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BOOK REVIEW

Taking the Politics of Corruption and Anti-Corruption Seriously*

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(PICCI, Lucio. *Rethinking Corruption*: Reasons Behind the Failure of Anti-Corruption Efforts. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024)

A recent wave of publications in the field of corruption studies cannot help but take the politics that is deeply embedded into the topic seriously. After the 1990s and 2000s witnessed the rise of a largely economics-inspired anti-corruption industry that influenced from public policy to academic research, now, as many of the remedies of that industry failed to work as imagined, it is about time to take stock. Lucio Picci's (2024) 'Rethinking Corruption' is an essential contribution to this growing 'post-consensual' view of corruption that adds to recent volumes that such authors as Johnston and Fritzen (2020), Rothstein (2021), Morris (2022) and Mungiu-Pippidi (2023), to mention a few, published. In addition to contributing to this vivid contemporary debate, this is possibly one of the most insightful and honest books on the topic to come out in years. It addresses not only problems in many of our current approaches to corruption and anti-corruption, but also lays groundwork for new research and, hopefully, better informed policy prescriptions.

The book has several merits. It is based on years of the author's own research experience as a trained economist who has worked precisely within the confines of the once prevailing view on corruption. As such, it provides a knowledgeable 'insider view' from the field, reflecting on several assumptions, concepts, metrics and hence conclusions widely and oftentimes uncritically shared across the corruption scholarship and the anti-corruption industry. The first part of the book presents a precious discussion

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about several shortcomings of this largely economics-inspired literature, which, on the one hand, conceives corruption as a discrete choice that rational self-interested individuals make and designs incentives to tackle it (e.g., KLITGAARD, 1988; ROSE-ACKERMAN et al., 1999), while, on the other, advances and bases its analyses on country-year indicators of corruption levels that such organizations as Transparency International and the World Bank (e.g. KAUFMAN, 1997; TREISMAN, 2000) produce. Picci's analysis (2024) showcases several limits of these approaches, including how this narrow conception of corruption fails to capture elements that should be central to it (e.g., inequality, power relations); how the emphasis on generic country-year indicators has led to relatively little knowledge about the actual processes of corruption on the ground; how the same indicators are poor at identifying many of the things that reformers care most, such as changes in the incidence of corruption over time and critical historical junctures; how the solutions advanced by most industry are often too simplistic to such a complex and variegated problem; and so on.

But more than a well-informed critique to some of the prevailing approaches in the field, the book also steps into new terrain in the hopes that a new paradigm in corruption studies is simultaneously more nuanced and academically rigorous than the previous one, particularly as far as its political pitfalls are concerned. Much of this derives from three in-depth case studies of the roles that corruption and anti-corruption play in Brazil, Russia and the United States, each deserving its own chapter in the second part of the book. The case selection is itself meritorious, since the author does not shy away from examining large, populous, politically complex and geopolitically relevant countries – an approach that contrasts with many analyses of small nations (e.g., Hong Kong, Singapore) that often inspire some of the 'best practices' that the anti-corruption literature (e.g., MANION, 2004; QUAH, 2001) advances. In addition, the cases illustrate well three different types of corruption syndromes that Johnston (2005) proposed in an influential book on the topic ('influence markets' in the United States, 'elite cartels' in Brazil, and 'oligarchs and clans' in Russia), pointing to the contrasting functions corruption and anti-corruption serve in different contexts. For instance, the threat of punishment by the criminal justice system induces political elites to remain cohesive under the helm of a strong executive in both Brazil and Russia, but for different reasons. Whereas in the former presidents can provide protection to political elites from a relatively insulated court system by appointing lenient prosecutors general, in the latter

presidents can use the same appointment as a way to weaponize justice to go after opponents or defectors. In turn, the author's analysis of legal corruption in the United States is a necessary step towards analyzing a largely underexamined topic in the literature that is filled with miscomprehensions about corruption in several developed nations, often disguised under supposedly cleaner labels, such as 'regulatory capture' (see NOVAK 2013).

The contributions above render the book a fundamental reading for those willing to rethink both corruption and anti-corruption in light of recent events and research developments. At the same time, there are two major interrelated contributions made clearer in the third part of the book that deserve to be discussed at greater length, given their implications for how we think about corruption and anti-corruption more broadly. I discuss them in a bit of detail below, and point to the implications afterwards.

The first major contribution is consistent with most current literature on the topic and highlights the need to look at context in order to understand not only what works to fight corruption, but firstly how corruption itself works and which roles it plays politically. Whoever is minimally familiarized with the descriptions of various corrupt practices knows that under the general notion of 'abuse of entrusted power for private gain' falls a plethora of activities whose political significance are quite distinct. Corruption may be as simple as a single civil servant cashing in money from public coffers, but it may also be as complex as a network of actors and organizations that launder money via offshore accounts to bribe high-ranking officials through shell companies; it may or may not involve off-the-books campaign contributions; it may or may not involve explicit connections with violent organized crime; it may or may not be a means to other ends, such as facilitating drug trafficking or tax evasion; and so on. At the same time, especially at the highest levels of government, corruption is rarely a discrete, clearly identifiable choice, but more fundamentally 'a way things work'. That is, political and business actors may not necessarily choose to become corrupt at some specific and well-defined point in time, but may actually have become successful politicians and businessman in the first place precisely by engaging in various different corrupt and borderline corrupt practices over time. The notion, derived especially from the analysis of the Brazilian case, that corruption may work as a 'bond of trust' that induces political elites to coalesce suggests precisely that. As a result, embracing this complexity and inevitable interconnectedness with powerful political actors in most contexts should be a

fundamental first step towards better understanding why corruption happens at all, as well as the consequences of attempting to disrupt different forms of corrupt equilibria.

The second major contribution is consistent with the general tone of the book of speaking openly about fundamental issues that are often hidden under layers of intricate academic language, and consists of stressing that corruption is a tool of government. This is a bold, straightforward and necessary statement that every academic who studies corruption for a living should take seriously. This does not reduce politics to corruption, of course, nor does it say that politics is only possible if corrupt. It simply reminds us, albeit unfortunately, that corruption is one tool that governments often have at their disposal – i.e., one tool among others – to induce collective action in many of the various settings where they perform their jobs: in parliaments to attract coalition partners and hence generate legislative majorities; in the bureaucracy to cut red tape; in different economic sectors to induce investment; in civil society to foster or dampen engagement; in international relations to forge alliances; to mention only a few. Precisely because corruption may work as a selective incentive that helps to generate collective action, to recall a key lesson by Olson (1965), it is not uncommon for governments to resort to it.

However, as Picci points out, if "long-term changes require the development of tools of government other than corruption" (PICCI, 2024, p. 14), then a few important implications follow. Among them, one is the notion that successful anti-corruption reform demands thinking more clearly about the replacements or substitutes of corruption, and possibly not as much about simply reducing or eliminating it. This, I believe, is one fundamental lesson from the book that will need to be explored at greater length in the years to come – i.e., what are the viable alternatives to corruption as a tool of government in different contexts, how to replace corruption with improved options rather than just assume that some desired opposite (call it 'honesty' for simplicity) will necessarily take its place, what circumstances or conditions foster replacements that do improve on the existing conditions instead of worsen them etc. I believe that this implication has the potential to set almost a new research agenda on the replacements or substitutes of corruption, including not only improved alternatives to corruption, but also, and sadly, alternatives that may be worse than an initial corrupt status quo. What are, in other words, other tools of government that can take the place of corruption? A brief exercise provides a few answers to this question that may be less than optimal from the reformers' perspective.

The first answer, in fact, is sheer violence. If corruption is used in a widespread manner as a tool of government, then fighting it may disrupt not only corruption proper, but government itself. That is, if the costs of using corruption as a tool of government are severely raised due to various anti-corruption efforts, the need for "governments that can govern" (HUNTINGTON, 1968, p. 08) will not simply disappear. Under these circumstances, as corruption recedes, resorting to strong political leadership may be one of the few options available to render governments effective. Unsurprisingly, anti-corruption surges seem to have favored the rise of populist and potentially authoritarian leaders in several countries, including – but not limited to – Brazil.

A second feasible answer is other forms of corruption. If many forms of corruption coexist within a single polity and considering that anti-corruption reformers are not omniscient, then 'fighting corruption' actually involves fighting one form of corruption and not necessarily others. As a consequence, imposing costs on political actors who benefit from one form of corruption may open the door for other actors who may benefit from other corrupt schemes that reformers have not necessarily targeted. So, for instance, curbing corruption at the central government may pave the way for more corruption in local administrations, just like fighting grand corruption may lead to more petty corruption, or attempts at controlling corruption that bears no relationship with violent organized crime may be an opportunity for the latter to take the former's place. All such replacements are possible depending on the context and it is not easy to know in advance which are necessarily more or less corrupt – or even democratic. That is why the book stresses, more generally, that anti-corruption is a tool of politics, in the sense it affects political competition by imposing costs on some actors, but not necessarily others, who may benefit from it while their adversaries fall prey even to well-intentioned anti-corruption efforts.

Along these lines, another possible answer is legal corruption. In fact, most developed nations may not necessarily be less corrupt as much as they may have evolved over time towards regulating several corrupt practices once considered illegal (ANG, 2020). Maybe legal corruption is just what looks like the 'honesty' that most reformers have in mind: an institutionalized party system where legalized lobbying and private campaign contributions get the job done. That is, as political parties cartelize political competition, they may end up helping companies to do the same – so, instead of bribes,

the latter work through legal channels such as lobbying and campaign contributions to change regulations which may benefit an entire industry, and not just a single business.

Of course, these are not the only possible alternatives to corruption. Ideology, trust in impersonal norms, diffuse legitimacy, persuasion, and other purportedly improved alternatives may also work as tools of government instead of corruption. At the same time, such alternatives may not be equally or immediately available in all countries. More than just assume that they are, these are also questions open to empirical investigation that should be explored at greater length in future research. Also, we know little about possible trajectories involving different forms of corruption and their potential replacements – be them a more honest democratic politics or not.

'Rethinking Corruption' (2024) correctly opens and closes the doors to various topics. At the same time, it leaves us wondering about others. One of them is the relative lack of discussion on the distinction between high-level (grand, political) and low-level (petty, street-level) corruption. Especially considering the argument developed in the book about the politics of corruption and anti-corruption, this is possibly an important distinction to bring to bear because remedies that may work at one level (say, enforcing legal sanctions) may not work so well at another. The key difference, of course, is one of power: punishing street-level bureaucrats may work because they have few tools to credibly evade or fight back those who enforce the rules, so the threat of punishment may induce them not to be corrupt; punishing politicians and businessmen, however, is a different story, since the enforcement costs are much steeper (DA ROS and GEHRKE 2024).

Also, and inevitably, there is the question about what to do with the problem that corruption effectively is. On the one hand, the author is skeptical about making it a political priority: "Perhaps, then, anti-corruption should be avoided as a political platform" (PICCI, 2024, p. 11). On the other, and consistent with his argument about the need to replace corruption with better options rather just than push to eradicate it, he suggests the possibility of introducing "new institutions and ways of governance" (PICCI, 2024, p. 126). In some ways, this echoes current debates in the field on the effectiveness of direct vs. indirect approaches to anti-corruption (e.g., CUÈLLAR and STEPHENSON, 2022; ROTHSTEIN, 2018). Both of them bear well-known risks: direct approaches may incite frontal responses that may render them counterproductive, whereas indirect approaches are often vague and may take too long to bear fruit – if at all.

Missing in the author's discussion is a possible third 'mixed' option, which consists of anchoring policies that have beneficial anti-corruption effects in other political agendas (e.g., improving transparency through reforms that allegedly aim to enhance fiscal responsibility, or empowering anti-money laundering institutions as a way to fight both organized crime and corruption). This may help to build support for anti-corruption measures so that they may gain increased institutionalization over time, resisting backlashes while simultaneously increasing the costs of corruption itself at present (DA ROS and TAYLOR, 2022).

The observations above are minor and serve mostly to improve on what is already an impressive book. One could say that some of the main contributions of 'Rethinking Corruption' (2024) lie more at identifying problems within current approaches, rather than at proposing solutions. Yet, given the inconsistent results of many of the current proposed solutions, Lucio Picci's (2024) careful analysis is an essential building block for new promising research on the topic.

Revised by Rodrigo Sardenberg

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