Notes on the Historical Study of Corruption

Mihai OLARU

"George Bariț" Institute of History, Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca
E-mail: olaruvm@yahoo.com

Abstract: Over the last fifteen years, the field of corruption studies underwent a historical turn. Social scientists added a historical dimension to their traditional concern with corruption and political and economic development. Historians joined the debates and brought a constructivist approach to the study of corruption, one that examines this phenomenon in its historical context. The present article examines the most important issues in the historical studies of corruption: the way in which the understanding of corruption transformed throughout the centuries, the precise moment the modern understanding emerged and the factors that triggered this transformation. Historians and social scientists tend to agree on the importance of the period around 1800 as the moment when corruption came to designate the abuse of the public office for private gain. At about the same time, various activities which were hitherto tolerated – gifts to officials, patronage, exploitation of the office for private gain – lost any legitimacy and became illicit, i.e., corruption in the modern sense. The factors which contributed to the change were the crises of the modernization process and the obsession with clear-cut categorization specific to the modern thought.

Keywords: corruption, modernization, public, private, ambiguity

Rezumat: În ultimii cincisprezece ani domeniul studiilor despre corupție a înregistrat o turnură istorică. Cercetătorii din științele sociale au adăugat o dimensiune istorică la interesul mai vechi

pentru corupție și dezvoltare politică și economică. Istoricii s-au alăturat dezbaterilor și au adus o abordare constructivistă în studierea corupției, una care examinează fenomenul în contextul său istoric. Articolul examinează cele mai importante probleme în studiul istoric al corupției: cum s-a transformat înțelesul corupției de-a lungul secolelor, când a apărut sensul modern al acestei noțiuni și ce factori au determinat această transformare. Istoricii și cercetătorii din științele sociale tind să conveargă asupra importanței perioadei din jurul anului 1800 ca momentul în care corupția începe să desemneze abuzarea de funcția publică pentru interes privat. Cam în aceeași perioadă, diferite activități care până atunci au fost tolerate – daruri către dregători, patronaj, extragerea de venituri din dregători – și-au pierdut legitimitatea și au devenit ilicite, adică corupției în sensul modern. Factorii care au contribuit la schimbare au fost crizele declanșate în procesul de modernizare și obsesia cu organizarea lumii în categorii bine definite specifică gândirii moderne.

Cuvinte cheie: corupție, modernizare, public, privat, ambiguitate

It is undeniable that corruption and anticorruption occupy a place in the public contemporary discourse. As one of the most important historians of corruption, Jens Ivo Engels, has noted, "[w]e are confronted with the fight against corruption literally every day."[1] Accusations of corruption are one of the most potent weapons used in political struggles. Politicians or political regimes, local and central administrations, national or multinational corporations can be, and often are, subject to the delegitimizing charges of corruption. International organizations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, NGOs like Transparency International, as well as NGOs acting at a national level, see corruption as the main obstacle in the path of promoting the rule of law, economic development, social integration and transparency in government and administration. These organizations produce, and periodically revise, indexes and surveys that measure corruption all across the globe, ranking countries from the least to the most corrupt. On the basis of these indexes and surveys, social scientists produced a massive literature that examines the causes and the types of corruption, the aim being that of identifying and proposing solutions to governors.

---

[1] Jens Evo Engels, "Corruption and Anticorruption in the Era of Modernity and Beyond," in Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória & G. Geltner eds., *Anticorruption in History. From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 167.

Historians are latecomers to the field of corruption studies. Despite being a relatively new area of research2, the history of corruption became a thriving field of historical research over the last ten-fifteen year. Conferences, collective volumes and monographs approached the problem of corruption from various angles. Taking up the concepts and theories put forth by social-scientists (mostly political scientists) in the study of corruption, historians have tested them against historical evidence and challenged them in several respects. At about the same time as a field of historical corruption was taking shape, some social scientists, finding the focus on the contemporary period too limiting, started to add a historical dimension to their studies. The time is ripe for an assessment of the contributions of these literatures on the history of corruption. In the following pages, I will trace the main trends in the historical study of corruption and discuss the salient problems raised by the researchers of corruption in history.

The history of corruption in social science

A shift in the corruption studies has prompted scholars to look into the past. Due to the fact that simply copying the institutions of the most developed and relatively corruption-free countries does not seem to work, some scholars have proposed to look into the past and see what those countries have done to attain a reasonable control over corruption.[3] Alina Mungiu-Pippidi starts her historical explanation from the Middle Ages, where she identifies two governance regimes: patrimonialism and republicanism. In the former case, which designates medieval and early-modern kingdoms, the issue of corruption is superfluous, since the ruler is not accountable to the people he governs and "the rule of the patrimonial monarchs is based on patronage and favour". The republican regime refers to the political model of the Italian city-states which managed to develop "control of corruption systems based on collective action, not on the principal-agent model". Through the appointment of the city managers (*podestà*), short mandates for public offices, rotation of positions by family, recruitment of officials by a lottery system or by complex electoral systems, appointments of outsiders and a culture of participation in public affairs contributed to "a reasonably effective, prosperous and fair government".

---

[2] The field in the sense frequent academic events and regular scholarly exchanges on the topic exists for some 15 years according to Jens Ivo Engels and Frédéric Monier, "Colonial and Corruption History: Conclusions and Future Research Perspectives" in Ronald Kroeze, Pol Dalmau, Frédéric Monier (eds), *Corruption, Empire and Colonialism in the Modern Era. A Global Perspective* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 339.

[3] Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, "Becoming Denmark: Historical Designs of Corruption Control," Social Research 80 (2013): pp. 1259–86.

Mingiu-Pippidi's approach raises several questions. The virtues of republicanism seem to be overstated, omitting the formation of oligarchies and the class divisions which often led to internal strife. Moreover, there is little explanation for the fate of the medieval republics and their impact on the modern states that incorporated them. What is even more striking is that the breakthrough, that is, the transition to less corrupt regimes, happened in the patrimonial regimes. However, how the breech of the corrupt regime specific to patrimonial monarchies occurred is not properly explained. The thesis advanced by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi is that absolute monarchs, acting as principals, managed to discipline their agents (royal servants) and to transform them into modern, honest bureaucrats. The main example is, as the title indicates, Denmark. But it is not clear why other absolute monarchies (France, Spain) did not follow the same path. In addition, the argument that Denmark managed to control corruption because it constructed a professional bureaucracy is circular. The professionalization of the Danish bureaucracy itself needs an explanation, as does the failure of other absolute monarchies to build it.

A similar argument was advanced in two articles focusing on the control of corruption in Sweden. Bo Rothstein and Jan Torell argued that the success of the anti-corruption reforms in 19th century Sweden hinged on "a relatively fair and clean court system". Yet, it is precisely the creation of a fair judicial system that needs explanation. If Alina Mungiu-Pippidi relied on historiography to formulate her arguments, Bo Rothstein and Jan Torell deploy an analysis of the judicial sources produced by the Swedish High Court. Although they are well aware that sources do not equate the phenomenon they study and that the frequency of sources documenting corruption cases does not necessarily correspond to the dimension of corruption, they seem to suggest exactly this. They interpret frequent occurrence of sources indicating corruption as high level of corruption and declining number of such occurrences as decline of corruption.[4]

The studies of Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and of Bo Rothstein and Jan Torell share a view of a transition from corruption to less corruption or from regimes in which corruption was rampant to regimes in which corruption was exceptional. Yet, even before their studies, other scholars expressed doubts over the employment of a universal understanding of corruption. Peter Bratsis criticized the "official history of corruption as a concept common

---

[4] Jan Torell and Bo Rothstein, "Getting to Sweden, Part I: War and Malfeasance, 1720–1850", *Scandinavian Political Studies* 38, No. 3 (2015): 217-237. Bo Rothstein & Jan Teorell, "Getting to Sweden, Part II: Breaking with Corruption in the Nineteenth Century", *Scandinavian Political Studies* 38, No. 3 (2015): 238-254.

to nearly all political forms and historical epochs."[5] Whereas the notion of corruption existed since Antiquity, its meaning varied considerably. Taking note of the most commonly used definition of corruption as abuse of public office or subversion of the common good for private interest,[6] scholars have rightly noted that all the terms of the definition depend on "social constructs". They argued that the meaning of notions like "misuse", "public" and "office" "is defined by social and professional norms that vary by time and place."[7]

It comes as no surprise that historians have been sensitive and receptive to the argument that the understanding of corruption is always context-bound. From their perspective, the political science literature, interested mainly in modernization, has either neglected the historical dimension of corruption or "engaged in a selective, frequently anachronistic interpretation of often complex and ambiguous data."[8] Moreover, equating the fight against corruption with rule of law, transparency and bureaucratisation, these approaches were exposed to critiques of teleology and circular argumentation.[9] Recently, the arguments about "getting to Sweden" or "becoming Denmark" were derided for taking at face value

---

[5] Peter Bratsis, "The Construction of Corruption, or Rules of Separation and Illusions of Purity in Bourgeois Societies," *Social Text* 77, vol. 21, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 11.

[6] From a vast literature using this definition, see James C. Scott, *Comparative Political Corruption* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 3-5. Joseph Nye, "Corruption and political development: A cost-benefit analysis." in *Political corruption: A handbook*, Arnold J. Heidenheimer, Michael Johnston, and Victor T. LeVine (eds.). New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1989. Mark Philp, "Defining Political Corruption." In *Political Studies* XLV (1997): 440–441; the same, "The Definition of Political Corruption." In: Paul M. Heywood (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption* (London-New York 2014): 21–22; Michael Johnston, *Syndromes of Corruption: Wealth, Power and Democracy* (Cambridge 2005), 11; Michael Johnston, "Democratic Norms, Political Money and Corruption. The Deeper Roots of Political Malaise." In: Ina Kubbe and Annika Englebert (eds.), *Corruption and Norms. Why Informal Rules Matter*, Cham 2018; Daniel Kaufmann, "Corruption: the Facts." In *Foreign Policy*, 107 (1997): 114; Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop Control of Corruption* (Cambridge 2015); Alina Mungiu-Pippidi/Mihály Fazekas, "How to Define and Measure Corruption." In: Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Paul M. Heywood (eds.), *A Research Agenda for Studies of Corruption* (Cheltenham, UK-Northampton, MA 2020), 7–26.

[7] Mark Granovetter, "The Social Construction of Corruption," in *On Capitalism* eds. Victor Nee and Richard Swedberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 153.

[8] Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória & G. Geltner, "Introduction. Debating Corruption and Anticorruption in History" in Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória & G. Geltner (eds.), *Anticorruption in History. From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

[9] Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória and G. Geltner, "Introduction" in Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória and G. Geltner eds., *Anticorruption in History. From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

surveys and indexes of corruption perception that "reproduce deeply rooted prejudices."[10]

Partially as a reaction to this literature, the historiography of corruption and anti-corruption proposes an approach that stresses the long-term impact of social, political, economic and cultural factors. Without claiming that the past can teach lessons in the present, historians who subscribe to this approach believe that

> "[s]uch a historical approach could help explain major moments of change in the past, which in turn may support or undermine the perceptions and unwarranted certainties we hold today about the reasons for the success and failure of specific anticorruption policies and their relation to a country's image […] as being more or less corrupt."[11]

But the most important contribution made by historians to the study of corruption is the constructivist understanding of this phenomenon and the emphasis they put on the way corruption was understood in various (proto)national contexts. This approach rejects the ahistorical perspective on corruption that fails to take into account what corruption meant in a certain time and place. Although, since Antiquity, corruption denoted, among other things, the abuse of public power to the detriment of public interest, this notion was shaped by various political, cultural, intellectual and economic factors and for long periods of time had completely different meanings.[12] Thus, historians tend to historicize corruption and to trace its transformations, especially in relation to modernity. Three major aspects have been examined by the historians of corruption: the understanding of the notion of corruption in the pre-industrial societies; the timing of the transformation of this understanding; and the factors which contributed to the change or how and why this transformation took place. This is a rather analytical distinction that I make, since all these aspects are to be found, in various proportions, in most of the studies that I will discuss below.

What and when was Corruption?

Intellectual historians have showed that, by and large, corruption had two main denotations. From Antiquity to the 18th century, it referred to the moral lapses of individuals or to the decline of states caused by the

---

[10] Engels and Monier, "Colonial and Corruption History", p. 348. The authors unceremoniously likened this type of argument to the thinking of Cecil Rhodesm, an advocate of British imperialism.

[11] Kroeze, Vitória & Geltner, "Introduction. Debating Corruption", 1.

[12] Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória and G. Geltner, "Introduction. Debating Corruption", 2.

lack of virtue of the governors and the malfunction of institutions. Corruption understood as abuse of the public office to attend to private interests existed during this period too, but form the 18th century on, it displaces the former meaning (without the latter vanishing completely). Thus, by 1800, corruption takes on a more precise and concrete meaning, designating illicit gains from the exploitation of the office.[13] This semantic evolution coincided by and large with a declining tolerance with regard to activities hitherto accepted: patronage, gifts to officials, officials' using the office as a sources or revenue etc. Moreover, administrative malpractice ceased to be framed as treason of the monarch to be regarded as violation of the laws and of the common good. In what follows, I will insist on this second meaning of corruption as administrative malpractice.

The new understanding of corruption was not the result of some "natural" evolution, but the outcome of political struggles. The constructivist perspective favoured by most historians, admits the contested character of notions like "public", "private", "abuse", "office", "common good" etc. and the role of the competing social forces in their definition. As Mark Knights has convincingly argued "the shifting concept of corruption, the birth of public office, the development of the state and empire, and the redrawing of public and private were all contested processes."[14] James C. Scott went even further and claimed that we need to study corruption as any other political process and to ask "who gets what, when, how?"[15]

Such reflections derive from the research on corruption in pre-industrial societies. In these societies, some facts that today pass as corruption were either legitimate or had an ambiguous status. A case in point is the patron-client relations which played a pivotal role in pre-industrial administrations and governments. Studies dedicated to this problem suggest that such relations were not always and automatically understood as corruption.[16] German researchers insist on what can be called the plurality or parallelism of norms (*Normenpluralität*, *Normenkonkurrenz*). As a result, pre-industrial officials oscillated between the loyalty to the

---

[13] Bruce Buchan & Lisa Hill. *An Intellectual History of Political Corruption*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014). Maryvonne Génaux, "Early Modern Corruption in English and French Fields of Vision," in Arnold J. Heidenheimer and Michael Johnston (eds.) *Political Corruption. Concepts & Contexts*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers 2002), 107–22; Maryvonne Génaux,"Les mots de la corruption. La déviance publique dans les dictionnaires d'Ancien Régime," *Histoire, Économie et Société* 21 (2002): 513–30.

[14] Mark Knights, Trust and Distrust. Corruption in Office in Britain and its Empire, 1600–1850 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6.

[15] James C. Scott, "The Analysis of Corruption in Developing Nations," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11, no. 3 (Jun. 1969): 340.

[16] As will become clear in the following, my references predominantly focus on the situation in Europe in particular.

family (or the patron-client networks) and the duties towards their office. To qualify some activities and relations as corrupt in such conditions means to commit anachronism.[17] Criticizing the emphasis on bureaucratization in the theories of state formation, these studies argue that, far from being a residue of the previous social organizations that needed to be removed, the patron-client networks in administration have, in fact, contributed to the centralization of power and to the formation of the modern states.[18] Moreover, corruption or what can be called corruption from a modern standpoint, was not a malaise which states needed to overcome, but a symptom of state formation.[19]

So, what and when was corruption in these societies? Were there cases or scandals of corruption? If pre-industrial corruption cannot be defined from the point of view of the 21st century, it is equally true that pre-industrial people had a notion of the misuse of the public office. Corruption was prosecuted and corrupt officials were punished, but this happed in certain conditions. This problem was raised even before the recent interest in the history of corruption by the American historian Sharon Kettering in a series of studies dedicated to patronage in 17th century France. She starts from the general observation that early-modern officials were corrupt, according to modern standards, although they were not seen as corrupt by their contemporaries. A series of factors contributed to this state of affairs: the influence of patrons in favour of their clients, low salaries, imprecisely defined responsibilities, blurred lines between public and private and lack of proper auditing. She shows that activities like bribery, abuse, favouritism, peddling of influence were legitimate or, at least, had a morally ambiguous status. Then what constituted then

---

[17] Jens Ivo Engels, *Die Geschichte der Korruption von der Früher Neuzeit bis ins 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2014), 39-50. Niels Grüne and Tom Tölle, "Corruption in the Ancien Régime" *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Corruption and the Rise of Modern Politics (2013): 31-51.

[18] Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth Century France* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1986), 192-206. Similar arguments are advanced in several of her other studies: "Patronage and Politics during the Fronde," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1986): 409-441; "The Patronage Power of Early Modern French Women," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 32, no. 4 (dec. 1989): 817-841; "The Historical Development of Political Clientelism," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1988): 419-447; "Patronage and Kinship in Early Modern France," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1989): 221-239; "Brokerage at the Court of Louis XIV," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1993): 69-87. Anthony Molho, "Patronage and the State in Early Modern Italy," in Antoni Mączak (Hg.), *Klientelsysteme im Europa*, 233-242.

[19] See especially Wim Blockmans, "Patronage, Brokerage and Corruption as Symptoms of Incipient State Formation in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands," in Antoni Mączak ed, *Klientelsysteme im Europa*, 117-126 and Helmut G. Koenigsberger, "Patronage, Clientage and Elites in the Politics of Philip II, Cardinal Granvelle and William of Orange," in Antoni Mączak ed, *Klientelsysteme im Europa*, 127-148.

corruption in such a context? Surely, the diverging of the resources of the crown towards private benefit was regarded as undermining the public interest. But, in order to have a formal accusation and a trial to be initiated, several factors were necessary. The social status, the protection offered by the patron and the reputation played a significant role in the opening of an investigation. The magnitude and the frequency of the abuses – which could trigger denunciations, petitions and tensions – could weigh a lot in such a situation. Moreover, the reputation of a government could influence whether or not it was perceived as corrupt (or legitimate).[20]

Similar situations are documented in other early-modern states. In 17th-century England, corruption was a political weapon aimed at royal patronage.[21] In a recent study, Mark Knights demonstrates that abuse of office and private gains obtained from a public office were negatively connoted, but also that "'abuse', 'fairness', 'excess', 'private', and 'public' were not fixed values. It was acceptable for an official to demand various taxes for his services, if they were not excessive or extorted, even when there were formal payments (salaries)."[22] During the 18th century, the system of sinecures granted on clientelist grounds was given the name "the Old Corruption".[23] In early-modern Amsterdam and Hamburg, the profits derived from the exercise of public office were not automatically perceived as immoral or illegal. Like in the French case discussed above, only under the impact of certain events, accusations of corruptions were formulated and investigations started.[24]

Scholars studying 17th century Romanov Russia reached similar conclusions. Corruption was inscribed in the very social and administrative structures based entirely on patron-client ties. Charges of administrative malpractice were frequently raised, but they merely reflected certain intra-elite struggles. It is notable that in spite of central power codifications, corruption was still circumstantially defined.[25] Just like in France, personal relations between office-holders, insufficient salaries, lack of training and

---

[20] Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients*, 192-206. For the previous century, N. Z. Davies, *The Gift in the Sixteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) argues that personal relations and gift practices characterized the working of the administration and that a scrupulous distinction was made between legitimate and illegitimate gifts.

[21] Linda Levy Peck, Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England (London: Routledge, 1993 [1990]).

[22] Mark Knights, *Trust and Distrust*, 4-5.

[23] W.D. Rubinstein, "The End of 'Old Corruption' in Britain 1780-1820," *Past & Present*, Bd. 101, H. 1, (1983), 55-86.

[24] Mary Lindemann, "Dirty Politics or 'Harmonie'? Defining Corruption in Early Modern Amsterdam and Hamburg," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 45, nr. 3 (2012): 582-604.

[25] David L. Ransel, "Character and Style of Patron-Client Relations in Russia," in *Klientelsysteme im Europa der Früher Neuzeit*, (ed.) Antoni Mączak (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1988), 211-231 (infra: *Klientelsysteme im Europa*, ed. Mączak).

of monitoring institutions created structural conditions for practices that look corrupt.[26] For the long time, the Ottoman Empire was depicted as a state marked by rampant corruption, which was, to a considerable extent, responsible for its decline. More recently, both the decline paradigm and the idea of massive corruption were rejected by Ottomanist scholars. Rifaat Abou-El-Haj tackled the problem of Ottoman corruption in a vigorous attempt to de-exoticize and de-orientalize Ottoman history. He rejects the notion of a declining post 16th century Ottoman Empire marked by growing corruption; he shows that the chronicles which supported this view were partisan historical writing which employed the vocabulary of corruption to delegitimize rival groups. Thence, he argues, what was called corruption was basically doing politics, no different from the contemporary situation in Western monarchies.[27] Iris Agmon noted that services, gifts and favours exchanged in the Ottoman society were conditioned culturally and did not automatically imply bribery or abuse of power.[28] When and why did this situation change?

When does the understanding of the administrative malpractice change?

This question has received a variety of answers, according to the studied historical configuration and varying perspectives of the authors. From the standpoint of intellectual history, the transformation occurred during the eighteenth century. It was during the Enlightenment that the notion of corruption as moral degeneration, political decline and physical decay is displaced by a narrower and more concrete understanding of corruption as the officials' illicit private gain.[29] Historians who studied the history of corruption in various (proto)national contexts tend to agree on the importance of the 18th century, but they do add nuances which lead to slightly diverging chronologies.

German historians converge on the importance of the period of rapid modernization known as *Sattelzeit* (1750-1850) in the transformation of the meaning of corruption. They link it to processes such as bureaucratization and the emergence of the modern ideologies (mostly liberalism and

---

[26] Nancy Kollmann, *Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Rusia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 94-112.

[27] Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj, Formation of the Modern State. The Ottoman Empire Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries. Syracuse, 2005 [1992].

[28] Iris Agmon, "State, Family and Anticorruption Practices," in Kroeze, Vitória and Geltner eds., *Anticorruption in History*, 251-263.

[29] Bruce Buchan & Lisa Hill. *An Intellectual History of Political Corruption*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

conservatism).[30] Not far from this point of view are those among British historians who insist on the reforms from the late 18th century and the first half of the 19th century.[31] A quantitative research on corruption in Sweden shows that the number of indictments grew spectacularly towards the end of the 18th century and then in the period 1820-1850, only to decline significantly in the second half of the 19th century. This trend reflects, according to the authors, a transformation of the Swedish administration in a Weberian bureaucracy and a high level of integrity of the Swedish officials.[32] The case of The Netherlands suggests a different chronology. Alternatively, it is argued that a transition from plurality of norms to value monism and from debates on corruption triggered by the "parallelism of norms" to debates on corruption arisen from clashing ideologies (conservative, liberal or bureaucratic) occurred during "the long 19th century" (late 18th-early 20th century).[33]

Instead of a sudden transformation in the understanding of corruption, some authors propose a slow transformation over a long period of time. In England's case, Mark Knights posits an "uncertain, inconsistent, patchy, and protracted" process stretching from 1600 to approximately 1850.[34] Denmark has drawn the attention of specialists, both political scientists and historians,

---

[30] Engels, *Die Geschichte der Korruption*, 217-251. Jens Evo Engels, "Corruption and Anticorruption in the Era of Modernity and Beyond," in Kroeze, Vitória and Geltner eds., *Anticorruption in History*, 167-180. Robert Bernsee, "Corruption in German Political Discourse between 1780 and 1820," *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Corruption and the Rise of Modern Politics (2013): 52-71. Robert Bernsee, "Patronage in Übergang. Personale Verflechtung um 1800 und die Sozietäten der Sattelzeit" in Robert Bernsee, Jens Ivo Engels, Volkhard Huth, Volker Köhler eds. *Modern Patronage. Annäherungen an die Bedeutung personaler Verflechtungen in Politik und Wirtschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Klosterman, 2020), 22-44.

[31] Philip Harling, 'Rethinking "Old Corruption"', *Past & Present* no. 147 (1995): 127–158. Harling, - *The Waning of 'Old Corruption': Thee Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1996). Harling, 'Parliament, the State, and "Old Corruption": Conceptualising Reform, c.1790– 1832', in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes eds., *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain, 1780–1850* (Cambridge, 2003), 98–113.

[32] Jan Teorell and Bo Rothstein, "Getting to Sweden, Part I: War and Malfeasance, 1720–1850", *Scandinavian Political Studies* 38, No. 3 (2015): 224-228.

[33] Toon Kerkhoff, Ronald Kroeze, Pietar Wagenaar, "Corruption and the Rise of Modern Politics in Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Comparison between France, the Netherlands, Germany and England. Introduction," *Journal of Modern European History*, 11 (2013): 19-30, Pieter Wagenaar, Toon Kerkhoff, Ronald Kroeze, "Conclusion", *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Corruption and the Rise of Modern Politics (2013): 130-133. Toon Kerkhoff, "Corruption in the Netherlands: Changing Perceptions from Early Modern Pluralism to Modern Coherence," *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Corruption and the Rise of Modern Politics (2013): 88-108. Toon Kerkhoff, "Princely patronage and Patriot Cause: Corruption and Public Value Dynamics in the Dutch Republic (1770s-1980s)," *Public Integrity*, 18/1: 25-41.

[34] Knights, *Trust and Distrust*, 20. For a concise version of his argument see his "Anticorruption in Seventeenth-and Eighteenth-Century Britain," in Kroeze, Vitória and Geltner eds., *Anticorruption in History*, 181-195.

due to its excellent score. The successful limitation of corruption is naturally predicated on employing the modern definition of the phenomenon (abuse of public office). Thus, it was important to find out when this understanding prevailed. According to Mette Frisk Jensen, the curbing of public office corruption occurred over a long period of time and was the unintended consequence of the absolute Danish monarchs to centralize and streamline their administration from 1660 to 1848. It was during this period that elements of anticorruption were successfully introduced in Denmark: rule of law, a close monitoring of the royal agents, petitions of the subjects with regard to the officials' behaviour, "a growing general notion that corruption was a severe crime and sin" and the rise of the modern understanding of corruption "that criminalized malfeasance such as bribery, fraud and embezzlement for royal servants in particular."[35]

Why did the understanding of corruption change?

This question gives rise to two others: how did that corruption become a major concern for modernizing states and how did they go about limiting it? In order to answer these questions, historians propose a mix of factors. In the absolute monarchies, the understanding of corruption as abuse of public office and the attempts to control it were the unintended outcome of reforms means to centralize and consolidate the state. This was the situation in Denmark and some German states. In the case of Denmark, following military defeat and territorial losses in the war against Sweden, the fullest form of absolute monarchy was introduced and this type of regime would last until 1849. Engaged in a competition with Sweden, the Danish kings sought to create a loyal and disciplined administrative apparatus able to efficiently mobilize the necessary resources. They passed legislation criminalizing administrative malpractice, broke the monopoly of the nobility on the state offices by recruiting members of the urban class. In time, criteria of merit were introduced and from the 18th century the office of judge, and latter a wide range of offices, required a formal law degree. All these measures, in combination with the resolve of successive kings to improve the administration of their realm, introduction of salaries and pensions, complex surveillance mechanisms, and a more developed notion of corruption "most likely contributed to a new and fairly non-corrupt Danish administration, which was securely in place around the middle of the 1800s."[36]

---

[35] Mette Frisk Jense, "Statebuilding, Establishing Rule of Law and Fighting Corruption in Denmark, 1660-1900," in Kroeze, Vitória and Geltner eds., *Anticorruption in History*, 197-198.
[36] Mette Frisk Jense, "Statebuilding, Establishing Rule of Law and Fighting Corruption in Denmark", 198-208.

Similar arguments were put forth by the researcher on corruption in Sweden. Like in the case of Denmark, the existential threat resulting from the defeat in the war against Russia (1809) prompted the Swedish elites to introduce a series of reforms. Criminalizing of malfeasance by means of legal codes, recruitment of officials on meritocratic criteria and their remuneration with salaries instead of fees, as well as a systematic conviction of dishonest officials describe "the transition from the if not systemically corrupt, at least patrimonial, personalistic and grossly ineffective state administration to the clean, Weberian and largely non corrupt state."[37] In distinction to Britain and Netherlands, the free press was absent and, thus, played no role until the middle of the 19th century.

In the Germanies, debates on corruption accompanied the processes of bureaucratisation and emergence of modern ideologies (especially liberalism and conservatorism) during the so-called *Sattelzeit* (cca. 1750-1850). By 1800, in Bayern and the Netherlands, corruption became the target of reform-minded politicians and civil society. Members of secret societies, publicists, pamphleteers and even officials criticized what they perceived as corruption, these critiques gaining weight in times of crisis of military defeat (as the defeat of Prussia in the Napoleonic Wars). Interestingly enough, corruption proved to be a double-edged weapon. It was used to demand the end of the Old Regime, but also to criticize products of the modernization process, like the bureaucracy or the secret societies.[38] In The Netherlands, the plurality of norms specific to the early-modern world gave way by the end of the 18th century to a coherent view on corruption in a context marked by the hardships and the tensions caused by the French Revolution The free press had an important role in making corruption a public matter.[39]

A wide range of factors contributed to the redefinition of corruption in England in a context marked by the emergence of the fiscal-military state and imperial expansion. A reasonably free press, scandals and popular pressure, resentment from below and retrenchment from above caused by the pressures of war financing, moral reform campaigns, a strengthening legal culture, and Enlightenment ideas of good governance helped to draw the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in office. Salaries were introduced and informal payment was either discontinued or minimized, gifts were strictly circumscribed and accountability mechanisms became more robust. In consequence, by 1850, the office came to be regarded as public trust carrying expectations of probity, impartiality, selflessness and accountability.[40]

---

[37] Torell and Rothstein, "Getting to Sweden, Part I": 222.
[38] Bernsee, "Corruption in German Political Discourse".
[39] Kerkhoff, "Corruption in the Netherlands".
[40] Knights, Trust and Distrust.

Thus, most explanations of the change in the meaning of corruption revolve around socio-economic pressures, changes in the legal culture and higher expectations with regard to the morality of the officials. A quite distinctive approach focuses on the invention or construction of corruption as part of the modern thought. Peter Bratsis argues that in the modern understanding of corruption, in contrast to the traditional one, "there is no division based on something that is in itself good and desirable and something that is not." Instead, "a strict division of the public and private is asserted and various phenomena that may conflict with that presumed division are termed corruption." The ordering of the social world according to a sharp separation of the public and the private sectors is specific to the modern thought and to the bourgeois society. The "public" here is derived from the notion of body politic, as distinct from the physical and private body of the king, as discussed by Ernst Kantorowicz.[41] How do private interests come to be regarded as bad since they are not bad in themselves? Here, Bratsis resorts to the theory of purity and cleanliness enunciated by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, who argued that objects or behaviours are unclean if they "confuse cherished classifications."[42] Thus, the contamination of the public by private interests render the latter dirty and thus corrupt.

Along the same lines, Jens Ivo Engels argued that corruption was constructed as a result of "important epistemological shifts."[43] Two innovations characterized this process: the sharpening of the public/private division and the simplification of the normative systems in the sense that the parallelism of norms was replaced by the common good as sole legitimation of the public office. Both innovations were informed, according to Jens Ivo Engels, not by attempts to solve objective problems, but rather by a fight against ambivalence, a mark of the modern thought obsessed with establishing clear-cut categories and classifications.[44] In spite of Jens Ivo Engels, his explanation of the rise of the modern concept of corruption is complementary, rather than outright opposed to the explanations that emphasize the role of objective factors. It is hard to accept that such a momentous transformation originated only in the realm of ideas. Even more so, if one were to think that strict definitions of corruption, of public office and common good as well as attempts to control the office-centred corruption were triggered to concrete tensions and crises that is by conscious policies.

---

[41] Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Political Theology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1957]).
[42] Quoted in Bratsis, 15.
[43] Engels, "Corruption and Anticorruption", 176.
[44] Engels, "Corruption and Anticorruption", 173-177.

Conclusion

Preoccupations with corruption and anticorruption are omnipresent notions in the contemporary society. Political scientists and economists have taken up the issue long ago in their effort to understand political and economic development and offer advice to governors. More recently, in the context of anticorruption strategies, some scholars proposed to study the history of those countries that score well in the corruption indexes and are considered the least corrupt. However, the historical work of the social scientists was met with criticism by historians. The latter reproach social scientists a teleological view of history as a march from systemic corruption to a situation in which corruption is only accidental, an essentialist definition of corruption and a much too confident interpretation of ambiguous data.

Historians are latecomers to the field of corruption studies. They have never attempted to inform political strategies to curb corruption, but pretend that the historical study of corruption facilitates a better understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, and this is their most important contribution to the discussion about corruption, they favour a constructivist understanding of the phenomenon. In their view, corruption is not a universal category but one that needs to be studied in context. Thus, historians have mostly focused on three questions. What is corruption and what did corruption mean in various historical configurations? When did the modern understanding of corruption arise? What factors triggered the transformation of corruption?

Historians have noted that, although all societies have a notion of administrative malpractice, this was not understood as corruption all the time and did not entail the same consequences irrespective of the context. Due to the so-called plurality or parallelism of norms (*Normenpluralität*, *Normenkonkurrenz*), blurred division between the public and private sectors and proprietary officeholding, the early-modern society could, to a significant extent, accommodate activities and behaviours that today look illicit: patronage, gifts to officials, exploitation of the office for private income, etc. without necessarily regarding them as corrupt. Things changed in the period of transition from the early-modernity to modernity. Various periodizations were proposed: a long early-modernity running from 1600 to 1850, the 18th century, a long 19th century running from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries or the so-called Sattelzeit in the German historiography covering approximately the period between mid-18th to the mid-19th century. What all these periodizations have in common is the pivotal role of the

decades immediately prior to and after 1800. By the end of the transition, corruption most often came to signify a subversion of the public office or of common good for private gain.

Why did the modern understanding of corruption arise? Here, both social scientists and historians posit several concrete factors: political crises, wars (or preparations for war) and the necessity to finance them, a change in legal culture, campaigns of moral reform, free press. Other scholars argued that the concern with corruption was not so much a response to immediate problems, but rather the result of epistemological shifts. The modern notion of corruption, based as it is on a clear division of public and private, was the result of the fight against ambiguity and of the modern obsession with ordering the social world in clear categories.