



## Critiquing corruption: A turn to theory

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### Introduction

Over the past two decades, the will to fight corruption has increased in society at large. Consequently, the importance of effective anti-corruption measures has expanded into a global political agenda with the OECD, the World Bank and the UN in the forefront. Historically, corruption has been seen as an issue in the public sector, defined as the ‘the misuse of public office for private gain’ (The World Bank Group, 2012). The scope has since been broadened to include other sectors, as illustrated in the widely used, post-Enron definition by Transparency International: ‘the abuse of *entrusted* power for private gain’ (Transparency International, 2009, italics added). Since 2003, when the OECD promoted a stricter definition of corruption, bribes, kickbacks and embezzlement are supplemented by practices such as illicit gifts, favours, nepotism, and informal promises (OECD, 2003a; 2003b; Lennerfors, 2008; Brown and Cloke, 2011; Breit, 2011). As the OECD puts it: ‘although, at a conceptual level, corruption is easy to define [...] corruption is a multi-layered phenomenon that may not always lend itself to neat definitions’ (2003a: 117).

The increased attention to corruption and anti-corruption has also led to a ‘corruption boom’ (Torsello, 2013: 313) in which corruption has been approached and theorized in various ways. Corruption is discussed in fields as diverse as economics, political science, anthropology, sociology, history, organization studies, international business, business ethics, psychology, and philosophy. While we will not attempt to summarize these discussions here, in economic terms, for instance, corruption is usually depicted as opportunistic behaviour based on rational choice and agency theory, and thus on the individual’s motivations for engaging in corrupt behaviour (Rose-Ackerman and Søreide, 2011). In political science, by comparison, corruption has often been regarded as

the result of dysfunctional overlaps between the private and public sector; the task is to decipher the organizational and institutional structures that give rise to corrupt behaviour (Heidenheimer et al., 1989; Johnston, 2005; Lambsdorff, 2007).

In organization studies, research has sought to describe and understand the organizational settings in which corruption takes place – whether by one or several members within an organization, by individuals on behalf of organizations, or by entire organizations in cases where corruption operates as an institutionalized practice (Pinto et al., 2008). Organizational scholars have emphasized that corruption should not only be regarded as a *state* of misuse, but also as a *process*, i.e. a gradual institutionalization of misbehaviour which contributes to legitimizing behaviour and socializing others into it in such a way that it gradually becomes normalized, what may be called a ‘culture of corruption’ (Ashforth and Anand, 2003). Such a process perspective has been invoked to explain why persons not considered to be corrupt or criminal might decide to engage in corrupt activities or networks (Fleming and Zyglidopoulos, 2009; Martin et al., 2009) and to understand the kinds of ethical reflections (or lack of these) that lie behind corrupt activities (Trevino et al., 2006).

Overall, the literature on corruption highlights the various ways in which the abuse of power is performed: for instance, the government official accepting a bribe or a kickback for his services (Rodriguez et al., 2005), or less overt exchanges such as gifts, favours, promises, symbolically sealed by surreptitious handshakes, and often embedded in, or consolidating, social networks (Bourdieu, 1977; Noonan, 1984; Granovetter, 2007). Stretching the notion of abuse of power even further, corruption may also involve practices such as violence, intimidation, harassment or bullying (Hearn and Parkin, 2001), thus highlighting the ‘dark side’ of organizational behaviour more broadly (Griffin and O’Leary, 2004).

The corruption literature has broken important ground for not only theoretical understandings of why corruption occurs and who it involves, but also for the development of anti-corruption policies and efforts across the globe. In this special issue, however, we argue that what tends to be neglected is an investigation into, and thus understanding of, the underlying causes and mechanisms of the phenomenon. Thus, we called for papers offering a critical study of corruption, and, further, we invited contributions that turn to theory to problematize and critique corruption. Our intention has been to go beyond descriptions of alleged corrupt behaviour or normative discussions of legitimacy of particular activities, through engagement in *theory-based critique*. By theory-based critique, we mean efforts to go beyond particular normative standpoints

regarding acceptable behaviour, as well as arguments rooted in a legal-positivist stance which restricts corruption to what can be defined in the courtrooms. Rather, we are searching for novel or forgotten theories, or combinations of these, that can further understanding of corruption.

This is not to say that there has not been a body of critical voices who in various ways have sought to problematize the mobilization of this ‘war’ as well as the ‘enemy’ that has been targeted, i.e. the very phenomenon of corruption, and the way it is ‘fought’ (e.g. Sık, 2002; Bratsis, 2003; Sampson, 2005; Brown and Cloke, 2011). Hitherto, however, much of this research – which either explicitly has been labelled ‘critical’ or by their very character falls into what we would like to call ‘critical studies of corruption’ – has remained scattered through various disciplinary traditions and empirical studies.

In the next section we will briefly elaborate on the necessity of a turn to theory in corruption studies. Following this, we bring together some critical studies on corruption, and through this collection, sketch out a framework for a critical approach to corruption research.

## **A turn to theory**

Admittedly, the central theme of this special issue – ‘a turn to theory’ – might seem naïve: What is critique, or research for that matter, without theory? On the other hand, what is theory if not critique? And turning towards theory from where or what?

Our insistence on a focus on theory has three pillars. First, corruption is an emotionally and ideologically vested concept, and corruption research is often characterized and/or motivated by normative descriptions and analyses of corruption. Such research tends to empirically single out corrupt practices as opposed to legitimate or non-corrupt but still illegal practices. Moreover, it is difficult to analyse – and even discuss – the concept of corruption because of the general assumption that corruption is bad for society. We believe that by undertaking more theoretical reflections on corruption, we can better take on the important task of thinking about the meaning of corruption – rather than to subdue our interests to the more practical concerns of eradicating corruption.

Secondly, we claim it is a challenge for critical studies of corruption to sufficiently address the assumptions underlying the dominant theories of corruption. Most studies that attempt to problematize corruption and anti-corruption practices take their point of departure in empirical data. This research, which often stems from or is inspired by anthropological methods, has

contributed with ‘thick descriptions’ of, for instance, how societies are prismatic (Riggs, 1964), how the public-private dimension does not make sense in all societies (Gupta, 1995), how the evil of corruption is problematized (Ledeneva, 1998), and how the anti-corruption industry is becoming an autopoietic system (Sampson, 2010). We want to explore the possibility for moving such corruption critique forward by focusing explicitly on the role of theory. We believe that a turn to theory can contribute to this already emerging body of literature by both providing a more powerful and effective critique, as well as contributing to the development of alternative conceptualisations of corruption and ways to tackle it.

Thirdly, theoretical explorations in corruption research have been characterised by an application of theories *to* corruption rather than a creative engagement in theorizing corruption *itself*. A turn to theory can give rise to *multiple* theorizations of corruption. This logic is rooted in a belief that critique should engage in dialogue and debate with the dominant theories of corruption, creating alternatives to them, rather than simply dismissing them out of hand. This, we hope, will lead to more multifaceted and nuanced discussions and understandings – both for research and practice. In addition, multiple theorizations may revitalize understandings of corruption as a complex phenomenon, and the different theoretical bases constructed could be a way to grasp the different dimensions and mechanisms of corruption.

What is more, since the mid-1990s, the argument has been made that we do not need to further theorize or define corruption, as dwelling on such issues hinders discussion and development in the field. Johnston (1996) even went so far as to state that it is unnecessary to turn to theory or define corruption – relying instead on the mantra of ‘we know it when we see it’. Ten years later, Johnston lauds the success of turning away from theory, satisfied to note

how quickly past debates over corruption – so often hung up on definitions, divided over the question of effects, and mired in a paralyzing relativism – have given way to extensive agreement [...] that corruption delays and distorts economic growth, rewards inefficiency, and short-circuits open competition (2005: 17-18, cited in de Graaf et al., 2010: 44).

Reflecting on this debate on corruption theory, Caiden (in the foreword in de Graaf et al.) argues that a key explanation for the lack of theorization is the broader legitimacy of corruption theories:

What further unites theorists is the recognition that research into corruption is not exactly welcomed, encouraged, or supported, that theorists are held at arm’s length, that their motives are suspected, and there may well be personal risks and repercussions if they delve too deeply and reveal too much about corrupt activities. (2010: 11)

This alleged agreement about potentially unreflective definitions of corruption, what in our view is the consequence of evading theoretical issues, represents a crucial paradox in corruption research. Agreement, despite operating as an important democratic tool for change and intellectual progress, also hinders reflexive discussion. To the extent that discussions take place, they may only perpetuate unreflective or prejudicial understandings of what constitutes corruption. It is precisely these concerns that compel us to (re)turn to theory when studying corruption.

We are not the only researchers in the field to express anxieties about the aversion to theory in corruption studies. In line with de Graaf et al. (2010), we propose a focus on *theorizing* corruption rather than on theories *of* corruption. Hence, Caiden compares theorizing corruption with ‘exploring a complicated maze replete with dead ends and surprising turns enough to frustrate the hardest venturer’ (2010: 9). Further, similarly to Caiden, we maintain that such ‘ventures’ of theorizing corruption will lead to rewards, as they ‘[strive] to reduce the confusion, to simplify the evidence, to discard the obsolete and unverifiable, and to incorporate new thinking’ (Caiden, 2010: 10). In short, theorizing corruption enables us to engage in theoretical debates and critique about social practices and organizational behaviour generally.

Although we build on and want to contribute to de Graaf et al.’s theorizing project, we want to stress that by turning to theory, we do not just mean turning to established theoretical approaches and incorporating these into the study of corruption, seemingly as fetishes or ‘full bodies’ (Badiou, 2009). In the end, that is where de Graaf et al. end up; they turn to rather well-established theoretical frameworks for studying corruption, such as Weber, structural-functionalist perspectives, and institutional economics. In addition to the use of established theory, this special issue calls for the application of novel theories to understand corruption. Thus, the contributions in our special issue are linked to the ideas of de Graaf et al., but are attempting to elaborate further and to engage creatively with the prospect of turning towards new pathways in the maze of theorizing.

Before we present the contributions of this issue, let us summarize here some of the previous attempts at critiquing and theorizing corruption. We focus on a body of critical voices that in various ways have sought to problematize corruption, the prominent role it has obtained in public discourse, and the way it is fought. This will serve both to contextualise the contributions of the special issue, and, we hope, open up pathways for theoretical explorations beyond this special issue.

## Critiquing corruption

It could be argued that studies of corruption, by their very nature, involve a critical perspective. After all, at the heart of much corruption research lays an interest in highlighting the various ways in which the misuse of power is performed and the effects it has on individuals, organizations and society. Why, then, insist of a *critical* study of corruption? What does this add to the perspectives and approaches already existing in studies of corruption? In this section, we highlight four themes that we believe are central to those studies that concern themselves with critique in corruption research: to challenge oversimplification, to unveil interests, to construct alternatives and to creatively engage in theorization.

### *Challenging oversimplification*

To challenge oversimplifications in corruption research involves, for example, attempts to identify aspects of corruption and anti-corruption that have not been (but could have been) discussed, views that have been suppressed or actors who have been rendered subordinate or silenced. Why, for instance, is corruption so often depicted as something ‘unwanted’ and ‘tangible’ that must be eradicated (Vogl, 2012), like a ‘virus’ (Ashforth, et al., 2008; see further Forsberg and Severinsson, in this issue) or as ‘cancer’ (Wolfensohn, 1998). That is, why is corruption seen as an alien organism that must be removed in order to heal the body? Further, why is this healing process, including the actors that perform it, so often epitomized as a just cause? Most would agree that the anti-corruption industry, including the OECD and the World Bank and ‘weapons’ such as the UN Convention on Corruption, and the UN Global Compact, have gained a massive impact on the global economic scale. Inevitably, this heightened attention to corruption has made a great impact on what is commonly understood as corruption (i.e. as something bad for the world economy) but also the way it is fought and the way in which certain actors are included in (and excluded from) this process.

Likewise, there has also been a lack of attention on *why* corruption has received such increased attention over the past few decades, as well as the implications for organizations and its members. As Williams and Beare (1998) have argued, the ‘problem’ of corruption might not be attributable to any increase in actual corrupt behaviours – i.e. the amount of opportunistic behaviour in economic terms – but it might rather be the result of a gradual reframing of the concept to account for broader shifts and transformations in the global economy. In this process, old institutions and relations between institutions have been replaced by

new institutions and new relationships – thus rendering practices and relationships that used to be accepted as unwanted, illicit or illegal.

Breit's (2011) study of media coverage of corruption in Norway between 1996 and 2009 provides support to this conclusion. The number of articles escalated from an average of around 50 articles per year in the major national newspapers up until 2001, to between 400 and 550 in the years 2005-2007, only to decline to around 300 in 2008 and around 200 in 2009. Much of this peak of attention can be attributed to the stricter definition of corruption that the OECD promoted in 2003 (OECD, 2003a; 2003b). As a result, friendships, networks and practices (not least involving gifts and favours) were forced to be rearranged and renegotiated – often involving massive sense-making in the media and in the courtrooms (Breit, 2011). Similar processes have taken place on the international scale, not least through the workings of the range of corporate scandals emerging during the 2000s such as Enron and WorldCom (Tumber and Waisboard, 2004; Hannah and Zatzick, 2008). At the same time, as Entman (2012) suggests, the news media also tend to neglect many more incidents of corruption than they cover.

Moreover, although the alleged wickedness of corruption may seem obvious, critical studies have reminded us that this not necessarily so, as the relatively beneficial or evil aspects of corruption depend on many aspects. Some researchers, for example, have suggested that corrupt exchanges can in fact be functional in inefficient contexts, and that corruption in some cases can be conceived as a fifth factor of production, in addition to land, labour, capital and knowledge (Kameir and Kursany, 1985; Ledeneva, 1998). In other words, to get things done, corruption may contribute to greasing the wheels of stiff bureaucratic systems that may otherwise be inefficient and counterproductive (see also Osrecki, in this issue). Others have further argued that in centrally planned economies, alleged corruption in the form of gift-giving fulfils the function of creating trust (Rivkin-Fish, 2005). In other geographical contexts, such as Sweden and Norway, there are efforts to eradicate *all* corruption, including a widespread and fervent fight against seemingly harmless practices such as giving chocolates or fruit baskets (Lennerfors, 2008). While giving a box of chocolates may be viewed as a form of undue influence, and therefore tantamount to corruption, it may also be seen as expected hospitality.

In a similar way, assumptions of efforts of fighting corruption as being (ideologically) noble and rational have been challenged. For instance, Lennerfors (2007) has argued that striving for a complete reduction of possibilities of corruption in public procurement, and the constant threat of disfavoured suppliers raising their voice against allegedly corrupt decisions, has led to public

procurers to base their decisions on the objective price of the service procured rather than the more risky, but ultimately more effective, concept of the most economically advantageous service. Fighting corruption *can* therefore be dysfunctional and contrary to the public good.

### *Unveiling interests*

A second common practice for a critical study on corruption is unveiling hidden interests. Critical studies have unmasked the ideological interests behind anti-corruption. For instance, Everett et al. (2006) argued that the measures to fight corruption are themselves not unproblematic, among other things because they contribute to promoting and legitimizing epistemological truth claims about corruption, and by extension the workings of a capitalist and neoliberal economic agenda. More specifically, attempts to measure the level of corruption in various contexts or countries – such as the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index – have been critiqued for being a technology of a neoliberal agenda. Moreover, the failure of key anti-corruption actors to reflect upon the global economic crisis, which started in 2008, has been seen as a symptom of this neoliberal agenda (Brown and Cloke, 2011). Others have argued that this might also be an underlying driving force for why corruption is studied almost exclusively in the public sector, even though definitions of corruption are becoming more and more sector neutral, i.e. as the misuse of power more broadly rather than public power/authority (Lennerfors, 2010; Brown and Cloke, 2011).

Another aspect of corruption that has been revealed by critical studies is that the discourse is highly Western-centric and that it therefore – often unfairly – involves positing corruption as a result of non-Western activities (Haller and Shore, 2005; Brown and Cloke, 2011; Doig, 2011). It has been argued that the function of the Corruption Perceptions Index, for example, is to legitimize anti-corruption measures in the developing countries, with the aim of eliminating obstacles for the free flow of capital, rather than to fight corruption (Sík, 2002; Bratsis, 2003).

### *Constructing alternatives*

The critical studies we are describing here often problematize the taken-for-granted aspects of corruption and/or unmask aspects of knowledge about corruption and anti-corruption, such as the neoliberal agenda. Yet, at the same time, it would be an oversimplification to argue that neoliberal forces comprise the sole driving force behind anti-corruption (see for example Sampson, this issue). To contribute to a more nuanced account of corruption and anti-



corruption, critical studies should therefore seek to go beyond unmasking the dominant understandings, by studying and building alternatives and by exploring the untold stories.

Hansen (1998), for instance, identified several actors and interests in corruption and anti-corruption practices and could thus broaden the understanding of the (power) relations embedded in differences between dominant or accepted meanings of corruption and more peripheral or subordinate meanings. Similarly, Breit (2010) has focused on how the discursive practices through which specific understandings of corruption are legitimized (see further Fairclough, 1989). These studies show how critique uncovers 'other', equally prevalent or barely existing, perhaps competing, interpretations embedded in the meaning-making struggles around corruption. In this sense, the concept of corruption can be seen as overdetermined, i.e. vested with excessive meaning (see Damgaard, this issue). This is similar to other ideologically vested concepts that have existed in the past, such as 'the Jew' (Žižek, 1989), or 'the Bureaucrat' (du Gay, 2000). Conversely, such efforts may also involve systematizing the plethora of highly visible perspectives of corruption and the actors behind them, including their underlying motives for taking particular positions in the struggles. Along these lines, many aspects of corruption indeed seem very visible and need no unmasking, echoing Žižek's observation: 'they know what they're doing, still they're doing it' (1989).

#### *Creative engagement*

A fourth quality of critical studies of corruption is that the corruption critique should involve a degree of creativity. Critique needs to do more than simply challenging or polemicizing 'the mainstream' understandings. Critique is beneficial and productive only to the extent that something novel or alternative is generated – new theories or new approaches (see for example Peters and Yue, this issue). Bratsis is another important example of theoretically informed, critical studies of corruption in the field of political philosophy (2003; 2006; see also Pignot, this issue).

The very origin of the theoretical foundation of corruption research is a good example of a norm that should be challenged by creativity and by constructing alternatives. In most definitions, such as 'abuse of entrusted power for private gain' (Transparency International, 2009), corruption is framed as a principal-agent-relation. The agent misuses the trust granted from the principal – the public or a private principal – and, rather than acting in accordance with the will of the principal, acts to enrich him- or herself. (Della Porta and Vannucci, 1999; Rose-Ackerman, 1999; see further Lennerfors, 2010). In response to the

principal-agent understanding of corruption, an alternative theoretical perspective has been to resuscitate a more general, pre-modern idea of corruption as *degeneration* (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 2004; 2009; Lennerfors, 2008). For Hardt and Negri, this understanding of corruption renders visible that in Empire, corruption is everywhere, because of the absence of new political subjects. This theoretical perspective additionally moves the focus from fighting *against* corruption to fighting *for* something, such that fighting corruption is a detour from the fight for the good. A more pluralistic understanding of corruption than that of Hardt and Negri would be to posit the existence of a variety of goods, each of which is to a certain extent suffering their own form of corruption (see Damgaard, this issue). This understanding is similar to Aristotle's original idea of corruption as formulated in *The politics* (1981) – that each state form has its own form of corruption.

Although some potential theory-based critiques exist in the critical studies of corruption mentioned above, important contributions to the critical corruption literature over the last decades have been, as previously acknowledged, the anthropological perspectives on corruption. These approaches have used thick descriptions to describe the ways in which the war on corruption is lived in the non-Western, allegedly corrupt, world (Torsello, 2013). Recently, the anthropological approach has been complemented by rigorous historical studies of corruption that have demonstrated how the idea of the modern, non-corrupt state is debatable and how even the most modern countries still have their own forms of corruption (Kroeze, 2008; Kroeze et al., 2013). While locating new actors or voices can be a potential way forward for critical studies, we maintain that new ways (or resurrecting allegedly obsolete ways) of dissecting, discussing, and deconstructing corruption and anti-corruption are needed. In this sense, the novelty or creativity of the critical project implies that the critical is always that which is 'yet to come'. The call of this special issue, to turn to theory, directly ties into this understanding of the critical project. With these ideas in mind, we will now present the articles, notes and reviews in the special issue.

## The contributions

The first article, Fran Osrecki's 'Fighting corruption with transparent organizations: Anti-corruption and functional deviance in organizational behavior', is inspired by the concept of 'functional deviance' to argue that some forms of corruption are positive for organizations. Given their very nature as social entities, Osrecki argues, organizations cannot function properly without some kind of rule-breaking and normative slack. In fact, Osrecki argues, drawing on Luhmann, that even outright deviation from formal procedures can have

positive effects in certain contexts, providing ‘win-win’-situations for organizations and their members through added freedom to think ‘outside the box’ and to be less ‘paralyzed’. In this manner, the paper problematizes the legitimacy of much anti-corruption work. Osrecki’s argument is that anti-corruption work stands the chance of throwing the baby out with the bathwater; it always runs the risk of ‘binding’ affected organizations to a strict formal operations mode.

In the second article, ‘Making up corruption control: Conducting due diligence in a Danish law firm’, Hans Krause Hansen and Morten Hove Tang-Jensen offer a critical analysis of due diligence as a specific anti-corruption technology. The authors argue that the lack of theoretical reasoning as to the nature and effects of such technologies has prevented a deeper understanding of how anti-corruption is performed and negotiated in practice. Hansen and Tang-Jensen provide an important example of the institutionalized, reified forms of knowledge, practices and beliefs in anti-corruption work and how they contribute to create *impressions* of corrupt-free environments.

In ‘Bringing down the house (of Goldman Sachs): Analyzing corrupt forms of trading with Lacan’, Edouard Pignot is inspired by Lacanian psychoanalytical theory (especially the ‘Essex Lacanian literature’). Specifically, the article discusses why corrupt actors derive pleasure from being corrupt. Pignot draws on four main features of the ideological fantasy: 1) a narrative structure, 2) the desire of the subject to fundamentally resist the public-official disclosure, 3) *jouissance*, which manifests itself as a secretly joyful and transgressive affirmation, and 4) a foundational guarantee for their existence as a subject of desire. Pignot employs this framework to study the Goldman Sachs Abacus deal, a case which constitutes the largest fine the SEC has ever imposed on a Wall Street firm (\$550 million). Pignot illustrates that behind the court orders, the lost money, and the technicalities of the argument, the critical situation was motivated by the *jouissance* of the corrupt subjects. Apart from providing a novel and creative application of the Lacanian framework to an interesting case, the paper also provides a comprehensive summary and review of the existing work on psychoanalytically informed perspectives for studying corruption.

In ‘Corruption: Multiple margins and mediatized transgression’, Mads Damgaard asks why corruption has become such a unilaterally illegitimate word. Damgaard does so by focusing on the use and meanings of the concept of corruption in media discourse. Drawing on Boltanski and Thevenot’s work in *On justification*, Turner’s concept of liminality, and contemporary media theory, Damgaard elaborates on the boundaries between different meanings of corruption in the media, thus providing grounded insight into the different

alternative theorizations of corruption. He develops the argument that the framing of corruption as actions crossing a line or boundary, and thus that they exist in a liminal and largely ambiguous space, in which various meanings may be easily attached to the concept. Overall, Damgaard's paper helps explain how different boundaries between corruption and *something else* are constructed in public and media discourses and how participants in these processes seek to gain control over the boundaries and hence the meanings of corruption. The paper also advances our understanding of the institutional role of the media in these processes.

In the first note out of three, 'The anti-corruption package', Steven Sampson critically discusses why the anti-corruption industry has become as 'hot' as it has during the past decades. Sampson argues it has gained legitimacy not necessarily because global actors want to build a better world, but because it is one of the latest innovations of global, neoliberal capitalism, and where corporate ethics and reputation are valuable assets. A fundamental problem, Sampson argues, is that the 'problem' – corruption – has changed from being relatively visible and tangible – i.e. bribery of public officials – to having a more liquid, floating character involving power abuse more broadly. As a result, corruption stands as a general explanation for social and political deroute, and anti-corruption operates as an all-purpose cure – and hence that neither of the workings are (theoretically) suitable to the problem at hand.

The two following notes examine the term corruption through thought-provoking rhetorical exercises involving metonymy and metaphor. Hence, they highlight how the use of the term may often refer to *something else* than what is often associated with the term.

In 'Corruption as co-created rupture', Anthony R. Yue and Luc Peters critically interrogate corruption through the lens of metonymy, i.e. naming something by other than its own name. Based on the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, they challenge the definitions of corruption on the basis that they may be too rigid and may even (only) represent something that has been, rather than something that is – thus being too late, in a sense. In fact, the authors argue that from this perspective, attempting to define corruption involves a fundamental contradiction. Based on the exercise, they ask whether a dialectic between the hidden and the open is needed for the term to exist – i.e. does corruption 'come to life' through its exposure? And could it be that corruption is given new life (resurrection) every time it is exposed, and that exposure fuels much of the indignation and/or fetishism about corruption? The authors do not draw any specific conclusions. However, they argue that such rhetorical exercises are important ways to further our discussion and problematization of corruption.

Petter B. Forsberg and Kristofer Severinsson make a similar rhetorical exercise in their note ‘Exploring the virus metaphor in corruption theory: Corruption as a virus?’. They approach corruption from a rather unusual perspective, namely from biology, and virology in particular. They go through various common theoretical assumptions associated with the ‘corruption-as-virus’-metaphor – as escalation, infection, and immune response – and link these understandings with the conceptions and usages of the term ‘virus’ in the field of biology. Forsberg and Severinsson argue that this kind of interdisciplinary exercise is necessary in order to elucidate the crucial, but often subtle distinctions and contradictions in usages of the word ‘corruption’. They end by highlighting an important distinction: that whereas viruses represent the fundamental causes, corruption should be seen only as a *symptom* of such fundamental causes.

In the first book review, Mikolaj Dymek has read Eric Wångmar’s (2007) historical analysis of corruption in Sweden: *Trust and corruption: Corruption, abuse of power and lack of trust in Swedish local politics 1963-2011*. The remaining four books that are being reviewed all discuss current ideas on politics and capitalism. Amir Elmi Keshtiban reviews *Protest camps* by Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy’s (2013). Richard Bilsker then reviews Moulrier Boutang’s (2011) conceptualisation of *Cognitive capitalism*, while Jo Grady has read Paul du Gay and Glenn Morgan’s (2013) edited collection, *New spirits of capitalism? Crises, justifications, and dynamics*. Lastly, Martin Parker offers an account of Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift’s (2013) *Arts of the political: New openings for the left*.

## Concluding remarks

Contemporary research on corruption has broken important ground for the development of policies and anti-corruption efforts across the globe. Missing in this process, however, is a more coherent, theoretically based, critical study embedded into and reflecting upon corruption theory.

In this introduction, we have attempted to collect and review some important works we regard as adhering to such a critical project. To take the next step from such works, forthcoming critical studies of corruption should engage more explicitly with theorizing – both as novel forms of inspiration and thinking, and as a way to use empirical findings of corruption to further social science theory more broadly. Corruption, we argue, cannot be understood as separate from society, nor can it be separated from the process of theorizing. Therefore, we should not settle for agreement on a set of ‘Theories of Corruption’ that define corruption, explain its causes and trajectories, or account for the motivations of corrupt individuals and groups. Corruption theories must be developed in

accordance with societal changes, including the effects of such changes on organizations and their members. Corruption theories are themselves creatures of society.

An endeavour that involves turning to theory is ambitious, and it cannot be fulfilled in a single special issue. Nor has this been our intention. Rather, the criteria we put forth – avoiding oversimplification, unmasking hidden interests, building alternatives, and creative engagement – are but an initial attempt to collect and relate critical studies of corruption. Together, the contributors to this special issue have produced creative, novel ways of theorizing corruption. They do not seek to promote a stringent view on theory. In their way, each article illustrates theoretical approaches that seek to integrate contemporary and updated societal impulses and changes into their theorizing of corruption. Hence, the turn to theory that this special issue has sought to invoke does not involve instrumental avenues, pre-understandings or ‘recipes’ of theory. There is no corruption theory template. Rather, we have sought to utilize creative and pragmatic forms of theorization. By showing some alternative theoretical ways of approaching and researching corruption, we hope we have illustrated the potential of theorizing corruption and the need to pursue this project further.

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