Book Review

Rajan, Sudhir Chella. 2020. *A Social Theory of Corruption: Notes from the Indian Subcontinent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tereza Østbø Kuldova

Oslo Metropolitan University

Corruption and its understanding have become in the last decades dominated by policy experts, economists and behaviour and political scientists, rational choice theorists and accountants, their theories mirrored in the policies and strategies of governments, multilateral, and civil society organizations, all largely aligned both in their moral-cum-economic mission to combat the multiple *evils* of corruption and in their predominantly *individualistic* understanding of corruption as abuse of entrusted power for private gain (at least when it comes to enforcement). Framed by buzzwords such as transparency, accountability, and integrity, these perspectives have been pushing the ideology of ‘good governance’ and the associated, typically neoliberal, reforms, largely focusing on the public

sector, while simultaneously fuelling the growth of the compliance and private intelligence industries, with their ever-proliferating tools for anti-money laundering (AML) and anti-corruption, and tools to combat an ever-growing range of affiliated frauds and crime scenarios, promising new markets for these industries. The RegTech (regulatory technologies) industry is now programming these very theories of corruption, fraud, money-laundering, and more into their KYC (know

your customer) solutions, insider threat management systems and into a wide range of compliance software powered by data analytics and machine learning. These perspectives are thus built both into the global policy architectures and into the algorithmic architectures increasingly leveraged to prevent and even combat corruption, fraud, and related crimes. However, this spectacular growth of the anti-corruption complex has only been matched by its spectacular failures to tackle the crimes of the powerful it sets out to combat, its success consisting to a great degree of growing revenues, market expansion, and creation of a monopoly on understanding corruption, rather than the ability to transform the world for the better. One could even argue that the anti-corruption industry has managed to establish a *hegemonic* understanding of corruption which aligns nicely with the interests of networked power elites, thus in the end serving more the reproduction of the structures of injustice than their dismantling.

It is in this scenario that Rajan's self-proclaimed 'provocation' and a macro-sociological, *long durée* and at times a bit leaky but for that matter only more stimulating theory of grand corruption intervenes, becoming a much-needed breath of fresh air. Grand corruption, or else, the 'long-term, collective, and colossal human failure to acknowledge the illegitimacy of elite networks exercising power over diverse social groups and ecosystems' (p. x) is typically comfortably evaded by the hegemonic anti-corruption discourses. As Rajan writes, 'many rational choice scholars of corruption will also be put off by my reasoning' (p. x) and he is probably right, but this is not a bad thing. To the contrary, Rajan's project to shed some light on the contours of 'how societies seem everywhere to sustain the criminally powerful for surprising lengths of time, aiding their own degeneration and corruption' (p. 6) is most worthwhile, not least because it breaks with the established and repetitive modes of writing about corruption. This approach may also not immediately lend itself to being translated into concrete policy measures, but this only speaks to its merits. This inherent resistance of Rajan's 'social theory of corruption' to being easily co-opted by the industry, forces the reader to think beyond the hegemonic narratives and the logic of scandals (where focus is largely on individual deviance, personal motivations, behaviour, and poor judgement) and opens a far more complex world of elite network formations, a world of 'powerful arrangements that perpetuate various types of injustice, while leading to long-term outcomes of rising symbolic and financial wealth and political dominance for a powerful few' (p. 8). Rajan shows how these powerful elite arrangements gain legitimacy, over the *long durée*, even if it is just a false veneer, and most importantly, how the ideologies that support elite interest are embedded into the material and the ritual, and how the many become subjected and complicit in their own oppression and patterns and structures of deep exploitation and deception, even if often with a cynical attitude. How come the exploitative relation appears 'normal', familiar, even comforting; how come that elites can so easily claim innocence while causing great harms, and what consequences does the 'subterranean complicity' of the people have? Inspired by Machiavelli, Rajan remarks that 'a corrupted people arises in a form of an anti-political, privatized mob composed of individuals who cynically conceive of the

political arena in purely instrumental terms as a source of power for advancing their personal interests' (p. 50); an insight that clearly resonates with our current scenario. Rajan also reminds us that Hannah Arendt described a totalitarian society 'as one emerging from a type of depoliticization of the public that promotes indifference to public affairs, as well as atomization, individualism, and unbridled competition' (p. 101).

The skilful use of cultural and social resources by elite networks for private benefit, the embedding of elite interests into the material and the ritual architectures of societies, the complicity of the public in reproduction of elite power, and the apathy and indifference of the populations when confronted with revelations of elite corruption, are thus at the core of this social theory of corruption. Through his speculative realist study of the history of the Indian subcontinent, from the Harappan and Vedic civilizations to Dharma Yuga, Rajan explores how elite networks emerge and grow in power and strength, but also become corrupted, degenerate, and decay morally, and how collective grant deceits and betrayals of commonly held value comes into being, the population doing their part. These historical excursions into different 'syndromes of corruption,' expanding on Michael Johnston's arguments, enable the reader to understand in more depth the 'processes that generate and maintain these syndromes, especially the way ordinary people end up becoming co-opted into elite agendas' (p. 63). These histories enable us also to view our present world of global hyper-elites in a new light, and to see ourselves as participants in collective rituals, myths, and ideologies that align with elite interests and which most of us have extremely limited power to shape, but which we are both coerced to reproduce and compliantly, consensually embrace in our everyday practices. They thus also challenge our own apolitical cynical drives, pleasures, and apathies. Rajan's book is indeed very ambitious, and a joy to read, one becomes fascinated by the explorations of the ideological functions of Harappan 'uninteresting but standardized design' (p. 132) in the context of an 'absence of grand demonstrations of power' (p. 137), creating its own syndrome of corruption, by the emergence of Brahmanical power and of the 'authority of Vedic rituals through the alliance of priests and kings' (p. 169) and the ritual legitimizations of power as much as slave labour, or by the emergence and corruption of *dharma* as law. The lessons are many and varied, no review can do justice to all. The book can be recommended to all who seek a more critical perspective on systemic corruption and elite power over the *long durée*. The following insight should serve as a springboard to future debates:

When processes that can be identified as corruption do become manifest, they typically appear when societies experience long periods of forms of anomie, dissolution, and wasting – deep social and economic malaise – accompanied by extraordinary accumulation of material and symbolic wealth by the few. Only rarely are connections made between the growing aloofness of elite networks in their luxury, even in the midst of internecine war, and the mounting despair of the majority. Worsening chaos, mutual suspicion and fragmentation, and the growth of separate identity or clan-

based groups may increase when matters do not sufficiently escalate to engender political transformation. Blatant exploitation and large-scale complicity are complemented by collective indifference and reciprocal dishonesty. Social trust and reciprocity – the basic elements of creating a people – decline in the midst of the elite's accumulation of symbolic and material goods. (p. 268)

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