

# In murky waters: a disentangling of corruption and related concepts

Kim Sass Mikkelsen

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## Introduction

Corruption is not what it used to be. While corruption used to imply a wide variety of morally dishonourable acts [15], with the passage of time a conceptual shift has occurred which has considerably narrowed the scope of what is commonly meant by the term. Specifically, contemporary usage refers to a set of actions of a distinctly material character which was not always shared by older conceptions [65]. Partly for this reason, disagreements still abound as to what corruption really is—not to mention the related issue of how it should be measured. As a topic of scholarly inquiry, corruption has a long history. Even disregarding the public discussions on the topic, from ancient Greece to early 20th century American muckrackers, works of scholars such as Huntington [26], Rose-Ackerman [52], and Heidenheimer [19] date back decades. Therefore, given persistent disagreement on the nature of the beast, it is understandable why some scholars have chosen to refrain from lengthy conceptual exercises. In his *Institutional Economics of Corruption and Reform*, Lambsdorff [41] notes that perhaps, like Weber’s ‘spirit of capitalism’, corruption needs no formal conception to be recognised when seen.<sup>1</sup> However, though Lambsdorff is right in arguing that other problems concerning the analysis of corruption are equally pressing, the approach toward these other problems, save clear conceptions, risk becoming skewed in unpredictable ways. Too often, scholars conflate corruption with related but distinct phenomena such as patronage or clientelism to the detriment of both theoretical insight and empirical measurement. If theories are formed on the basis of interrelations among conceptual attributes as Goertz [16] argues, a proper conceptualisation of corruption is not only important for the study of both its causes and consequences—it is indispensable.

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<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that, following this comment, Lambsdorff [41] does launch into a very insightful discussion on the issue.

K. S. Mikkelsen (✉)  
Department of Political Science and Government, School of Business and Social Science,  
Aarhus University, Bartholins Allé 7, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark  
e-mail: ksm@ps.au.dk

In the early 1970s, the discussion on definitions centred on the yardsticks against which corruption could arguably be defined [19, 59]. First, public opinion could be used to define acts as corrupt. This, however, is unfeasible as public opinion may be divided on the topic, and a simple majority opinion is hardly useful for conceptual purposes [59]. Equally, cultural differences influencing public opinion might, to paraphrase Heywood [22], render cross-country comparisons pointless. Second, Heidenheimer [19] suggested that deviations from the public interest could be thought of as corrupt. Corruption has indeed been argued to have a number of negative effects on economic development, health, and other factors which might constitute the public interest [24, 47]. However, just as the public opinion approach, the public interest approach is impossible to operationalise [40]. Finally, corruption could be defined with reference to the content of penal codes. However, as discussed further below, laws may vary and therefore illegality, too, is an imperfect Archimedean point for defining corruption.

Thus, the classic yardsticks leave little guidance for realistic conceptions<sup>2</sup>. In recent years, though, a new understanding of corruption and related concepts like patronage and clientelism has been coined by, among others, Kurer [40] and Rothstein and Teorell [54, 55]. This understanding finds its basis in a *principle of impartiality*. The principle is breached when a holder of public office violates the ideally non-discriminatory principles underlining the practise of government (see below). However, and this is of course key for scholars working on the subject, not all of such breaches constitute corruption.

In what follows, it will be argued that part of the reason for the conceptual disagreements (and the occasional frustration) is that corruption has not been adequately placed in relation to other, related concepts. However, such placement is necessary if a more conceptually clear understanding of corruption is to be achieved. This, in essence, is the simple purpose of the bulk of the present discussion. Drawing on contributions stressing the principle of impartiality, and on Sartori's [56, 57] conceptual tools, corruption will be distinguished from other types of public malfeasance, and set in relation to them. This discussion expands both on the commonplace understanding of corruption as the misuse of public office for private gain, and adds an additional layer of conceptual depth to Rothstein and Teorell's [55] work on the principle of impartiality.

The article proceeds as follows: Section two disentangles the semantic field by tracing the etymological change in the term 'corruption' over time, and outlines the conceptual tools which guide the remainder of the discussion. Section three draws distinctions between corruption and related concepts such as patronage and nepotism. Section four considers the conceptual relation of corruption to bribery and extortion. Section five briefly addresses issues of empirical measurement. Section six concludes.

### Disentangling the semantic field

Etymologically, the term corruption has a much wider meaning than what is commonly used today. Stemming from the Latin *corrumpere*, the word finds its origins in a combination of the words *com* or *con*, meaning together or total, and *rumpere*,

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion on this point see Kurer [40] or Scott [59].

which refers to decay or dissolution. In this literal sense, then, when something corrupts, the whole of which it consists comes apart. When referring to people, this unravelling was understood as a deviation from (a moral) duty [13]. Essentially, corruption was equated with the loss of virtue [15] and thought to manifest itself in behaviour contrary to public or civic duty. As Doben put it ‘corruption is the loss of a capacity for loyalty’ [12] by which he explicitly meant loyalty to communities or societies as wholes rather than to groups, classes or factions. Loyalty to the latter at the expense of the former would imply a loss of virtue and the proliferation of particularism, some of which give clear resemblance to corruption as discussed below. Clearly, however, not all loss of virtue and loyalty share this resemblance.

A couple of examples of behaviour connoted by *corrumpere* but manifestly not by contemporary corruption will suffice to illustrate this point. First, relying on *corrumpere* as a conceptual frame Euben [13] discusses Ancient Athens’ descent into ‘political decay’ through its foreign policy towards the independent island of Melos. In this discussion, the ‘corruption of the body politics’ [12] emerges as a disintegration of integrity, unity, and a shared sense of commitment to the state, none of which would be denoted by the term corruption today. Second, in *the Prince* Machiavelli cites the case of a Roman captain who after his forces mutinied in Spain was referred to as the ‘corrupter of the Roman soldiery’ on the floor of the Senate [46]. Seeing him as having allowed his soldiers to lose their loyalty to Rome, Machiavelli faults the captain’s lack of virtue as the cause of the defiance of duty in his unit; much in the same way he faults Caesar’s lack of virtue for ‘corrupting’ the Empire in *Discourses* [45]. Again, corruption is the deviation from duty and loyalty to Rome on part of its soldiers and citizens, or *corrumpere*, without necessarily sharing the material connotations of contemporary corruption.<sup>3</sup>

This broad notion of *corrumpere* is different from what is now understood by corruption. In contemporary usage, the term corruption has come to connote only deviations from duty which have a distinctly material character. Hence, the most commonly used definition of corruption is ‘the misuse of public office *for private gain*’ [63]. Clearly, the term ‘misuse’ implies that deviation from duty remains an attribute of this definition. However, the explicit reference to ‘private gain’, which infuses the concept with a material component, narrows the concept’s reach considerably. As a consequence of this narrowing of the concept over time, usage of the traditional Latin meaning of the term in academic analysis today would risk committing conceptual stretching [57]. This does not mean that the connotation embedded in *corrumpere* has disappeared from contemporary usage. Quite the contrary, deviations from duty is still at the heart of understanding corruption. In this way, the Latin meaning lives on. Indeed, this is arguably the reason why measuring corruption is so

<sup>3</sup> In both works, Machiavelli [45, 46] does mention actions which fit the contemporary notion of corruption as well. This underlines a point made below that *corrumpere* is a superset of corruption. Machiavelli’s work embeds a notion of *currumpere* as systemic [13]. That is, it is a problem at a societal rather than individual level. However, this is not a necessity for deviations from duty. More generally, neither *corrumpere* nor corruption or any of the other concepts discussed here are conceptually wedded to a particular level of analysis. Rather, from the perspective presented here Warren’s [65] critique that contemporary corruption is individualistic is only partially correct. While it is true that many analyses take the individual as a point of departure, this is not a logical extension of corruption as conceptualised below. For instance, corruption may be considered an informal institution [21] or indeed a systemic phenomenon [8].

difficult: people hesitate to disclose deviations from duty, even when there are no risks of sanctions, because of the immoral or asocial connotation of such actions. However, contemporary usage refers only to a subset of the Latin term's denotation. For instance, regarding sleeping on the job, certainly a deviation from public duty, as an act of corruption would be incongruent with contemporary usage [51].

It is worth mentioning that the narrowing of the concept 'corruption' is most pronounced in analyses of public (as opposed to private) corruption. Quite frequently, analyses of workplace malfeasance discuss topics such as sexual harassment, and unethical decision making under the rubric 'corruption' [4]. In these discussions, the traditional Latin meaning has resisted the conceptual narrowing which has taken place in other fields. While some scholars argue that business-to-business malfeasance such as public-sector fraud and workplace theft should be considered corrupt, and while undoubtedly such malfeasance and corruption have a lot in common, the present discussion maintains that corruption, as the reference to 'public office' in the above-stated definition indicates, is by definition a public sector phenomenon. Thus, throughout the following, 'corruption' should always be taken to mean 'public corruption'. And in discussions of public corruption, the material connotation is unequivocally dominant. As far as the present subject of discussion goes, then, the term has indeed narrowed. And there is very little doubt that acts of what is today termed (public) corruption would be encompassed by the connotations of the original *corrumpere*, but not the other way around.

According to Warren [65], the conceptual change began in the early modern period. As particularly European states bureaucratized, *corrumpere* became insufficient as a conceptual tool for understanding, and attempting to outlaw, deviations from duty within them [15]. However, the point here is not that what today would be termed corruption would not be considered corruption in earlier ages. It certainly would. For instance, Jordan makes the point quite forcefully that material transactions within the extension of contemporary corruption were thought of as being corrupt in 13th century France [27]. Rather, the point is the reverse, that is, some actions which were considered corrupt then would today more adequately be classified as something other than corruption. Tracing the elements of this conceptual narrowing and the defining attributes of corruption can shed light on the concept as commonly understood in academia and beyond today.

Sartori famously noted the inverse relationship between a concept's number of defining attributes—its *intension* or *connotation*—and its empirical coverage—its *extension* or *denotation* [56]. The core idea is simple: The more attributes used to define a given concept, the more demanding the definition and hence, the fewer empirical cases will be covered by the concept's reach. Conversely, the more abstract the concept (i.e. the fewer definitional qualities featured), the more empirical instances can be encompassed by it. Sometimes, the level of abstraction can be changed by adding adjectives to concepts. For instance, fewer cases qualify as small countries than as countries *tout court*. Here the extension of the concept is delimited by the use of the adjective 'small'. Sometimes, as will emerge below, less abstract concepts have distinctive names of their own. In that case, however, these distinctive names are logical equivalents of more abstract concepts with added adjectives. For instance, the term 'man' is logically equivalent to the term 'adult male human being', and clearly covers less instances than the more abstract term 'human being'.

Thus, as one descends (ascends) the rungs of what Sartori termed ‘the ladder of abstraction’, the concept’s extension decreases (increases). Moreover, as attributes are added in a hierarchical fashion, every concept on a lower rung will exclusively contain instances of the concepts on higher rungs. Thus, each lower rung will contain a subset of the denotation of the rung above it. All small countries are countries, but not all countries are small. The use of the adjective ‘small’ sheds aside not-small countries from the extension of the concept, but still contains only countries. Equivalently, moving from *corruptere*, implying deviation from public duty, to *corruption* empirical instances will be shed aside as they can be seen as instances of concepts related to corruption only in sharing some defining attributes. As for small countries and countries, all instances of corruption are instances of *corruptere*, but not the other way around. Distinctions between corruption and specific corrupt acts can be drawn in a similar fashion. The resulting ladder of abstraction is depicted in Table 1 below. The objective of the present and two following sections is to descend the rungs of this ladder and to discuss the concepts contained in each rung and how they are distinct from one another.<sup>4</sup>

As has already been discussed, not all deviations from public duty can be meaningfully classified as corrupt. A bureaucrat who sleeps on the job can hardly be thought of as committing corruption. Similarly, a bureaucrat who gives away (i.e. does not sell) sensitive information to a foreign country may perform treason, but is not engaging in corruption [51]. Thus, conceptions of corruption must move beyond *corruptere*. The concept, in short, must be less abstract.

### Particularistic governing

Descending from the first to the second rung on the ladder means narrowing the conceptual scope from any deviation from public duty (*corruptere*) to a particular type of such deviations: breaches of impartiality. This notion encompasses a number of phenomena which are often considered indiscriminately. Patronage, clientelism, nepotism, pork barrel politics, as well as corruption populate this conceptual field [34, 36, 55].<sup>5</sup> All these phenomena relate to what Kopecký and Scherlis [36] term particularistic exchanges, the absence or opposite of which has been subsumed under the label Quality of Government. The key principle of the latter is *impartial government*, implying that the signature of quality institutions is the equal treatment of equal cases [24, 55]. To quote Rothstein and Teorell: ‘When implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take into consideration anything about the citizen/case that is not beforehand stipulated in the policy or the law’ [55]. Thus, the *particularistic* in particularistic exchanges consists of any unequal treatment of citizens/cases on grounds which are not contained in policy or law.

<sup>4</sup> See Goertz’s *Social Science Concepts* [16] for a much more extensive discussion as well as some extensions of Sartori’s ideas.

<sup>5</sup> On a side note: Some might argue that particularistic governing is really a subset of corruption and not the other way around. I disagree on the following grounds: If corruption is indeed on a higher level of abstraction than nepotism, clientelism, pork barrel politics and patronage, the concept must encompass all these terms. What this would mean, however, is essentially an equation of corruption with particularistic governing, and the loss of an overarching conceptual category which demarcate the communalities between specific corrupt acts such as bribery and embezzlement. Such course of action implies an unnecessary loss of information, and—which is worse—conceptual stretching of the corruption concept.

**Table 1** A depiction of the ladder of abstraction

		Attribute				
		Initiated by bureaucrat or politician	Direct exchange of material payment	Material purpose	Deviations from the impartiality principle	Deviations from public duty
Concept	<i>Corruptere</i>					(+)
	Particularistic Governing				(+)	(+)
	Corruption			(+)	(+)	(+)
	Bribery		(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
	Extortion	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)

(+) indicates that the content of a column is an attribute of the concept in a given row

Importantly, this does not imply that citizens working actively to receive their due from public administration are partaking in particularistic exchanges, although insofar as particular individuals receive their due on the basis of considerations not stipulated in laws or policies, their interaction with the administration may be considered particularistic.

Kurer, in this context, notes the problem of particularistic legislation. In other words, how does one consider the special case of a law which stipulates unequal treatment in a way which treats intuitively equal cases unequally? To quote:

[C]andidates for identification as corrupt legislation include discrimination according to social proximity (such as nepotism, including discriminating in favour of the public official himself), religion, social or political class, caste, tribe, sex, ethnic characteristics and, at least within broad bounds, political views [40].

Arguably, Kurer's examples do not constitute corruption. Laws discriminating on account of, for instance, social class may be unjust but are neither corruption nor breaches of impartiality. A political party representing a certain social class which adopts legislation promoting the interests of that social class can scarcely be thought of as either. Generally, the content of public policies should not be considered part of the definition of impartial government [55].<sup>6</sup>

The use of 'exchanges' in the term particularistic exchanges implies that all deviations from impartiality are by necessity transactional. While this is true by definition of nepotism, patronage, pork barrel politics, and clientelism (see below), the case for corruption is less clear. Some authors argue that corruption as well is, by necessity, transactional (e.g. [50]). However, using this perspective implies a risk of missing parts of the picture. An official granting himself preferential treatment through his public position will *ipso facto* treat equal cases (i.e. people like the official on all relevant parameters) unequally. Consider the following example: In the 1993, officials in the Polish Foreign Debt Service Fund were charged with participating in a scheme in which

<sup>6</sup> Instances where the legislative process is distorted by the corruption of parliamentary parties or their deputies [20, 65] are separate from this question and are fully in line with corruption as a special instance of particularistic government.

they bought up Polish foreign debt just before its value declined due to factors they could only know about from their public positions [25]. In private companies, this might have been ‘insider trading’—in public office, given the preferential treatment of the officials themselves which clearly constituted a breach of the impartiality principle, it was corruption. Consequently, in what follows the term *particularistic governing* will be preferred to connote deviations from the principle of impartiality. The Sartorian approach to these concepts has a clear advantage in underlining this point: by focussing exclusively on exchanges, the analysis of corruption would effectively place itself at a too low level of abstraction (namely that of bribes, see below).

Impartial government has been argued for more than a decade now to positively affect a wide variety of desirable outcomes; from democracy and the rule of law to economic growth, public health, and the environment [24]. However, deviations from the principle of impartiality consists of types of transactions which might systematically diverge in their nature and causes, and which may affect one another in ways that are overlooked if particularistic governing *tout court* is chosen as the topic for analysis. The realist view of concepts presented by Goertz clearly brings this issue to the fore since the defining attribute of a concept is related to the way it affects with the world [16]. Attributes, in short, are causes (and facilitators of effects). In this view, analyses and explanations of pork barrel politics might be of very little use to scholars interested in corruption insofar as the defining attributes vary between the two concepts.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while particularistic governing undoubtedly has value as a research topic in itself, it is too abstract for present purposes.

The deviation from impartial government is common for corruption, nepotism, patronage, clientelism, and pork barrel politics all. The distinction between these terms, then, follows diverging lines as to the type of particularistic governing they relate to. Since Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice* [64], scholars have come closer to an understanding of the theoretical mechanisms underlying breaches of the impartiality principle. In particular, scholars have—implicitly or explicitly—adopted Walzer’s idea that in different parts of society different ‘moralities’ are able to coexist [3, 50]. Thus, Rothstein and Teorell [55] propose a division of society into four spheres. These spheres delineate zones of appropriate action divided on two dimensions. First, the inclusiveness of the sphere, that is, whether it is open to everyone or is restricted to ‘a few’ individuals, groups, families etc. Second, whether legitimate action in the sphere is self-interested or other-regarding.

*The state* is ideally—that is, if it lives up to the standards of the impartiality principle—a sphere guided by laws and policies applied equally to all without self-interested considerations. *The market*, by contrast, is an open forum guided by self-interest; whereas the family, the clan, and other *close, emotional communities* are guided by an other-regarding ethos, based on what Offe terms ‘shared notions of virtue’ [50], and are therefore not open to all. Finally, *interest groups* are driven by the considerations of their members, and are thus both self-interested and of restricted scope [55]. That political parties, like other interest groups, possess self-regarding interests with a delimited scope is already quite clear in the scholarly discussion on particularistic governing (e.g. [34, 36, 49]).

<sup>7</sup> There is no necessity in this lack of utility. The causes and consequences of corruption and pork barrel politics could well be similar. The point is we cannot know at a general level as the matter relates to which other concepts corruption and pork barrel politics are thought to be related to in a concrete study.



Particularistic governing occurs whenever a sphere with a diverging logic of legitimate action encroaches on the domain of the state. In these overlaps between spheres, the type of interest turns self-regarding, the scope is narrowed, or both, as logics foreign to impartial government permeate the state's handling of citizens or cases. The key point is that the purposes of the transgressions stemming from this diverge according to sphere and delineate the distinctions between the concepts contained in particularistic governing.

*Nepotism* (the preferential treatment of fellow member of family or other close, emotional communities) in this mode of thinking stems from the legitimate logic of close, emotional communities permeating the state. Andvig analyses this problem with regard to modernising societies in which the modern state is constructed on top of previously dominant family-friendship structures [3]. If practises based on these structures continue in domains formally overtaken by the state, nepotism is likely to ensue since the scope of interest (in Rothstein and Teorell's terms) remains narrow. An example: Reforms of the Ugandan tax administration have faced major difficulties due to the dominance of kinship structures.

Certain tribal networks are strong in the URA [Uganda Revenue Authority] and influence promotions and transfers within the organization. Many tax officers and managers remain under the strong influence of traditional pattern of social relations and recognize the benefits of large extended families and strong kinship ties. This implies that such social relations operate at cross-purposes to formal bureaucratic structures and positions [14]

Related to, but conceptually distinct from, nepotism three types of phenomena based on narrow, self-regarding interests are found: clientelism, patronage, and pork barrel politics. In today's world, these are often related specifically to political parties. Naturally, however, this has not always been the case. Kings, princes, generals, priests and others have utilised these means to secure administrative control or sufficient popular support to remain at the reins of power throughout history. Regardless, the point remains that whenever the narrowly delimited interests of political leadership permeate the ideally other-regarding, open sphere of the state, impartiality suffers. So does public duty, as will be touched upon in the end of this section.

The distinction between patronage and clientelism is probably the one made the least in studies of particularistic governing. Yet, the distinction between the two concepts is quite clear. *Patronage* refers to the power of political leaders to appoint loyalists to public posts [36], and is a strategy pursued in order to gain control of public administration [34]. For this reason Kopecký, Mair and Spirova [35] refer to patronage as an organisational resource in contrast to clientelism which they conceive of as an electoral resource (see just below). Furthermore, in contrast to nepotism, patronage is not based on other-regarding ties like family or kinship, but on a self-regarding transaction where obedience is provided in exchange for a public position. Finally, while appointments of loyalists can certainly provide a crucial stepping stone for corrupt enrichment, they are not themselves corrupt [34].<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Kopecký notes that patronage may be a necessary condition for corruption since the control of positions in the state is necessary for corrupt enrichment [34]. Certainly, bureaucrats need to 'play along' in order for most corrupt schemes involving political leadership to function [11, 35]. This, however, does not change the fact that the two phenomena are conceptually distinct, which is the main point I try to make here.



*Clientelism*, on its part, is an electoral strategy, or more broadly a strategy towards obtaining or sustaining political support, rather than a means toward administrative control. Clientelism, then, ‘refers to exchanges between a political [leadership] and individuals in which the former releases a benefit that the latter desires in order to secure their political support’ [36].<sup>9</sup> The linkage between citizens and leaders using this strategy is based clearly on self-interest, inasmuch as leaders target material inducements directly towards individuals or small groups in return for their support, vote, or consent [31]. In contrast to patronage, loyalty towards the political leaders on part of the recipient of particularistic treatment is not a prerequisite for clientelism. Instead, to achieve or retain loyalty is the very goal of the transaction. Thus, as the goal on part of the distributing political actor diverges across the two concepts, patronage cannot be considered a subset of clientelist practises (cf. [23]). Furthermore, clientelism, unlike patronage, need not relate to appointments for public office, though appointments can be one of the benefits distributed in return for support. For instance, in 1997 69.6 % of the organisational base units of the Argentine Peronist Party reported to be involved in the distribution of food or medicine to voters [44]. Further examples of clientelist politics include machine politics in 19th and early 20th century American cities [58], Western European affluent democracies up until the end of the 1980s [29], and party-citizen linkages in several Latin American countries [44].

Unlike clientelism and patronage, the realm of *pork barrel politics* lies on the margins of particularistic governing. However, since it constitutes a subset of such deviations which is extensive in some political system, it deserves mentioning. Kopecký and Scherlis define pork barrel politics as ‘a distinct practice that connotes tactical allocation of government funds, usually in the form of public works projects, to favour specific constituencies’ [36]. Actions are driven by self-interests of delimited constituencies, and the goals of the exchange on part of the public actor are oriented towards public support or consent. So far, pork barrel politics is essentially clientelism. However, since it is directed at entire constituencies, it does constitute a distinct practise [17, 23, 39]. Furthermore, due to this focus on full constituencies, the transactions in question are less at odds with the impartiality principle than other types of particularistic governing (public works project, after all, do need to be undertaken somewhere). Even less so insofar as Lancaster and Patterson are right in their assessment that pork barrel politics is universal in the sense that over time pork is distributed across legislators’ constituencies so there is ‘something for everyone’ [42]. Thus, while conceptually a subset of particularistic governing, pork barrel politics are found on (or rather just outside) the margins of impartial government, though it obviously cannot be characterised as fully impartial.

The ladder of abstraction adds an extra dimension to all varieties of particularistic governing which is worth making explicit. Because particularistic governing is a subset of *corruptere*, the latter’s notion of deviation from duty is retained in corruption, clientelism, patronage, nepotism and pork barrel politics all. This highlights what the principle of impartiality is, namely a requirement or public duty posed to individuals who operate in the sphere of the state. Other principles may, or perhaps even ought to, operate in other spheres. But in the state, duty implies impartiality. However, this

<sup>9</sup> Some authors use the term clientelism in a broader sense, encompassing what Kopecký [34] refers to as patronage (e.g. [31]). However, for the purpose of conceptual disentangling, which is the exercise performed here, a distinction between the two is fruitful.

conclusion does not go far enough for the present purpose. Neither nepotism or patronage, nor clientelism or pork barrel politics are conceptually identical to corruption. They may, of course, be empirically related and, in fact, one advantage of recognising corruption as a subset of particularistic governing rather than equating the two is that it becomes viable to study the interconnections and mechanisms linking, for instance, patronage to corruption in explanatory terms as scholars have successfully done already [10, 11]. Each of the concepts contained in particularistic governing can possibly be subdivided into less abstract concepts on their own. However, as corruption is the main focus here, this is the only concept for which this exercise will be pursued, as is done in the following section.

### Conceptualising corruption and beyond

*Corruption* forms a distinct subset of particularistic governing. Whereas patronage, clientelism, and pork barrel politics imply the state being permeated by the sphere of interest groups, corruption instead occurs when the *market* permeates the state [50] rendering public decisions marketable or extractable in a way which is clearly at odds with the impartiality principle [55]. In his discussion of definitions, Kurer underlines how corruption fits into the discussion on impartiality: ‘Corrupt acts ... are characterized by a holder of public office violating non-discrimination norms in order to gain a private advantage’ [40]. Hence, all corrupt acts fall within the bounds of particularistic governing, but not all such governing is corrupt. Unlike other particularistic governing, the aim of corruption is solely the acquisition of material rewards [51],<sup>10</sup> though these rewards need not be monetary [15]. This is what sets corruption apart from the rest: Not control, nor votes, popular consent or community loyalties, but simple material reward is the immediate goal. This view is the cause for Holmes’ statement that ‘[a]t the simplest and most intuitive level, corruption is often a manifestation of one of the seven deadly sins, greed’ [25]. Even so, as will become clear in what follows, greed has many faces.

One might be tempted to think that the subset relation between corruption and particularistic governing implies that where the latter is the very basis of the functioning of government, corruption as a concept does not make sense; that corruption is ‘in the eye of the beholder’ and somehow disappears if people do not recognise it when seen (see [25] for a discussion). Had the yardstick for corrupt behaviour been based on the public opinion approach [59], this notion would have had some truth to it. When corruption is thought of as a deviation from the principle of impartiality, however, it is misguided. Or, to put it slightly differently, the question is of an explanatory, and not an isolated conceptual, nature<sup>11</sup> and is as such irrelevant for the present discussion.

<sup>10</sup> Clientelism as well might be argued to entail material rewards [59]. However, the rewards in this case befall the client outside politics and/or the bureaucracy, whereas corruption as defined for present purposes entails rewards for actors within these arenas. Clientelism, in this way, is corruption in reverse.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, I should explain: Consider a people of a certain country who engage frequently in deviations from the impartiality principle for material gain as they do not consider such an act to be corruption. This is not a conceptual issue; they are still engaging in corruption. What becomes interesting, of course, is *why* they do not consider what they are doing corrupt. Clearly, this is an explanatory question, which does not relate to the scholarly classification of their actions.

The notion of corruption as a deviation from the principle of impartiality for material purposes is contained in the most common definition: ‘The misuse of public office for private gain’. As argued above, this definition places corruption in a material realm which is but a rather small subset of what is covered by the classic *corrumpere*. However, even taking this conceptual narrowing into consideration, corruption in the contemporary sense encompasses a dizzying flurry of diverging acts and schemes. When opening Robert Klitgaard’s classic *Controlling Corruption* [32], the reader is met with an abundance of terms which neatly illustrate this diversity: bribes, kickbacks, commissions, collusive procurement bidding, and extortion. Furthermore, embezzlement and certain variants of tunnelling could be added to the list. Thus, in many scholarly works on corruption, the discussion on concepts and definitions does not end with the contemporary notion of corruption. As a consequence, neither will this. Below, the lower rungs on the ladder of abstraction will be subject to discussion. However, before then the question of legality, which is relevant to all the acts subsumed under the concept corruption, deserves mentioning.

Some scholars have argued that corruption is by definition an illegal act (e.g. [43]). However, this focus may be excessively narrow and conceptually problematic for at least three reasons. First, problems of comparisons across different legal systems will be insurmountable. While most countries’ legal codes by now outlaw bribery, other less quintessentially corrupt acts or schemes are only included to a varying degree [41]. Second and closely related, grey areas which escape the domain of the law will be excluded [25]. As with other regulations of the modern state, legal codes are often lagging several steps behind the imagination of perpetrators. Finally, the legalistic conception of corruption places the law over and above the reach of potential corrupt actors. However, if political or administrative actors are able to shape penal codes to fit their purposes, a conspicuous correlation might occur between which actions the law stipulates against (or not), and the actions performed by these same actors [51]. Note how this discussion differs from the discussion on ‘corrupt laws’ above, since it does not concern preferential treatment built into the laws, but solely concerns the penal codes constituting what is defined as corruption. To consider corruption a deviation from the principle of impartiality is hence a more viable approach. Following this, the *misuse* in ‘misuse of public office for private gain’ clearly resonates with both *corrumpere*, and particularistic governing. This dovetails with the hierarchical approach embedded in the ladder of abstraction.

It is debatable whether ‘private gain’ should be equated with ‘individual gain’, or should include, for instance, material gains for organisations or political parties. Following the approach presented here, there is no reason to focus exclusively on individuals as impartiality is breached for purposes of material gain in either case. Empirically, furthermore, the gains from corruption are quite often funnelled into the coffers of groups, organisations, political parties, or even militias.

In sum, to be perfectly clear: Corruption can be defined as ‘the misuse of public office for private gain’, but only if misuse is taken to mean deviations from the impartiality principle, ‘private’ is not equated with ‘individual’, and ‘gain’ is taken to mean *material* gain, as opposed to for instance direct electoral gain<sup>12</sup>. Or, to put it in the logically equivalent added-adjective form, corruption may be defined as a deviation from public

<sup>12</sup> Though, for instance, a political party’s gains from corrupt schemes may translate into electoral gain indirectly in a separate transaction.

duty by breach of impartiality for the purpose of material gain. Unsurprisingly, this is closely aligned with already widely used definitions, and is indeed contained in the standard definition in the literature. What the Sartorian approach adds, in essence, are the conceptual underpinnings of what constitutes misuse, namely deviation from impartiality as a special instance of public duty, and the addition of conceptual depth to already existing insights on corruption and the principle of impartiality.

Returning to the ladder of abstraction, corruption is not the lowest rung. However, moving beyond this rung, concepts become very specific indeed. At the first stage, the *bribe* is corruption in a specific form<sup>13</sup>: the direct exchange of material payment in exchange for breaching the principle of impartiality. Clearly, using this conception, all bribes are corrupt. The direct exchange of money, of course, is to many the quintessential bribe – the fat envelope is the notorious symbol of corruption in many places. However, material payment can take other forms: bottles of expensive whisky, tickets for sporting events or for travels, and so on. Furthermore, not all corruption entails bribery, though according to Brown [7] equating the two is common practise, particularly in economics: as Brooks put it corruption ‘is by no means synonymous with bribery’ [6]. For instance, kickback schemes are more indirect exchanges, whereas the abovementioned case of the Polish Foreign Debt Service Fund, while constituting corruption, did not entail bribery at all.

The final rung on the ladder of abstraction pertains to the distinction between ‘grass-eating’ corruption (where officials accept, but do not demand, bribes) and ‘meat-eating’ corruption (where officials demand bribes in order to fulfil their tasks) [25]. This distinction in the scholarly discourse has come to embody the conceptual difference between bribes and *extortion*. Extortion, then, occurs when bureaucrats or politicians initiate the bribery transaction on threat of not performing a task unless a bribe is paid. Extortion encompasses all the characteristics of a bribe—indeed, it is a bribe—and has been argued to be largely a superfluous concept since the difference, in practise, between the two is marginal [53]. Indeed, peculiar problems can arise by considering them distinct legal categories. For instance, an understanding of extortion as requiring threats on part of the recipient of a bribe gained precedence in the interpretation of the Hobbs Act in America in the 1960s. This prevented the conviction of recipients of illegal payments accused of extortion as they could argue that they were ‘merely’ partaking in bribery [61]. This, too, underlines how all extortion is bribery, but not all bribery is extortion. In spite of the short conceptual distance to bribery, for some analytical purposes the distinction is worth making. For instance, extortion is generally abhorred more than bribery [25] and the distinction could, therefore, be relevant to studies of the loss of legitimacy for political systems related to various types of corruption (e.g. [60]).

These subsets of corruption are clearly conceptually relevant. The extent to which they are theoretically and empirically relevant depends on the particular study. Consider, for instance, a study on the effects of parliamentarism and presidentialism on corruption emphasising the incentives for policy makers to receive bribes. Such an emphasis may well be perfectly appropriate. However, in contexts where policy

<sup>13</sup> What constitutes the specific differences between a bribe and a gift is beyond the topic discussed here. A discussion can be found in Holmes [25]. Suffice it here to say that insofar as material inducements or rewards directed at public officials cause deviations from impartiality, they are to be regarded as corrupt.

makers engage widely in embezzlement or public theft this focus may not show the whole picture. In such an instance, corruption could be a more appropriate level of abstraction than bribery, and theory could gain advantage by considering linkages between the explanatory factors of interest and these non-transactional forms of corrupt behaviour as well as bribery. Whether this is useful, and whether not doing so is consequential, depends on how much of corrupt behaviour takes the form of bribes in the given context. And, on a more practical note, on whether measures exist to assess this issue empirically. Fortunately, as the ensuing section will discuss, measures do exist, and are hence possible to produce, for most levels of abstraction. The choice of measures to use in the context of a given study, however, is not a free choice but depends precisely on the chosen level of abstraction.

### Measurement validity

Among Sartori's insights was that 'concept formation stands prior to quantification' [56]. Hence, the chosen measures for any empirical study needs to correspond to its chosen concept—and the chosen level of abstraction. Congruence should always exist between concept and measurement to the highest degree possible, that is, one should strive for *measurement validity* [1]. Measures are available for many of the concepts discussed above. However, the more abstract concepts, because they encompass such a wide variety of actions, pose difficulties. Ultimately, though parts of deviations from duty not pertaining to particularistic governing may be captured in measures of, for instance, organisational slack [5], comprising an encompassing measure of *corruptere* is extraordinarily difficult. The types of deviation from duty which concerned Machiavelli [45, 46], for instance, will be well-near impossible to operationalise.

Measures of the remaining concepts discussed above do exist including pork barrel politics [42], patronage [34, 37, 38], clientelism [29, 30], bribery [2, 18], and extortion [48]. Among the measures of particularistic governing, the measure of patronage devised by Kopecký and Spirova [38] in particular aligns well with the discussion above as it explicitly addresses the purpose of the particularistic transaction and hence allows a differentiation of patronage and clientelism. In line with the main purpose of this article, the measurement of corruption deserves a few notes with special reference to the two most commonly used measures: Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) and the World Bank's Control of Corruption Index (CCI). The discussion here does not imply that either measure is an ideal reflection of the conceptual arguments above. Measures could be derived which reflect them more directly. Nevertheless, the discussion of the CPI and the CCI is worth having partly because their conception of corruption does align with the present discussion (the purpose of the behaviour they address—bribery, extortion, embezzlement, public theft, etc.—is clearly private gain as defined above, though see just below), and partly for the sake of commensurability with the remainder of the literature.

The two indexes, while far from perfect, might be feasible measures of corruption since both do attempt to tap into varieties of behaviour denoted by the contemporary conception as misuse of public office for private gain [28, 41]. However, neither

should be used to measure particularistic governing more generally or bribery more specifically. Both indexes strive to measure corruption, and corruption is not the same thing as either of the other two phenomena. Both the CPI and the CCI are composite measures composed from a variety of underlying sources. The aggregation of individual measures implies a loss of conceptual precision balanced by a gain in reliability [33]. And while many of the individual indicators address bribery directly others do not. Therefore, measurement validity is weakened if the indexes are used to examine bribery rather than corruption. Sources assessing the incidence of embezzlement of public funds could lessen the composite measures' use as measures of bribery and could aid the development of theory if taken directly into account.

In choosing between the two composite indexes as a measure of corruption *on conceptual grounds* (provided it is wise to choose either), the CPI is probably preferable to the CCI as the designers of the former consciously exclude measures included in the latter on the basis of conceptual imprecision [41]. As a consequence, the CCI contains indices capturing other elements of particularistic governing than corruption including nepotism and patronage which are explicitly addressed by included sources [28] (though not enough to present a viable measure of particularistic governing). Thus, though neither of the two indexes is likely to be perfectly aligned with the distinctions made in the above, the CPI does express comparatively more concern about conceptual issues and a more strict approach to ensuring consistency between concept and the selected measures [41].

This does not mean that the CPI is superior in all respects. In fact, its more restrictive approach to sources might make it less statistically reliable; the lower degree of measurement validity for the CCI might be of little empirical consequence for some purposes as measures tend to correlate strongly; and analysts might reasonably prefer the CCI on other grounds including aggregation or the choice of measurement model (though Thomas [62] and others have voiced critiques concerning these too). But on the basis of measurement validity, the CPI aligns closer to the *concept* of corruption as discussed in the above. Unfortunately, there is likely to be trade-offs in the choices of any measure, and the choice of corruption measure is certainly no exception.

### Concluding remarks

The concept of corruption has been subject to extensive discussion for decades. However, disagreement still abounds regarding its definition and its conceptual relation to other forms of particularistic governing such as patronage, nepotism, clientelism, and pork barrel politics. Parts of these disagreements perhaps stem from the change which notions of corruption have undertaken over time. In the above, an attempt was made at clearing some of these remaining questions by using Sartori's [56] ladder of abstraction as an ordering principle. It was argued that the contemporary conception of corruption, while related to it, diverges from the classical Latin meaning of the term since the current exclusive focus on material gain is relatively novel. Furthermore, it was argued that corruption is distinct from other types of particularistic governing in that the purpose of corruption is material gain, as opposed to administrative control or political support.



Following work by Rothstein and Teorell [55], it was argued that societies can be divided into spheres in which distinct logics of legitimate action dominate, and that particularistic governing occurs whenever other spheres encroach on the supposedly open and other-regarding domain of the state. In doing so, an essential aspect of legitimate state action—the principle of impartiality according to which equal cases should be treated equally—is breached. However, encroachment from different spheres provided conceptually different breaches of impartiality. Thus, corruption is not nepotism since the purpose of the latter is looking after the interests of people with which a closed emotional sense of community is shared. Nepotism is other-regarding, and not concerned with material gain. Neither is corruption equal to patronage since the latter involves the appointments of political loyalists into public positions in order to achieve control, and not (directly) material gain. Moreover, corruption is not clientelism since the latter consists of inducements from political leadership towards individuals or limited communities for purposes of legitimacy. Finally, corruption is not pork barrel politics since such favouring of particular constituencies in the making of public policy, as well, is a legitimising or electoral strategy, which moreover exists on the cusp of particularistic governing. Instead, corruption consists in deviations from public duty by breach of impartiality for the purpose of material gain. This aligns with the standard definition as the misuse of office for private gain, but gives substance to the notion of misuse. Furthermore, it expands on Rothstein and Teorell's [55] insight that the term reflects deviations from impartiality by showing that impartiality is a special case of public duty. Subsequently, it was argued that, although bribery and extortion are both corrupt, they are not equal to corruption. Corruption need not entail the direct exchange of material inducements, and should thus not be equated with bribery. In a similar vein, bribery need not entail extortion.

As the necessarily brief discussion on empirical measures show, most of these phenomena can be measured, but measures used in a given study should be chosen to reflect the concept they are meant to address. By engaging in reflection on these issues scholars may not only acquire a higher degree of measurement validity, but might also be able to advance their theoretical views and hypotheses to reflect the intricacies of each level of abstraction.

An implication of the discussion above is that the Latin meaning of *corruptere* lives on as a part of the contemporary conception of corruption. This raises a few points worth noticing. First, when some scholars (e.g. [65]) argue that something has been lost in the changing understandings of corruption over time, they are right. But losses are found in the extension of the concept, not its intension. Therefore, the normative underpinnings of *corruptere* are retained in contemporary conceptions. Second and closely related, one should not be blind to these normative underpinnings. They are quite real. But nor should one dismiss the study of corruption because of them. So many topics in the social sciences have normative bases [9] and the mere fact that the study of corruption is based in a normative standpoint should not discourage it. Quite the contrary.

One final note: Quite obviously, there is no optimal level of abstraction for all intends and purposes. The choice depends solely and fully on the research question at hand. However, one cannot, in any case, investigate the incidence of bribery by analysing, discussing, and measuring corruption as a whole—nor vice versa. More



generally, concepts, models, analyses, and measures must all correspond. What emerges, then, is that if meaningful theorising and measurement validity is to be obtained to an acceptable degree, the analyst has to make a conscious choice about the level of abstraction on which analysis is carried out and choose models and measures accordingly. In short, corruption scholars, just as other scholars in the social sciences, need to be what Sartori [56] once called *conscious thinkers*.

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