VERSITA

INTRODUCTION:
CORRUPTION AND RATIONALITY

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Corruption lacks what might be called a common definition in the social sciences. This is often related to the difficulty encountered by scientists in applying a single working definition which accounts for the several variations (in time and space) of corruption. The most commonly adopted definition refers to the abuse of public office in the pursuit of private interests, but this definition is far from unproblematic.

Corruption represents a type of fraud, entailing illegal ways of acquiring financial or material benefits (such as money, promotion, other assets including land, houses and buildings, cars, trips and so forth) avoiding fiscal control. Corruption is also a social mechanism which bridges the public and the private spheres, irrespective of what kind of asset is at stake. Since it entails an informal agreement between two or more parties who represent different institutions or organizations with different goals, it is virtually impossible to develop a comprehensive theoretical model that applies to corruption. This is mainly for two reasons. The first is that informal agreements can be of various types and can be enforced in various manners, from blackmail, violence and menace to patronage, personal trust and friendship. The second is that the types of organizations to which corruption applies may vary from state, local government, to private sector, non-profit or professional organizations. This variation explains why the common definition of personal abuse of public office may not necessarily be of use, or in other words may not be envisioned as such in the societal contexts to which corruption applies (Pardo and Prato, this issue).

A way out of this impasse is to make use of interdisciplinary approaches and methods which stress (as in the case of trust) the benefits of individual actions, on the one hand, and the perceived usefulness of these actions, on the other. In reality this has not been accomplished so far (Torsello 2011).

Social scientists have tackled corruption by following three general approaches. The first focuses on the rational choice of individuals. Corrupt practices are justified by the common assumption, not far from the idea of homo oeconomicus, under which each individual will pursue his personal interest if allowed to. Corruption is then the opportunity to obtain

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particular benefits; the value of these benefits increases in relation to particular factors: the number of these benefits, the lack of access to resources, low levels of social trust and cooperation (Theobald 1990; Kaufmann and Siegelbaum 1996; Rose-Ackerman 1999; Anderson and Tverdova 2003).

The second approach can be termed institutionalist. Corruption emerges when structural features of the economic and political institutions give it space to consolidate. A number of authors agree with the idea that free, unrestricted market competition, for instance, lowers the incidence of trust in democratic states (Banfield 1975; Bliss and Di Tella 1997; Della Porta 1992; Mauro 1995). Cases where the state has firm control over the economy and where particular political cliques monopolize assets, benefits and resources are typically quoted as some of the most natural breeding grounds of corruption. Furthermore, the institutionalist approach can individuate the consolidation of international (or transnational) political networks (such as the EU) which operate beyond the state and impose the will of interest groups onto local politics. Also in this case corruption is expressed as functional to these particular forms of institutional arrangements, and eventually fostered by their strength and degree of control over economic resources.

The third approach is relativist. Corruption is basically a cultural variable of a society, which can be expressed as the tendency of one country to be more or less affected by corruption according to particular socio-cultural features. There is a tendency to pinpoint the historical conditions which have allowed the development of a stronger or weaker sensibility towards corrupt practices. One of the most commonly used explanations for the high variability of corruption in political and economic systems is that different cultural backgrounds may reject or justify the existence of practices such as informal ties between social and economic relations, values attached to individual instead of collective achievements, familism, envy and mistrust (Akerlof 1980; Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman 1981; Mény 1992). It has been argued that anthropological approaches to corruption have followed this approach since they tend to confine this phenomenon to the specific realms of social contexts in which corruption possesses an ideology, rhetoric and pragmatism of its own. This position underlines how the study of corruption has methodologically suffered from an unresolved tension between particularism and universalism, which in some disciplinary approaches, such as most of the anthropological ones, is difficult to solve.

On the other hand, the rationality which imbues corruption practices has often been studied from the perspective of a failure, be it systemic-institutional or individual, to assess and recognize the true ethical value of acting in compliance with laws, norms and regulations. Although in different ways, both the principal agent and the collective action theoretical models, stem from this idea. The principal-agent theory postulates that each player acts in his own interests, maximizing personal profit. In this equilibrium-seeking approach the bribe giver and the bribe taker will reach a win-win situation in which each of them is content with the transaction (Rose-Ackerman 1978; Klitgaard 1998; von Alemann 2005). This model, however, fails to provide explanations as to why some systems (or institutions) rationally seek stabilization in this manner, and others avoid this type of equilibrium.

Collective action theory defies the idea that each actor should be individually aware of and calculate the benefits of a corrupt deed, by putting emphasis on social collectivity (Ostrom 1998; Fischbacher et al. 2001; Gintis et al. 2005). As long as there is widespread

corruption in society the perceived benefits of corruption remain, because everyone has incentives to act in a corrupt manner. This dominant rationality would cause a collective action problem, because there would be little space for the implementation of anti-corruption policies and measures since there would be few perceived incentives to embrace them. Again, the problem of rationality, at the individual or collective level, stands, as the hard-to-die assumption is that in a society dominated by corruption there would be weak rationalizing arguments to implement integrity and transparency.

The rationality approach has been selected as the title of this issue specifically because it is revealing of the many flaws in corruption theory, which are pointed out by most of the contributions in this issue. As in the case of the critique on approaches centered on morality (Rothstein and Teorell 2008, Uslaner 2008), rationality cannot be a useful argument in explaining corruption because it does not account for the high variability and pervasiveness of this phenomenon. Moreover, the distinction between an "essentialist" and a "relativist" position in the study of rationality is of little help (Hollis and Lukes 1982). If the essence of rationality lies in the human ability to clearly articulate something that we understand, i.e. in what some philosophers call "theory", then it is easy to understand how corruption cannot be rational per se, since this requires, almost by definition, secrecy and concealment. Furthermore, corrupt behavior cannot be explained in terms of rationality through the idea of logical coherence, i.e. action that follows the norms of a societal context, taking the position of Winch (1964). Single and plural rationalities are instilled with shared ideas, beliefs and discourses through which the interpretation of social norms takes shape. This interpretation is formed at the individual and collective levels, therefore there is little sense in understanding which of the two comes first. Beyond the heuristic scope of actors' decision making, the true analytical validity of rationality, in the case of corruption, lies in the opportunity to discard theoretical models which are of little or only partial help in understanding corruption.

This issue originates from an interdisciplinary symposium entitled: "Corruption: forms, ideas and opportunities", held in Bergamo in March 2011. The main constraint with which the symposium was confronted was the difficulty of finding a common language in conceiving an analytical understanding of the notion. Corruption is strongly ambivalent in terms of the universalistic forms of its social, economic, political and even cultural consequences and the particularism of its forms, vision and perception in societies. This might be interpreted as one of the reasons why each discipline in the social sciences has developed an analytical framework of its own, and lessons learnt in other disciplines often fall on deaf ears. Hence the crucial importance of the aim of this symposium: exploring the various and plural fields in which corruption emerges, and how it becomes intrinsically related to different forms of rationalities. The emergence of corruption in relation to strategies of new political parties (Bågenholm, this issue) makes the rationality of using this phenomenon a highly relevant and timely issue in countries dominated by profound institutional transformation, as in Eastern Europe. Similarly, corruption and its parochial form, clientelism, became entrenched with logics of conspicuous state intervention in post-earthquake reconstruction in southern Italy (Caruso, this issue). In another context, in Japanese politics during the economic boom years, political language and cultural constructs intertwined to consolidate metaphorical images of power, clientelism and legitimacy (Kawata and Papp, this issue). Here the rationality of patronage politics seemed closer to the aforementioned tendency to communicate through

linguistic codes that are accessible to some but inexplicable to many, which draws on the socio-cultural specificity of Japanese politics. A similar argument, that focuses on the institutional restructuring of post-socialist Albania, is developed by Prato (this issue) who shows that the failure of the state is not only to be interpreted in cultural and historical terms, but more significantly on the margins left to arbitrariness that distinguish this judicial system with few or contradicting laws. Concerning the failure to establish perfect insulation among the legal, moral and political spheres in the Southern Italian case, Pardo (this issue) warns of the necessity to study corruption in the interaction zone between power and its expedients, between law, politics and civil society. A further, holistic and comparative suggestion for the study of corruption is provided by Zerilli (this issue) who traces an interesting parallel between the local "moral" understanding of corrupt practices in Romania and the often circular and abstract rhetoric of the "anti-corruption industry". When making comparisons, Rose and Heywood (this issue) advise attempting to operationalize or provide thickness to the concept of integrity through measurements and indexes. By contrast, in an original attempt to measure quantitatively the relationship between corruption perception and social values, Torsello (this issue) employs a cross-national analysis to critically introduce a conceptual framework of cultural theory. All these contributions, both in spite of and thanks to their different themes and methods and their interdisciplinarity, may add to our understanding of one final point, which is about the complexity and weakness of the rationality argument in explaining or accounting for differences in the forms, fields and visions of corruption in societies.

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