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The Definition of Political Corruption

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22/10/12

I

To conclude. The Light of humane minds is Perspicuous Words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; *Reason* is the *pace*; Encrease of *Science*, the *way*; and the Benefit of man-kind, the *end*. And on the contrary, Metaphors, and senselesse and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui* (will-o'-the-wisp); and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention, and sedition, or contempt.¹

Hobbes's clarity is appealing, although he seems to demand a lot from the irremediably inexact social sciences. Nonetheless, the discipline of politics includes many who believe that something like a Hobbesian programme of definition 'first snuffed and purged from ambiguity' followed by 'science' is possible. This is certainly the case for many who write on political corruption, and while that strategy has some things in its favour, it also has pitfalls. The last thirty years of writing on political corruption and its definition provide eloquent testimony to both.

A definition can have two dimensions: it may articulate the meaning and use of a word, and it can provide a tool in the construction of an explanation. The linguistic and cultural turns in philosophy, history and anthropology have made many scholars more interested in the former; while the social sciences have focussed more on the latter. Both programmes are defensible, but neither should be conducted in ignorance of the other, as Hobbes was aware.²

Understood as a tool, a definition aims to identify a set of criteria that serve as necessary and sufficient conditions in picking out a distinct phenomenon or class of phenomena. That phenomenon (or class), once distinguished, can be understood or explained by reference to sets of antecedents or causal conditions. If we conflate the definitions with the causal conditions we get tautologies. For example, we cannot explain the fact that increasing numbers of young men are failing to marry by saying that they are bachelors! Nor do we explain the fact that people are using their offices to generate income for themselves by saying that they are corrupt. That may be a re-description of the state of affairs but it is not an explanation. Explanations are in something of a state of tension with definitions. Ideally, one's class of events (picked out by a definition) is a class that also has some explanatory unity, in the sense that members of the class are susceptible of the same causal explanations. Yet, we do not want to identify the class by the fact that the same explanation works, since we need to pick out the criteria that unite the class independently from the conditions that explain its occurrence.

Consider, for example, 'economic' definitions of corruption that use 'principal-agent theory' – that is, economic theory that looks at ways of designing incentives to induce agents to act in ways that are optimal for those employing or directing them (their principals), when the agent's behaviour cannot be directly observed. On these accounts, corruption is defined 'in terms of the divergence between the principal's or the public's interest and those of the agent or civil servant: corruption

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* Ch. 5 original pagination 22 ed., R. Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p, 36.

² See Philip Pettit, *Made with Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind and Politics* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2008) and Adrian Blau, 'Hobbes on Corruption' *History of Political Thought* (2009) XXX (4) pp. 596-616

occurs when an agent betrays the principal's interests in pursuit of her own.' ³ Here the definition – it is a case of corruption when the agent 'betrays' the principal in pursuit of her own interests – is quickly tied into an account in which the focus is on the conditions under which it is possible for the agent to pursue her own interests with impunity. Such conditions usually entail a monopoly of certain goods, discretion in their distribution, and a lack of accountability. But these causal conditions risk being too closely linked to the definition, in virtue of the background assumptions about agent motivation. If we assume that people act self-interestedly, and think of politics as a realm in which the interests of those holding public office are potentially divergent from the interests of the public at large, then we produce an explanation of corrupt behaviour by reference to the conditions under which self-interest can be pursued by public office holders with impunity. Probity in public office, then, is explained by the absence of monopoly and discretion and the existence of high levels of accountability – that is, we get probity when the principal-agent problem is diminished to zero, since behaviour is rendered observable! Moreover, the definition includes the term 'betrayal, but remains silent on the range of issues concerning what counts as a 'betrayal'. What counts as a betrayal must depend on the relative rights and responsibilities of principal and agent and must refer to norms concerning their respective roles and responsibilities. Corruption is, then, is derogation from these norms, but it is not just any derogation. Incompetence is not the same as corruption. Nor are all derogations that involve the pursuit of self-interest corrupt, since some (such as treason on the one hand, or informal collective bargaining to raise wages on the other) should be distinguished from corruption. What should be clear is that the definition now seems less convincing, since a huge amount depends on the structure of norms and expectations that frame the agent's relationship to her principal, and frame the range of legitimate expectations the principal may have. These elements must inform our definition of corruption, making it, inevitably, a more complex, and more local matter.

Definitions carve up the world of objects and events in way that allow us to think more clearly and consistently about our world. But, in many areas of the social sciences, they are not picking out discrete natural objects, so much as types or ranges of behaviour. And, in defining behaviour as corrupt, we define it not solely in terms of an external description of bodily movements, but as a motivated social action. That means that we are distinguishing types of agent motivation, and thus differences in the meaning associated with the act by the agent, and are acknowledging that the categories of meaning with which men and women engage are not solipsistic in character, but are linked to the broader social world in which they participate.

Moreover, corruption is category term of appraisal: in calling something corrupt we attach negative connotations to it - or, at the very least, we report it in terms to which those involved would attach negative connotations. Because it is a widely used category of social meaning with powerful negative connotations, more specialised, technical and professional use of the term often clashes with the meanings which are ascribed to it by ordinary people, politicians and public servants, the media and commentators, each of whom may have different concerns, and different interests in identifying certain types of conduct as corrupt. And, least we think that our scholarly position guarantees our objectivity, a vast quantity of the now voluminous literature on corruption is clearly and deeply marked by a set of Western assumptions about the need for free markets and liberal constitutional orders, coupled with a suspicion of political power and the state. Indeed, the thrust of most literature emanating from economics and drawing on rent-seeking and principal-agent models, is close to suggesting that politics is inevitably a force for corruption.

This does not mean that we cannot reach any degree of objectivity in definition, although doing so is a lot more difficult than the literature generally assumes. The great majority of those writing about

³ Robert Klitgaard, *Controlling Corruption* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988) p. 24.

corruption deal with the definition of corruption rather dismissively, suggesting that, while there are issues about definition these tend to muddy the water to no real purpose, and they take this as sufficient warrant to adopt a one-line definition, usually following the model of bribery, which they then apply to the argument in hand – being helped along by metrics such as the Corruption Perception Index, which rely heavily on perceptions of bribery. Stipulating in this way rides rough shod over social meanings. But, if we argue that corruption is an entirely local phenomenon - wholly defined by local norms, mores and cultural values -then we abandon the idea of family resemblances that would allow us to see it as an instance of a more general cross-cultural category. The definitional problem of political corruption then is bounded by the unappealing options of relativism (in which local definitions are treated as untranslatable to other contexts) or stipulation (in which we insist on a technical definition). With a strong behavioural turn in political science and its the emphasis on quantitative analysis it is not surprising that scholars tend to opt for the latter, or follow others who do so!⁴

Certainly, acknowledging definitional complexities introduces problems in analysis and tends to render rather meaningless a number of pieces of work that treat the term as effortlessly capturing the same phenomenon across vastly differing cultures. But the fact that work must be done on a conceptual tool for it to work in different contexts should be accepted as part of the price for a political science that is sensitive to differences in social and cultural systems, meanings and values. Does this approach take us away from Hobbes's injunction? Not at all. Hobbes was a nominalist: what he sought to do was to put together a clearly defined lexicon that could render the political world coherent and orderly for people in virtue of it being itself, orderly and coherent. If people understood terms in very different ways there could be no order. This meant that definitions had to mesh with people's more inchoate understandings, serving to systematize these into a coherent world view. That, for Hobbes, was a central objective of his science. In a similar spirit, this chapter explores the difficulties of definition in the field of political corruption and argues for a deeper conceptual understanding that identifies the place which the problem of political corruption occupies within western political thinking. With Hobbes, it argues that getting the terminology right is also a way of both understanding and ordering the political world.

II

Corruption in the West has a very particular history, tied to a conception of the decay and decomposition of a thing. As the OED defines it:

The destruction or spoiling of anything, *esp.* by disintegration or by decomposition with its attendant unwholesomeness; and loathsomeness; putrefaction

Or, in a more general sense:

Destruction, dissolution of the constitution which makes a thing what it is.

In this essay I am concerned more generally with *political* corruption, that is, with the decay or destruction of the political (although the term may also be applied elsewhere – as in economic corruption). This Western understanding of political corruption, then, presupposes an understanding of the character of politics and the political order, which is why it is not surprising that the most extensive analysis of political corruption is given in classical and republican texts in which there is a sense of the unity and cohesiveness of the political order being harmed or destroyed by malign influences. That sense of a political order as involving a shared political culture, with public offices being directed to securing the public interest or the public good, plays a major part in ancient Greek and Roman thinking, and goes on to be profoundly influential on

Machiavelli's republicanism and on the languages of political theory in early modern Europe that J. G. A. Pocock and others have traced through Britain and America.⁵

We inherit from this tradition a sense that politics can work: that is, that there can be ways of resolving differences that do not involve simply the domination of one group by another or the design of institutions and rules to facilitate that domination. The Western conception of political corruption, in so far as it is an intelligible and coherent one, derives its meaning in large part from the sense that political order has (at least potentially) a certain function and character and that this is suborned and subverted when interests turn the political system to their own ends. We can disagree about what politics requires and about what supports or harms it. But, in the West, we have this concept because we think that politics can be prevented from working as it should, with damaging long-term consequences, when people use their power for their own ends, or where the exercise of public office is subverted by forces that lack legitimate standing within the political system. Moreover, while the technical discussion of corruption is often very precise and may seem unconnected with this tradition, there is also a public discourse in which corruption is used by people to describe their sense that political power is being subverted by sectional forces. This tension between technical and popular understandings can give rise to confusion for which there is no simple solution.

Technical definitions are also dogged by the clear normative connotations that are intrinsic to the term 'corruption.' At the same time, popular understandings, while they express this normative element, are often imprecise and highly emotive and may attribute to corruption a range of failings in the political or economic system that are not in any clear sense corrupt. At the same time, the absence of popular concern certainly cannot be taken as indicating the absence of corruption. One middle route between highly technical definitions and relying on popular understandings has been to appeal to the intrinsic character of a particular political system as a basis for identifying corrupt deviations. Dennis Thompson, for example, in his work on 'mediated corruption,'⁶ partly appeals to shared norms, but also to the character of the democratic system. The difficulty with this route is in justifying the norms that are taken to be integral to the type of political system. (In an appeal to standards of democracy should we think of this as reflecting norms of democracy *tout court*, or of democracy in the United States, or, more broadly, of constitutional democracies or representative political systems?).

On the account I am proposing, corruption arises within a set of largely western assumptions about politics and its character.⁷ This encourages us to extend the focus of concerns about cultural differences and the importance of local understandings from a concentration on what *behaviour* people classify as corrupt, to identify *the framework* in which they make these judgments. That is, by grasping how they understand the political system and its operation, and how far they have a sense of the political as a sphere in which conflicts could be resolved in ways that can be widely legitimated. The challenge for political scientists, from this perspective, is to recognise the diversity of political orders and the various judgments that are made about the forces that threaten the stability and legitimacy of these orders. Exactly what counts as corruption may be relative, but our understanding of it is rooted in a conception of politics that sees it as a distinct sphere of allocation and exchange, and as one that can be subverted in ways that attack its basic 'nature' or function,

⁵ See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975) and the voluminous literature that followed it.

⁶ Dennis Thompson, 'Mediated Corruption', in his *Restoring Responsibility: Ethics in Government, Business, and Healthcare* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 143-73. See also Mark Warren, 'What does corruption mean in a democracy' *American Journal of Political Science* (2004) 48, pp. 328-43.

⁷ Although there are instances of similar analysis elsewhere – for example in Ibn Khaldûn's writing on the Maghreb (although this too was strongly influenced by Aristotle) see, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* 3 Volumes (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

and that we call corrupt. The underlying conception of politics is often deeply contested, and its precise character and scope will vary across different contexts, but people's concerns with corruption are predicated upon it. People's conception of politics can be flawed: by seeing politics as appropriate where other systems of rules or norms – social, familial, religious – provide a basis for distribution and exchange and are able to command a sufficient consensus, which politics may destabilize or damage; or by failing to recognise the contradictions in their conception – as when they expect both direct accountability to popular pressure and procedural fairness. But, while conceptions can be flawed and contested, it is the underlying conception of politics that is at stake, and that is something that is not infinitely varied – there are feasibility constraints, and limits on what conceptions can provide sufficient normative content to fuel judgments of corruption, both of which give some objective and cognitive character to the debate. And, while some cultures do not have an understanding that delineates politics from other realms (such as religion) or which subordinates politics to those realms, we can understand the growing universality of the language of political corruption as symptomatic of the way that Western states and global capitalism have drawn a wide range of different social and political orders into a system of power and exchange that has increasingly necessitated the development of domestic political institutions that the West can recognise and endorse, in part by their sharing (or seeming to share) in its understanding of the character of politics.

When we define political corruption, then, we do so with a sense that politics has some structure and order (if only potentially) that is being subverted by people who fail to conform to the norms and expectations of that structure in their societies, and do so in pursuit of advantage for themselves or their groups or factions. People can fundamentally oppose the political order without being corrupt (as with revolutionaries), but their behaviour counts as political action (rather than corruption), because they project another order and different criteria of legitimacy, and because their end is not simply their own gain but the establishment of an alternative political system.⁸ As political theorists and political scientists, our vocation is centrally concerned with identifying the conditions for the emergence and continuance of stable, legitimate orders, that command authority, and that are able to resist subversion for personal or sectional ends either by those entrusted with power and responsibility or by internal social forces or external powers. But we should recognise that what this will look like is likely to be heavily dependent on local causal conditions and existing cultural commitments and norms.

III

It should now be clear that we will not find a one-line definition of corruption.⁹ If we adopt something like 'the misuse of public office for private gain' we may find the conditions to be present without corruption being the appropriate term, as the case of treason shows. Equally, we might fall short of one of the conditions and yet still want to use the term corruption: when a politician sticks to the rules but devotes his office to maximising his income; where a public official's distribution of

⁸ See my *Political Conduct* (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 2007), chapters 3 and 5. This is not to deny that the adoption of certain means may lead to the defeat of certain self-proclaimed ends.

⁹ On definition see Heidenheimer (1970), Heidenheimer, Johnston and Levine (1998), Heidenheimer and Johnston (2002). See also Michael Johnston's 'Keeping the Answers, Changing the Questions'; and my 'Defining Political Corruption', in Heywood (1997); also my 'Corruption Definition and Measurement', in Sampford *et al.* (2006: 45-56) and my last attempt to get things right in 'Conceptualising Corruption in Peacebuilding Contexts' in Christine Cheng and Dominik Zaum, eds., *Corruption and Post-Conflict Peacekeeping* (Routledge, London, 2011) to which the three subsequent paragraphs are indebted.

contracts responds to a mix of threats and offers (what Nozick calls ‘throffers’¹⁰), so that he has little choice in what he does; or where the gain is to one’s party or constituency, rather than personal, but where rules or norms are broken or subverted.¹¹ We need then to identify the major elements of political corruption, which can then be combined into a rough definition – one that sketches a core conception while acknowledging that cases without all the core features may nonetheless count as corruption.

The key elements of a definition of political corruption are:

- A conception of public office with rules and norms for the conduct of that office, where the office is defined partly in terms of a broader public interest that it serves, and where these interests may conflict with the personal or partisan interests of the office-holder.
- A view that corruption involves the distortion or subversion of the exercise of public office so that it meets private, partisan or sectional rather than public interests - so that some people gain who should not and some lose (or fail to benefit) who should not.
- The idea that three actors are *normally* involved in or affected by corrupt activity: the occupant of the public office (A), the intended beneficiary of that office (B); and the actual (i.e., newly intended) beneficiary of the particular exercise of that office (C).¹² This triadic relation does not always hold (in a kleptocracy, for example, A and C are the same; whereas, with administrative payments, B and C may be identical, although A also gains) but the identification of three distinct roles encourages us to distinguish common theft or fraud from corruption, and helps capture how corruption distorts the exercise of public office and power.

Combining these elements we can arrive at a suitably tentative definition:

Corruption in politics occurs where a public official (A), violates the rules and/or norms of office, to the detriment of the interests of the public (B)¹³ (or some sub-section thereof) who is the designated beneficiary of that office, to benefit themselves and a third party (C) who rewards or otherwise incentivises A to gain access to goods or services they would not otherwise obtain.¹⁴

Note, the definition does not assume that A’s behaviour must break the law. Legal definitions of corruption can fail to capture some of the worst cases of corrupt activity because corrupt transactions can be institutionalised in the laws of the state or economy - as recognised in work by

¹⁰ Robert Nozick, ‘Coercion’ in P. Laslett, W. G. Runciman, and Q. Skinner, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Fourth Series (Oxford, Blackwell, 1972).

¹¹ The case of Richard Nixon is contested, but at least some of his misuse of public office is not best understood as undertaken for private gain, although we want to characterize it as a part of the corrupt character of his presidency..

¹² A misfiring of a corrupt intent does not detract from the corrupt character of an act. It is corrupt if A tries to ensure that C rather than B benefits, even if A fails.

¹³ Corrupt acts may not always harm, or directly harm, B. Moreover, the point is not that we define corruption solely by its consequences, so much as that we define it by a combination of intention and the distortion of political processes. So if by accident, A’s corrupt relation with C benefits B, it is still corrupt. Moreover, even if A does not intend to harm B (or withhold a benefit from B), B’s interests are taken to include a procedural interest in the rules of the political system being upheld, and A acts in ways that are negligent with respect to B’s interests. Although people accused of corruption in fact often claim to be acting for the benefit of ordinary voters, it is often not difficult to show that they are primarily seeking personal gain. And where rules are broken to secure wider public interest, we tend not to describe it as corrupt.

¹⁴ This might be interpreted as linking corruption firmly to impartiality, much as is done in Bo Rothstein’s *The Quality of Government : Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011); but the definition makes no reference to the content of the rules, which may not themselves be fair, without being corrupt. Moreover, impartiality is likely to turn out to be as contested a concept as corruption and is thus perhaps not a good alternative!

the World Bank on 'state capture' – that is, where corrupt relations are used to pass laws that entrench, extend, and render 'legitimate' corrupt gains.¹⁵

Although I have emphasised 'political' corruption, it is clear that the term can also be applied in other domains. We can talk of economic corruption, or corruption in a range of public services, such as health or education. But all corruption has the same conceptual structure: firstly, a recognition of certain formal responsibilities attached to an idea of office or a position of trust, which imply certain responsibilities and constraints on certain types of self-interested behaviour; secondly, the violation of rules and norms concerning the exercise of that office or trust, with thirdly, the (intended) harming of one set of interests identified by the rules and norms as legitimate, to serve others deemed illegitimate; and fourthly, the benefitting of those not formally entitled to benefit and, thereby, the subversion of the legitimated ends of the office.

IV

One area in which there has been disagreement about how to characterize a corrupt act concerns the issue of non-triadic relationships. In the definition given above there are three types of agent – those in public office (A); those who are the intended beneficiaries of those offices (B); and those who are the actual beneficiaries (C). In some cases, however, we want to identify agents as corrupt when they use their office to expropriate wealth directly from the state for their own benefit. A public official who takes money from the office safe is not engaged in a triadic relationship – his actions do cause harms, and may mean that some individuals entitled to a benefit do not receive it, but this is not done in a way that benefits a third party. People's intuitions here vary. It seems clear that a kleptocrat ruler is corrupt, because he systematically distorts the exercise of power to his own benefit. I am less persuaded that the office clerk who steals postage stamps is corrupt. Those who want to equate the cases show exemplary consistency in criteria – A is clearly abusing his public office to serve his private interests. But they omit the political context of the action. The clerk is engaged in theft – he is stealing from his employer, he is not, in most cases, distorting the way in which power and authority is exercised. If we take an understanding of corruption that tries to think hard about the political order and its subversion, then the kleptocrat's case looks very different from the clerk's, even if their actions can fall under the same description. Pressing the political interpretation is complex, because we have to have some sense, in highly corrupt states, of what is actually possible, but it also has the advantage of not over-generalising, and not proliferating cases of corruption. Moreover, accusing people of theft is both simpler and better understood in the public domain, and it avoids tainting the system with the more general claim that it is corrupt. It may lack adequate regulation, it may create incentives and opportunities for people to steal, but in itself this does not make it politically corrupt.

That said, the cases lie on a continuum and it has to be a matter for argument and judgment as to what type or scale of thefts is sufficient to count as politically distorting. One possibility is that, beyond a certain point, those involved need the collusion of others, and to secure that the illicit 'redistributive' process begins to develop implications for how far a wider range of people are fulfilling their roles. Moreover, these additional beneficiaries do now provide us with the third triadic point (C).

The misuse of public office for private gain is too blunt an instrument to serve as a definition of corruption. President Clinton's philandering looks like it meets that definition, but it is conceptually incontinent to think that the philandering is itself a case of political corruption. On the other hand,

¹⁵ *Anti-Corruption in Transition: a Contribution to the Policy Debate* (Washington: World Bank, 2000)

a political system that systematically allowed its President or government ministers to impose their sexual demands on young women (as in Mario Vargas Llosa's depiction of the Dominican Republic under Trujillo)¹⁶ looks more plausibly corrupt because it does turn political power into a source of access to goods and resources that are not formally and legitimately in its domain, leading to cover-ups, conspiracies against the public interest, the use of coercion, fear and brutality, and distorting the character of political power.

The cases of kleptocracy and of self-serving dictatorships more generally are usually cases of A-led corruption. The state begins as a body of armed men, they recognise the virtues of being stationary rather than roving bandits (to follow Olson's distinction¹⁷) but, while they court some legitimacy, they court only what they judge necessary to keep their hold on power and to allow them to maintain their expropriation. They are primarily systems of domination and exploitation, they have a very limited arena of politics, and their authority is often heavily buttressed by coercion, intimidation, and ideology. In making the rules, they can sometimes ensure that they do not need to break them. But, while this leaves them clean on many definitions of corruption, the public domain is corrupt because it involves the distortion or subversion of the exercise of public office so as to meet private, partisan or sectional rather than properly public interests. This is inevitably a partly normative claim – it assumes that there is something like a *telos* to the idea of a public domain or the public interest and that no amount of legislation can define away the content of the public interest to eliminate its status as a standard (which is not to say that its definition is easy or uncontentious). This underlines the fact that corruption is a partly normative concept and that when its underlying sense of a deviation from a 'natural' or ethical standard of politics is eliminated then the term loses its moral and cognitive compass.

Applying the term is not, however, equally easy in all contexts. In a state with a structured and well-regulated public domain, with high levels of transparency and an active and open public culture, not only is the detection of corrupt activity easier, so too is its identification as 'corrupt', because we can see that the agent is using his office in ways that violate clear standards for that office, and because we can identify individual gain. But this is a great deal more difficult where the political order is more fractured and chaotic.

While the self-interested violation of norms and rules of public office looks like at least a necessary condition for corruption (not sufficient because of the case of straight theft), in war-torn states, transitional regimes, or a variety of other contexts in which the rules and expectations of public office are not clearly articulated and laid down, it may be unclear how to characterise the agent's actions. This is because we are not sure what to say in cases where people have no realistic options but to act as they do and because it seems odd to characterize their behaviour in terms that assume that it is self-serving. We may here be talking about the victims of corrupt states, or of cases where disorder is so rampant that no norms concerning public office and the allocation of resources are operative. In these cases, behaviour may not be wholly a function of necessity, or self interest, but may involve family duties, ethnic or religious loyalties, fidelity to friends, norms of reciprocity, machismo values of risk taking, and so on, each of which may displace the norms of public office for some individuals or groups of individuals. Where international agencies or central institutions attempt to establish norms that demand different behaviour than those of the group, these activities will seem corrupt, even though it is not clear what alternative behaviour is open to people. In some cases (as with family-based mafia organisations) we are dealing with mutually exclusive normative systems, but in others we often face powerful normative systems that are more benign but are still partly in conflict with the norms of the political system. Above all, we need to grasp

¹⁶ Maria Vargas Llosa, *The Feast of the Goat* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002)

¹⁷ Mancur Olson, *Power and Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 2000)

what is motivating people if we are to change the way they behave or adjust the demands we make of them.

What we cannot do is to assume that self-interest lies at the base of every action. Economic models of corruption mostly assume that the way to reduce corruption is to reduce the incentives to break rules, either by increasing the costs of being caught, or by increasing the cost of the activity itself (either making it more difficult or reducing the opportunities for it). But seeing things in cost-benefit terms, assumes that the agent's orientation towards rules and norms is such that they are to be followed or broken in accordance with a calculation of rational self-interest. This characterisation runs up against the issue of what it is to follow a rule. If rules have no salience for the individual except where following them maximises self-interest, then the character of a rule is not being recognised. If we think all other agents have a wholly opportunistic attitude to the rules of a game, then the game falls apart (much as if we were to assume that when people speak they only ever say what they think will work to their maximal advantage in a given situation – that assumption would destroy the conditions for conversation, collaboration or friendship). For it to be a rule for an agent it needs to be recognised as a *prima facie* guide to conduct and/or as a way of initially framing a context. That a rule may subsequently be violated to maximise self-interest does not mean that we should understand compliance, where it happens, as also self-interest maximising. Given the chance, we might decide to cheat at chess, but to weigh compliance with every rule by the test of expedience would be to make the game itself unintelligible. Corrupt players, for the most part want to cheat within a framework that identifies goals, means and opportunities. To repudiate the framework entirely is not to play that game. This means that the issue cannot be wholly reduced to providing the right incentive structures for people's interests. Indeed, it is a wildly ambitious to try to establish a system of cross-checking interests that can ensure that both the principal actors and those responsible for rewarding or penalising their behaviour act to sustain the political order while also acting maximally in their own interests. It is more useful to think in terms of how to frame people's relationship to the political system so that they share (some of) its norms and values, rather than having their aspirations and expectations framed by wholly non-political expectations – whether economic or cultural. This is why those who are trapped in situations where there is no clear sense of what the rules are or what the game is, are not best understood as corrupt. And it is that insight that underlines the sense that it is only by having politics (to a reasonably structured extent) that one can have political corruption.

A further dimension of the definition is that it should alert us to potentially very different types of corrupt activity. Thus far, the examples used have tended to focus on those in public office, treating them as the key agents in corruption, but there are different types of action and those holding office in some capacity can be differentially predatory (we might appeal to the Knapp Commission's distinction between grass eaters and meat eaters¹⁸), but the triadic definition also points to the potential importance of the other agents (or groups of agents) involved. A can play a variety of roles, from predator, to accomplice, to victim, and corruption can be very much C-led, rather than initiated by public officials. In predatory mode, A may initiate the corrupt exchange and actively seek out opportunities for such exchanges. A is an accomplice if he is responding to initiatives in their mutual interest from C, who is either outside or in another part of the political system. A is a victim when he is subordinate to the demands of others, by blackmail, intimidation, or coercion. Political systems can be corrupt from the head – hence the anti-corruption mantra 'the fish rots from the head'; but they can also be corrupt from the body – that is, that societal group and forces may be such as to undermine the autonomy of the political process and suborn or intimidate those

¹⁸ The Knapp Commission, officially the *Commission to Investigate Alleged Police Corruption*, was set up in 1970 to investigate corruption in the New York Police Department. It reported in December 1972. Grass eaters was used to describe those who took bribes and back-handers because that was what everyone did; 'meat-eaters' were those who actively sought opportunities for financial gain.

in public office. These distinctions can help us to recognise certain types or, as Michael Johnston has termed them, syndromes.¹⁹ A-led corruption can be recognised in the case of official moguls; influence markets and elite cartels are predominantly reciprocal systems, and C-led corruption is common where oligarchs and clans, with bases outside the political system, are able to control and dominate greater or smaller parts of that system. Johnston's categories are ideal types (although that cannot be quite the right term!) and given cases might need further analysis, pressing the question of how some get others to do things they would not otherwise do, what the basis for that capacity is and how far it is distinct from, linked to, or rooted in the formal political system, as well as how far there are any clear lines between political institutions and other social and economic structures. But they have the great virtue of taking seriously both the variety of forms of corruption, and the very different problems faced by strong and weak states.

While definitions and studies of corruption tend to focus either on predatory public officials or powerful extra political interests that subvert the political process, relatively little attention is given to those who lose out by their activities – namely B in the triadic relationship. One reason is that the claim that they necessarily lose out can be challenged. In states which are locked up in red tape, it is possible that corrupt activity can promote economic activity that benefits all; where corruption plays a part in a rationing system for scarce resources, and where influence is exerted through patrimonial systems, rather than financial incentives, formally corrupt systems may produce more rational allocations than the available alternatives. More generally there is always an issue of whether a group, B, is worse off than it would be, not if it received its due, but if it received what could be secured to it from the feasible set of possibilities in a given situation.

The case of B is simple where there are clear distributional principles and entitlements that are widely legitimated and a political system that complies with these relatively systematically. Things become more complex the more fragile the order. They become more complex in part because the roles of A, B, and C, lose some of their distinctness: public office, its boundaries and responsibilities are less sharply delineated; and lines between B and C may also become indistinct. Thus, in post-conflict areas everyone may be engaged in a struggle to secure resources in what is effectively a zero-sum game. Even in more structured and ordered contexts, although we can enhance B's power in various ways to reduce their risk of losing out, or to increase their ability to hold public office holders to account, we also have to recognise that political systems also need to educate their expectations. Popular senses of exploitation or disadvantage often have recourse to the normative and emotive language of corruption to classify problems that are in fact a function of a range of other problems. And this can serve further to destabilize political systems. In many respects this parallels the concern underlying Hobbes's obsession with definition. We need a clearly defined lexicon, but we also need to ensure that that language both reflects and orders in various ways the understandings of those who act in politics, lest conflicting understandings generate or reinforce conflicting interests that threaten the integrity of the political domain. To be united under the sovereign is partly to accept and share a common political language and its accompanying expectations.

Assessment of the dynamics of the interactions between these three elements, A, B, and C, is central to grasping the precise nature of the activity involved. But attention also needs to be directed to the site and the character of the corruption: Does the activity aim at the electoral process and the filling of public office, at controlling policy within the political process or decisions within the administration (including the allocations of burdens, such as taxes and rates, or benefits, such as licences or contracts), or at eliding the formal controls on public officials and members of the political élite? How securely is the political system legitimated, and how far is its activity undermined

¹⁹ Michael Johnston, *Syndromes of Corruption: Wealth, Power, and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

by non-compliance among the wider population? And what impact does this have on the way the state acts, and especially on its ability to retain its capacity to rule and on its relations with enforcement agencies within the state, such as the police and army. The precise form and context of corruption will affect assessments of what remedies might be appropriate. In choosing between norms, incentives, penalties, scrutiny systems and demands for transparency or tolerance, one must fit the medicine to the patient.

The more that corrupt activity flows from individual incentives *unattached* to group norms and a broader motivational frame, the easier it is to deal with. Any political system has a few bad eggs, every system needs checks and audits, and public officials need to be clear when contacts with the public over-step acceptable bounds. But if we are dealing with isolated cases, the costs are likely to be less extensive and detection and prosecution easier. In contrast, the more embedded corrupt activity is within a society's broader social or cultural mores the more difficult it is to deal with - because there will be more things to change, more reflexive and organised resistance to such change, less legitimacy attaching to those who promote the changes, and considerable collective action problems (such as who is to change first!). Where holders of public office share these extra-political mores, it becomes increasingly difficult to say that corruption is A-led or C-led, since there can be a very high degree of collusion between the actors, and a sense that what they do is legitimate. The more widespread this sense is, the more difficult it is to identify any institution or office in the political system that could authoritatively signal that the activity is unacceptable.

V

Understanding issues relating to the definition of political corruption in the way I have suggested should alert us to the fact that our Western language of corruption is unlikely to map without difficulty onto all local understandings. For example, corruption, as Western political scientists use it, is a largely technical term that may part company, sometimes dramatically, with the broad public use of the term to express dissatisfaction with their government. That is a reason to be careful about its local use, and to avoid broad-brush anti-corruption campaigns, which, as Ivan Krastev has argued, are likely to trigger unrealistic expectations.²⁰ Indeed, in many states a good deal of work needs to be done to help to articulate a conception of politics and of the role of the state that can command widespread legitimacy and form the basis of people's expectations of their political and administrative systems. On that ground, the World Bank's shift in concern away from corruption to governance indicators is to be commended (even if the contestability of these indicators tends to be under-estimated). Scattering the landscape with anti-corruption slogans establishes negative attitudes, but often does little to contribute to positive expectations and the emergence of a shared lexicon of political evaluation.

I have argued that careful thinking about the respective roles of the three agents identified in the definition of corruption can help us recognise a wide range of different corrupt practices, with corresponding implications for the way in which we respond to corruption. I have not in any sense sought to be exhaustive in my analysis but I have tried to make a case that a fine-grained analysis of the exact form that corrupt relations take in any given state is necessary if we are to think constructively about how we might explain and address the problem. To do this we do not need a single-line definition, but a grasp of the conceptual commitments within which it makes sense to talk of corruption, and within which we can develop finer grained distinctions that isolate different types of corrupt relationship. And we need to reflect on the plausibility and relevance of those commitments to that particular context and to the norms and expectations that people have. In

²⁰ Ivan Krastev, *Shifting Obsessions: Three Essays on the Politics of Anticorruption* (CEU Press, Budapest, 2004)

turn, this will allow us to think through directed strategies to tackle particular problems, in particular contexts. In my view, this kind of activity is very much in keeping with Hobbes's concern, 'by exact definitions first snuffed and purged from ambiguity to secure the increase of science and the benefit of man-kind.' It is just a lot more difficult than it is often taken to be and it demands a very acute awareness that the terms we use come from a particular way of seeing the world that others do not automatically share and that a world in which people do not share understandings of corruption will inevitably be a disordered one. Moreover, with Hobbes, the underlying point of such an account of the definition of corruption is to develop a lexicon that, in given national contexts, can secure legitimacy, and thereby consensus and political order, as against 'contention, and sedition, or contempt.'