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**Corruption, Anti-corruption, Un-corruption**

In social anthropology we learn that all categories are relational. There is no ‘us’ without a ‘them’, no nature without culture, no working class without a capitalist class, no local without a cosmopolitan, no theory without practice. What, then, is a relational definition of the phenomenon we call corruption? To what antipode is corruption related? This question is not purely academic, as corruption is generally considered to be a negative phenomenon. Corruption is something that should be reduced, combated, or eliminated. So what is the positive valence for corruption? If corruption is bad, what exactly is good? For a number of years, I have been studying those who fight corruption, the ‘integrity warriors’. I have done this largely through the prism of NGOs such as Transparency International, but also observing how governments and international organizations approach ‘the corruption problem’ (Sampson 2005-2016). Aside from institutional organized struggle against corruption, there are also popular protests against corruption, especially in countries where people feel compelled to pay bribes; some of these protests evolve into social movements and political parties. In addition, we also have everyday accusations of corruption between politicians, combined with a constant stream of news media exposes of scandals in government, business and public organizations; the most recent example being Brazil. Corruption is thus all around us, like an ether.

These popular outcries against corruption are often overshadowed by an anti-corruption policy priority within governments, among international organizations and even in private business. What I call an ‘anti-corruption industry’ (Sampson 2010a, 2010b) contains its own ideologies, experts, measurement specialists, its own set of sophisticated technologies, standards, budget lines and tools. There are annual international anti-corruption conventions (with about 1500 attendees), and dozens of national anti-corruption laws and anti-bribery regulations. There are national anti-corruption agencies and anti-corruption campaigns even in some of the world’s most authoritarian states. With grants from anti-corruption budget lines, anti-corruption NGOs conduct anti-corruption ‘awareness raising’ campaigns, carry out anti-corruption training for public officials, collect anti-corruption statistics for donors, and put together anti-corruption ‘toolkits’ for activists. There is now even an ISO standard for anti-corruption (ISO Standard 37001) developed ‘to help large, medium and small organizations from the public and private sectors, and from any country, prevent bribery and promote an ethical business culture.[[1]](#endnote-1) Within the private sector, who are the bribe-givers, there are several initiatives for business to fight corruption, such as the UN Global Compact’s ‘Tenth Principle’, and the International Chamber of Commerce’s *Fighting Corruption: A Corporate Practices Manual.* In almost all major international firms, there are ‘ethics and compliance officers’ who conduct anti-bribery training, while prohibitions on corruption are integral parts of most firms’ mission statements and their ‘codes of conduct’ (Sampson 2016).

Most prominent among the ‘civil society’ sector is the global NGO Transparency International (TI), with a staff of about 80 in Berlin and 90 national affiliate organizations. TI maintains close relations with its partners in the World Bank and the EU, and with its other donors, most of whom are governmental aid agencies in Europe, the US and Canada, as well as some private foundations. TI is known especially for its Corruption Perceptions Index which is a ‘naming and shaming’ instrument showing the most and least corrupt countries in the world.

Finally, at the international top of this pyramid, alongside various regional conventions (OECD, Africa, etc.) lies the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). Like other UN Conventions, UNCAC is celebrated as a victory for the international community to make the world a better place. Hence, December 9th is International Anti-corruption Day, with various anti-corruption events around the world. With so much government, international, NGO and private sector activity, we obtain a picture of what the ‘anti-corruption industry’ looks like.

This anti-corruption industrial complex, or what other anthropologists might call an ‘assemblage’ (Ong and Collier 2005), we have the conglomerate of persons, organizations, networks, laws and technologies that can define the object against which it is fighting and how to fight it most effectively. This discourse I call ‘anti-corruptionism’. The question I would like to pose here is simple: what does anti-corruptionism have to do with corruption? Or more precisely, can we use anti-corruption as a portal for a more precise understanding of the set of phenomena we call corruption? I think we can. Further, I will argue that we can use anti-corruptionism to understand the absence of corruption, what I will call ‘un-corruption’.

**What does it mean to fight corruption?**

Anti-corruptionism is the ideology that fights corruption. But this ideology rests on an assumption that corruption fighters all know what they are fighting against. It implies a definition of corruption which is reasonably unambiguous, if not pragmatic. What if corruption is not so unambiguous? What if it is an empty vessel in which various actors can channel their world views into an object? In fact, this is what has happened in the history of definitions of corruption. And it is some of these definitions that I will run through here.

Buchan and Hill, in their book *An Intellectual History of Political Corruption* (2014) have described the historical oscillation between two main understandings of corruption. One definition is an older, classical definition highlighting the corruption of society; corruption here is a moral degeneracy, a prelude to collapse. This older understanding should be contrasted with a more recent definition that emerges with the rise of a public administrative class, in which corruption is limited to the violation of the public interest by bureaucrats. Viewed in this framework, corruption is an aberration that can be ‘fixed’ with the right tools.

The early, classical definition is now used more polemically to describe a general crisis in society. The second definition, in various forms, is more common. Hence, in Nye’s (1967) oft-used definition of corruption, he spoke of corruption that happens when ‘private-regarding’ criteria are used by bureaucrats to appropriate resources. For Nye, corruption is a violation of the public trust committed by officials. These private-regarding criteria tend to be social linkages (nepotism, political favoritism, clientelism) or market linkages (bribery). This understanding of corruption as related to unethical officials led to a widely used definition employed by aid agencies, the World Bank and earlier on by the NGO Transparency International: ‘corruption is the abuse of public power for private benefit’.[[2]](#endnote-2) The focus here was on corrupt officials in the public sector.

In the past decade, this definition was subsequently expanded by anti-corruption activists to ‘the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.[[3]](#endnote-3) The ‘entrusted power’ revision, coming after the Enron scandal, was intended to show that corruption was not limited to public authorities; it could also occur in the board room of a corporation or inside an NGO. Corruption here is the abuse of any kind of trust placed in anyone by any group. Corruption is thus conceived as a broad abuse of power, a misuse of resources over which one has been entrusted. Nevertheless, almost all anti-corruption programs continue to focus on abuse by public officials.[[4]](#endnote-4) The main development here is that corruption has givers and takers of bribes or other forms of influence.

As any researcher knows, in order to understand a phenomenon, it needs to be demarcated and preferably measured. How do we identify corruption? How do we assess its significance? Can corruption be measured? There are books, studies and articles showing measurements of corrupt behavior, or the potential for corrupt behavior (notably Sampford et al. 2006). Some of these measurement surveys attempt to map bribe-giving in corruption-vulnerable sectors, such as healthcare, education, or customs import. Other measurements are more qualitative descriptions of administrative processes. Customs import, for example, can be slower or faster in various countries, imposing such delays that so-called ‘speed payments’ or more euphemistically ‘facilitation payments’, will be required. Comparing such bureaucratic procedures, we can compare the ‘level of corruption’ in different countries or across sectors of public administration such as health, education or customs import. Typical data here involves calculating the number of forms that need to be filled out to bring a container of freight through the customs service, which is a measure of bureaucratic complexity; or survey questions such as, ‘Have you given a cash bribe to a doctor or nurse during the past year?’ which presumably gives an indication of the frequency of bribery.

But what if the definition of a concept remains unclear, or unbounded? Any comparison of levels or degrees of corruption, not to mention an assessment of whether corruption is increasing or declining, would remain vague or misleading if the concept was ill-defined. For example, practices such as embezzlement or fraud are illegal and immoral, but they not necessarily what people would associate with corruption. Nevertheless, they are often included in definitions of corruption. Like any social science concept, the label ‘’, and accusing others of corruption, can be used, or to use the current American term ‘deployed’ for strategic reasons. Let me give some examples of how the term corruption is deployed.

**Some examples of corruption**

*Example 1. A corruption ‘index’*. Many comparisons of corruption are country based. This is typical of the Corruption Perceptions Index, published by Transparency International, which ranks countries based on their level of corruption. This level combines perceptions by foreign businessmen, by local experts and by other surveys (often using the same sources). In these surveys, the Nordic countries, Canada and Australia are ranked the least corrupt, and various war-torn, fragile states – Afghanistan, Somalia, Kosovo, Guinea – are at the very bottom of the list But exactly what do we mean when we say that *one country* is more corrupt than another? (Ostensibly uncorrupt Iceland, whose bank system collapsed and whose prime minister ended up in the Panama Papers, provides a vivid example). I leave it to other anthropologists to decipher this kind of discourse where entire countries are called more or less ‘corrupt’.

*Example 2. Corruption prosecutions*. National anti-corruption agencies routinely report their progress in ‘fighting corruption’ based on the number of cases they have brought to trial, the number of convictions obtained, and especially the number of top politicians or officials convicted. Having worked many years in Romania as an anthropologist and later as consultant, I have followed Romania’s progress in developing its own anti-corruption industry. Romania’s entry into the EU, first delayed and finally permitted in 2007, was contingent partly on conducting a successful fight against corruption. To this end, the EU helped establish and finance Romania’s national anti-corruption agency, now called the DNA. The DNA has existed for 12 years, and under former governments was often blocked and sabotaged in its work of prosecuting corruption. The EU supported and financed the DNA before entry, and it now monitors Romania’s anti-corruption progress in annual reports. Today, under (yet another) reform government, the DNA has become more powerful. In 2014, it brought to trial 1167 leading public figures and convicted 1138 of them, including top politicians, businessmen, judges, prosecutors, a former prime minister, and now, even the current prime minister.[[5]](#endnote-5) Most of these accusations concern nepotism in public contracts or diverting EU funds into politicians’ private businesses or personal accounts. What was called a ‘transparty mafia’ has been operating for two decades, bringing together politicians, officials, judges and businesspeople from all sides of the political spectrum. The discourse here is ‘the fight against corruption’, and according to journalistic accounts and the EU, Romania is starting to ‘win the fight against corruption’. Yet we do not know exactly why this is the case. Is it because of a social movement that presses the regime to take corruption seriously? Is it because the corruption fighters in the DNA have some unique special character? That finally ‘the good guys’ have taken power? What exactly has changed in Romanian society such that ‘fighting corruption’ is now taken seriously? Why this rather sudden change?

*Example 3. “Do the right thing.”* In the world of business ethics, private companies have developed codes of conduct for their employees. Most of these codes explicitly forbid the use of bribes, often called ‘facilitation payments’, to obtain contracts. Typically, foreign companies seeking to business abroad give such payments to middlemen or directly to government officials in to obtain a contract (to build an airport for example) or make a sale to a public authority (e.g., hospital equipment to a Chinese municipality). I am now doing fieldwork with ethics and compliance officers in private companies. Then I listen to them talk about this practice of ‘facilitation payments’, they explain that the company code of conduct will help employees understand ‘company culture’, and that in this way they can achieve a ‘culture of compliance’ throughout the organization. They insist that instances of bribery and corruption among employees are not due to the employees’ moral character. It is not because the sales staff or agents are ‘bad people’. Rather, it is a case of ‘good people doing bad things’, or that the employees ‘didn’t understand the limits’. In this discourse, corruption and bribery are the result of people acting in a ‘grey zone’, they are unfortunate illnesses that strike people, a kind of influenza. And the code of conduct is a kind of vaccine. The problem for these company ethics officers is to get the employees to take the code of conduct seriously, to get them ‘on board’ (which has led to the neologism ‘onboarding’). Anti-corruption here is thus a *pedagogical project*, explaining to employees that practices they once thought were acceptable, even practical – taking officials on trips, paying them a facilitation payment, giving or accepting gifts from them – is in fact a violation of company ethics. Sales personnel now need to take the code seriously. Ethics and compliance, anti-corruption behavior, is a matter for the entire company. Ethics is not just ‘the right thing to do’, it is also ultimately a way for the firm to save money and protect its reputation in cases of scandal. Otherwise, the firm could end up in court, accused of violating corruption laws, or its reputation destroyed in social media. Nevertheless, there is a dilemma here: sales personnel are ultimately paid by the amount that they sell. Fewer sales make for lower commissions and less profits. The lament of the sales people is that ‘everyone else is doing it’. It is the ethics officer’s job to convince the sales people that another strategy is possible, and to get support from management, called ‘tone at the top’, so that capitalist firms can be seen to be acting on principles rather than profit. Here anti-corruption is pedagogical, a way to stop ‘good people from doing bad things’.

*Example 4. Nordic-style transparency*. The two countries where I have lived (Denmark) and worked (Sweden) are known for being almost corruption free. One rarely hears of payments to public officials to obtain services. There is no cash given to police, doctors, teachers, or customs officials to speed up a bureaucratic process or obtain better service. However, there are various processes that take place that we might call corruption according to the definitions frequently used. One of them is called the ‘tailor-made position’. According to law in these countries, all public sector positions, even many temporary or short-term positions, must be advertised. The application process is transparent, and in Sweden one has access to all documents, even judgments by committees. So if a public institution wants to hire someone whom they already know, especially someone already working there in a temporary position, they can describe the open position using such particular specialties that the qualifications can be fulfilled only by that particular applicant. This is often the same person who knew about the position even before it was formally advertised. Moreover, the legal requirement to advertise the position publicly can fulfilled by placing it in a single magazine or newspaper, ensuring that it is only in Danish or Swedish, and with a short deadline of a few weeks. Hence, those who are not reading the magazine, or outside the country, or outside the immediate network, may not even see the advertisement. As a result, the number of applicants is reduced, and the time-consuming assessment of applicants, with all its formalistic, transparent criteria, can select precisely that individual whom the institution desired in the first place. Technically speaking, there is no corruption or violation of procedure. There is transparency. There is no nepotism, and certainly no bribery. Rather the selection of the ‘most qualified candidate’ is influenced by the formulation of the advertisement text and its limited dissemination. Everything appears to be ‘transparent’. In Scandinavia this is called ‘the tailor-made position’ (or ‘customized position’).. I am not sure whether this is even corruption in any conventional definition. We might just call it clientelism. But certainly, it is a violation of the ethics of public administration. In any case, most people in public employment, including the academic sector, know that it exists. Most people reading this article are familiar with this practice, and I would venture to say that most of us have either been victims or beneficiaries of it in some form. In any event, in Scandinavia the word ‘corruption’ is never used, only ‘tailor made position’.

*Example 5. Nordic nepotism I*. In a gymnasium (lyceé) in the southern Sweden town of Malmö, the local newspaper discovered that the gymnasium directors had hired several of their own older/adult children as substitute teachers-assistants’.[[6]](#endnote-6) The newspaper noted that there is nothing in the municipality’s personnel policy that prohibits hiring one’s family members, but they nevertheless asked the director directly about this practice. The director replied, ’I am not the one who hired her, it was the librarian’. The reporter replied, ‘But it is your name on the hiring contract’. The director: ‘We have changed the routines since that contract was written.’ Reporter: ‘Do you think that your subordinates would have felt pleasant about rejecting the boss’s child for a job?’ Director: ‘There are several of our staff who have children working at the school. And we have the need for many hourly substitute teachers, we take in at least one substitute for day,’

*Example 6. Nordic nepotism II*. Let me give another example of Nordic networking from that strange land called Academia. At Gothenburg University, in October 2013, the head of the Biomedical Institute, AO, married a fellow researcher at his institute.[[7]](#endnote-7) The researcher had been working there for several years, but in a temporary position, and they married while attending an academic conference in San Francisco. Two months later, AO now hired his wife in a permanent position, along with awarding her a 12% salary increase. An internal revision also noted that the couple had attended international conferences in several places that ‘have a certain tourist appeal’, but could not conclude ‘the extent to which the trips had any connection to the university’s activity’. AO was asked by a journalist about working with his wife, commented that there are many married couples working together at the university, and had no more to say. He admits that he ‘moved too fast’. AO remains director, and his wife also has the same position and salary.

*Example 7. Nordic nepotism III*. Again at Gothenburg University, a dean in the university, one MH, was compelled to retire after turning 67, which is stipulated by Swedish labour law.[[8]](#endnote-8) Immediately afterward, however, MH was hired as Senior Professor at the Institute for Philosophy by the institute head, one CTT (“Senior Professor”, a new position in the Swedish university system, is a position reserved for retired professors who are rehired for special purposes, such as teaching duties or advising doctoral students). CTT had recommended to the university rector that MH be hired. But CTT had herself been appointed a few months earlier by none other than the former dean MH, for which she received a 3000 SEK salary increase. With the formerly retired MH now a Senior Professor in the Philosophy Institute, she could now continue as dean of the Humanistic Faculty. How did this happen? The university’s administrative chief, CN, explained to a journalist that ‘generally speaking it is naturally not OK to hire your own boss’, but in this case ‘it was a practical solution.’ The ‘practical solution’, rehiring a dean who should have gone off quietly, was soon criticized on Facebook by others at the university. The Facebook discussion led CTT to send an email to another head of department to find out who put up the Facebook discussion and to take it down. Unfortunately, CTTs e-mail was also exposed, leading to embarrassment for CTT, and a polemic about CTT attacking freedom of expression inside the university.[[9]](#endnote-9) Gothenburg University’s rector, who approves hiring of all professors and deans, has remained silent. She has asked for a full report on the case.

Now the word ‘corruption’, or ‘nepotism’, never appears in these kinds of discussions. In a Scandinavian context, corruption is something that happens far away, in poor countries with aid money. In Scandinavia there may be ‘scandal’ or ‘sloppy administration’, but the word ‘corruption’ is never heard. At best, it is what we might call ‘potential conflict of interest’ (Swed. *jäv*, with emphasis on the potential for conflict). Clearly what happens in Gothenburg University is something that social scientists can identify in many environments with small towns and intimate networks connected by family, locality, ethnicity, political party or in this case workplace. We could call this patronage, clientelism, nepotism, or we could the more positive term: ‘networking’. Denmark and Sweden have no anti-corruption commissions as in so many ‘countries of transition’ or countries receiving World Bank loans. There are no government anti-corruption programs, no anti-corruption budget lines, no vicious accusations among politicians that they are corrupt. This is largely because the Scandinavian definition of corruption is connected to cash bribes to officials or bureaucrats, but not to ‘tailor made position’, or the granting of access to jobs or services to kin, friends or close colleagues, or to other such ‘practical solutions’.

**Conclusion: from anti-corruption to un-corruption**

In aid jargon, it is customary to discuss failed aid projects by using the phrase ‘lessons learned’. What are the ‘lessons learned’ about the nature of corruption from the above examples of corruption indexes, corruption fighting, business ethics, and Nordic nepotism. The major lesson is that corruption, like all social science concepts, needs to be understood in a relational context. Whether it is corruption as practice or corruption as rhetoric, it needs to be placed on some kind of scale or continuum of what *it is not.* What is the opposite, then, of corruption? It is not *anti-*corruption, which is the practice of anti-corruptionism. It is, rather, *un-corruption,* the absence of corruption. Such un-corruption would presumably mean some kind of perfect administration, transparent practices, and total hierarchical bureaucracy in the positive (Weberian) sense. A world of uncorruption, or to use the more sloganeering phrase ‘a world free of corruption’[[10]](#endnote-10), would be a strange world indeed. In this world, any kind of corruption would be the penetration of social relations – networks, patronage, schemes of various kinds -- into the spheres of abstract law or formal administration. Corruption would be those practices we now call ‘culture’.

If uncorruption is the absence of culture, is ‘anti-corruption’, fighting against corruption, the same as ‘anti-culture’? Is winning the battle against corruption the same as eliminating all forms of social relations, human agency and social power from social life and replacing it with mechanical processes?[[11]](#endnote-11) What would uncorruption, ‘a world free of corruption’, look like empirically? There are two possibilities. One is a society where there is only a public sphere, a society that is mechanical and bureaucratic. We call these societies ‘totalitarian’. Efforts have been made to create uncorrupt societies of this type, but they have never succeeded. Neither Stalin’s Russia nor the worst type of prison was totalitarian in this way. There were always informal networks, subversive activities and private projects. The second possibility is where there is no public sphere at all, and hence, no possibility of corruption. Societies without public spheres exist. We call them ‘tribes’ or communities, where everyone has some kind of kinship or social bond to everyone else. Tribes are societies of gifts and exchange that we know from classical anthropology. The world of tribes and utopic communities is a world of total social relations. It is a world free of corruption. It is uncorrupt.

In today’s bureaucratic, marketized world, it is precisely these social relations which facilitate corrupt exchanges. Our world has legitimate gifts, but it also ‘suspicious gifts’ (Åkerström 2014). In our contemporary society, social relations are potential breeding grounds for these suspicious gifts, for nepotism, bribery and patronage. Those who would pursue an un-corrupt society, a society ‘free of corruption’, would give us guidelines to prevent the ubiquitous ‘conflicts of interest’, assistance in identifying those notorious grey zones that are the stuff of social life (and of anthropology). We do not yet live in a world of un-corruption. We live in a world of anti-corruption. Anti-corruption is a project of continuing illumination: more disclosure, more openness, more accountability and more responsibility. Anti-corruption is the manifestation of ‘audit culture’ (Strathern 2006). Pursuing transparency, disclosure and accountability is the method which anti-corruptionists use to root out the elites and powerholders who hide resources or breach their administrative mandate. Anti-corruptionism thus seems to have a ‘progressive’ colour to it. But the pursuit of transparency and disclosure is also an attack on the substance of social life: how people deal with the uncertainties and insecurities of their lives. It is an attack on cultural practices, the kind we anthropologists study when we do ethnography. These social relations and cultural practices are manifested by the powerful and the powerless in different ways. But no matter who is doing what, it is these kinds of practices that are the object of anti-corruptionism. Eliminating them completely would yield the un-corrupt society. And this is perhaps why even the most authoritarian states have anti-corruption campaigns.

To study corruption, and to define corruption, we need to know what it is that is being corrupted. Perhaps corruption is not the phenomenon that must be measured, assessed, prevented and combatted. Perhaps corruption is something else. Perhaps corruption is just another word for culture. If this is true, we must rethink what corruption, anti-corruption and uncorruption really entail.

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2. <http://www.eldis.org/go/home&id=11164&type=Document#.VoJYWlI9ZSh> and V. Tanzi (1998), p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.transparency.org/whoweare/organisation/faqs\_on\_corruption. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example: http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/anticorrupt/corruptn/cor02.htm#note1 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.pna.ro/obiect2.jsp?id=241>. This is a conviction rate of 97%, if valid, which would make Romania a world leader in anticorruption convictions. See also <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-09-30/romanias-anticorruption-dna>, and http://www.pna.ro/faces/bilant\_activitate.xhtml?id=32 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/malmo/uppsagd-larare-far-700-000/> (2 November). In other recent case, a Swedish teacher recently solicited SEK 2000 (EUR 215) for two pupils to pass their mathematics examinations. The pupils reported the teacher’s ‘offer’ to their advisor and the teacher was convicted and forced to pay a fine of SEK 19000 see . http://www.metro.se/nyheter/larare-doms-for-mutbrott/Hdzokp!yeLAe8xmSOggnwetOKhUPg/ [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
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   [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See ‘Efter lönehöjningen –anställde sin chef’ (After salary increase, hired her boss). Expressen 3 December 2015. http://www.expressen.se/gt/gt-granskar/efter-lonehojningen--anstallde-sin-chef/ [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. GU-chef jagar kritiker på Facebook (G.U. head hunts for critics on Facebook). *Goteborgs-Posten*,12 February 2015. http://www.gp.se/gu-chef-jagar-kritiker-på-facebook-1.26352. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This slogan is often use in the mission statement of NGOs such as Transparency International. See for example https://www.transparency.org/about/ [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. One sees this tendency in the moves toward e-bidding for public procurement contracts and other e-systems, as if a digital system would somehow replace all human interactions, strategies, agencies, and subterfuge.‘ [↑](#endnote-ref-11)