

RETHINKING CORRUPTION

Why have anti-corruption efforts often failed? Current thinking on corruption has largely overlooked the profound implications of its contested nature, which paradoxically makes it an effective yet highly dysfunctional “tool of government.” As a tool of government, it helps execute policies and guarantees a degree of political order. Moreover, anti-corruption measures are wielded as political instruments, strategically embraced by governments and oppositions to further their respective agendas. Based on an analysis of Russia, Brazil, and the United States, *Rethinking Corruption* takes a fresh look at corruption and critiques the prevailing view of anti-corruption policies. Embarking on a captivating journey through these countries, this book encompasses the notion of legal corruption and invites a comprehensive reconsideration of corruption, with a focal point on questions of economic and political equality.

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Rethinking Corruption

Reasons Behind the Failure of Anti-Corruption Efforts

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a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009468800

DOI: 10.1017/9781009468824

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First published 2024

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-009-46880-0 Hardback

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Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-46880-0 — Rethinking Corruption
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*To the memory of Sergio Picci, who tried to teach me how
to build things*

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Preface

The idea for this book has been with me for quite some time. It gradually emerged as I observed cracks in the prevailing paradigm about the timeless question of corruption and how to fight it. This paradigm established itself approximately in the mid-1970s, when researchers trained in economics applied their rational choice tool kit to the study of corruption and displaced previous theories of a sociological nature. Over time, I became convinced that certain themes that are often seen as almost incidental characteristics of corruption within the current debate, such as the difficulty in defining it and the politicization of its fight, deserve much more centrality. In fact, I believe that to truly understand corruption, we must move these themes from the edges to the center of the debate.

At the beginning of this project, I realized that to make progress in this direction, I needed to take a broad perspective and to adopt a multidisciplinary approach. This consideration made my research more complex, also because it is based on detailed studies of three different countries: Brazil, Russia, and the United States. For these reasons too, the assistance I received from colleagues and friends was invaluable.

Some of the ideas that I present in Chapter 3 result from joint work with Laarni Escresa. Other ideas of this book started to develop as Alberto Vannucci and I wrote a book in Italian humorously titled *Zen and the Art of Fighting Corruption*. I am grateful to Marco Albertini, Michele Aleceovich, Rachel Brewster, Nicola Bruno, Tito Cordella, Giulia Gortani, Ian Jacobs, Michael Johnston, Elisabetta Lalumera, Mark Philp, Shitong Qiao, Mauro Sylos Labini, Federico Varese, and Maurizio Viroli for reading part of the manuscript, and to Octavio Amorim Neto, Osvaldo Croci, Luciano da Ros, Brandon Garrett, Fernanda Odilla, Benedetto Ponti, Matthew Taylor, Daniel Treisman, and Alberto Vannucci for finding the time to read it in its entirety. Also, two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript provided

valuable feedback. Without the comments and criticisms of these persons, I would not have completed this project.

I had the fortune of discussing particular questions of interest with Larry Bartels, Elizabeth David-Barrett, Marco Bertamini, Luigi Curini, Mario del Pero, Esther Dweck, John French, Giampiero Gallo, Diego Gambetta, Miriam Golden, Tatiana Guarnizo Useche, Sergiei Guriev, Rodrigo Janot, Nia Johnson, Daniel Kaufmann, Judith Kelley, Paul Lagunes, Alena Ledeneva, Ben Noble, Lucio Renno, Richard Sakwa, Luca Savorelli, Dmitriy Skougarevsk, James Snyder, and Jennifer Wolak. I thank all of them. In the last few years, I also presented my developing ideas at various workshops: at the European University at Saint Petersburg, Jindal University, the University of Perugia, Tbilisi State University, Duke University Law School, the University of St. Andrews, and the Federal University of Santa Catarina. I am grateful to these institutions for hosting me and to the audiences of those meetings for their comments and criticisms.

I completed this book while on sabbatical leave. I thank my *alma mater*, the University of Bologna, for the support. I also acknowledge funding from the Italian Ministry of University and Research under project PRIN 2022 “Scalpo” (State Capture and Legal Political Corruption). At Cambridge University Press, I am indebted to Robert Dreesen, for his help in making this book a reality, to Sable Gravesandy and Narmadha Nedounsejane, for their work on the production of the volume.

This book that emerged from such efforts, and collaborations, has a contrarian slant, but it does not contradict a basic element of the prevailing paradigm, according to which corruption is worse than bad. In this regard, my long journey has not taken me far from the point of departure. At a certain point in my work, a literal lack of movement was imposed by the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, I wrote a significant part of this book not far from where a gifted political scientist who also was interested in corruption, Niccolò Machiavelli, famously taught us to forget about “*cose*,” things, as they are imagined, to consider how they are in reality. This book is my attempt to do so.