

**The Moral Physics of the Body Politic: Changing Contours of  
Corruption in Western Political Thought**

**Author**

Buchan, Bruce

**Published**

2004

**Conference Title**

APSA Conference - Refereed Papers ([www.adelaide.edu.au/apsa/papers](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/apsa/papers))

**Rights statement**

© The Author(s) 2004. This is the author-manuscript version of this paper. Reproduced in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher. Please refer to the conference's website for access to the definitive, published version.

**Downloaded from**

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/1960>

**Link to published version**

<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/>

**Griffith Research Online**

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

**The Moral Physics of the Body Politic:  
Changing Contours of Corruption in Western  
Political Thought**

Dr. Bruce Buchan

School of Arts, Media and Culture

Griffith University

Refereed paper presented to the  
Australasian Political Studies Association Conference  
University of Adelaide  
29 September – 1 October 2004

'Governance' is an ambiguous term that denotes regulation and control, and when coupled with the appellation 'good', has come to mean something like the conformity of domestic regulatory regimes and activities with an internationally recognised ideal or prescribed standard of conduct. This is a particular characteristic of modern political thought in which the assessment of the worthiness of a regime or political community is held to depend on some kind of 'objective' standard such as how well it protects human rights, or how regularly it holds elections. In Ancient Greek or Medieval thought however, such judgements explicitly depended on an understanding of the virtues that the political community was thought to embody. A prime consideration in the discourse of 'good governance' is that governments should secure the requirements for a healthy domestic economy underpinned by foreign investment.<sup>1</sup> One of these structural requirements is the elimination of 'corruption', forms of behaviour that threaten to subvert the separation of government and economy, and impose wasteful costs.<sup>2</sup> This technocratic view of corruption is well entrenched in recent literature, and owes much to Joseph Nye's influential definition of corrupt activities as those in which public officials violate rules or laws for the sake of private, usually pecuniary gain.<sup>3</sup>

One criticism that has been made of this approach is that it obscures the fact that corruption is a normative concept, its identification depending on some conception of what has been corrupted, and hence of a particular vision of the boundaries supposed to have kept it secure. The identification of political corruption then, assumes an ideal image of what an uncorrupted politics is.<sup>4</sup> Corruption is then not a self-evident category of conduct, but a political concept whose parameters are set by

---

<sup>1</sup> International Monetary Fund, *Good Governance: The IMF's Role*, Washington: IMF, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Dearden, S. 2003. 'The Challenge to Corruption and the International Business Environment.' In *Corruption and Governance in Asia*, ed. J. B. Kidd and F-J. Richter, Houndmills: Palgrave. pp. 27-42

<sup>3</sup> Nye, J. S. 2002. 'Corruption and Political Development: A Cost-benefit Analysis.' In *Political Corruption: Concepts and Contexts*, ed. A. J. Heidenheimer and M. Johnston. 3rd edition, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, p. 284. Also, Rose Ackerman, S. 1999. *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform*. Cambridge: CUP, p. 205.

<sup>4</sup> Philp, M. 1997. 'Defining Political Corruption.' *Political Studies* 45(3): 436-462; Dick, H. 2002. 'Corruption and Good Governance: The New Frontier of Social Engineering.' In *Corruption in Asia: Rethinking the Governance Paradigm*, ed. T. Lindsey and H. Dick. Sydney: Federation Press, p. 72.

an implicit vision of what the political realm actually is.<sup>5</sup> The language of corruption has traditionally played a crucial role in Western political thought in defining the 'health' of the community by its moral qualities, and especially to the emulation of virtue among its members. The emergence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of a language of civilisation however, reconceived the polity as an artefact of governmental activity premised on the separation of public and private interests. Importantly, this meant that the 'political health' of the polity was not held to depend on virtue (or 'political disease' on vice), but on the governmental management of separate but interdependent political, social and economic realms. In tracing the shift between these discourses, corruption emerges as an important indicator of the elasticity of Western political thought. It will also be argued however, that while earlier notions of the 'body politic' privileged expansive understandings of corruption, they also prefigured narrower, more modern definitions.<sup>6</sup>

## 1. The Physics of Change and Corruption

It is a common place of the literature on corruption that the use of the term in the modern sense, to denote the use of public office for private (pecuniary) gain has substantially changed from Ancient Greek and Medieval usages. In Ancient Greek thought, corruption was understood to refer to the process and effects of change.<sup>7</sup> In Aristotle's (384-322BC) physics for example, all earthly bodies are in a constant process of change. Change may be measured in the growth or reduction of a body, but most importantly change may also affect the very substance of a body, determining its 'coming-to-be' (or generation) and 'passing-away' (or corruption).<sup>8</sup> Change of substance is said to have an 'instantaneous' effect of changing one thing

---

<sup>5</sup> Gardiner, J. 2002. 'Defining Corruption.' In *Political Corruption*, pp. 53-4.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance, Hirschman, A.O. 1977. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 39-40, and the note on p. 40; Whelan, F. G. 1996. *Edmund Burke and India: Political Morality and Empire*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, pp. 66-105.

<sup>7</sup> Euben, P. J. 1989. 'Corruption.' In *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. T. Ball et. al. Cambridge: CUP.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, 1930. *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Translator: H H Joachim. In *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. Ross. Vol II, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.317.

into another, not gradually but immediately.<sup>9</sup> As a form of change then, 'corruption' denoted the physical decay, degeneration, or other aberration from the optimal condition of that body.

In the *Ethics*, Aristotle likens moral decay to physical decay by contrasting it with the optimal condition or mean:

...both excessive and insufficient exercise destroy one's strength...  
whereas the right quantity produces, increases and preserves it. So it is the same with temperance, courage and other virtues. The man who shuns and fears everything and stands up to nothing becomes a coward; the man who is afraid of nothing at all, but marches up to every danger, becomes foolhardy. Similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and refrains from none becomes licentious... Thus temperance and courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency and preserved by the mean.<sup>10</sup>

In moral terms then, virtue denoted a carefully judged mean between excess and deficiency. Thus 'corruption' might refer to the process by which a virtue, such as liberality, gives way to vices such as prodigality (wastefulness) or illiberality (meanness). Aristotle seems not to have used the term 'corruption' to refer to any particular vice, but to refer to the fact that a virtuous person may be 'corrupted' by vice.<sup>11</sup> The vices that have come to be associated with corruption as a particular form of action, such as greed or avarice, Aristotle referred to under the vices of licentiousness and prodigality. The licentious, he argued, are especially to blame because they voluntarily surrender to pleasure, while the prodigal are so desirous of making money that they 'take [it] from the wrong sources', and indeed are also licentious in their 'self-indulgence'.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Edel, A. 1982. *Aristotle and his Philosophy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pp. 58-59.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, 1976. *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translator: J. A. K. Thomson. London: Penguin p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, pp. 140, 146-7.

In politics, the problem of personal vice is important because the inability (or unwillingness) to make wise and balanced judgements leads people to harbour grievances and form factions (due to envy or malice), and this, Aristotle maintained, was the chief cause of constitutional change.<sup>13</sup> Aristotle's political thought was coloured by the need to preserve the political community by balancing the ever present tension between the rich and the poor. Rather than opting for a simple ideal type of regime, Aristotle appears to have favoured the supreme need to preserve the political community from dissolution, even to the extent of proffering advice to tyrants on how best to preserve their rule.<sup>14</sup> The political 'mean' Aristotle endorsed was a kind of mixed constitution in which neither democracy, nor monarchy nor aristocracy alone prevails, but the finished form or 'polity' borrows and combines elements of each. While such a community could be described as imperfect, it has the greatest chance of preservation and longevity, and therefore of staving off the horrors of political dissolution.<sup>15</sup> For Aristotle then, the political problem of corruption was not defined by private misuse of public funds, though he recognised this as a problem, but the larger problem of how to prevent the 'corruption' (understood as the degeneration or dissolution) of the polity itself.

## 2. Corruption of the Body Politic

The combination of Aristotelian thought with Christian theology during the Medieval period overlaid the doctrine of the moral mean with measures of moral praise or condemnation in reference to the tenets of divine teaching. In this sense, particular forms of activity such as venality or simony might not be described as 'corrupt', but carried with them strong connotations of the sin of avarice.<sup>16</sup>

According to Coleman, the problem of avarice in Medieval political thought consisted in the immoderate love of money supplanting the love that human beings should have for god or for each other. The solution to the problem of avarice was

---

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, 1962. *The Politics*. Translator: T. A. Sinclair. London: Penguin, p. 300.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 343-351.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 330-31.

<sup>16</sup> McCall, A. 1979. *The Medieval Underworld*. London: Book Club Associates, pp. 24-6.

framed in distinctly Aristotelian terms, requiring the restoration of the 'right order of things' by the exercise of virtues such as liberality.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the key to the public, political well being of the community lay in the exercise of the appropriate virtues by its members. Historians have argued that this conception of the direct relationship of virtue and politics precluded a conception of public office or 'politics' as autonomous realms characterised by disinterested and 'rational' conduct.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, important elements of narrower modern understandings of corruption can be detected in Medieval thought, despite the prevalence of very different images of the political community.

The Medieval image of politics was expressed in terms of an organic unity of the entire community, often envisaged through the analogue of the 'body politic'.<sup>19</sup> As John of Salisbury (1115-1180) described it, the political community could be thought of as consisting in several connected members, just like a human body. The Church, responsible for the spiritual well being of the community, was the 'soul in the body of the republic'; the prince occupies the head and rules subject only to being 'ruled by the soul'; judges and provincial governors are like the political body's sensory organs; those who support the ruler resemble the body's muscles and the peasants are like its feet.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, John's image of the body politic made special mention of the treasury and the need to regulate it:

Treasurers and record-keepers... resemble the shape of the stomach and intestines; these, if they accumulate with great avidity and tenaciously

---

<sup>17</sup> Coleman, J. 1988. 'Property and Poverty.' In *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350-1450*, ed. J.H. Burns. Cambridge: CUP, p. 624.

<sup>18</sup> Swart, K. W. 2002. 'The Sale of Public Offices.' In *Political Corruption*, pp. 96-7; M. Génaux, 'Early Modern Corruption in English and French Fields of Vision.' In *Political Corruption*, pp. 107-8, 111-112. Alternatively see, Waquet, J-C. 1991. *Corruption: Ethics and Power in Florence, 1600-1770*. Translator: L. McCall. Cambridge: Polity, pp. 10-14.

<sup>19</sup> Gierke, O. [1900] 1958. *Political Theories of the Middle Age*. Translator: F. W. Maitland. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 8; and Kantrowicz, E. H. 1957. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 199. Also, Harvey, A. D. 1999. 'The Body Politic: Anatomy of a Metaphor.' *Contemporary Review*, 275 (1603): pp. 85-93.

<sup>20</sup> John of Salisbury. [1154-9] 1990. *Policraticus: of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*. Cambridge: CUP, pp. 66-67.

preserve their accumulation, engender innumerable and incurable diseases so that their infection threatens to ruin the whole body.<sup>21</sup>

What is important here is John's identification of finance as crucial (for nourishment of the body) but dangerous if not properly regulated (causing disease and infection in the body). While John thought it expedient for the ruler to be wealthy, he argued that the ruler must count their wealth as the people's.<sup>22</sup> John also stipulated that no one 'who governs is to accept a present or gift, except of food or drink...', although they ought not to refuse gifts entirely but to exercise moderation.<sup>23</sup> His reasoning here was that it would require 'an inhuman strength to accept from no one; but to accept indiscriminately is most vile; and for all things, most avaricious.' He is clear here also that acceptable gifts include 'perishable', consumable items, and anything in the way of money or property must not 'take on the character of remuneration.' The concerns here certainly pertain to what we would consider today as 'corruption', but John spoke of them under the category of 'avarice', indicating that where such problems occur they indicate a personal failing, an inclination toward excess rather than moderation.

For other Medieval Aristotelians, such as St Thomas Aquinas, corruption could be applied to whole regimes, as in his reference in the title of Chapter 3 of his *On Princely Government*, 'Tyranny, the Corruption of Monarchy, is the Worst Form of Government'.<sup>24</sup> Here as elsewhere, Aquinas applies the Aristotelian framework of virtues to portray corruption as a process of political degeneracy caused by the person of the ruler becoming tyrannical. The hallmark of tyranny was that 'the personal aims of the ruler are sought to the detriment of the common welfare.' The tyrant is thus a ruler who submits to 'passions', is a 'slave to avarice', whose rule flouts the 'law', follows 'caprice', discourages the 'virtue' (*virtus*) of the people,

---

<sup>21</sup> John, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> John, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> John, p. 97. Following quotes from same page.

<sup>24</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, 1965. *On Princely Government*. In *Aquinas Selected Political Writings*, ed. A. P. D'Entreves. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 15. Following quotations from pp. 15, 17-19.



'sow[s] discord' among them, and prevents 'harmony' and 'unity'.<sup>25</sup> Giles of Rome (1243-1316) made a similar connection by implication in speaking of moral 'goodness' as consisting in 'integrity' or 'unity'. Integrity required the control of 'appetite' by 'reason and intellect', but 'when reason dictates one thing and appetite pursues another, which happens in those who have a perverse soul, then the human being is not united but has within him a fissiparousness which deforms him...'.<sup>26</sup> This passage uncovers a understanding of integrity as wholeness, almost completely lost in more recent literature on corruption. It may also suggest a powerful connection to the Koranic term *Rahsua* that implies the dissipation of strong character by surrender to the vice of greed.

In Medieval thought then, corruption meant the process by which a body decays, its members falling away or disintegrating like the putrefying and rotting flesh of the human corpse and its gradual dismemberment as the limbs of the body fall away and the maggots and worms go to work.<sup>27</sup> For Medieval Christians, this kind of corruption was the fate of all human beings – the physical decay of the body was the necessary step to the resurrection of the soul, and, at the last judgement, to the triumph over corruption when the 'dead shall be raised incorruptible'. The surprising lack of physical corruption seen in the remains of the bodies of saints was thus interpreted as a sign of their holiness, their partial victory over death and corruption. It was thus not ironic that these remains should then be wrapped in the finest silks, or encased in gold and jewels, nor for the monastic establishments to embellish their remains as lavishly as possible. This wealth was not *necessarily* seen as sinful, much less as 'corrupt', but a display of wealth 'untainted by sin'.<sup>28</sup> Wealth and privilege was not therefore a problem in itself, but only that form of wealth that originated in or gave rise to sin. This constituted a political problem insofar as these sins or vices took hold within a particular segment of the 'body politic' causing the

---

<sup>25</sup> Aquinas, p. 15-19; Coleman, 'Property', p. 624.

<sup>26</sup> Giles of Rome. 2001. *On the Rule of Princes*. In *The Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical texts, Vol 2: Ethics and Political Philosophy*, eds. A.S. McGrade et.al. Cambridge: CUP, p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> Binski, P. 1996. *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 134-8.

<sup>28</sup> Janes, D. 1998. 'Gold, God Corruption and Poverty.' *History Today*, 48 (12): p. 12.

'disease' to spread.<sup>29</sup> The problem was that all members of the body politic were connected, and the corruption in one could not be prevented from infecting the others.<sup>30</sup> Some Medieval writers however, were beginning to develop more a modern conceptualisation of the community consisting of discrete realms.

Marsilio of Padua (1275-1342) was an Aristotelian in the service of the Emperor engaged in the bitter ideological street fighting against Church authorities. He marshalled an Aristotelian scheme of 'good' and 'bad' polities and attempts to show that one of the chief distinctions between them was that 'bad' polities were those in which secular, public authority was under the sway of those who were not motivated by or able to protect the common good. Consequently, Marsilio spoke of regimes as either 'well tempered' or 'diseased'.<sup>31</sup> This metaphor clearly denotes the influence of Aristotelian physics, but Marsilio's approach suggested that there were distinct and identifiable boundaries between spheres of responsibility. In particular, the boundaries between secular and religious authorities were especially important.<sup>32</sup> One of Marsilio's chief concerns was that Church authorities were especially prone to avarice, decadence and simony. After engaging in some rather choice denunciations of such practices, he wrote,

I pass over their corrupt methods of distributing ecclesiastic offices... For the distributors or their intermediaries... are motivated by the desire to obtain the favour or the good will of wealthy laymen, or are given bribes... and hence, as is obvious to everyone, ecclesiastic offices... are bestowed upon ignoramuses, criminals, children, strangers, troublemakers, and persons who are clearly idiots.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> The problem was further complicated by the doctrine of the monarch's two bodies – his or her individual person that passes away, and his person as embodiment of the state or *dignitas* that lives on beyond the individual King or Queen's death. Kantrowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, pp. 30-40, 407.

<sup>30</sup> Généaux in *Political Corruption*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>31</sup> Marsilius of Padua. 1956. *The Defensor Pacis*. Translator A. Gewirth. New York: Harper, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Marsilius, p. 182.

<sup>33</sup> Marsilius, p. 184, and 185.

Here the use of 'corrupt' has clearly modern parallels in two senses, first, in being linked with the seeking and receiving of 'bribes' and second, in the notion that those least fitted, or compromised in some way will be given access to power.

Marsilio's references to corruption denoted a dual sense of the term. First, that there were different and distinct spheres of authority within the state, and that the transgression of the boundaries represented a kind of corruption. Second, that corruption consisted in a particular kind of transgression, namely, the control of public authority by those with dubious financial interests. Money-making for its own sake had been considered 'vicious' and thereby 'corrupt' or 'corrupting' by Medieval thinkers. More positive attitudes toward money-making however, began to develop during the Renaissance, as economic changes and the development of international trade began to stimulate a taste for lavish consumption as a demonstration of status or princely power.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, important doubts about the moral effects of money-making, and of what could be termed a 'market economy' persisted.<sup>35</sup> Importantly, early-modern usage of the term 'corruption' denoted a problem that had implications not simply for the individual but the wider community and polity.

### **3. Machiavelli's Two Dimensions of Corruption**

Niccolo Machiavelli's (147-1529) use of the term 'corruption' appears to fall within the ambit of moral concerns relating to entire regimes and forms of rule (prefigured to some degree in Marsilio's first sense of the term 'corruption' above). Machiavelli's use of the term encompassed a range of related but quite distinct phenomena, related that is by the fact that their appearance denoted a degeneracy in the public, political life of the republic. In other words, corruption could mean any of the following: widespread decadence or indolence, a loss of good order and discipline among the citizens, a loss of military prowess, the predominance of faction or private interests

---

<sup>34</sup> Jardine, L. 1996. *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance*. London: Macmillan, pp. 327-8.

<sup>35</sup> Hale, J. 1993. *The Civilisation of Europe in the Renaissance*. London: Harper Collins, pp. 384-5; Schama, S. 1987. *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*. London: Fontana, p. 371.

over the common interest, or the preponderance of the wealthy and powerful over the commonality. The first three and the last two phenomena are closely related, and I propose to discuss them as two dimensions of Machiavelli's understanding of corruption, first as loss of discipline or *virtu*, and second, as a preponderance of private interests over the public interest.

According to Pocock, Machiavelli decisively shaped the civic humanist ideal of the active citizen engaging in public deliberations within the *polis* by sensing that the framework of institutions that supported, indeed enabled such a concept of citizenship to occur had collapsed.<sup>36</sup> The political world of the modern *polis*, the Italian republic of the fifteenth-century (Florence or Venice), existed in a world of flux, indeterminacy and uncertain fortune (*fortuna*). In this environment, the idea of the active citizen needed a new foundation, a new set of orders (*ordini*) which made the pursuit of virtue (*virtú*) comprehensible. In response to this perceived need, Machiavelli provided a radically new account of the possibilities for virtue in a world where its opposite – corruption (*corruzione*) – was an ever present possibility. Pocock contends that he accomplished this by tying the mercurial concept of *virtu*, with its connotations of both individual excellence in judgement and decisiveness in action, to a notion of political virtue consisting in a collective pursuit of the health of the republic through commitment to the general good. Most importantly, he identified a citizen's militia as the vital mechanism by which individual citizens could receive training in the virtues of war (discipline, courage, fortitude), and the virtues of political stability (loyalty, obedience, and love of homeland).

Republics, Machiavelli argued, could not avoid the challenges of war and conquest. All republics are brought by 'necessity' (*necessita*) to defend themselves from outside aggression, are moved by the constant 'motion' that means that things 'cannot stay

---

<sup>36</sup> Pocock, J. G. A. 1975. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

steady', 'must either rise or fall', and so must be prepared to conquer.<sup>37</sup> Machiavelli's concept of corruption emerges in light of his analysis of the fate of republics governed by a 'mixed constitution', which was not solely produced by constitutional design, but political contest between the forces of monarchy, aristocracy and populace.<sup>38</sup> The maintenance of a balance between these forces however, is a very difficult operation, requiring the active management of public 'manners and customs' and the inculcation of *virtu*. It is in this sense that he spoke of the difficulty of re-establishing a mixed constitution in a republic that has become corrupted (*corrotto*). Here corruption is used in the context of describing the falling-away of regimes from a former glory, attributable to indulgence in excess, luxury, or a loss of discipline among the citizens. Crucially, the danger of corruption is explicitly associated not only with those who hold public office, but with the entire populace and the institutions of the republic.<sup>39</sup>

Virtue was closely associated with military service and training, and the association was emphasised in his *The Art of War*. Here, Machiavelli contends that the moderns (especially the Italians, and to a lesser degree the French and Spaniards) had fallen away from their former virtues, and instead of continuing honest and wholesome had become dishonest and corrupt.<sup>40</sup> What he meant here in particular was that modern Italian citizens, and especially their rulers had not only renounced lives of hardship, toil, and exertion, that such was the corruption of the age that such a lifestyle was frowned upon, and none seemed able to deviate in the slightest from the now common indolence.<sup>41</sup> All of this led him to the rather incommodious suggestion that to avoid corruption the citizen should 'expose... himself naked upon a sandy beach to the heat of a noonday sun... or roll... himself in the snow in the depth of winter as Diogenes did'!

---

<sup>37</sup> Machiavelli, N. 1996. *Discourses on Livy*. Translators: H. C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, I.6, 22-23. (Subsequently: *D*, Book.Chapter, pp.)

<sup>38</sup> *D*, I.3, 15.

<sup>39</sup> *D*, I.17, 47.

<sup>40</sup> Machiavelli, N. [1521] 1965. *The Art of War*. Translator: E. Farnsworth. New York: Da Capo, p. 10

<sup>41</sup> This and subsequent quote from: *Art*, p. 11.

*Virtu* has often been represented as the sum of a Prince's 'manly' cunning and ruthlessness in the constant struggle to master *fortuna*. A fuller appreciation of *virtu* however, would have to include other skills such as the emulation and inculcation of the qualities of a well-disciplined militia - order, endurance, fortitude, and courage.<sup>42</sup> For Machiavelli then, one dimension of corruption centred on the loss of *virtu*; the other dimension however, connected the loss of *virtu* to a more modern conception of a separation of public and private interests. Toward the end of the First Book of *The Discourses*, Machiavelli speaks of states that are 'corrupt' (*corroto*) in the rather unusual context of not surrendering private wealth to the public account.<sup>43</sup> At first glance this would appear to be a simple reflection on public honesty, but it also touches on a conception of the due relation between private and public realms with specific reference to finance, taxation, and the influence of the wealthy.

Machiavelli developed his view in reflection on the Germans, who, he believed, were 'honest' and displayed 'probity' by their voluntary commitment to paying their taxes, and preventing any of their citizens from becoming 'gentlemen'. Gentlemen, it appears, were the chief promoters of all corruption because they lived in splendour, idleness, and indulgence, possessed greater wealth, and were especially dangerous when they maintained castles and retainers. Here we have a notion of 'corruption' which has two dimensions, one denoting a loss of *virtu*, the other suggesting a blurring of public and private interests weakening the 'political equality' on which the republic rested.<sup>44</sup> Where corruption occurs in any part of the citizen body, it may be corrected if the entire republic has not already become too 'corrupt'. Though Machiavelli did not explicitly evoke the image of the 'body politic', he did make the analogy between the 'corruption' of the republic and physical illness, both of which will prove fatal 'unless something intervenes...'.<sup>45</sup> The autonomy of politics then,

---

<sup>42</sup> *D*, II.19, 172-3.

<sup>43</sup> This and subsequent quotes from: *D*, I.55, 109-113.

<sup>44</sup> Pocock, p. 209.

<sup>45</sup> *D*, III.1, pp. 397-8.

consisted in the contest between political actors for 'glory' or supremacy within the city. The second dimension of corruption threatened the collapse of this autonomy when the public interest is supplanted by the ruler's private interests.<sup>46</sup>

Building on Machiavelli's conceptual foundations, Pocock argues that Western political thinkers in the seventeenth century thought the possibilities for corruption were greatly enhanced by the rise of 'new' forms of financial wealth undermining the tangible, solid and intergenerational stake in the commonwealth that land ownership was thought to provide.<sup>47</sup> In this new environment, Pocock argues, *fortuna* was gradually replaced by corruption as the chief danger to virtue, and the implications of this shift are most apparent in British political thought.<sup>48</sup>

#### **4. Commerce and the Rhetoric of Corruption**

While commerce was thought to expand the possibilities for corruption, the gradually narrowing definition of corruption in early-modern political thought also suggests a series of other conceptual shifts. The changing contours of corruption can be correlated, for example, with the decline of the metaphor of the 'body politic', and the identification of new dynamics of political development focussed on ensuring the financial viability and military security of sovereign states, and a political balance between newly emerging social classes. Conventionally, historians of Britain have traced the emergence of modern concerns over corruption to the late Elizabethan and Stuart reigns in which rises in inflation and the inability of the state to levy and raise efficient taxation put pressure on state functionaries to pursue private gain through public office.<sup>49</sup> As Peck observes, this resulted in the concept of corruption becoming a crucial ideological weapon in political contests between King and Parliament in the seventeenth-century.<sup>50</sup> In the context of this struggle, she argues that corruption was

---

<sup>46</sup> Fontana, B. 2003. 'Sallust and the Politics of Machiavelli.' *History of Political Thought*, XXIV (1): pp. 106-8.

<sup>47</sup> Pocock, pp. 466-7.

<sup>48</sup> Pocock, p. 402.

<sup>49</sup> Russell, C. 2002. 'Contracting Out: Administrative Privatisation in the Reign of James I.' *History Today*, 52 (12): pp.44-47.

<sup>50</sup> Peck, L.L. 1990. *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England*. Boston: Unwin, Hyman, p. 203.

used as a rhetorical charge to attack particular forms of royal revenue raising and patronage.<sup>51</sup> According to Asch, the emergence of corruption as a more clearly defined crime in European thought was a result of efforts to find a less damaging, indeed 'consensual' way to bring the sovereign to book.<sup>52</sup> The language of the 'body politic' in other words, left few options for re-thinking the place of the sovereign in relation the other members of the 'body'.<sup>53</sup> Re-casting that relationship required a language able to separate the monarch's private person from their persona as embodiment of the 'body politic', and a narrower conception of corruption was an important tool in that quest. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth-century corruption appears as a chief concern in British political thought. Tensions between narrow and broader understandings can be detected alongside biological metaphors of disease and decay, and increasingly anachronistic invocations of the 'body politic'.

Edmund Dudley's (1462-1510) *Tree of Commonwealth* for instance, was based on an alternative organic metaphor, that of the state as a tree whose 'roots' (concord, justice, and peace) needed to be secured, and were capable of producing 'fruits' (tranquillity, prosperity, and dignity).<sup>54</sup> Among the chief dangers to the 'health' of the 'tree' however, were simony, the 'Beastly appetite' of covetousness, and the 'venemous core' of the fruit of prosperity, 'vaine delectacion', which 'alienate[s]... the mynd of man from god and good vertues'.<sup>55</sup> For Dudley then, undue pecuniary interests were not spoken of as corruption, but were referred to under the conventional rubric of particular charges (such as simony) or a lack of virtue. Corruption, where it was referred to, denoted decay, 'disease' or perishability, brought on by vices such as 'vain delectation' whereby a person bestows his love

---

<sup>51</sup> Peck, p. 186.

<sup>52</sup> Asch, R. G. 1999. 'Corruption and Punishment? The Rise and Fall of Mattäus Enzlin (1556-1613), Lawyer and Favourite.' In *The World of the Favourite*, eds. J. H. Elliott and L. W. B. Brockliss. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 105.

<sup>53</sup> McLaren argues that the succession of Elizabeth I as the Protestant saviour in England raised other concerns related to the effects of a female 'head' of state. McLaren, A. N. 1996. 'Delineating the Elizabethan Body Politic: Knox, Aylmer and the Definition of Counsel 1558-88.' *History of Political Thought*, XVII (2): pp.248-252.

<sup>54</sup> Dudley, E. 1948. *The Tree of Commonwealth*. Editor: D. M. Brodie. Cambridge: CUP.

<sup>55</sup> Dudley, pp. 25, 28, 77.



‘only and intierly in corruptible and transytorie vanyitie’.<sup>56</sup> The association of undue pecuniary interest in public office with the lack of virtue, and of corruption as a loss or decay of virtue remained in place in Britain in the sixteenth-century. In a case of electoral bribery in 1571 for instance, Thomas Long was charged not with corruption, but with a ‘lewd and slanderous’ act, while the danger of treason could be described in official proclamations as consisting in ‘how many hearts it hath corrupted’.<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, the contours of the language of virtue and politics, pecuniary interest and corruption were changing throughout this period. In 1581 for instance, a treatise by ‘W.S.’ on the impact of inflation on English society was couched in the conventional garb of the ‘goode virtues’ that show the ‘Image of god in man’.<sup>58</sup> But while virtue clothed the rhetoric, the analysis suggested a new dynamic art of good government consisting in the regulation of exchange and coinage as a means of mediating between the interrelated but independent sectors of society engaged in separate economic pursuits. Nonetheless, older notions of the organic unity of the ‘body politic’ still made sense as the preamble to the ‘Lay Subsidy Act’ of 1601 shows. Here the Parliament could still refer to themselves as her majesty’s ‘faithful and obedient subjects’ constituting ‘one Body Politic’ in which ‘your Highness is the head and we the members’.<sup>59</sup>

Just as the image of the political community was shifting, the rhetorical appeal of corruption was also characterised by wide contours of meaning. In the impeachment of the Lord Chancellor, Sir Francis Bacon, in 1621 for instance, corruption was linked with bribery in what appears to be a consistently modern and narrow implication of

---

<sup>56</sup> Dudley, pp. 94, 79.

<sup>57</sup> ‘First Case of Bribery, 1571.’ In Tanner, J. R. 1951. *Tudor Constitutional Documents AD 1485-1603 With An Historical Commentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cambridge: CUP, p. 527; ‘Proclamation on the seizure of the Earls of Essex, Rutland, and others for their rebellion’ [1601] 1990. In *Elizabethan Backgrounds: Historical Documents of the Age of Elizabeth I*, ed. A. F. Kinney. Hamden: Archon, p. 326.

<sup>58</sup> W.S. [1581] 1954. *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*. Editor: E. Lamond. Cambridge: CUP, p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Lay Subsidy Act’ [1601] in Tanner, *Tudor Constitutional Documents*, p. 612. I leave aside here the ambiguities associated with the legal doctrine of the ‘body politic’ defined by Lord Coke in *Calvin’s Case* in 1608, by which the monarch’s private (mortal) person was separated from the public (immortal) person of the state. See, Thomas, J. H. [1836] 1986. *Lord Coke’s First Institute of the laws of England*. Vol I. Buffalo: William S. Hein, Ch. V, p. 59.

the term. Interestingly, Sir Francis attempted to extenuate himself on the grounds that he 'was never noted for an avaricious man' and that the charges (all 23 of them), were mostly old misdemeanours that had not been continued, 'whereas those that have an habit of corruption do commonly wax worse and worse'.<sup>60</sup> Bacon's linking of corruption with avarice, and the danger of its 'infectious' spread were no more than a very distant echo of the older language of corruption as a loss of virtue.

The same echoes could be heard in the contest between King Charles I and his Parliament in the 1640's in which Parliament complained of the 'corrupt and ill-affected party' advising the King who had managed to 'corrupt divers' bishops, and to maintain 'pressures and corruptions wherewith your people have been grieved'.<sup>61</sup> Corruption here meant both self-interested and extortionate financial measures, and the deviation of the bishops from the authentic word of god (as Parliament saw it). The King responded by buttressing his own claim to a divine sanction to rule by rejecting Parliament's charge of 'corruptions (as you style them) in religion'.<sup>62</sup> This exchange highlighted a connotation of the term corruption derived from Aristotelian physics, in which corruption conveyed a deviation or perversion from some original state or condition. Some eight years later, as he was about to pay for defeat in the Civil War (1642-49) with his life, Charles reflected that divine sanction or no, only in resurrection could any human, even a king, triumph over corruption. As he stood upon the scaffold in Whitehall he said to Dr Juxon, 'I go from a corruptible, to an incorruptible Crown; where no disturbance can be, no disturbance in the World.'<sup>63</sup> The contours of corruption continued to shift as the very image of the 'body politic' itself was transformed by the trauma of the decapitation of the King as 'head' of the

---

<sup>60</sup> 'Impeachment of Lord Chancellor Bacon' [1621]. In Tanner, J.R. 1952. *Constitutional Documents of the Reign of James I AD 1603-1625 With an Historical Commentary*. Cambridge: CUP, pp. 332-333.

<sup>61</sup> *Petition Accompanying the Grand Remonstrance* [1641] 1980. In *Seventeenth-Century England: A Changing Culture Volume I: Primary Sources*, ed. A. Hughes. London: Ward Lock Educational, pp. 76-77.

<sup>62</sup> *King's Answer to the Petition* [1641]. In *Seventeenth-Century England*, p. 79.

<sup>63</sup> 'King Charls his Speech made upon the Scaffold...1649', London: Peter Cole, 1649.

URL:<<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/pc/charles/charles1.html>>. Consulted 9 July 2004.

English 'body politic', and the attenuated rulership in his wake of the infamous 'Rump' Parliament.<sup>64</sup>

As the new political settlement in England was forged in the later half of the seventeenth-century, corruption appeared in the efforts that political writers were making to define the role of commerce and its relationship to the distribution of power. For James Harrington (1611-1677) for instance, a healthy commonwealth appears to have been one that managed to unite 'authority' or the proper ordering of laws and internal institutions, and 'empire' or the control of one's enemies through popular participation in, but gentlemanly leadership of the militia.<sup>65</sup> Harrington referred to this as 'the plastic art of government' and he suggested that "interweaving the militia" within the Commonwealth, was akin to the human skeleton, it was the foundation of "proportion or symmetry" in both body and polity.<sup>66</sup> Corruption referred to the process of change in both political institutions and public manners that follows from alterations to the 'balance' between the forces in the republic.<sup>67</sup> Some have claimed that Harrington's account of corruption was 'value-neutral' insofar as he argued that corruption simply meant 'change' in the political balance of forces.<sup>68</sup> Corruption of popular government may therefore lead to tyranny, but the corruption of oligarchical or monarchical government may lead to popular government. Corruption did not necessarily lead to chaos and decay. Nonetheless, a popular commonwealth, he argued, was to be preferred because it 'bringeth the government from a more private unto a more public interest', whereas in oligarchies and monarchies, private interests (such as luxury) prevail.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Jenner, M. S. R. 2002. 'The Roasting of the Rump: Scatology and the Body Politic in Restoration England.' *Past and Present*, 177: pp. 96-102.

<sup>65</sup> Harrington, J. [1656] 1977. *The Commonwealth of Oceana*. In *The Political Works of James Harrington*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock. Cambridge CUP. All quotes here from pp. 161-170; 269-70; 312.

<sup>66</sup> Harrington, p. 299, 303.

<sup>67</sup> Harrington, p. 202.

<sup>68</sup> Barnouw, J. 1986. 'American Independence Revolution of the Republican Ideal A Response to Pocock's Construction of 'The Atlantic Republican Tradition.'" In *The American Revolution and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, ed. P. J. Korshin. New York: AMS Press, p. 63.

<sup>69</sup> Harrington, p. 202.

An even more narrow conception of corruption can be seen in Harrington's near contemporary, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who was less concerned with the conditions for popular government, and indeed, considered it an anathema. By conceptualising political legitimacy in terms of a contractual bargain between self-interested individuals seeking protection of life and property, Hobbes' thought played a pivotal role in the post-Medieval rejection of the Aristotelian foundations of Western political thought. Nonetheless, Hobbes' 'modernity' was still coloured by a striking use of the analogy of the body politic in his analysis of the various 'infirmities' and 'diseases' to which a commonwealth may be exposed.<sup>70</sup> His use of the term corruption however, was much closer to modern usage in speaking of the use of bribes to 'buy' judicial opinion. Hence, in Chapter 26 of *Leviathan* Hobbes discusses the role and characteristics needed of judges, and he speaks of the necessity that their judgements be not corrupted by reward.<sup>71</sup> For Hobbes, the law was understood as the pronouncements of the sovereign, and the purpose of sovereign power was to secure the lives and property of the members of the commonwealth.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, he warned of the danger of 'false judgements' procured by 'corruption either of Judges or Witnesses'. For Hobbes then, corruption in cases of judicial application of the law was tantamount to the vicious subversion of sovereign power.

For a republican like Algernon Sidney (1622-1683) however, the problem of corruption could not be entirely isolated from the virtue (or vice) of the sovereign. In the *Court Maxims* for instance, Sidney posed the problem in terms of a dynamic relationship between the ruler(s), the law and the virtue of those who administer the law,

...faults in the law introduce all manners of corruption into the administration of it. They who corrupted the law for corrupt ends will certainly make a corrupt use of its corruption. The effect of this is that the

---

<sup>70</sup> Hobbes, T. [1651] 1968. *Leviathan*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 363-5.

<sup>71</sup> Hobbes, p. 328

<sup>72</sup> Hobbes, pp. 382-3.

king does what he pleases, and the courtiers and lawyers get what they please. ...if there be a great defect in the law, it leaves an easy entrance for corruption in the administration... Again, if there be corruption in him or them who administer the law, he or they will corrupt the laws, as the depraved will darkens and corrupts the understanding.<sup>73</sup>

Sidney's language here is redolent of the old Aristotelian physics of decay. Indeed, the imagery becomes more explicit when he speaks of corruption as a 'plague' that 'if suffered to continue' will render 'the body that was strong, healthy, and beautiful':

...a carcass full of ulcers and pacrid sores. This in physics is called *κακα ἐξις* or *malus habitus*, which must be followed by death and dissolution; in politics it is called *ἀταξία*, | contrary to the *εὐταξία* ... A people that falls into it is in the lowest degree of misery. All order is overthrown.

They who ought to be shepherds become wolves. That mischief which the law should prevent, it establishes.

In the later *Discourses*, and in response to Filmer's notorious defence of monarchical rule, Sidney considered the chief danger of corruption lay in the sovereign becoming corrupt, and corrupting the rest of the community.<sup>74</sup> While Sidney's earlier imagery of corruption employed the biological metaphors of disease and decay, his *Discourses* coupled this with a strong focus on corruption as a problem of private interests dominating in the public administration of the law.<sup>75</sup> As the more perceptive political theorists of the period noted, the development of commerce was transforming the nature of government and society. As they sought to make sense of these transformations, they struggled also to adapt the received language of political discourse to new realities, and the constantly changing contours of corruption were often accompanied by echoes of older organic metaphors of the 'body politic'.

---

<sup>73</sup> Sidney, A. [1664-5] 1996. *Court Maxims*. Editors: H. W. Blom, E. H. Mulier and R. Janse., Cambridge: CUP, pp. 131-132-133.

<sup>74</sup> Sidney, A. [1681-2] 1990. *Discourses Concerning Government*. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, pp. 51, 135, 184-5, 229, and 252.

<sup>75</sup> Sidney, *Discourses*, pp. 212-213.

### Conclusion: Civilising Corruption

The prospect of commerce and trade as a new and influential political force bedevilled late seventeenth-century British political thought in which one can detect both expansive understandings of corruption alongside narrower modern understandings. The contrast between narrow and more expansive understandings of corruption throughout the period can be traced in the recurrent debates between 'Court' and 'Country' ideologies. In the Standing Army debates of the 1690's, 'Country' partisans considered corruption as a danger posed by a Court bloated with the wealth gained from public credit to buy (through patronage) a Parliamentary faction to support the expansion of royal power. Within the broad church of Country ideology however, corruption could be construed rather differently, as a threat by the Court to the independence of members of Parliament, a threat to the civic virtue which was conceived as the ideal foundation of the commonwealth, and even as Dickinson has shown, as the maladministration of elections that allowed widespread graft and reliance on 'pocket' and 'rotten boroughs'.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, as Brewer has also noted, the rhetorical appeal of corruption lay in its service as an indictment of the current administration, rather than in any genuine determination to achieve wholesale moral reform.<sup>77</sup>

The charge of corruption then, was slowly detached from claims of moral decay and increasingly associated with specific kinds of misdemeanour in the exercise of public office. Though few went as far as Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) in endorsing the beneficial effects of the 'slipp'rey... Perquisite' in public office, he did express a more popular trend in dismissing the 'body politic' metaphor as 'very low'.<sup>78</sup> As even his

---

<sup>76</sup> Dickinson, H. T. 1977. *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. London: Methuen, pp. 102-118. A remarkable example of this latter kind of corruption can be found in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 4 June 1734, p. 313. Here the author complains that at the most recent election, members elected from Cornwall had no knowledge of their electorates, nor their electors of them. 'There must' the author surmised, '...be some extraordinary Magnetick to draw the Affections of the People at such a Distance. Some affirm that this Nostrum is composed of a yellow Kind of Earth found in Great Quantities, at these Seasons, on a certain Hill in Cornwall, called the Mount of Corruption.'

<sup>77</sup> Brewer, J. 1989. *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 74.

<sup>78</sup> Mandeville, B. [1724] 1970. *Fable of the Bees and Remarks*. Editor: P. Harth, London: Penguin, pp. 66, 72-3, 135.

strongest critic, Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) recognised however, the market was transforming the nature of government. This would require new boundaries to insulate trade and commerce from undue government interference, but also to prevent unscrupulous traders from attempting to ‘corrupt and procure’ political power.<sup>79</sup> As William Temple had argued in 1690, among the chief virtues of the Dutch republic was that its government exempted none from the laws, it generally promoted the ablest governors, and ensured that ‘no great Riches... enter by Publique Payements into Private purses... to feed the prodigal Expenses of vain, extravagant, and luxurious Men’.<sup>80</sup> Rather all ‘Publique Monies’ were ‘applied to the Safety, Greatness, or Honour of the State’ in which the ‘Magistrates themselves bear an equal share in all the Burthens, they impose.’

What writers like Defoe and Mandeville were grasping toward, in very different ways, was a theory of civilisation – a conception of the development or progress of society premised on the extension of commerce and trade. The eighteenth-century emergence of such theories in France and Scotland helped to re-cast Western political thought in significant ways. One important change lay in the development of new ways of speaking of the ‘health’ of the state in terms of its ‘civilisation’, that is, in terms of its conformity to presumed standards of modernity, civility, and good governance. Though this new language did not necessarily ‘replace’ older metaphors of the body politic, it made their application seem increasingly anachronistic, and eventually rendered it a ‘dead metaphor’.<sup>81</sup> By the terms of the ‘new’ language of political thought, the political community came to be seen as an artefact of governmental activity decoupled from citizen virtue. As a consequence, the ‘health’ of the political community came to be defined in terms of the requirements for a flourishing market and solvent state. This was an image of a political community freed from the moral physics of decay, and in which the

---

<sup>79</sup> Defoe, D. 1799. ‘The Freeholder’s Plea.’ In *The Versatile Defoe*, ed. L. A. Curtis. London: George Prior, p. 258.

<sup>80</sup> Temple, W. [1690] 1932. *Observations Upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands*. Cambridge: CUP. All quotations from p. 80.

<sup>81</sup> Hale, D. 1973. ‘Analogy of the Body Politic.’ In *Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Vol I*, ed. P. P. Weiner. New York: Charles Scribner’s, p. 70.

contours of corruption began to coincide with the boundaries that separated private interests from public responsibilities.