

Corruption in the Contemporary World: Theory, Practice and Hotspots

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Corruption in the Contemporary World: Theory, Practice and Hotspots Edited by Jonathan Mendilow and Ilan Peleg. London, Lexington Books, 2014. 271pp.

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Corruption undermines good government. It trashes public value and engenders distrust in political institutions and processes. There are also tangible harms such as poor economic performance, poor quality social and education services, unsafe infrastructure, not to mention a breakdown in the rule of law and damage to the environment.

The study of corruption is a mixed bag, occasionally claimed by political scientists, and also occasionally claimed by many other disciplines, but rarely owned. Explaining comes in many shades. Sometimes where you stand on the root causes depends on where you sit. Psychologists will focus on individual behavioural characteristics, and anthropologists will tell us that societies are built around status and obligation, and gifts and bribes are socially structured. Philosophers will debate exhaustively the principles that underpin ethics, and historians will tell us it was worse in the old days. Lawyers will talk about deficiencies in laws, and processes of legality and compliance, while criminologists will apply crime prevention theories to corruption. Economists will put up a bunch of equations and make assumptions, often in algebra, while business academics won't necessarily know what is being discussed.

This book by political scientists is also a mixed bag, but it offers good insights into political relationships and follows the Burkean perception that corruption threatens the legitimacy of the political order. The opening chapter, by the editors spells out a definition of corruption that goes to the very heart of political theory and political analysis "the use of public office to undermine the norms delineating the boundaries separating social and economic power from political authority in order to advance individual, group or institutional benefits" (p.14-15). The editors show good analytical skills as they blend theory and reality in their two chapters.

The originality of this book is that it moves beyond the flouting of the boundaries of public office to a broader spectrum of social and political relationships that results in political aggrandisement and illicit enrichment. In many cases this is done legally, but of course, not ethically. The tension between morality and legality runs through this book.

Many of the authors are from Rider University, and it is good to see the spread of interest in corruption in one political science department. As is often the case, the chapters here are

uneven in quality and scope, but some excellent chapters give us a lot to ponder upon. There are chapters which pose theoretical questions and there are chapters which build on themes espoused by the editors, and relate them to specific countries. These chapters offer insights into how corruption affects the polity in parts of Europe, the US, China and the Middle East.

By and large, there is a pessimism about whether corruption can be contained and many chapters demonstrate its rampant nature and ineffectual responses. Italy has tried criminalization, Spain seems to have given up, Austria is corporatised and this creates opportunities where political power meets economic strength, while the Chinese juggernaut just powers on with corruption rampant.

The chapter by the editors on the Arab Spring uses the Burkean definition above, and proposes a diagnosis of the factors that made the revolution. While this is done systematically, events have overtaken the Arab Spring revolutionaries, and each of the regimes has regressed, except perhaps Tunisia, but this has a new set of intractable problems. While the Arab Spring was ostensibly brought on by rampantly cultural corruption there has been no diminution, just a shift in emphasis. This chapter does not give us solutions but it does summarize in six bullet points (p.101) standards of corruption, and follows this with five countervailing arguments as to why new brooms will not be able to sweep clean (p.104). These points make a good base for analysis of corruption in many different settings, and are usefully laid out for teachers and researchers.

Some of the theoretical chapters are disappointing. The anthropological chapter tells us little that we do not already know, that in some cultures nepotism, for example is not a civic problem, but a moral duty, and that the West's view of bribery and nepotism is not the prevailing view in many non-Western cultures.

Chapter 2, on world opinion is badly dated. It analyzes 2006 data and does not refer to any literature after that date. It concludes that the more empowered citizens are, the less likely they are to perceive corruption in their countries. This is simply not so. In many of the countries at the top of the Transparency International lists, the citizens who are empowered are deeply aggrieved by acts of corruption which would not raise an eyebrow in poorer countries. They see their countries as corrupt when minor breaches come to the fore. This chapter could well leave the reader with correlation fatigue, and little real understanding. Chapter 8 on Corruptible Competition also plays with a lot of data about sleaze, but does not yield a lot of understanding, and this too cites very little recent literature.

There are many types of corruption - it's not just bribes, but there is extortion, conflict of interest, nepotism, pay to play. It happens in different activities, such as developing infrastructure, building things, approving development plans, inspecting things, hiring people, issuing licences etc. It happens in different sectors, in local government, in the sporting sector, the health sector, the mining sector, the energy sector, etc, and corruption is different in different places. This book takes its cue from political theory and starts to give good understanding of the shape and the dynamics. The opening chapter gives us a basis to understand these types and activities and sectors. At times the theory is particularly illuminating, and at other other times one has to imagine hard so as to identify how value

has been added. On balance, the editors have put together a useful volume that gives political scientists a framework to better understand and analyze corruption.