In such contexts a growing proportion of the population withdraw or 'exit' into subsistence farming or into the informal economy by means of smuggling, black marketeering and banditry. Corruption in its 'grand' and 'petty' forms plays a major role in the political and economic life of the continent but there are still exceptions and an article is included on Botswana which examines how one state has managed to combine political stability, administrative effectiveness and economic growth with low levels of corruption.

Selecting examples from Asia was a particular challenge given its somewhat imprecise geographical identity and the vast range of societies and states. The choices were made on the rough and ready assumption that it is possible to identify three broad types of Asian state: those which have endured long periods of authoritarian rule in which the military has been the

dominant force, such as Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines; formal democracies, albeit with an authoritarian tinge, such as Malaysia and India; and the command economies in the process of transition, such as the People's Republic of China and Vietnam. The final selections deal with the issue of to what extent certain developmental processes, notably marketization and democratization, exacerbate or ameliorate the problem of corruption in the developing world.

The third volume, *Corruption in the Developed World*, includes articles on Europe, North America, Australia and Japan. The contributions include reflections on corruption and social change, corruption and organized crime, and, in the Italian and Russian cases, reflections on the notion of structural corruption. They offer discussions of the inter-relationship of corruption with political culture and party finance, and with concepts of democracy, accountability and public ethics. While many analysts have principally focused their attention on the less developed states, the corruption scandals which have afflicted most developed states in the past twenty years have stimulated new analyses and revisions of once strongly held convictions about standards of public integrity in the developed world.

In some cases, the source of corruption can be traced to a particular characteristic of the political system; for example, campaign finance practices in the United States or the interweaving of party and state structures in Italy. In other cases, political transformation of the Russian sort has created new incentives and opportunities and has exchanged one kind of corrupt system for another.

Complacency has given way to concern and, across the developed world, anti-corruption reform is high on political agendas. It is no longer possible to tolerate corruption, to shrug one's shoulders and accept that a certain degree of nepotism and fraud is an unavoidable consequence of a particular national political style. Political cultures may vary but, as the European Commissioners discovered in 1999, it is increasingly the norm for common and rigorous standards to be applied. Countries which place a premium on combating corruption in the less developed world find it morally and politically necessary to tackle corruption at home.

The fourth volume in this series, *Controlling Corruption*, reflects the global consensus that corruption is a major problem which has a variety of negative impacts on political, economic and social systems around the world. But the consensus which shares the conviction that something must be done does not extend to agreement on what exactly needs to be done. If corruption is a common problem, are there common solutions? While the Independent Commission Against Corruption in Hong Kong is frequently hailed as a success, attempts to replicate it in very different political and economic contexts are fraught with difficulty.

This volume includes articles from the ever expanding literature on anti-corruption strategies. Anti-corruption strategies can be initiated at a variety of levels; international, regional, national, sub-national and local. The impetus for reform can come from international bodies such as the World Bank and from donor countries in the form of specific assistance and aid conditionality. But reform can also be domestically driven and evidence suggests that, without strong political will and commitment, reform programmes are likely to be cosmetic rather than substantive. But even where political commitment is not wholehearted, the demands and protests emanating from civil society can induce reluctant political leaders to conduct anti-corruption purges.

The articles selected represent different strands of thinking about how best to tackle corruption. Some approaches are holistic, arguing that corruption issues are a sub-set of governance problems and the governance problems are a manifestation of structural and systemic

problems of the political economy of particular societies. The aim here is comprehensive reform but, however laudable the aims, it is not yet clear how such grand designs can be implemented. Even if wholesale reform of economies, societies and governance is thought feasible, it is still necessary to determine priorities, to provide co-ordination and to work out the sequencing of reform measures. The costs of anti-corruption strategies need to be identified, as does their impact on the effectiveness of organizations. Research suggests that striving to eliminate corruption completely can be counterproductive when the need to avoid corruption takes priority over achieving the aims and objectives of the organization. Some reformers have more limited ambitions and reject the holistic approach in favour of targeting the most vulnerable parts of state activity; for example, customs services and procurement procedures.

The debate on corruption and anti-corruption strategies continues because it is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. Few reforms to date have been completely successful and some have been counterproductive. Anti-corruption strategies are beset by problems of transferability, sustainability, cost effectiveness, sequencing and intent. The choice of strategy has implications for different elements of the government. A focus on investigating corruption has obvious implications for the criminal justice system, its resourcing and independence. If the focus is on prevention rather than retribution, or on attacking the causes rather than the consequences of corruption, different considerations apply. All require state resources, and decisions have to be made about whether the concern is the loss of state income or the diversion of state expenditure into unnecessary and expensive projects. Where low level, 'petty' corruption is concerned, anti-corruption strategies sometimes focus on empowering the public through information and access in order to hold local officials to account. If grand and petty corruption both flourish best in secrecy, openness and transparency are often seen as key elements in anti-corruption strategies. The contributions assembled here do not definitively resolve the above issues but rather offer a range of perspectives and approaches which illustrate the scale and difficulty of the task.

Taken together, the four volumes offer a representative, up-to-date and authoritative guide to the literature on corruption. They do not purport to be comprehensive because the literature has expanded so rapidly in the past ten years. Hard choices had to be made about what to exclude and what the balance should be between academic and policy-related literature and between theoretical and empirical work. The result is four volumes which contain, in the editor's judgement, the most informative, important and influential articles written on corruption in the last third of the twentieth century. The intention is to provide students of corruption with a substantial body of material which shows how the subject has developed and how it is currently understood and explained. Volumes 2 and 3 illustrate and explain the scope, incidence and consequences of corruption in a variety of political settings in the developed and developing worlds. The decision was made to place Russia in the developed world although, sadly, it is recognized that there is now a case for locating it in the developing world.

Corruption differs from many other subjects in that those who study it are often committed to combat it. Volume 4 is therefore dedicated to illustrating the variety of prescriptions that have been presented as ways of controlling corruption. Although the problems which bedevil anti-corruption strategies are, as *Controlling Corruption* shows, considerable, that should not deter reformers. Academics may be content to define, conceptualize, theorize, interpret and explain but detachment is difficult when the pernicious effects of corruption are felt across the globe. Perhaps Karl Marx had corruption as well as class struggle in mind when he wrote that

‘philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it’. But we first need to recognize and understand the enemy before it can be overcome. These volumes are offered as a contribution to that vital process.

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