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THE POWER OF CORRUPTION

Sandipto Dasgupta

Politics, one hears, is a dirty business. This dirt, one also hears, is not universally distributed across all political spaces. In the parts of the world that are variously called "global South," "Third World," or "developing countries," politics seems especially dirty. This conversation has a global/comparative dimension wherein these countries are viewed as being more prone to corruption in public life compared to the advanced capitalist countries of the West. From everyday anecdotes to the influential rankings of Transparency International and the World Bank, one can find frequent confirmation for this view. The conversation also has a local dimension: "corruption" or "crime" is often the most prominent issue in the political sphere of these countries, overshadowing the usual suspects such as fiscal policy or security. This version of the conversation generally oscillates between the contrasting poles of righteous anger and resigned acceptance.

This cohabitation of anger and resignation point to a paradox that informs much of social scientific inquiry into the widespread phenomenon of corruption and criminality in the democracies of the global South. Cor-

ruption is widely acknowledged to be a problem, even an urgent and catastrophic one, by both local and global actors. Unlike other sociopolitical ills, it is neither ignored by powerful voices (like inequality), nor a matter of partisan contestation (like secularism or ethnic conflicts). It is constantly condemned in editorials and political campaigns, and universally lamented by presidents and pundits. Yet it persists with no discernible improvement through successive regimes. The question, then, is, How can such a widely despised phenomenon continue so untroubled by all the attention?

To view this situation as apparently paradoxical requires a couple of stable assumptions shared by most social scientists and policy makers, the first of which concerns the nature of the modern state. The state became modern by becoming both functionally distinct and delimited in its sphere of activity. The activity of making profit or material gains is meant for the “private” sphere, that of the market, while the functionaries of the state act as “public” officials. They maintain neutrality and procedural formality in their actions vis-à-vis private actors, making decisions only on the basis of the “public good.” Corruption is a distortion of this ideal, whereby the power of the public office is utilized to make private gains. In the process, it distorts the normal functioning of the market by illegitimately intervening in it (e.g., allocating resources based not on qualification or merit, but as a result of bribes).

The second assumption concerns the nature of democracy, which is defined as a system in which the only route to state power is through competitive and unprejudiced elections. In such a system, voters are meant to punish bad actors and reward good ones. In turn, they establish an incentive structure for politicians, whose main goal is to win elections. Since corruption is widely derided, benefitting a handful of private actors to the detriment of the majority and the “public good,” a functioning democracy should take swift and robust action against corrupt behavior.

In the vast majority of the social scientific literature, the persistence of corruption in the democracies of the global South can be understood as the failure of one or both of those ideals to be realized. Either the state is insufficiently developed or the democratic system is insufficiently functional. With regard to the former, we are told that the state in the global South is still lagging in its developmental trajectory. Lacking the capacity to enforce the rule of law with the necessary degree of uniformity and neutrality, it is thereby unable to fully differentiate itself from society and its myriad group iden-

tities, patronage ties, and personal bonds. With regard to the latter, we get a similar analysis regarding the dysfunction of the democratic process, with voters being either uninformed, poor, or lacking in civic virtues to effectively hold politicians accountable.

In two recent books, Steven Pierce and Milan Vaishnav—despite their very different disciplinary backgrounds, methodological commitments, and geographical focus—complicate this more or less familiar framework for the discussion of illegality in politics. The very different ways in which they go about doing so set up an interesting, and critical, dialogue.

The overarching ambition for Pierce, in *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria*, is a critical one. He critiques the stable sets of assumptions mentioned above that underlie much of the scholarship on corruption. The book does not seek to provide a causal account of corruption in Nigerian politics, but rather to analyze the discourse of corruption. The central claim in it is that one cannot separate an incidence of corruption from the way corruption is spoken about. That is, one cannot take corruption to be a particular kind of phenomenon, defined unproblematically in legal/technocratic terms (e.g., using public office for private gains), and view the way corruption is discussed as a post facto reaction to that phenomenon. Instead, there is a polyvalence in the way acts are labeled as *corrupt*, and it is worth investigating the shifting currents of how, through which acts, by whom, and when such a labeling takes place. Instead of a reactive acknowledgment of a predefined phenomenon, the discourse of corruption should be understood as enabling and generative, as one that generates a particular field of politics. The discourse of corruption does a specifically “political work.”²¹ The book, then, is, as Pierce writes in the introduction, a “history of the practical polyvalence of corruption discourse” as well as a “history of the political work ‘corruption’ has done in Nigeria” (20, 21).

Pierce, then, is not so much interested in providing an answer to an already formulated question (Why is Nigeria corrupt?), but instead challenging the terms through which that question is posed (What does it mean to say that Nigeria is corrupt?). The book is not one big causal claim building up through successive chapters, but a collection of interrelated pathways to unsettle the framework through which social scientists understand corruption. To take one such example that I found to be particularly fascinating, the word (many) Hausa speakers most commonly use to describe incidents that Pierce (and we) would be inclined to call

“corruption” is *zalunci*, a word whose most accurate English translation is “oppression” (160). Pierce takes this as the starting point for a compelling discussion of how the normative universe of the discourse of corruption in Nigeria does not revolve around clearly marked lines denoting which actions are disallowed by law or ethics. Rather, it is about a wider “moral economy” regarding the relationship and obligations of the state to the citizen. Instead of cataloging illegalities, corruption marks the sense that something has gone wrong in the life of the country. This labeling fluctuates with regions, party affiliations, material conditions, and the passage of time. Corruption, in other words, operates within a complex “web of values” rather than on a unidimensional axis of juridico-technocratic definition. Reading corruption in this light, he argues, can be the “source for a cultural history of politics.”

The substantive focus of Vaishnav’s study, *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics*, is different from Pierce’s. While Pierce is interested in financial malfeasance, Vaishnav is interested in “serious” acts of violent crimes (e.g., murder, abduction, rape) by successful political actors²—that is, the increasingly frequent example of actors who could accurately be called professional criminals, with lengthy lists of serious criminal acts to their names, being elected (and reelected) in competitive elections. The real difference between Pierce and Vaishnav, however, lies not in their substantive focus, but in the degree of their commitment to challenging the stable social scientific frameworks we began with. Vaishnav does not explicitly take issue with those frameworks and instead seeks to contest some of the substantive answers they generate. That is, he wants to provide sophisticated and empirically driven rationales for the deviations from the norm that is criminality in politics, rather than challenge the basis of that norm itself.

Vaishnav draws upon that framework to define (electoral) politics. He describes it as a market, in which the political parties are sellers, and voters are the buyers. Criminality is a market distortion. His goal is to provide a rational explanation for why this distortion arises and persists. This requires one to investigate both the supply (why parties put forward criminals as candidates) and the demand (why voters vote for them) side. The “core reason” for the supply is money—with criminals being capable of raising the kind of money that is increasingly critical to elections in India given the opacity of the fundraising process. However, arguably the more interesting contribution of the book is its expla-

nation of the demand side, which in turn explains better why the supply exists.

The answer to the demand question is complex—and requires a journey through the fracturing of the Indian political space from the seventies after the eclipse of the hegemony of the Congress party, a map of the caste hierarchy, and the failings of the Indian justice system. Vaishnav’s first move is revisionary. He challenges the idea that what explains the Indian voter’s proclivity to elect criminals into public office is insufficient information and education regarding criminal behavior—the so-called ignorant voter hypothesis. This belief lies at the heart of many anticorruption initiatives that focus on areas such as civic education, the right to information, and transparency, all operating within the overarching notion that democracies, when functioning properly, lead to greater accountability. Instead, Vaishnav argues provocatively (through impressive empirical evidence) that voters are well aware of the criminal pasts (and presents) of candidates and vote for them not *despite* but often *because* of it. The reason they do so can be broken down into three parts. The first two are background conditions: “weak rule of law” and meaningful “social divisions.” Given the presence of these two conditions, he says, “voters often have an incentive to reward politicians whose criminal bona fides serves as a signal of their enhanced capacity and willingness to do whatever it takes to protect their supporters’ interests” (168). In the absence of a pathway to satisfy interests through the established legal paths of mediation, citizens (as voters) look for pathways outside of it. A candidate’s criminal prowess then acts as a signal of his ability to negotiate successfully the murky terrain of illegality.

In their critique—in very different ways—of the simple legalistic framework of corruption, these authors seek to bring the discussion on corruption within the ambit of politics. Both argue that corruption is central to political life in India and Nigeria, and its discussion cannot be separated from a larger discussion of the sociopolitical structure. Following this analytical lead, the question that arises is one regarding power. Politics, to a large extent, concerns the relations of power in a given space. Taking up the challenge to think corruption politically, one wonders what role corruption plays in shaping, maintaining, or disrupting those relations of power. It is in this regard, that one feels that one can take up the provocations offered in these books to think beyond where they draw their concluding lines.

For Pierce, the question becomes whether a scholar of corruption can step outside the complex and ever-shifting discursive network of corruption to offer such an account. In one of the more interesting parts of his book, he speaks of how corruption both presupposes and disrupts the ideological work of the state—*state effect* is the term he uses—to appear as an impersonal, norm-bound actor. Yet his lifting of this ideological veil reveals contingency and private crimes, rather than patterns of power relations. For Vaishnav, the problem of power appears in a more direct way. He devotes the last third of his book to a panoply of legal and institutional reform proposals to diminish criminality in politics. Given the deep and complex entrenchment of criminality that he himself had described in such detail earlier in the book, cutting through all parties and regions, one wonders, What could possibly motivate such reforms? What exactly are the subject positions and sources of power of the agents who are to undertake these rather far-reaching changes?

It is worth asking these questions, since the books themselves implicitly gesture toward possible paths of inquiry along those lines. Some of the more absorbing parts of Vaishnav's book consist of individualized portraits he sketches of various notable criminal politicians (especially from Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, the primary sites of his fieldwork). A near-constant theme in these descriptions is how almost all of the criminals in Bihar began their journey through private forces organized to suppress left-wing peasant mobilizations against dominant landowning groups, with a similar pattern in Andhra Pradesh. One can add to that the fact that the Shiv Sena, another prominent presence in the book, began as a reaction to the influence of the labor unions among the working classes in Mumbai. The doling out of nominal charity among their constituents has led to the epithet "Robin Hood" being regularly used to describe criminal politicians in the Indian media—a description that Vaishnav cites in the book (20, 75, 106, 289). However, it would appear that their origin story is linked to maintaining existing social hierarchies rather than any redistributive subversions of the social order. Vaishnav cites a well-known comment by an Indian prime minister that only 15 percent of the resources intended for social welfare reach the poor (66). Corruption, in this case, actively negates any redistributive agenda. There are two interesting discussions in the book where these themes could have become relevant: one regarding social domination (in chapter 5) and another on why constituencies reserved for Dalits (the most disadvan-

tagged group in the Indian caste hierarchy) see a striking decline in criminal politicians. But Vaishnav opts for "competition" as the key analytical axis for both areas of discussion, (i.e., competition among dominant groups for the former, and the lack of competition [due to reservation] for the latter) rather than hierarchy and power. From Pierce's work, one gets a similar sense of the relations of power, and control over the distribution of key resources (especially oil and land), that play a part in the Nigerian story. Pierce is aware of this. In the introduction he writes, "The use of the term [corruption] lies at the center of how moral questions about distributions of public goods are negotiated" (4). His main focus—this is not a criticism but an acknowledgment—however, is on the discursive dimension, which therefore allows one to pursue some further analytical connecting of dots.

That path might lead to rethinking the basic premises with which we began this essay. The cohabitation of democracy and corruption seems puzzling only if we consider democracy primarily as a system for choosing the best public officials and holding them accountable. Democracy, however, is also a form of generating power, demanding public control over decisions on how resources are used and distributed, a form of power that has, historically, been a matter of concern and mis-giving for those at the top of existing social hierarchies. Criminality and corruption, on the evidence these two books present, seem to run counter to that demand—working in the service of existing structures of dominance and hierarchies against the tides of democratic mobilizations. They are a reaction to the democratic potential not just to generate public goods but also to make goods public. Under certain conditions, such counter-moves assume cruder forms requiring looting and murder. Under other conditions, they can be achieved by ensuring that the impersonal norms of the state are subtly bent to the will of the powerful—turning public goods into private profit. Corruptions appear, in this altered framework, not as distortions of the democratic marketplace, but as maneuvers of counter-democratic power.

The technocratic discourse of corruption ends up isolating incidences of corrupt or criminal behavior as dysfunctionalities in the system and of individuated instances of malfeasance. To take the threads of these books seriously requires us to challenge that act of isolation, to situate corruption within a larger discussion of how hierarchies and dominations are perpetuated in political and social life, and to question the wall

of separation between social and political power that such an isolation presumes and hence perpetuates. Corruption, as a phenomenon understood in its true breadth of entanglements, shows us that the public officials are not abstracted from private power relations in society, and private actors are not bereft of public political capacities. When talking about corruption, it is necessary to also talk about who wields power and how, and to offer anticorruption initiatives not simply as packages of technocratic “reforms” and civic education, but as a part of broader democratic movements that seek to challenge those existing relations of power.

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Notes

1. Pierce, *Moral Economies of Corruption*, 21. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Vaishnav, *When Crime Pays*, 9. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

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CRIME, POLITICS, AND THE FUTURE OF INDIA'S DEMOCRACY

Milan Vaishnav

The review essays by Sunila S. Kale, Sandipto Dasgupta, and Michael J. Watts on my book, *When Crime Pays: Money and Muscle in Indian Politics*, and Steven Pierce's *Moral Economies of Corruption: State Formation and Political Culture in Nigeria* raise a number of theoretically interesting questions about corruption, criminality, and their historical embeddedness. In particular, they force a rethinking of the commonly accepted notion that in many contexts the state, far from being seen as the remedy to citizens' core grievances, is the very source of the grievance to begin with. Paradoxically, elected representatives who helm the state apparatus are often the only actors with the authority and delegated powers to

reform the state, something that they have few incentives to do.

My book *When Crime Pays* tries to provide a framework for understanding why one-third of elected parliamentarians in India are under criminal indictment at the time of their election. This nexus of crime and politics is present in both state and national politics; is geographically widespread; afflicts parties across the political spectrum; and appears to be growing, rather than shrinking, at a time when information about the private lives of India's political class is more widespread than ever before.

In her review, Kale makes an important intervention that requires discussion here. She argues that one potential explanation for crime in modern Indian politics can be found in the colonial period, when the law was a “weapon wielded to control populations, territory, and trade in the service of an inequitable colonial order.” As such, it is perhaps no surprise that Indians do not seem bothered by political candidates who regularly run afoul of the law. Kale is most certainly right on this score: for many Indians, the state is an obstacle that needs to be circumvented or manipulated, as opposed to a popular enabler that can be harnessed with ease. Therefore, many voters perceive criminal politicians who are willing to throw their weight around to “get things done” as a potential lifeline. This argument is also in sync with Pierce's contention in his book on Nigeria that corruption in that African country has an expressly performative aspect to it; voters are rarely ignorant about their politicians' predilections, but they may find rational reasons to downplay or discount them.

There can be no more telling example of an historically distrusted state institution than the Indian police, whose operations are still guided by the Police Act of 1861, a colonial-era law enacted by a foreign imperial power more concerned with coercing subjects than providing community policing for citizens. As a result, many Indians continue to view the police as the criminal entity, not the lawbreaking politician who is willing to use his or her clout to get local police officials to register their complaints (which often fall on deaf ears, especially if you hail from the “wrong” caste or community). Although *When Crime Pays* does not dwell on the deep historical legacies that contribute to today's marriage between crime and politics, the concluding chapter does make reference to the enduring, path-dependent legacy of the *zamindar* (landlord). In many parts of India, the *zamindar* doubled as the local state—dispensing justice, collecting revenue, and providing local order. The