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Review Essay

Corruption: An Intractable Issue

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Corruption, Natural Resources and Development: From Resource Curse to Political Ecology, edited by Aled Williams and Philippe Le Billon, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2017, xii + 192 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 9780198796718, (ebook), ISBN 9781785361203

Corruption Scandals and their Global Impacts, edited by Omar E. Hawthorne and Stephen Magu, London: Routledge, 2018, 264 pp., £115 (hardback), ISBN 9781138307971, £36.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780362821036, £18.50 (ebook), ISBN 9781315142722

The Changing Face of Corruption in the Asia Pacific, edited by Maria dela Rama and Chris Rowley, Cambridge, Elsevier, 2017, 416 pp., £126 (hardback), ISBN 9780081011096, £151.20 (ebook), ISBN 9780081012307

Corruption is an issue of considerable academic and professional attention. Despite this attention, there is difficulty in establishing a neat categorisation, as the term encompasses everything from small-scale, petty acts through to so-called grand corruption implicating the institutions of the state (Rothstein and Varraich, 2017). Authors such as You (2015) make a compelling case for recognising the importance of the historically rooted origins of corruption and the way the gradual normalisation of such practices resists efforts at reform. There is also extensive attention paid to the gradations and variations of corruption, which reflect the societies in which they operate. Johnston (2014) highlights this by pointing to a spectrum ranging from the grand corruption of national leaders in cases such as Ben Ali's Tunisia through to more nuanced, subtle influence of markets that operate in the advanced democracies of the United States and Western Europe. The latter cases generate difficult questions regarding the definition of corruption, as they implicate 'everyday' social relations.

This diversity of perspectives and definitions regarding the form and extent of corrupt practices therefore requires effort to unpack if they are to be understood and tackled.

The books considered in this essay consider different manifestations of corruption alongside attempts to understand and counter it. What links the books is a concentration on the social roots of corruption, pointing to the way such practices are shaped by and specific to their context. Hawthorne and Magu's (hereafter H&M) collection focuses on the eruption of different forms of corruption scandals, considering whether the surfacing of corruption in the public imagination can lead to change. Adopting a focus on the role of natural resources, Williams and Le Billon (W&LB) draw attention to the ways in which political ecology can aid understanding of opportunities for corruption. Finally, in the most comprehensive collection, dela Rama and Rowley (DR&R) examine the forms of corruption and anti-corruption measures across the Asia-Pacific region. The breadth of coverage of the books surveyed is reflected by the fact that together they consider 29 countries, as well as regional perspectives. This range provides ample space to consider variations in how corruption is defined, experienced and countered.

Defining Corruption

Corruption is arguably an entrenched feature of contemporary politics, fuelling public discontent and falling levels of trust in institutions. At the most simple level, corruption is 'defined as a misuse of public office for private gain' (Hawthorne and Magu, 2, in H&M), representing a 'symptom of something... wrong in the state' (Hawthorne, 98, in H&M). The core of the corrupt act is the misuse of resources for personal gain or enrichment, with the character of the social and political order determining what is possible in each case. The label of corruption can be seen as a blunt instrument, capturing something deemed to be rotten or spoiled within the system. Operating below the level of corruption, Morris and Polese (2015) refer to the notion of informality, to capture the small forms of deviation that represent the way we do things around here. Identifying the pervasive nature of such practices, they argue (2015: 298) that:

Informality, like a gas in an enclosed space, comes to occupy the space between what a state or formal institutions are and what they claim to be, diminishing pressure on the formal

managers/rulers (be this state or any other overarching entity) and suggesting alternative ways to deal with (not necessarily to solve) pressing social issues.

The practical reality of informality points to the ways in which corrupt practices may arise to fill empty or less tightly controlled spaces, potentially where the state has failed or is absent. It also points to the reality that those holding positions of formal, institutional power determine the boundaries of what is tolerated, proscribed and forbidden.

Moving beyond institutional constraints (and enablers) to examine the social context in which corrupt acts take place is therefore vital. Viewing corruption as related to or building out from informal practices requires us to consider the distributed nature of corruption, allowing entrepreneurial individuals to adjust their behaviour to best capitalise on the opportunities available (see Bratu, 2018). Dela Rama and Rowley (2) reinforce this point, arguing that:

Corruption is... the, sometimes, unspoken dark underbelly of organizations. Ignored or left without light, it creates a culture where ethical norms or a civilized society are discarded, allowing power to reside in those most likely to abuse it.

The emphasis on the social roots of corruption is a significant element within this definition. While issues of power are central to grand forms of corruption, as they imply an ability to avoid or overcome legal and political constraints, they also reside within a wider network of relations that shape everyday interactions. Vaishnav (2017) illustrates this through a detailed analysis of the character of Indian politics, where candidates with criminal backgrounds receive support based on their ability to guarantee access to resources for supporters. You (2015: 13) further underlines the role of the social setting arguing that 'democratic control of corruption is... ineffective under high levels of inequality'.

Digging into the definition of corruption, Williams-Elegbe (in H&M) draws a distinction between everyday, petty corruption and grand corruption by those in power. Petty corruption may seem insignificant, but You (2018: 476) argues that where 'petty corruption [is seen] as a social lubricant, trusting people may engage in petty corruption as frequently as nontrusting people', normalising such behaviour. Complacency in managing the lower-level forms of petty corruption may lead to a compounding effect, whereby corrupt actors accrue power, potentially facilitating the conduct of grand corruption. In cases such as Russia (Holmes, in

H&M), Nigeria (Amundsen, in W&LB), and India (Oberoi, in DR&R) there is recognition that corruption is a widespread feature of the system, yet there is limited sanction for those involved. Corruption becomes a structural issue, distorting the operation of politics through the creation of a self-reinforcing system that punishes or disadvantages behaviour that is not corrupt. The end result is a situation in which 'distrust in public institutions, especially those providing essential services to citizens' (Magu, 85, in H&M) becomes rooted in society, thereby further undermining the capacity of the state to carry out its functions. The longer-term effects of corruption are reflected in the case of Italy, where Torsello and Pezzi (213, in H&M) argue that 'it has gone from being an exclusive mechanism to being an inclusive one'. The implication here is that the web of corrupt practices has been woven so tightly that it is not possible to escape without some form of penalty. This forces us to consider the way social norms and practices reinforce and encourage certain outcomes, challenging the idea that corruption is a temporary dysfunction.

Alongside situations where grand corruption prevails and structures a political system, we also see more subtle forms of behaviour. As noted by Johnston (2014), the boundary between legal inducements and bribes is not necessarily clear-cut, as complex webs of social relations and ties may work to obscure questionable practices. Market-driven social structures encourage competition and entrepreneurial behaviour that may involve cutting corners to get ahead (see Bratu, 2018). Examining the pharmaceutical market in the United States, Reider-Gordon (in H&M) argues that the industry's use of financial and in-kind inducements to encourage brand loyalty raises difficult questions. The harms done to individual patients may be limited and such acts may not be illegal, but they certainly fit the definition of actions leading to personal gain. In a similar vein, Fjeldstad and Johnson (in W&LB) note the importance of foreign lobbyists in shaping natural gas policy in Tanzania, utilising industry resources to push for favourable treatment (see also Heilbrunn, 2014). The grey areas that persist at the margins of legal practices represent a challenge for regulators, as they are not straightforwardly corrupt. However, their potential to influence decision-makers means that they may well distort practices, leading to suboptimal outcomes and further inequalities.

The increasingly interconnected nature of the global system also means that actors are not

limited by the boundaries of the nation state, thereby presenting new challenges around accountability. The role of multinational corporations operating across multiple jurisdictions requires greater attention be paid to private actors as well as their relationships with public bodies, which have traditionally been the focus. The proliferation of global production chains in the manufacturing industry demonstrates the difficulties in ensuring best practice at this level (Locke, 2013), as the ability of even high-capacity states to monitor the actions of firms operating abroad is restricted (Eriksen and Søreide, in W&LB; Windsor, in DR&R). Addressing the ideological base that underpins the assigning of responsibility for corrupt acts, Dine (89, in DR&R) presents a robust challenge to a 'hidden agenda... to compare the efficient private sector with a corrupt public sector'. In doing so, the aim is to unearth inequalities within the economic system that allow private sector actors to avoid responsibility. These patterns also play out on the regional and global levels, where powerful states are potentially able to shift blame and divert attention from their own behaviour. Sumaila, Jacquet and Witter (in W&LB) reflect this concern when considering negotiations around management of international fisheries. Where rich countries seek resources from poorer countries, the ability (or willingness) to closely monitor issues of access and provenance may be tempered by the desire to ensure continued access on favourable terms.

Manifestations of Corruption

Having defined what constitutes corruption, the next task is how to measure it. As Hawthorne and Magu note, the tension between perception and experience-based indicators is an important limitation, as the former is shaped by the social context and expectations. Ufen (30, in DR&R) highlights this challenge, noting that "'Western" notions of illicit behaviour are not always helpful to understand politics' in other parts of the world where informal practices may be driven by need rather than desire, in the absence of effective institutions (see also Devlin, 2018). Bearing in mind the potential limitations, developing meaningful perceptions of corruption may be important in enabling states to guard against complacency. Gregory and Zirker (162, in DR&R) argue that in the case of New Zealand, 'evidence is coming to light suggesting that... [the country's] pristine image needs to be examined much more carefully and critically'. By contrast, Costa (in H&M) notes that the perception of widespread corruption in Brazil has led to a sense of disconnect. This sense of disillusionment and

frustration is an important longer-term outcome of corruption, actively working against attempts to achieve equality and, ultimately, development. Examining the rosewood trade in Madagascar, Remy (143, in W&LB) argues that 'corruption... is rather a profound, and in its own way quite orderly, transformation of an otherwise legally sanctioned system'. In a similar vein, Magu (77, in H&M) argues that in the case of Kenya corruption events are 'predictable, pervasive, high reaching, of great magnitude, unstoppable and regular as sunrise'. The result is that corruption is recognised as a way of operating, weakening and obstructing attempts to tackle it in a meaningful manner.

An important feature of corrupt behaviour is its apparently hidden character, suggesting transparency as an important tool in tackling it. In the conclusion to their collection, Hawthorne and Magu (239, in H&M) argue that 'As long as officials have discretionary authority, corrupt incentives will remain'. The point being that the opportunity for corrupt behaviour is central, with the individual deciding how to act. Further pressing the significance of transparency, Bauhr et al (2019) argue that transparency that enables horizontal monitoring is most effective, as observers have a stake in addressing corrupt behaviour. Using transparency to expose corrupt acts can lead to change, as 'corruption becomes scandalous when it is publicly visible' (Magu, 77, in H&M). The extent to which exposure will then impact behaviour depends on the context and prevalent norms. Saschenko (219, in H&M), reflecting on the case of Belarus, argues 'sometimes a scandal can be compared to a "stone thrown into a marsh"... "making rings can be problematic"'. Dealing with the issue that has been exposed may be costly in terms of financial resources required, but also politically if it undermines the position of power holders, suggesting it may face resistance. The effectiveness of transparency as a solution is also based on the understanding that people are not aware of what is happening. This is questioned by Lujala and Epremier (62, in W&LB) when they ask 'if people did not act based on their previous knowledge of wrongdoing or incompetence, why would they behave differently after receiving additional information on these issues?' Monyake and Hough (2019) further this complicated relationship through their finding that experiences of bribery increase both the willingness to engage in anti-corruption protests and to rely on bribes.

Tackling Corruption

The challenge then becomes what can be done to tackle corrupt behaviours and reduce their prevalence and impact. As noted above, the socially constructed nature of corruption suggests the need for more systemic change. A range of possible mechanisms are available to governments, such as whistleblowing regulations (Alleyne and Chandler, in H&M), strengthening regulatory institutions (Boamah and Williams, in W& LB), and imposing robust penalties. Addressing the last point, Hawthorne and Magu (239, in H&M) note that 'In developing countries... the frying a big fish approach is often needed... [as] in many instances public officials act with impunity and there is rarely ever any consequence'. Targeting individuals in this manner can demonstrate the potential costs, but it requires political will, which cannot be guaranteed. In some cases, attempts to directly reduce corruption are blocked or undermined by state actors, who may be threatened by such actions (Oberoi, in DR&R). In the case of developing countries, donor countries may be able to impose conditions for assistance, including tackling corruption, but it is important to note the ability of recipient states to exercise agency in such relationships. This is demonstrated in the case of Papua New Guinea, where Walton (in DR&R) argues that Australia's ability to exert pressure and uphold treaty instruments is limited by its reliance on Papua New Guinea to host refugees, as well as ensuring continued investment in Australian markets by regime elites.

Efforts undertaken to tackle systemic corruption also raise important questions around intent and commitment. Rather than an attempt to address the causes of corrupt behaviour, anticorruption drives may be used as a tool with which to target enemies and ensure factional dominance. Aburamoto (2019) notes that in the case of Russia, the anticorruption drive under Vladimir Putin in 2012 was based on an attempt to deflect blame from regime elites as much as tackle corrupt practices. In China, Xi Jinping's anticorruption drive has been deemed more concerted and extensive than past efforts by encouraging change in more deeply rooted norms (Keliher and Wu, 2016). Despite this, there remain concerns around the real motivations behind the project. The case of Nigeria presents a different perspective and potentially one that will be more sustainable in the longer-run. Addressing the challenge in that country Amundsen (17, in W&LB; also Williams-Elegbe, in H&M) argues that the 'slow but assured increase in quality of several government institutions of checks and balances' has

created an environment where democratic practices are becoming normalised. These cases bring the attention back to the importance of social practices, whereby trust in institutions is required to provide a foundation on which anticorruption efforts can build.

Questions of political will underpin many of the efforts to tackle corruption, bringing issues of power and influence to the fore, as domestic and international actors interact to determine best practice. Addressing the spread of Anti-Corruption Agencies (ACA), Sekkat (2018: 232) argues they are significant in this regard, as:

separate, permanent specialized agencies established by governments for the specific purpose of combating corruption.... [they] send a powerful signal to citizens in the country that the government is committed to fighting corruption.

The proliferation of ACAs (Gemperle, 2018) therefore signals intent, but as Sakib (2019) notes these bodies must be appropriate for the local context to be effective. At the international level, bodies such as the World Bank promote ideals of good governance to discourage corruption (Hough, 2013). Agreements such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the OECD's Anti-Bribery Convention also play a role in establishing guidelines to guard against corrupt practices (David-Barrett and Okamura, 2015). Additionally, the motivations behind these agreements must be considered, determining whose interests they serve. Examining the OECD's Anti-Bribery Convention, Mistitch (in H&M) points to the central role of the United States in generating the momentum behind its creation. Having introduced regulations governing its own firms, the United States sought to create a system in which they would not be punished by a lack of enforcement amongst competitors. This reflects the collective action problem that rests at the heart of anticorruption efforts (Persson et al, 2013). States may be willing to turn a blind eye or at least soften the restrictions derived from international agreements and guidelines if there is a domestic benefit in doing so. Shifting norms in such a context is important, but rests on deeper, practical considerations around economic performance and political viability.

Conclusion

Together, the books considered present a broad range of cases, illustrating forms of corrupt behaviour, harms caused, and possible solutions. In focusing on slightly different elements

and perspectives of corruption, they provide a set of useful cases for future reference. Reading across the cases, considering the social, political and economic inputs, there is almost a question of whether corruption can ever be eliminated. Several cases present situations where corrupt practices have been stamped out, but many more where they persist, re-emerge, or morph into new forms of politics and governance. This in turn leads to the question of what lies at the heart of attempts to tackle corruption. Is it possible to get to some form of ideal balance or will motivations of power, status, and financial gain remain determinant? The books appear to suggest that tackling corruption may be possible, but not without awareness of both the everyday, micro-level pressures and opportunities alongside the grander, strategic considerations that shape relations within and between states.

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