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A Comparative Historical Sociology of Corruption

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ABSTRACT

A view of corruption as disembedded from society and history is predominant today. In this view, corruption is basically the same thing everywhere and inherently a bad thing because it gets in the way of proper processes. In opposition to this view, we argue for understanding corruption as socially and historically *embedded*. While there are many viable ways to embed corruption, we advocate a comparative historical sociology of corruption in particular. This approach has in mind a view of corruption as "a moving object," that is, as subject to variation across social space and transformation over time. It focuses on the processes through which a course of action is worked out in relation to historically specific structural conditions. By tracing these processes and embedding "corrupt" practices in the situations where they were developed and make sense, we gain a deeper understanding of these practices and are in a better position to evaluate them. We are also able to make better comparisons, comparing objects shaped by similar processes rather than objects identified by definition alone. We proceed, first, by situating our intervention in the context of the rise of a disembedded approach to corruption. Second, we review a selection of more or less embedded approaches in anthropology and sociology. Third, we describe what a comparative historical sociology of corruption entails. Finally, we highlight the costs of a disembedded view in terms of ineffective and pathologizing anti-corruption efforts.

1 | Introduction

A view of corruption disembedded from society and history is predominant today. In this view, corruption is conceived as individual utility-maximizing behavior (Rose-Ackerman 1978, 1999). It may take on various cultural hues but there is something universal at the core of it: self-interest. Simply put, people abuse public office or public trust because it is in their self-interest to do so. The issue then is how to better manage self-interest. The problem has less to do with bad actors than with bad incentives, and thus reform requires getting the incentives right and channeling self-interest more productively. A good part of the model's appeal is its theoretical coherence, even elegance, and the fact that it provides a clear solution to corruption. "Getting the incentives right" tends to mean political and economic restructuring in the direction of more competition, freer markers, and smaller and more efficient government. This account is *disembedded* from society and history insofar as it grounds action in individual self-interest. Because self-interest is universal, corruption can be generalized as basically the same thing everywhere—and inherently a bad thing because it gets in the way of proper processes.

This article is a condensed version of the introductory chapter to our edited volume, *A Comparative Historical Sociology of Corruption*, forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.

In opposition to this view, we argue for understanding corruption as socially and historically *embedded*. Embedding is a basic move in sociology, perhaps the fundamental one. Study the social fact within its proper milieu, Durkheim (2014 [1895]) exhorted in *The Rules of Sociological Method*. The reason, of course, is because such context is constitutive of the object itself. Stripping it away represents a "scientific disaster" (Abbott 1997, 1171). We end up reducing the phenomenon to its definition; in the case of corruption, typically, some version of Nye's (1967) classic formulation: the abuse of public office for private gain.[1] The definition alone is insufficient to identify the object sociologically. It is only the beginning of investigation. The crucial work is embedding or supplying the context structuring the phenomenon. While there are many viable ways to embed corruption, as we will see, we advocate a comparative historical sociology of corruption in particular. This approach has in mind a view of corruption as "a moving object," that is, as subject to variation across social space and transformation over time. It focuses on the processes through which a course of action is worked out in relation to historically specific structural conditions. By tracing these processes and embedding "corrupt" practices in the situations where they were developed and make sense, we gain a deeper understanding of these practices and are in a better position to evaluate them. We are also able to make better comparisons, comparing objects shaped by similar processes rather than objects identified by definition alone.

This approach represents an intervention given the predominance of the disembedded view, which looms so large in the contemporary scholarship on corruption, particularly on corruption in the developing world, that it gets in the way of understanding the realities on the ground. In this piece, we aim to recover a more sociological way of seeing corruption and make the case for a comparative historical sociology of corruption. We proceed as follows: First, we situate our intervention in the context of the rise of a disembedded approach to corruption. Here we trace the development of the scholarship from the "old sociology of corruption" in the 1960s to the asociological view behind contemporary anti-corruptionism. Second, we review a selection of more or less embedded approaches in anthropology and sociology with the intent of showcasing their diversity and the manifold possibilities they index for studying corruption. Third, we describe what a comparative historical sociology of corruption entails. Finally, we highlight the costs of a disembedded view in terms of ineffective and pathologizing anti-corruption efforts.

2 | A Brief History of Disembedding: From the Old Sociology of Corruption to Contemporary Anti-Corruptionism

A view of corruption as embedded used to be central to the study of corruption. In the old "sociology of corruption" of the 1960s, McMullan (1961), Leys (1965), Nye (1967), Huntington (1968), Scott (1969), and others—political scientists and yet deeply sociological—approached corruption as bound up in the process of modernization. On the one hand, they defined corruption in terms of the transgression of the public/private distinction. Corruption, Leys (1965, 221), "breaks some rule, written or unwritten, about the proper purposes to which a public office should be put." On the other hand, they understood this rule to be a construction, an ideal everywhere but particularly difficult if not impossible to follow for countries in the throes of modernization. This was because modernization made the public/private distinction salient in the first place. It also created new sources of wealth and power and led to the expansion of public roles and activities. These changes served to define the category of corruption as well as provide both incentive and opportunity for corrupt behavior. In other words, corruption *emerged* in the process of modernization. Within this context, transgressive behavior was all but inevitable given the novelty and fragility of modern standards. Huntington (1968) pointed to the weak institutionalization of these standards and McMullan (1961) to the discrepancy between them and attitudes on the ground.

These scholars went beyond grounding corruption structurally. They saw it as functional. Corruption fulfilled certain requirements associated with building a market economy and modern state. It facilitated political participation. "At a high level [corruption] throws a bridge between those who hold political power and those who control wealth" and at a lower one it serves to incorporate subordinate groups into the political system (McMullan 1961, 196). It stimulated economic development by enabling capital accumulation and the circumvention of bureaucratic hurdles. It helped build political parties by generating the resources used for patronage (Huntington 1968, 59–71).

Despite their functionalism, early corruption scholars were not insensible to its costs. McMullan (1961) begins his "Theory of Corruption" with a litany of the ills caused by corruption: injustice (for the poor, whom corruption puts at a disadvantage), inefficiency, mistrust of government, waste of public resources, discouragement of enterprise, political instability, and so on. "Understanding is desirable," he remarked, "but it is wrong to underrate the evil consequences of widespread corruption" (p. 181). This acknowledgment was tempered by a structural analysis, however, one which preceded and informed thinking about interventions; hence corruption was not colored entirely by an anti-corruption attitude, as it tends to be today. In general, these scholars rejected a "moralizing approach" to corruption as being myopic, involving a view of corruption stripped of its structural determinants, and ethnocentric, involving some version of the complaint, "'Why does the public morality of African states not conform to the British?'" (Leys 1965, 60).

The impetus to do something about corruption was also, perhaps, allayed by the faith that corruption would sort itself out in the course of modernization. Huntington (1968) posited that corrupt behaviors would diminish over time but also that some of these behaviors would become accepted and even formalized, and in this way behaviors and rules would align. In other words, he believed that eventually political institutions would consolidate and the public/private distinction become ingrained. Scott (1969, 1156) pointed to political machines in the United States dying "a more or less 'natural' death" as a result of industrialization. People became less poor and thus less susceptible to material blandishments. They developed horizontal loyalties to social class and occupational groups, which

superseded their vertical ties to political patrons and parties. Scott supposed the same would happen in transitional countries. There was some uncertainty on this point, however, given the recalcitrant realities of development. Scott concludes his paper wondering why political machines in the "new nations" were not developing as quickly or in the same way as in the US. McMullan (1961, 181) notes that if corruption is "a passing phase" then it is unlikely to pass quickly.

By the 1970s, this approach had fallen out of fashion. A new generation of scholars rejected its functionalism and teleological bent. Rightly so, in our view. The functionalism of these accounts left little room for human agency. If corruption exists to fulfill developmental imperatives, then corrupt behavior is mechanical and actors empty vessels simply carrying out their preordained functions. This oversocialized view of human action as dictated by system requirements is untenable theoretically (Wrong 1961). The account's teleological bent is an artifact of its association with modernization theory. The obvious problem is that it has been 60 years since these accounts predicted that corruption would be "tamed" and yet it continues to plague nations no longer new. The real issue is not how long it is taking for corruption to pass away—adherents of modernization theory would probably argue that it has not been long enough—but, rather, that the faith that developing countries are moving in the right direction, as opposed to being stuck in place, has been profoundly shaken. Sociologists largely turned away from the study of corruption. Some approached the topic critically, adopting world-systems and dependency perspectives, and idiographically, exploring the diversity of practices and meanings of corruption on the ground (Osrecki 2017).[2]

By the early 1990s, the study of corruption had been taken over by a disembedded view. The proponents of the new model were primarily economists in academia and the World Bank. They understood corruption within a rational action/principal-agent framework, basically as individual utility-maximizing behavior. This framework was adopted and elevated by powerful organizations, particularly the World Bank and IMF (with which the chief proponents of the economic model, Susan Rose-Ackerman and Vito Tanzi, were affiliated), as well as the US government, OECD, and UN. Key events helped put corruption, so conceived, on the global policy map: the founding of Transparency International in 1993, a speech given by World Bank president James Wolfensohn denouncing the "cancer of corruption" in 1996, the signing of the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention in 1997, and the passage of the UN Convention Against Corruption in 2003. Further, the new model complemented the broader push for economic liberalization ongoing at the time. A view of corruption as an impediment to market integration and economic growth supported prevailing development policy (Hough 2013).

A narrow focus on bribery facilitated the quantification of corruption and its comparison and ranking globally (Johnston 2005). International organizations, governments, and corporate service firms (tasked by companies with assessing the financial risk of their investments abroad) began to generate troves of new cross-national quantitative data on corruption. These data represented a particular way of knowing corruption and constructing the problem. Study after study linked corruption to underdevelopment, non-democratic governance, and all manner of social harm, including poverty, poor health, low life expectancy, and inequality (Ades and DiTella 1997; Treisman 2000; Montinola and Jackman 2002; Lambsdorff 2006). Not incidentally, these studies tend to adopt the conventional definition of corruption as a violation of the public/private divide. In so doing, they take for granted an ideal largely associated with countries in the so-called developed world. They assume a context where the public/private distinction is bright and political institutions relatively strong. Under these conditions, corruption represents deviation from a "Weberian" standard of rational-legal bureaucratic procedure. Is it any surprise then that corruption is found to be prevalent in places where these conditions do not hold? Or any wonder that Western countries cluster at the top of the rankings? Treisman's review (2007) of the corruption scholarship in economics and political science highlights this circularity. Corruption is conceived in terms of underdevelopment and then discovered to be associated with a lack of development. To describe the mutual shaping of measures and concepts, Picci (2024, 50) resorts to the visual metaphor of M. C. Escher's "Drawing Hands." "One hand, corruption, drew the other, its measures, which in turn partly shaped our understanding of corruption."

The ranking of countries in terms of corruption is also problematic. The preeminent scale, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), measures perceptions of corruption and not actual incidence and then mainly the perceptions of experts and Western business leaders. It is not clear whether respondents in different countries are interpreting corruption in the same way. The interval scale gives a false impression of accuracy (Andersson and Heywood 2009). Despite these issues, the CPI remains hugely influential. It is used in academic research and to inform policy decisions. In some cases, donors make development aid conditional on a country improving its corruption score. The annual publication of CPI scores is front-page news in many countries and a topic of fervid discussion on the ground. A country's ranking shapes how people view their governments and themselves.

Ranking and the focus on costs informed an approach to corruption almost exclusively in terms of anti-corruption. The aim of this approach was not to understand corruption qua social phenomenon, as it had been historically, but simply to eradicate it. The rationale behind anti-corruptionism expanded to include political goods in the 2000s. Corruption came to be articulated within a good governance framework emphasizing strong institutions, the rule of law, and provision of key public services—"Denmark" in short, as scholars affiliated with the World Bank referred to it (Pritchett and Woolcock 2003). In this framework, corruption stands in the way of getting to Denmark, while anti-corruption means promoting the three institutional virtues of transparency, accountability, and integrity (Kaufman 2009).

The anti-corruption field grew enormously over the course of the 2000s. Michael and Bowser (2010) estimate the value of goods and services procured by donor agencies for anti-corruption projects to have ballooned from $100 million in 2003 to almost $5 billion in 2009. Sampson (2010) describes the formation of an anti-corruption "industry" consisting of a set of

actors organized around a common framework, inspired by key texts, making use of the same tools and indicators, and implementing similar projects and programs. It has even spawned an academic critique serving more to legitimize the framework than seriously challenge it. To call the anti-corruption field an industry is, of course, a criticism. It suggests that a degree of standardization has set in, narrowing the thinking on corruption and taking important issues and questions off the table because they fall outside of or are at odds with corruption doxa. As Johnston (2005, 18) put it, the problem is "too much consensus."

The other issue is the moralization of corruption. A recitation of the evils of corruption has become de rigueur in the anti-corruption literature. Work in this genre tends to be punctuated by quantitative and qualitative accounts of harm. These accounts do more than illustrate; they serve to justify the anti-corruption agenda. According to one account (Rothstein 2011), there is no drinking water in Luanda because of corruption, property rights are tenuous in Santa Lucia because of corruption, and because of the corruption in public hospitals in India, poor mothers cannot hold their babies, who are reportedly withheld until a fee is paid. We would not deny or minimize corruption-related harms but would, however, complicate simplistic and exoticized assessments of them.

Today, fighting corruption is seen as God's work, a moral project, Sampson (2005) argues. It is clear who the good guys are —the "integrity warriors," so called—and who the bad guys. The moralistic construction of the problem produces a sense of urgency. It mandates that we "do something." The problem is that the feel-good quality of the work supplants a more reflexive posture. The sense that "we're doing something" can keep us from asking whether what we are doing is any good. Pursuing this question has become more important than ever given the poor record of anti-corruption initiatives even by the World Bank's own reckoning (Kaufmann 2009). Brazil's *Lava Jato* scandal prompted the economist Lucio Picci (2024) to rethink corruption in a more sociological key. It was not just the naked politicization of anti-corruption efforts so apparent in *Lava Jato* that gave him pause, but the failure of these efforts in most of the world. In recent decades, only a few, mainly small countries have brought corruption under control (p. 5; see also Mungiu-Pippidi 2017, 12–22). The real question, Picci writes, is not whether anti-corruption efforts are sufficient but whether the paradigm informing them is sound.

3 | A Review of Embedded Approaches in Anthropology and Sociology

The scholarship on corruption in political science and even economics is not uniformly disembedded. Indeed, as should be evident from the previous section, we have been building upon many of the criticisms of political scientists and economists themselves, particularly Michael Johnston and Lucio Picci. There have been efforts in both disciplines to understand corruption in terms of the larger political economy at stake and as not necessarily incompatible with economic development; in economics see Khan and Jomo's edited volume (2012) and in political science Yuen Ang's recent book (2020). We might even say that around the early 2000s political science underwent a context turn in repudiation of the prior behavioral one. Johnston (2005), Mungiu-Pippidi (2006), Hough (2013), and others took issue with the lumping together of behaviors that looked like corruption in economic terms but meant different things in different contexts. They rejected a one-size-fits-all approach as glossing over significant variations in the organization and practice of corruption.

From our perspective, however, most of these efforts don't go far enough. Linking corruption to ideal-typical contexts is not the same as showing how the object has been constructed in specific ones. The aim of these efforts is not to embed corruption but to elaborate a framework better able to accommodate significant variation in the forms of corruption. That is, they seek to enhance the *concept* of corruption. We are interested, however, in understanding the phenomenon concretely. Thus, we turn to the scholarship in anthropology and particularly sociology, where embedding is central to most approaches to corruption. We highlight the diversity of these literatures, organize them, and underscore a comparative historical approach as being of particular importance today.

Partly in response to disembedded approaches in economics and political science, anthropologists addressed corruption with the intent of providing "something far richer and more complex than simply the 'abuse' of public office" (Shore and Haller 2005, 7). They emphasized the importance of understanding corruption in context, that is, as embedded in particular communities, publics, societies, cultures, and histories (S. Muir and Gupta 2018). They approached corruption as a phenomenon steeped in significance and inextricable from larger systems of social relations and practices, and proceeded by "thick description," aiming to capture the phenomenon in terms close to reality. This effort, perhaps necessarily, involved bracketing normative judgments. Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006, 108), for instance, articulate a commitment to "taking the African state 'as it is' and avoiding its normative characterization with reference to the Western state, which usually leads to the underlining of its 'deficits' as compared with this model." The contemporary anthropology of corruption (a literature dating back to the early 2000s) has produced accounts of corruption that go well beyond the transgression of an imaginary line. Corruption has been presented as a survival strategy (Das 2015), a performance requiring social skill (Gupta 2012), a ritual of citizenship (Hornberger 2018), a mental atmosphere (Smith 2007), and as grounded in a moral economy and grounding a moral discourse (Olivier De Sardan 1999). This literature has greatly expanded the frontiers of scholarship on corruption. Here we might discuss a few major entries to illustrate.

Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006) examine corruption in the context of everyday life in three African countries. They describe a host of practices that stretch the boundary between public and personal, formal and informal, and legal and illegal, including collecting informal "tolls," pulling strings, and working sidelines. While the status of these practices may be ambiguous, their functional importance is not in that they serve to lubricate the business of bureaucracy.

Olivier De Sardan (1999) describes the cultural logics justifying corruption, for example, gift-giving, negotiation, solidarity, redistribution, etc. These logics and the values underlying them help make corrupt behavior socially acceptable. They enable a "corruption complex," a wide of range of practices in some way violating the public trust, including nepotism, embezzlement, misappropriation, insider trading, and the abuse of official authority. Notably, actors enjoy some room for maneuver. They are able to appropriate cultural logics, combine them, and refute them. In other words, these logics are not determinative, and a culturally embedded account should be distinguished from a "culturalist" or culturally determined one (see Smith 2018).

The focus of Gupta's work (2012) is on the discourse of corruption. He notes that in India corruption stories form a distinct genre of folklore. While relatively autonomous of actual incidents of corruption, corruption narratives accomplish significant ideological work. They shape how people come to know and engage with the state: how they view the state, how they interact with its deputies, and how they see themselves transforming it. In short, the discourse of corruption is productive, generating a particular and deeply consequential imagination of the state.

Smith (2007) is interested in how the pervasiveness of corruption talk creates an atmosphere of general mistrust. Ordinary Nigerians are apt to see corruption everywhere, constantly on guard against being defrauded, and suspicious of everything official, including anti-corruption efforts. This corruption consciousness is a source of great frustration, reflecting not just a crisis of morality but an impetus to change. In this respect, Nigeria's is not just a culture of corruption but a culture against corruption. Smith insightfully points out that these two strains are dynamically intertwined.

S. Muir (2016) identifies corruption consciousness with a particular moment in Argentine history, the financial crisis of 2001–2002. People expressed the sense that their governing institutions had lost legitimacy and their society its moral moorings through the idiom of "total corruption"—a surrender to forces of social and moral decay. People saw themselves as being complicit in the process of self-destruction; indeed, they felt that they deserved it because, as one of her informants put it, "corruption is in our hearts" (131). This overwhelming negativity is interesting and productive, and yet another important aspect of the phenomenology of corruption.

The contemporary scholarship on corruption in sociology is less coherent than in anthropology and features different approaches drawn from the discipline's motley traditions, but it is generally possessed of the same impulse: to embed corruption in social structure, culture, and various forms of organization.

The earliest entries into this literature are not so different from their anthropological cousins and may be described as belonging in the thick description camp. They focus on describing how corruption works in practice and how the people involved make sense of it. Yang (1989) distinguishes *guanxi*, the personal exchange of gifts and favors in China, from bribery. Against a purely economistic reading of the practice, she presents *guanxi* as a complex and delicate performance aimed at the cultivation of symbolic capital. Ledeneva (1998) does something similar with the Russian practice of *blat* and Auyero (2000) with clientelism. Viewed from the outside, clientelism is simply an exchange of votes for favors, but from inside the relationship, the exchange involves a whole moral economy. Brokers and clients, Auyero argues, form a personal bond, with brokers expected to help out of concern, much like social workers, and clients to feel grateful and obliged. The relevant context is one where politics is unreliable and poor people generally feel invisible. The power of brokers thus lies in their recognition of poor people. Hoang's focus (2022), in contrast, is on rich people, financial elites, and the ways they "play in the gray," or finesse the boundary between legal and illegal transactions. They obfuscate payments to political officials by presenting them as gifts, bundling them in compensation packages, or using brokers. She argues that these quasi-legal practices fundamentally shape frontier markets.

A second approach is structural in the formalist sense following in the tradition of Simmel, Peter Blau, and the anthropologist Larissa Lomnitz. Here the focus is on the structure of social relations and, specifically, the types of relations and exchanges involved. Granovetter (2007) explores the role of social status in determining the meaning of the exchange at stake. Is it a bribe, a tip, or a gift? Is it taken as a compliment, a supplement, or an insult? Following Lomnitz (1971), Granovetter argues that it depends on whether one is dealing with a social subordinate or a social equal. The exchange is more likely to be interpreted as clientelism in the former and gift-giving in the latter. Jancsics (2024) distinguishes four types of corruption on the basis of two dimensions: the form of exchange and the primary beneficiary of the corrupt act. These are market corruption, gift-type exchanges, organizational corruption, and state capture (neopatrimonialism).

We might describe a third approach as organizational, with scholars embedding corruption in particular organizations. They generally seek to explain variation across different organizational contexts. Zaloznaya (2017) investigates why patterns of corruption in Ukraine and Belarus are so different despite their having had similar corruption economies during the Soviet era. In Ukraine, organizations in different bureaucratic sectors are more or less corrupt, while in Belarus, whole sectors are either corrupt or corruption-free. She argues that given Ukraine's more democratic regime, high rates of political turnover allow for greater organizational autonomy, resulting in cross-organizational variation in bureaucratic corruption. Meanwhile, low political turnover in Belarus' more autocratic regime means that elites are more entrenched and thus able to control activities in the bureaucratic sectors in which they have an interest, producing cross-sectoral variation in corruption. McDonnell (2020) is also interested in institutional variation; in her case, the huge difference in corruption between Ghana's best- and worst-rated agencies. What accounts for pockets of bureaucratic effectiveness in an otherwise neopatrimonial state? She argues that the clustering of socially similar kinds of people, particularly with respect to education, enables processes of recruitment, cultivation, and protection that create organizational cultures distinguished by a bureaucratic ethos, or Weberian public-office orientation. Her work highlights the sociological foundations of effective bureaucracy.

As we have already seen, there is a critical strain in the literature exemplified by the crucial work of Steven Sampson (2010) in tracing the development of a global anti-corruption industry (see also De Sousa, Hindess, and Larmour 2010). More recently, Atiles (2023) has discussed the "coloniality" of corruption, pointing out that allegations of corruption may involve racist representations formed in the course of colonial relationships. He illustrates with reference to the Trump administration's use of corruption narratives to justify its tightfisted relief efforts in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria in 2017.

Fifth, problem-solving sociology (M. Prasad 2021) represents another kind of approach to corruption. The approach tends to underscore the various and substantial costs of corruption and, therefore, the need to find ways of combating or transforming corrupt practices. In this vein, Prasad, Martins da Silva, and Nickow (2019) identify three challenges to solving corruption: a resource challenge (people resorting to corruption in order to meet basic needs), a definitional challenge (ambiguity over what constitutes corruption), and an alternative moralities challenge (some corrupt practices are culturally acceptable). They propose addressing these challenges within the context of particular organizations, for instance, by promoting an organizational culture of anti-corruption.

We would articulate a sixth approach around the idea of corruption as a moving object, that is, as subject to social difference and change. While it is obviously not the case that other approaches are insensitive to these dynamics, a comparative historical sociology of corruption makes them central to understanding corruption. It mobilizes a particular kind of sociological imagination, the kind displayed by the old sociologists of corruption and on display still in more contemporary work. Scheppele (1999), observing the transition to capitalism in Eastern Europe, notes that practices of petty graft and pilferage labeled corruption by Western observers were considered normal in the Soviet era. It is not that people suddenly became more corrupt, of course, but that the framework for evaluating these practices changed. The old public sector norms were deemed inappropriate while many of the norms of the new capitalist order proved impossible to meet. As a result, corruption appeared rife. Granovetter (2007) cites Richard Hofstadter's analysis of the Progressive movement in early 20th century America. Hofstadter (1955) roots the movement's opposition to urban political machines in its mainly middle-class constituency's fear of losing social and political ground to immigrants and industrialists. "The ideology of clean government developed out of their status anxiety," Granovetter (2007, 165) suggests. According to Wilson (2023), the English East India Company came to adopt a more modern conception of corruption emphasizing the sanctity of public duty as a result of organizational change. Geopolitical competition and the militarization of trade in the late 18th through early 19th centuries prompted the company's transformation from a largely commercial enterprise to a subsidiary of the British Empire. As such, the conduct of its agents came under the oversight of imperial officials—"outsiders" with little knowledge of India and company operations. These supervisors favored a universal definition of corruption disembedded from social and organizational contexts.

We would draw a circle around this kind of work for the broader perspective it affords us. It enables us to "see around" the object and understand it in the context of the social processes environing it, for example, economic transition, status competition, and organizational change. This perspective offers a crucial antidote to viewing corruption as a generic object. While this approach clearly overlaps with "purely" historical work on corruption—see, for example, Buchan and Hill's (2014) intellectual history of corruption and Kroeze, Vitória, and Geltner's (2018) volume on anticorruption from antiquity to modernity—we would underscore the sociology of comparative historical sociology. That is, embedding means for us tracing the dynamic of social structure and agency over time. We expound upon this approach in the following section, specifying its aims, focus, procedure, process-orientation, and significance.

4 | A Comparative Historical Sociology of Corruption

The aim of a comparative historical sociology of corruption is not to provide a better definition of corruption or a more refined typology. It is not to elaborate corruption conceptually but, rather, to describe it in its constitutive contexts, including social space and time. Besides, the conventional definition of modern corruption as the abuse of public trust is usually sufficient to start with because it is only that, a starting point. It is an ideal type serving to bracket a piece of reality for investigation—a means to an end (Weber 1949 [1904], 90–95). The end is something else entirely; not a better definition, typology, or classification, but a better understanding of how the practices in question came to be, why they persist, and how they are understood and utilized on the ground.

The procedure is to embed, embed, and compare. We configure corrupt practices within the structures or sets of social relations we deem relevant to their emergence and institutionalization (embedding socially), we trace the development of these structures over time (embedding historically), and then we compare, not the behaviors alone abstracted from context, but the social processes producing different corruption milieus. Corruption may not be the same thing everywhere (universal), but it is also not a wholly different thing in every case (radically particular). We can generalize meaningfully across a set of cases not because the practices we are interested in are by definition the same but because the processes underlying those practices are similar (they foster a certain relation to the state, for instance). That is to say, we compare with an eye to social structures and processes and not simply categorical behavior. Such comparisons are socially and historically bounded, and more analytically coherent for it.

While this approach is compatible with many of the efforts to embed corruption in anthropology and sociology, it is distinguished by a central focus on *process*. To understand what we mean by process, we must dispense with the unhelpful distinctions between structure and its others—mainly culture, process, and agency (with structure usually the disfavored term). Structure refers to concrete, ongoing systems of social relations (e.g., Granovetter 1985). These relations are laden with

meaning and form the webs of significance Geertz (1973) called culture. These meaningful relations are ever in the process of transformation, and thus, rather than structure we might speak of processes of structuration (Giddens 1984). In another sense, structure refers to durable patterns of thought and action (Durkheim 2014 [1895]). These patterns are not automatically reproduced but have to be enacted, or actively constructed in situ. People have to "translate" the social pressures of a particular situation into appropriate behavior (March and Olsen 1989). They possess a degree of autonomy in doing so but must also contend with various contingencies, and thus outcomes may vary even when structural contexts are similar. With these considerations in mind, we use the word process to get at structure and culture taking shape in time as well as the progressive dynamic of structure and agency.

The focus of a comparative historical sociology of corruption is on empirically tracing the concrete, or historically specific, processes shaping the practices labeled corruption. In general, we advocate studying corruption in terms of three generic processes: emergence, institutionalization, and mobilization. These rubrics serve to underscore the temporality of corruption. Corrupt practices have to emerge and may disappear. They become institutionalized (or de-institutionalized) over time. Allegations of corruption are deployed to mobilize (or demobilize) people and resources. We have to understand this mobilization with respect to the normative projects and material interests of institutions and individuals as they develop over time.

Finally, we conceive a comparative historical sociology of corruption as an intervention. The relevant context is the disembedding of corruption in recent decades and the alarming extent to which, today, even among social scientists, corruption is regarded as a natural, as opposed to social and historical, object: as self-evident, universal, and evil. We regard this conception as blinding. There is, thus, a great need for reflexivity in the scholarship. Embedding enables reflexivity generally by putting corruption in its social and historical place and particularly by situating its mobilization with respect to particular interests, agendas, and institutions. It entails shifting from a primarily normative to a primarily sociological and historical register. We are led to approach corruption not as a problem to be solved but with a set of questions concerning its emergence, institutionalization, and mobilization.

In this respect, a comparative historical sociology of corruption is different from a problem-solving sociology, which, in practice, tends to mobilize a narrow definition of the problem. The latter approach emphasizes the costs of corruption as an impetus for action but seems less interested in looking beyond costs and complicating the picture, for instance, by recognizing the ideological accounting of these "costs." Our approach would bracket the problem-solving effort in order to create space for understanding corruption in the Weberian sense (1949 [1904]), that is, grasping its significance in the concrete terms of the social reality in which it takes shape. Some might discount our goal as "only" understanding, but we see this kind of understanding as a form of action. As Arendt (1994 [1954]) observed, understanding is harder to do than simply doing and yet, insofar as it serves to reconcile us to reality, imperative to feeling at home in the world. Understanding would serve to correct a reductive and moralistic conception of corruption. This conception is costly in its own right, as we will discuss below.

5 | The Costs of Anti-Corruption

A disembedded view of corruption promotes two kinds of misperceptions, idealism and essentialism, with real-world costs.

First, *idealism*. Treating corruption as a generic problem can lead to policy prescriptions that are detached from the reality on the ground and hence inappropriate, ineffective, or perverse in their effects. To illustrate, let us consider an example of corruption in Cambodia's land market. The country's World Bank-sponsored land registration program was supposed to improve tenure security and prevent land grabbing. Nearly a decade on, however, the development worker turned academic Robin Biddulph (2010) concluded that it did not make much of a difference. It did not make people more secure, increase their productivity, or improve their access to credit. Rather, it led to more conflict, making people keen to title their land and claim communal land and pitting formal title holders against those with only informal titles. He argued that the intervention served primarily as cover for powerful interests. Private titling distracted from the selling off of public land on a massive scale. In addition to three million titles of questionable value, the program produced political capital; it served to appease international donors and could be touted domestically as a pro-poor initiative.

The gap between the ideal and reality of the titling effort was the result of systematic misrepresentation, Biddulph (2010, 215–19) writes. The land registration program was based on a "caricature" of rural life and an insensibility to the schemes of powerful interests. Part of this had to do with the intervention being conceived with the donor community in mind—an audience that was more interested in solving a problem framed in generic terms (tenure insecurity) than in coming to terms with the complexities of the situation at hand. The need to be effective led to policy simplifications discounting the local context and bracketing power relations. The result was a kind of structural blindness.

This blindness was shared even by development workers on the ground. Biddulph tells the story of Oxfam field workers tasked with protecting Cambodia's forests. They had to confront the fact that ordinary villagers routinely plundered the forests for their livelihoods, collecting timber and non-timber forest products. When asked about it, they responded by saying that they would have to teach the villagers to value their environment. "If the ideas and behavior of the people did not fit the project document," Biddulph (2010, 218) observed wryly, "then the ideas and behavior should be changed." This brings to mind Weber's caution (1949 [1904], 94) against forcing reality into the "procrustean bed" of theory.

Some may argue that embedding runs the opposite risk of idealism, that of *excusing* corruption. We disagree. An embedded approach does not preclude recognizing the problems created by

corrupt practices. It simply makes understanding these practices as structured social action—that is, historically and sociologically—the priority. To be sure, this understanding will inevitably complicate a social problems framework, not least by challenging reductive accounts. But this is a good thing insofar as it brings us closer to reality. The hope, of course, is that an embedded understanding will inform more realistic approaches to the problem as such.

Second, *essentialism*. We might think that articulating corruption in terms of self-interest would pull us away from a cultural understanding of the problem, and yet, ironically, a reductive and moralistic account serves to entrench a view of corruption as a cultural pathology. The relevant conceit is that if corruption is the same thing everywhere, then so is anti-corruption; in other words, what worked in, say, Singapore, should work in the Philippines despite the two countries being completely different sociologically. This particular alchemy of commensuration informs Quah's (2011) approach to corruption in Asia. "Why is corruption a serious problem in India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand," he asks, whereas "Singapore and Hong Kong SAR [have] been able to minimize corruption"? (32), holding up these two exceptions—which are, of course, exceptional for good reasons—as models for emulation. (It's a stunning formulation if you really think about it and almost reads as if it were meant facetiously.) In the case of the Philippines, he points to the usual suspects as promoting corruption: the low salaries of civil servants, red tape, the low risk of detection and punishment for corrupt actors, a lack of political will, and culture. With respect to the latter, Quah writes that corruption thrives in the Philippines because of the importance of family ties and a culture of reciprocal obligation, and approvingly cites a description of the Filipino family as a "corruption syndicate" (132). He ultimately concludes that curbing corruption in the Philippines remains "an impossible dream" so long as these factors persist.

Telling people that they need to change and then saying that they cannot because of who they are—their politics and culture—is not an idle gesture. It succeeds in making people feel bad about themselves. This negativity is easily pathologized, or attributed to cultural or national identity, as Smith (2007) illustrates. His informants tend to view corruption as a specifically Nigerian problem, and their sense that "something is wrong with us" fosters much handwringing and self-flagellation. As Chinua Achebe (1983, 2) lamented in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, "Whenever two Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national deficiencies." Similarly, in the Philippines, the nationalist politician Benigno Aquino (1968), in an article titled "What's Wrong with the Philippines?", bemoaned his countrymates' lack of discipline and propensity for corruption. This sensibility is debilitating, and of course it is. What if anything can be done about corruption if the problem is cultural? Hence, as Olivier de Sardan (1999, 48) observed, "the general feeling of helplessness in the face of an infernal mechanism." The real problem is that a thin and morally charged account of corruption leads people to view corruption as both endemic and problematic without access to a deeper understanding of why the practices labeled corrupt are endemic and also, just as importantly, why the problem framework is so compelling. Consequently, they end up blaming themselves as the problem. They point to their "bad values" while judging themselves by an impossible standard. Understanding corruption in the context of long-term processes, as practices that have grown out of real structural conditions but are also changing in ways that escape anti-corruption metrics, provides people with a broader and more salutary perspective, one less likely to lead them to denounce their "cultures of corruption" and leave them feeling hopeless.

In sum, embedding inevitably complicates the conventional understanding of corruption. The distinctions holding it together start to blur. Transgression is shown to be constructed and the public/private divide contingent. The corrupt bureaucrat shades into the "Weberian," organizationally minded one. We arrive at a conception of corruption that is messier, contingent on the course of certain processes, and normatively slippery, making corruption hard to "fix" in both senses of the word: to pin down and to solve. This messiness is a resource analytically, however. It yields a more complex account, to be sure, but also a more clear-eyed one.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] Nye (1967, 419) himself acknowledged the narrowness of this definition, which he understood as "denoting specific behavior generally called corrupt by Western standards." He proposed it specifically in order to assess the benefits and costs of such behavior.

[2] Osrecki (2017, 115–16) used Google Ngrams to show that the relative occurrence of the term "sociology of corruption" plummeted in the mid-1970s, never to recover. Mentions of the term "economics of corruption," meanwhile, began to climb around the same time and spiked in the 1990s\mn.

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