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Development and Corruption: A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

Public debate on corruption tends towards a cultural relativism that primarily deems corruption a problem of the developing world and subaltern groups. The debate on African corruption in particular fluctuates between viewing it as a hopeless case, or as the perversion of a corruption-free pre-colonial social order, or as a logical instrument to be employed in the struggle for survival. In some instances corruption has even been seen as a necessary corollary to development. This paper argues that a sociological analysis of corruption would expose its anti-developmental force. Sustained sociological analyses of corruption as an illustration of systems in trouble and the implementation of the recommendations flowing from these analyses in the form of social policy, could arguably contribute to the strengthening of the developmental state in South Africa.

Keywords: Corruption, monetary and bureaucratic corruption, corruption as a social construction, developmental state
1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s some authors have described corruption as ‘an issue of global revolutionary force’ (Glyn et al, 1997: 7) or as ‘the spectre at this feast [of globalisation]’ (Pryce-Jones, 1997: 22). Aguilera and Vadera (2007: 431) point to the increasing importance of corruption as an ‘obstacle to economic and social development’. On the other hand, what Alatas (1990: 184) calls the ‘corruption functionalists’ promote an understanding of corruption as a necessary corollary to development.

Despite this talk of corruption as a universal concern, there is still a tendency to view corruption as largely a problem of the Third World, in particular Africa. The 2007 Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index lists only one non-Western country among those found to be the least corrupt (Singapore), while 13 of the 30 most corrupt countries listed are from Africa. Somalia is considered the most corrupt country jointly with Myanmar. Even TI’s 2008 Bribe Payers’ Index confirms this view as most of the countries with the highest perceived propensity to pay bribes tend to form part of the Global South.

In South Africa, discussions of corruption make a regular appearance on the front pages of newspapers, especially with regard to the awarding of tenders, the Tollgate and the Arms deals and the Travelgate scandal. Numerous popular
books have appeared depicting the corrupt events, of which *Dangerous Deceits* by Frank Welsh (1999) and *Eye on the Money* by Terry Crawford-Browne (2007) are merely two examples.

A vast literature on corruption has been produced by political scientists and economists, with a small contribution from business ethics (Aguilera & Vadera, 2007: 431). Sociology is largely absent from the debate (Hodgkinson, 1997: 17-18; Jong-Sung & Khagram, 2005: 136; Khondker, 2006: 25).

Aguilera & Vadera (2007: 431) ascribe this relative absence of research on corruption by what they call ‘organisational scholars’ partly to ‘the complexity of corruption, particularly as it transpires across multiple levels of analysis, and partly [to] the different perceptions and definitions of organizational corruption across societies’. The general inclination to define corruption in individualistic terms, and a cultural relativism that primarily deems corruption a problem of the developing world and subaltern groups (the myth of the ‘corrupt’ native, to paraphrase Syed Hussein Alatas (1977)) could play a role in discouraging sociologists from devoting their energies to this area. Although Gabriel Abend (2008: 87) argues that investigations with regard to the moral basis of human actions are central to the endeavours of sociologists studying the subfields of ‘gender, culture, theory, and religion’, the absence of sustained contributions to the sociology of morality seems to contradict this view.
Sociology has always been intimately connected to issues of social change and social justice and in advancing the case of the powerless against the powerful. This paper argues that sociology has a major role to play in understanding the link between development and corruption, in particular through a focus on the inherently social nature of corruption. First, it is argued that the definition of corruption should be couched in such a way that its essentially social nature is foregrounded. Secondly, the debate on African corruption demonstrates the interdependence that needs to exist between developed and subaltern states for corruption to flourish. Should sociologists disregard corruption as an important and valid area of research, they are by default promoting the perpetration of injustice. Therefore and thirdly, through a sociological analysis of corruption as evidence of systems in trouble, the necessity of addressing issues of corruption in promoting development is uncovered.

2. Defining corruption as a social problem

Corruption is generally defined in individualistic terms as the use of authority for personal gain (Aguilera & Vadera, 2007: 431; den Nieuwenboer & Kaptein, 2007; Doh et al, 2003: 115; Doig & McIvor, 1999: 3-5; Hodgson & Jiang, 2007: 1044; Jong-sung & Khagram, 2005: 137). Rimsky (2005: 32) defines it 'as illegal or amoral economic activity involving the receipt of financial or material resources by parties concerned'. The focus is on the demand-side of the equation, on those who demand and accept corrupt payments. Attention to the supply-side, to those
who make corrupt payments (Beets, 2005: 65), is decidedly muted, if not completely absent. In particular, corrupt activities are linked to various levels of the state apparatus where officials ‘abuse the power invested in them, or, more accurately, officials who utilize their powers for personal enrichment, in order to obtain certain goods and services that they would not have access to otherwise’ (Shevchenko & Gavrilov, 2007: 93). Brooks (in Alatas, 1990: 1) defines corruption as ‘the intentional misperformance or neglect of a recognised duty, or the unwarranted exercise of power, with the motive of gaining some advantage more or less directly personal’. Rimsky (2005: 35) views corruption as the disintegration of power and defines it ‘as the deriving of benefits from one’s position in the system of state power or one’s social status related thereto, as effected by any methods and under any circumstances’. An understanding of corruption therefore entails the ability of power-holders to separate the public and private spheres (Doig & McIvor, 1999: 9; Hodgkinson, 1997: 32; Hodgson & Jiang, 2007: 1044-1049; Hyslop, 2005: 12).

Syed Hussein Alatas (1990: 1-2) identifies a number of characteristics that demonstrate the explicitly social nature of corruption. First, it requires that more than one person or party is involved and that reciprocal obligations and benefits, in monetary or other forms, are present. Any corrupt activity entails deception of some public body, a private institution or society as a whole. The corrupt act focuses on ‘those who want definite decisions and those who can influence them’. This betrayal of trust is only possible if those committing the corrupt act
find themselves in a situation where a conflict of interest is involved and where secrecy is required. Alternatively, powerful individuals are in a situation to provide some kind of lawful justification that camouflages the corrupt act. The ‘deliberate subordination of common interests to specific interests’ emphasises that power-holders have the ability to ignore the demarcation between the public and private spheres.

This focus on the role of power relationships in transactions of corruption emphasises the social nature of corruption: ‘Corruption can be seen not so much as an objective practice existing in a vacuum, but as a social act whose meaning needs to be understood with reference to social relationships’ (Harrison, 2006: 20).

In this regard Vinod Pavarala (1993: 408) promotes viewing corruption as a social construction. Corruption is a contested concept, and it is therefore necessary to consider ‘how a set of putative conditions get defined as a problem, who does the defining, why do different sections of society perceive the problem in the ways they do and so on’ (Pavarala 1993: 406). Viewing corruption as a social construction would enable one to expose the complexity and fluidity in determining the defining point where an act starts to become corrupt.

In his study of the elite construction of corruption in India, Pavarala (1993: 410-412) distinguished between the narrow/legalistic definition of corruption and the broad/moralistic conception of corruption. While the former follows the legal
reasoned definition of corruption rather closely and only defines a limited number of acts as corruption, the latter takes a broader view and considers a large variety of activities to be corrupt. A legalistic definition of corruption would view it as ‘an action involving a “public servant taking gratification other than legal remuneration in respect of an official act”‘ (Pavarala, 1996: 61). Where the legalistic view would steer clear of making moralistic statements, and tend towards an instrumental and rationalistic language, the broad/moralistic conception of corruption would convey an explicit morality, encompassing a broad range of activities as corrupt.

Mathieu Deflem (1995: 248) defines corruption as ‘that type of strategic action in which two or more actors undertake an exchange relation by way of a successful transfer of steering media (money or power) which sidesteps the legally prescribed procedure to regulate the relation’. This definition clearly suggests a distinction between monetary and bureaucratic corruption, where the former relates to an exchange relation based on the transfer of money and the latter where corruption entails a transfer of power. He (1995: 248-249) develops this as follows: ‘Monetary corruption can be defined as that type of corruption in which the exchange relation is carried out by way of a successful transfer of the steering medium of money, in particular, a transfer of a sum of money in return for a service or commodity, which bypasses the legal procedure to acquire that service or commodity.’ In contrast, in the case of bureaucratic corruption the steering medium is power, and a position of power is given to those who are loyal
in a way that disregards the legal procedure to be followed to acquire the position of power. While the motivation in the case of monetary corruption is inducement, for example bribery, the motivation in the case of bureaucratic corruption is deterrence where the corruptor uses negative sanctions to prevent the corruptee from resisting entering into the corrupt relationship.

Corruption also has a moral element. It is generally condemned worldwide. Chabal & Daloz (1999: 104) states ‘officially, all African societies have accepted Western norms in respect of this phenomenon, which is why the local press regularly exposes the most blatant cases of venality and illegal deals’. Kurer (2005: 236) couches the definition of corruption in non-culturally relativistic terms when he argues that ‘Public officials act corruptly when they violate non-discrimination norms that regulate the allocation of a polity’s rights and duties in order to derive a personal advantage’. This definition avoids cultural relativism as it does not give content to the specific non-discrimination norms, which may vary over time and from society to society.

3. Sociological analyses of corruption

One of the very few sociologists who devoted a significant amount of his scholarly activity on the study of corruption, is Syed Hussain Alatas. He produced three books: The sociology of corruption: the nature, function, causes, and prevention of corruption (1968), Corruption: Its nature, causes and function
(1990) and Corruption and the destiny of Asia (1999) and, numerous articles on the topic.

Jose Veloso Abueva (1970) analysed the extent of graft and corruption in the Philippines in an article titled ‘What are we in power for?: The sociology of graft and corruption’. The next contribution by a sociologist was Pavarala’s (1993) study of elite constructions of corruptions in India which was turned into a book in 1996. Deflem (1995) suggested that corruption should be conceptualised in terms of Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action. He defines corruption as ‘a colonization of social relations in which two or more actors undertake an exchange relation by way of a successful transfer of the steering media of money or power’ (Deflem, 1995: 243).

In his analysis of corruption in Britain, Peter Hodgkinson (1997: 34) comes to the conclusion that ‘the sociological imagination can, and should, make a far greater contribution to the debate on this particular public issue’. Jonathan Hyslop (2005) provides an incisive analysis of political corruption in South Africa, both before and after apartheid, in considering the role of administrative and political legacies in shaping various forms of corruption.

Jong-sung & Khagram (2005: 136) argue that the relative scarcity of sociological theorizing and research on corruption has resulted in scant attention being paid to the relationship between inequality and corruption. Studies have been
conducted on the role of corruption networks (Nielsen, 2003; Rimsky, 2005) in undermining attempts at moral corruption reform. Hatti et al (2010) explore this further by developing the notion of analysing corruption in terms of a corruption bazaar model of interpersonal behaviour with the emphasis largely on economic motives.

Habibul Haque Khondker (2006: 27) considers the contribution of Syed Hussein Alatas in enhancing our understanding of corruption. He argues that sociology’s neglect of burning problems of society such as corruption points to a corruption of sociology itself.

As public intellectuals, sociologists have an important role to play in enhancing our understanding of moral issues. I have argued above that corruption is a social as well as a moral issue. Shilling & Mellor (1998: 205) argue that ‘questions concerning the sources of moral action [are] central to the foundation of sociology’. Unfortunately this is not always evident from the scholarly activities of sociologists. Neither the International Sociological Association nor the American Sociological Association has a research committee or section devoted to the study of the sociology of morality. ISA’s research committee on deviance and social control seems to have a fairly restricted view of their domain. The use of morality in a search of sociological databases results in only a limited number of hits with sociology of morality in the title and the use of corruption in even fewer. I would like to argue that it is important to study issues around the
construction of morality as ‘thoroughly sociological, in that it is dependent on collective experiences which shape both the emotions and the thoughts of human agents’ (Shilling & Mellor, 1998: 195).

Anthony Maingot (1994: 51-52) argues for a ‘more systematic, and theoretically self-conscious’ sociological approach to the study of corruption in order to avoid two pitfalls. The first is personalisation: that is a focus on corrupt individuals to understand the origins, mechanisms and solutions to the problem of corruption. The second pitfall is the moral comparison of whole cultures that could result in two erroneous beliefs with regard to remedies for corruption. The involvement of sociologists can help us avoid the belief that moral codes can be imposed cross-culturally. On the other hand there is the even more damaging subjectivist and relativist belief that ‘outsiders’ should refrain from making pronouncements on corruption in other cultures. He argues that the ability to translate codes, makes it possible to form very similar cross-cultural judgements on corruption.

Hopefully, the recent appearance of Sten Widmalm’s (2008) book with the title Decentralisation, corruption and social capital: From India to the West augurs well for a renewed and sustained interest in the study of corruption by sociologists. Departing from the argument that corruption ‘is perhaps one of the most fundamental obstacles to development’ (Widmalm, 2008: 19) explores the complex relationship between corruption, decentralisation and social capital (in particular trust).
Some researchers (Hodgkinson, 1997: 23; Khondker, 2006: 30; Werlin, 1994: 554) argue that a distinction should be made between primary and secondary corruption, where the former entails an attempt to exploit one’s position for personal gain while accepting that it is wrong to do so. Secondary corruption occurs in a situation where the perpetrator is not concerned about retribution, nor is he/she experiencing remorse as the ‘political system facilitates or condones corruption’ (Werlin 1994: 554). Chabal & Daloz (1999: 104) identify the presence of secondary corruption in African states when they argue ‘above and beyond [the] ritual disclosure of wrongdoing and the no less ceremonial demand for the upholding of the rule of law, it is well to ask whether this denunciation is not essentially instrumental. Arguably and with few exceptions, such anti-corruption discourse is primarily rhetorical and that the recurrent purges which follow are, more often than not, convenient devices for eliminating political rivals rather than a real attempt to reform the “political order”.

The debate on African corruption needs further elaboration.

4. The debate on African corruption

Chabal and Daloz (1999: 95) argue that the state in Africa is a relatively empty shell where the absence of meaningful institutionalisation robs the Westernized notion of corruption of any significance. They argue furthermore that the debate
on African corruption in particular fluctuates between viewing African corruption as a hopeless case, as the perversion of a corruption-free pre-colonial social order, or as the logical instrument to be employed in the struggle for survival.

The first two views, Chabal and Daloz (1999: 97) argue, can be contrasted in terms of two extremes: ‘The one consists in irrevocably ostracizing the continent as a hopeless den of corruption on the basis of a blinkered and largely ahistorical interpretation lacking in self-critical awareness. The other runs the risk, in reaction of idealizing the virtues of a pre-colonial era supposedly devoid of corruption, the growth of which is supposed to have been caused by the perversion of the social order induced by the arrival of the colonialist Europeans’.

Both these views, however fail to provide an understanding of the endemic nature of corruption in Africa, the fact that it is ‘an integral part of the social fabric of life’ (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 99). In most of Africa, the dichotomy between the private and public spheres is muted. It is a phenomenon that is evident at all social strata: ‘For those at the bottom end of society, like lowly civil servants, the sale of the limited amount of power they possess is virtually their only means of survival. Higher up, extortion is one of the many avenues of enrichment; it facilitates social advancement and the upholding of one’s position. As we have seen, it enables the political elites to fulfil their duties, to meet the expectations of their clients and, hence, to enhance their status’ (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 99).
In order to gain an understanding of corruption in its different permutations, it is important to consider distinctions between African and Western corruption. Corruption in sub-Saharan Africa is largely decentralized in the sense that everybody everywhere tries to share in the spoils. There is little evidence of the horizontal corruption which occurs in developed countries: that is to say ‘the exchange of favours between economic and political elites’ (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 102). In Africa corruption involves all of the population ‘and operates essentially according to vertical relations of inequality’ (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 102). Contemporary African norms and practices are informed by those of the pre-colonial period, such as ‘the obligations of mutual support, the imperatives of reciprocity, the importance of gift exchange, the payment of tribute, the need to redistribute, even the habits of cattle rustling’ (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 100). Condemnation of corruption only follows if ‘its fruits are [not] deemed to have been suitably and vigorously redistributed according to the logic of patronage’ (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 100).

African corruption is therefore a systemic problem and should be studied by focusing on understanding its cultural, social and structural roots – how it forms a key element of the ‘instrumentalization of disorder’ (Chabal & Daloz 1999: 103). Rather than focusing on the corrupt African, we should concentrate on understanding systems in trouble, a consideration of the conditions of poverty, disease and exploitation that characterise Africa (de Maria 2005: 5-6). Features of the social system in a particular society could promote different combinations
of opportunity, motivation, and justification that are the preconditions for corruption to occur (Aguilera & Vadera 2007: 432). The study of these preconditions is pre-eminently the task of the sociologist.

It should also be kept in mind that African or subaltern countries do not operate in a vacuum and that this is particularly true when it comes to an understanding of corruption. The interdependence between the West and the global South in a globalized world, the fact that the bribe-giver is advantaged more than the bribe-taker and that corruption is ultimately the expression of unequal relations should all be factored into the equation.

5. Corruption in South Africa

The South African acceptance of the importance of a ‘developmental’ state could be viewed as a commitment to effective governance. Jeffery (2010: 195) defines the developmental state as: ‘…an efficient and effective state which would actively intervene in the economy whenever this was necessary to drive development, while simultaneously maintaining and expanding essential infrastructure, mopping up unemployment through public works, and rolling out free basic services and social grants to those in need. The implicit premise was that all these tasks would be performed with minimal wastage or corruption (own emphasis).
In an analysis of the functionality of South Africa’s developmental state, Roger Southal (2007: 1-24) argues that corruption in government has become systemic. He articulates it as follows: ‘There are disturbing indications that corruption in government is becoming systemic, and that it is linked to the drive for representivity. However justifiable and politically necessary, affirmative action appears to have spawned a culture of entitlement amongst some of the beneficiaries of racial preference. In turn, this has been fostered by the apartheid legacy of lack of formal education, skills and training amongst the majority of black people, for this undermines their competitiveness on the open job market and hence increases the intensity of their scramble for public or political office. Party and state positions are regarded as providing access to private wealth.’

Southall (2007: 9-12) offers four propositions in an attempt to explain the pervasiveness of government corruption in South Africa. First, the expansion of corrupt activities can be attributed to the mixed messages emanating from the national leadership of the ANC, in particular with regard to the prevarication by the government on ensuring a transparent and effective investigation of the Arms deal and Travelgate scandals. A second proposition is related to the government’s reluctance ‘to investigate allegations that state positions and resources have been misused to the ANC’s advantage’ (Southall, 2007: 10). The ‘Oilgate Scandal’ where allegations were made that state funds were diverted by the state oil company, PetroSA, via Imvume Management to the ANC which was
experiencing financial difficulties prior to the 2004 elections, is a good illustration of this. The third proposition entails the ambivalence of the ANC about acting resolutely against conflicts of interest. Formally, there is an acceptance that the use of political or public office to promote personal interests should not be condoned. However, the actions of the government in particular instances, for example its response to the murder (or assisted suicide) of Brett Kebble in 2005 or more recently the government response to allegations about the activities of General Siphiwe Nyanda during his term of office as Chief of the Defence Force (Brümmer & Sole, 2010: 3) seem to gainsay this formally declared view. It could be argued lastly that because of these contradictions in government’s attempts to address corruption at the top, it is unable to combat corruption at lower levels. Southall (2007: 12) concludes: ‘Numerous other official successes in exposing corruption could be cited from around the country, yet the impression remains that the government’s efforts at tackling the issue are half-hearted, in part because it is so extensive, and in part because to do so would be to involve the high political costs of taking on provincial and local ANC elites.’

Anthea Jeffery (2010: 33-35) supports his analysis by referring to the contribution by the ANC government to the present ‘culture of impunity’ as well as a number of instances where the ANC cadres were themselves involved in corrupt practices.
In an analysis of the impact of corruption on the developmental state and good governance in South Africa, Soma Pillay (2004: 586) identifies a number of problems that impede government’s attempts to fight corruption: ‘insufficient coordination of anti-corruption work within the South African public service and among the various sectors of society; poor information about corruption and the impact of anti-corruption measures and agencies; and the impact of corruption on good governance’. If the suggested single independent anti-corruption agency is to succeed, a proper evaluation of the weaknesses in the existing anti-corruption structures as well as mechanisms through which societal stability and trust can be established, should be conducted.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that an investigation into sociology’s historical contribution to the study and theorizing of corruption, provides us with slight pickings. This is probably related to the lack of attention given to the sociology of morality in our scholarly endeavours. I want to add my voice to that of Andrew Linklater (2007: 149-150) when he argues:

Investigating these questions is critical to understanding how the human race may yet come to organise its political affairs so that all individuals and communities are released from constraints which are not absolutely necessary for the reproduction of society, which are grounded in gross asymmetries of power, in the domination of
sectional interests, in disrespect for other persons or groups, and in forms of fear, distrust and insecurity that are intrinsic to intractable social conflicts. The purpose of a global sociology of morals with an emancipatory intent is to understand how human beings might yet learn to live together without such crippling infestations and afflictions.

This paper argues that sociology has an important contribution to make to the study of the link between development and corruption. This contribution lies particularly in the study of the construction of corruption and of societal differences in definitions of and tolerance for corruption. Sociology views corruption as a systemic problem with cultural, social and structural roots. The sociological study of corruption therefore entails a study of systems in trouble – the conditions of poverty, disease and exploitation that characterise most of the developing world and in particular Africa. It also requires a study of the ways in which these conditions promote different combinations of opportunity, motivation and justification that generate the preconditions for corruption. Ultimately corruption is the expression of unequal power relations within a society but also as is evident in the interdependence between the West and the global South. Sustained sociological analyses of these dynamics and the implementation of the recommendations flowing from these analyses in the form of social policy could contribute to the strengthening of a developmental state in South Africa.
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