corruption

by Karin Zotzmann

Abstract:

Deutsch. Korruption ist nicht nur ein universelles Phänomen, es wird auch universell abgelehnt, weil es Ungerechtigkeiten hervorbringt. Korruption kann deshalb Menschen mobilisieren, politische Veränderungen zu verlangen. Das Gefühl von Ungerechtigkeit kann allerdings auch strategisch genutzt werden, zum Beispiel von Politikern die ihre Gegner in ein schlechtes Licht rücken und sich selbst als moralisch besser darstellen wollen. Indviduen und Gruppen, die als homogen dargestellt warden, werden als 'korrupte Andere' und als unmoralisch stigmatisiert. Diese moralisierende Darstellung erlaubt es einerseits von tatsächlich stattfindender Korruption abzulenken und andererseits die Strukturen, die Korruption ermöglichen, intakt zu lassen und Gegenmaßnahmen zu verhindern.

Dieser Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit dem strategischen Missbrauch des emotionalen Substraums. Korruption als 'leere Worthülse' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) erlaubt es den Zuhörern den Begriff mit ganz unterschiedlichen, oft widersprüchlichen Bedeutungen zu verbinden und sich im Kampf gegen 'die Korrupten' einig zu fühlen. Tatsächlich ist es so, dass der Terminus für eine Vielzahl unterschiedlicher illegaler Praktiken gebraucht wird, z.B. für Bestechung, Erpressung, 'Vetternwirtschaft', Bevorzugung von Familienmitgliedern, Freunden und Geschäftspartnern, illegal Beinflussung, Veruntreuung und Unterschlagung (Caiden, Dwivedi & Jabbra, 2001). Was legal als Korruption betrachtet wird, hängt ausserdem, zumindest teilweise, von der jeweiligen Rechtsgebung und Normen in bestimmten Kontexten ab.

Corruption generates **injustices** and can therefore mobilize people to demand political change. At the same time, the feeling of injustice can also be mobilized through the **strategic use** of the term, for example by politicians who aim to vilify political enemies and present themselves as morally superior. By attributing corruption purely to a lack of ethical conduct and values, attention is diverted away from **structures** that enable and motivate agents to engage in illicit practices and from the need to develop structures that would inhibit such actions. This entry explores the strategic use of the word corruption to mobilize people against an imagined common enemy.

Etymology:

The term corruption comes from Latin and combines the prefix *com* (together) with the verb *rumpere* (to break), thus suggesting **three interrelated idea**s: In a first instance, something 'pure', 'beneficial' or 'rightful' is being **destroyed** or **degenerated** (Noonan 1984: xvii). In other words, something that *exists* loses its function or degenerates through harmful actions. In a historical context where impersonal institutions granting rights to citizens did *not* exist—for example in absolutism where the king held absolute power—contemporaries would have possibly seen bribery, extorsion, and nepotism, to name but a few, as normal and part of everyday life. They might have had a sense for the injustice that such practices entail but there were no structures in place that inhibited or penalize these transactions.

Secondly, by saying that something is corrupted or that someone is corrupt we make an **evaluative statement** based on norms or values we hold. If we envisage, for instance, someone paying a bribe to help a prisoner escape from an oppressive regime we would not necessarily call this corruption as we evaluate the altruistic motive behind the bribe positively.

The etymological origin indicates, thirdly, that these illicit practices cannot be done by one individual alone. This seems obvious as any form of **corruption is a transaction** where something valuable, a *gain*, changes hands, either literally or metaphorically. Corruption, however, always **involves three actors**: a *principal*, an *agent*, and a *client* (Rose-Ackerman 1999). The agent is the person or group who represents an institution (the principal). The institution can be either from the public, the corporate or the non-profit sector. This principal grants institutional power to the agent under the condition that the latter follows its official policies, norms and regulations. Corruption occurs wthen an agent breaches his positional duty by treating a particular client, a citizen or a company, favourably in exchange for some private reward. A prototypical situation is for example when a government representative accepts a bribe from a private person who wants some form of preferential treatment in exchange.

This raises the question whether giving gifts to business partners, paying tips in restaurants, or lobbying for a particular political cause would also count as corruption, as they are largely accepted *legal* practices. While there are fuzzy boundaries between what counts and what does not count as corruption, the practical reality is at least partly determined by law, and these laws in turn are based on normative assumptions about what is regarded as beneficial or desirable for a given society at a certain point in history. Offering bribes to secure contracts abroad was, for instance, legal in Germany until 1999 when the *Internationales Bestechungsgesetz* (IntBestG) [International Bribery Law] was established and in the US until 1977 when the *Foreign Corrupt Practices Act* (FCPA) was passed.

Problematization:

Although **what counts as corruption** depends on historical context and particular norms and laws at the time, this does not mean that evaluating transactions as corrupt is an entirely subjective or culture specific judgement. Corruption is **a social ill** that has a wide range of negative effects on societies. In contexts where corruption is systemic and thus hard to avoid, citizens might nevertheless be aware of the wide range of corrosive effects corruption has on their society and the common good. The anti-corruption as well as the mass demonstrations in Russia (2021), Romania (2017), India (2011), Egypt (2011), and the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Euromajdan in Ukraine (2014) bear witness not only to the staggering dimensions of this phenomenon but also to the **growing fatigue and desperation of citizens** who see themselves forced to bribe public officials for many services they want or need to access. Explaining corruption as being caused by a lack of values in a specific 'culture' or particular social group is therefore wrong. It assumes in a first instance that cultures overlap with nation state boundaries, are internally homogenous and distinct from other national cultures. Secondly, it views **individuals** as being determined by their '**national culture**' and thus overlooks differences among groups in a society but also differences between individuals. What holds this **essentializing idea** in place is the belief that **one's own cultural group is better**, a phenomenon the social psychologist Henry Tajfel (1919-1984) described as intergroup discrimination: Our identity, he argued is tied up with the social group we feel we belong to. As soon as people are categorized as members of distinct groups they start to think that they are more similar among themselves but also better than or superior to members of other groups.

The use of the term corruption is also **problematic** when it is employed for **strategic purposes.** As it is based on **evaluations** of what is right and wrong, of what is just and unjust, it is highly emotionally charged and can mobilize people. It can thus be used as **a form of propaganda**, as 'a hidden or overt intentional move aimed at inducing a desired response in the addressee'. Donald Trump, for instance, presented himself as a commoner, as being on the side of 'the people' and against the 'establishment'—even though he is wealthy and has been promoting the interests of the rich at the expense of the majority of US citizens. In his presidential campaign he promised to 'drain the swamp' of elite corruption but during his presidency, he leveraged his political power into greater wealth for himself, his family, and political allies. A report by the Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics (2019), a non-governmental watchdog in Washington, lists 3,740 cases of conflicts-of-interests during his time in office.

Communication strategies:

While corruption is indeed harmful, **different ways of presenting corruption** and corrupt agents can be used to **serve political purposes and interests**. The following set of communicative strategies are often used in a variety of combinations depending on the respective purpose and context:

- **individualising**: attributing the cause of corruption to a lack of values and ethical conduct
- **depoliticization**: by attributing the causes of corruption to a lack of values, attention is diverted away from structures that enable and motivate people to engage in illicit practices. This can be done, for instance, by vague metaphors like 'swamp'.
- **essentializing**: claiming that corruption is systemic in particular countries because of their 'national culture'
- **scapegoating**: identifying and blaming others, for instance political contenders or enemies, to be corrupt and thus delegitimize them
- **polarizing**: presenting a black and white picture of a 'clean' and virtuous in-group and a corrupt out-group
- **elevating oneself**: by attributing corruption to others—either individuals or groups as allegedly morally deficient—one implicitly adopts a position of moral superiority

- **appeal to emotions**: corruption indeed generates great injustices which must be addressed. This feeling of injustice can, however, be strategically misused.

Subversion:

The following **three suggestions** for subverting the strategic use of the term corruption share three elements: In a first instance, they **engage with different art forms** that have depicted corruption to gain an insight into the mechanisms of the phenomenon. Secondly, they shift the **focus** of attention from moral deficiency of individuals or groups to the **structures** that enable and motivate agents to engage in illicit practices. This is complicated as structures—as opposed to people—are largely invisible. You need to use theories to explain how people are empowered in particular systems so that they can act in certain ways and not others. Thirdly, the suggestions work **against cultural stereotyping** {'othering') by drawing attention to the fact that corruption has occurred in all societies throughout history.

Whistle blowers are crucial in combating corruption because it is a usually invisible crime, conducted behind closed doors and without the immediate presence of a victim. Often informal structures are in place that protect those who engage in illicit practices and whistle blowers therefore take considerable risks when the leak information. In **Renaissance Venice**, stone boxes with a lion's mouth (*bocca di leone*) were inserted into the walls of offical institutions where citizens could anonymously—even at night—insert letters of complaint about public officials. While this practice might have given rise to false denunciation it is an early example of whistle blower protection.



Whistle blowers: B*ocche di leone* (Lion's Mouths), Venice, Italy


***Little Dorrit*, film adaptation (BBC 2008)**

Most **novels** by **Charles Dickens depict corruption** in one form or another. As in the case of *The Wolf of Wall Street* (see here below), one can read his books as a portrayal of the moral **corruption of individuals** *or* as an **analysis of the structures** that enabled or constrained individuals. Institutions such as the 'Office of Circumlocution' in *Little Dorrit*, for instance, epitomize the red tape created for common citizens who applied for patents, licences, and other official documents. The Office was run by the Barnacles, who Dickens described as a *'very high family, and a very large family'.* To get something done, you needed access to powerful networks which was only available to the rich and the powerful.

The film tells the story of **Jordan Belfort**, a New York **stockbroker** who made his way up in the echelon of Wall Street through rampant corruption and fraud. The film can be seen as depicting a thoroughly corrupt individual. My suggestion is to view this film with **a focus on the structures** that enabled Jordan to engage in illicit practices as he would not have been able to do what he did, had not he gained the trust of banks (principals) and other stakeholder in a relatively unregulated environment.



***The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), (dir. by Martin Scorsese)**

Discussion:

- Think about recent examples of accusations of corruption. When was the cause of corruption attributed to a deficiency in character and when was a justified analysis of structures or the lack thereof provided?
- Think about a situation where you would only get a necessary treatment in a hospital if paid a bribe. What would you decide in this situation? Does your decision say more about your character or more about the situation you find yourself in?
- Can you think of any past or contemporary examples of corruption in countries which have a lower score on the Transparency International Global Barometer?
- If you come across a poster, a meme or any other representation of corruption, think about how the topic is represented through pictures and language. Are any of the above-mentioned communication strategies used? Does this help to understand why corruption is enabled to take place?

References/Further Readings:

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Links:

Bocche di Leone (Venezia): https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bocca_di_Leone_(Venezia)

Global Corruption Barometer: https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb

Little Dorrit: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00fcm3b

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