

Materially Unfree

Corruption as a societal diagnosis and the political forms of unfreedom in Machiavelli, Davenant, and Bolingbroke

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The following essay will examine a semantic change in one of the republican tradition's key terms, "corruption." This change can be traced back to oppositional polemics against the political order in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, polemics which more often than not were articulated through a republican vocabulary. It occurred, I argue, as a reaction to the very gradual birth of the modern state in England after the Glorious Revolution. Behind this exercise in historical semantics run two other, more theoretical arguments. The first is that a republican understanding of corruption is tightly interwoven with an understanding of the subjective state of not being free. The second, which will only be hinted at, is that the diagnosis of "universal corruption", so called by Lord Bolingbroke, is semantically distinct from other attempts to describe the social ills of modernity. As such, it might be worth retrieving again today.

In that sense, my essay is a late addition to attempts in the past twenty years to make the republican tradition relevant for contemporary political debates. The different attempts to revive the republican tradition have also, however, almost exclusively focused on what one could call republicanism's normative vocabulary. Michael Sandel (1996) has attempted to reintroduce a republican concept of civic virtue; Quentin Skinner (1998) and Philip Pettit (1997) have challenged a liberal conception of freedom as absence of interference, replacing it with a concept of freedom as absence of dependence or domination; the Italian philosopher Maurizio Viroli (1995) has argued for a republican concept of "patriotism" as an alternative to both cosmopolitan and nationalist currents in contemporary political thinking. This essay instead examines the potential in a less discussed

term (but see Lessing, 2011; Viroli, 2012) within the diagnostic vocabulary of the republican tradition.

CORRUPTION OF THE REPUBLIC IN MACHIAVELLI'S *DISCOURSES*

There is a great deal of literature on the phenomenon of corruption within the disciplines of economy and political science, especially within the studies of developing third-world economies. But as Seumas Miller (n.d.) – one of the few contemporary philosophers who has written on corruption – has pointed out, this literature is only rarely interested in analyzing different concepts of corruption. Typically, it has been defined as a form of economic criminality, the paradigmatic example of which would be the civil servant taking bribes in order to give someone preferential treatment. In a classic essay with the very telling title, “Corruption and Political Development: A Cost-Benefit Analysis,” J.S. Nye (1990) defines corruption as “behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise against certain types of private-regarding influence” (Nye, 1990, p. 966).¹ In another classic study, *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform*, Susan Rose-Ackerman discusses acts of corruption as examples of “unproductive rent seeking” (Rose-Ackermann, 1995, p.4, but see Johnston, 2005, for a partial repudiation of this view); it has as its primary societal consequence a clogging up of the smooth workings of a wealth-producing, efficient market. This definition is primarily legal and economic. Corruption is an illegal act performed for private benefit; its consequence is the hampering of economic development and the societal production of wealth.

This is not how “corruption” was used in the republican tradition, at least not in one of its most important texts, Machiavelli’s *Discourses*.² However, even

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- 1 Nye continues: “This definition [...] excludes any consideration of whether the behavior is in the public interest, since building the study of the effects of the behavior into the definition makes analysis of the relationship between corruption and development difficult” (Nye, 1990, p. 966). It is clear from the essay that “development” for Nye means economic growth.
 - 2 Earlier Italian thinkers had mentioned moral corruption as a threat to a free republic, but the concept is developed with far more semantic specificity in Machiavelli’s *Discourses* (Skinner, 1978, vol. 1, p. 165). One of the few attempts to systematically

though “*corruzione*” is a key concept in Machiavelli’s analysis of the historical examples from Titus Livius, and in the different political lessons he draws from this analysis, he never defines what corruption means, nor does he explicate the premises of its use. From the examples in *Discourses* it is clear, however, that for Machiavelli corruption does not describe single acts and is not conceived within a legal or economic framework. Instead he uses it as a political diagnosis. Drawing on the word’s etymological roots in rot and decay and, specifically, upon the Greek historian Polybius’ description of the decay of the different forms of government (Sasso, 1987), Machiavelli uses corruption to signify a kind of rot in the tissue of society, in the material which the political constitution is to give form.³ This rot is in *Discourses* connected to the Aristotelian distinction between having regard for the common good and only having regard for private gain, but it is not just to be understood as an individual moral failing, nor is it to be understood as a general lack of common ethos or as the simple existence of diverging opinions or political conflict. On the contrary, Machiavelli famously emphasizes that conflict – in *Discourses* between “*i grandi*” and “*i popoli*”, the patricians and plebeians of the roman republic – is necessary to keep the republic strong and vigorous. In a passage which both shows how corruption is a decay of the societal “*material*” understood as the collection of people whose lives the laws of the political community are to regulate, and that corruption is not connected to the absence of conflict, Machiavelli declares in the end of *Discourses* I.17 that “*dove la materia non è corrotta, i tumulti ed altri scandoli non*

examine Machiavelli’s use of “*corruzione*” is found in Alfredo Bonadeo’s *Corruption, Conflict and Power in the Works of Niccolò Machiavelli* (1973). However, Bonadeo is more interested in Machiavelli’s discussions of the causes and consequences of corruption than he is in an analysis of the concept itself. For the differences between what is sometimes called a liberal and a republican concept of corruption, see also Sara M. Schumer (1979); Peter Bratsis (2003) criticizes what he calls a “*bourgeois*” concept of corruption, but does not engage with the republican tradition.

- 3 The relevant passage in Polybius is this: “Just as rust is the corruption inherent within iron, and woodworm and grubs are the corruption inherent within timbers, and just as iron and wood, even if they remain unaffected by all external sources of harm, are still destroyed by these things that form within them, in the same way every political system has a source of corruption growing within it, from which it is inseparable” (Polybius, 2010, p. 378). It is worth noting that Polybius’ metaphors imply an image of society as something made out of organic material, but nevertheless created by humans; speaking of societal corruption does not lead to a conception of the political community as a living organism.

nuocono; dove la è corrotta, le leggi bene ordinate non giovano, se già non sono mosse da uno che con una estrema forza le faccia osservare, tanto che la material diventi buona.” (Machiavelli, 1997, p. 244); “when the material is not corrupt, tumults and other troubles do no harm, but, when it is corrupt, good legislation is of no avail unless it be initiated by someone in so extremely strong a position that he can enforce obedience until such time as the material has become good” (Machiavelli, 1997, p. 159).

How should we then understand this decay of the social fabric? I would like here to turn to an early essay, “Civic Humanism and its Role in Anglo-American Thought,” by J.C.A. Pocock. In this essay Pocock tries to articulate the meaning of corruption in the writings of Machiavelli and his contemporary Francesco Guicciardini. First of all, Pocock writes that they both understand corruption as the absence of civic virtue. But this absence is understood as more than the individual citizen’s inner lack of a moral compass, his inner choice to disregard the common good of the republic. On the contrary, civic virtue is dependent upon the fact that citizens are equal to one another; its absence, correspondingly, is caused by relations of inequality in the social fabric of the republic: “To lose one’s due share of authority, or to have more than one’s due, amounted to a loss of virtue, and since virtue consisted in a relation between equals its loss was not private but mutual” (Pocock, 1971, p. 89; see also Pocock, 1975, p. 184).

That corruption also entails a mutual loss of civic virtue can and I think should be understood in two ways: one weak, which regards the individual consequences of intersubjective inequality; one strong, which regards the political consequences of it. The development of one’s “civic virtue,” understood as a property of the individual, is dependent upon the fact that you are enmeshed in relations between equals. Only then are you able to identify with your co-citizens, only then are you free to identify with the common interests of the political community. But, at the same time, Pocock assumes – like Hannah Arendt – that Machiavelli’s concept of “virtù” has as much to do with “virtuosity,” the ability to act quickly and adequately, to navigate difficult circumstances, as it has to do with moral virtue (Arendt, 2006, p. 151). A virtuous republic is not (just) a republic whose citizens are morally virtuous, it is also a republic which possesses virtuosity. Understood this way, civic virtue can be recognized as the ability of a political community to act adequately, to navigate difficult circumstances. It is the republic’s ability to uphold itself as a free political community within the vicissitudes of secular time.

According to Pocock, Machiavelli thus has a threefold understanding of civic virtue. It is a moral compass, but it is also dependent upon the way the individual is positioned within intersubjective relations, and it is also connected to a diagnosis

of the health of the political community as such. This is mirrored in Pocock's description of the civic humanist understanding of corruption:

"[Corruption is] first, the degenerative tendency to which all particular forms of government are prone; second, the specific cause of that degeneration, which is the dependence of some men upon other men when they should be depending upon all and upon themselves; and third, the moral degeneration of the individual who, in these circumstances, is prevented from developing his virtue by identifying his particular good with the good of all. The climax of this corruption arrives when he finds his world controlled by an irrational Fortune instead of by the virtue of political man. Time, which cannot be conceptualized as qualitative change, is now in command." (Pocock, 1971, p. 88)

Like civic virtue, corruption is scalable at a subjective, an intersubjective, and an institutional level. At each level it is the antithesis of civic virtue. Furthermore, Pocock gives the intersubjective level precedence – it is the cause both of the individual's "moral degeneration" and of the "degenerative tendency" of the forms of government.

In the ideally virtuous republic the citizens are equal in the sense that they are only dependent upon themselves and upon the political community in its totality, Pocock writes. In the republican tradition this has often been articulated as the fact that the *res publica* should be governed not by men, but by laws, which the citizens themselves have chosen or at least consented to. But Pocock's exact formulation does not point toward the form and structure of government. It relates to the tissue of intersubjective relations. This tissue is corrupt when it is dominated by relations of dependency, which give some men unbridled power over other men, and leave these other men unfree, at least if we accept the argument by Quentin Skinner (1998) and Philip Pettit (1997, p. 21cc), namely that a fundamental premise in republican thought is the definition of freedom as non-dependency or non-domination. Both Skinner and Pettit understand domination as a consequence of unbridled inequality, of relations of dependency leading to situations where the powerless are forced to constantly take the interest and demands of the powerful into consideration. This means that they are not free to follow their own interests, but also that they are not free to take into regard the common good. However, neither Pettit nor Skinner connects this analysis of what it means to not be free with the republican concept of corruption. In my interpretation, corruption for Machiavelli is a diagnosis of political unfreedom understood materially, as a phenomenon regarding not the formal rights of the citizen or the structures and procedures of the government, but the interpersonal relations which in a sense precede the political forms – our laws and institutions

– which are, at least in the public, political realm, to be given form by our laws and institutions. In such an interpretation one should note that the “materia” of the republic is not its population understood as an aggregate of individuals, but its population understood as individuals always already enmeshed in intersubjective relations. To follow the vocabulary of Pettit, a republican concept of corruption entails an anthropology, which is neither collectivistic nor atomistic, but rather holistic (Pettit, 1993, p. 166).

It is these relations of inequality which cause both institutional and moral degradation. How this happens can be seen in an example from *Discourses* I.18, where Machiavelli discusses the Roman way of choosing consuls and more generally how a corrupted material can subvert the structures of government:

“Non dava il popolo romano il consolato e gli altri primi gradi della città, se non a quelli che lo domandavano. Questo ordine fu nel principio buono, perché e’ non gli domandavano se non quelli cittadini che se ne giudicavano degni, ed averne la repulsa era ignominioso; sí che, per esserne giudicati degni, ciascuno operava bene. Diventò questo modo, poi, nella città corrotta, perniziosissimo: perché non quelli che avevano piú virtù, ma quelli che avevano piú potenza, domandavano i magistrati e gl’impotenti, comeché virtuosi, se ne astenevano di domandarli per paura.” (Machiavelli, 1997, p. 246)

“The Roman people had never given the consulate or any other important office in the city except to such as had applied for the post. This institution was at the outset good, because only such citizens applied for posts as judged themselves worthy to fill them, and to be rejected was looked upon as ignominious; so that everybody behaved well in order to be judged worthy. This procedure, when the city became corrupt, was extremely harmful; because not only those who had more virtue, but those who had more power, applied for magistracies, and the powerless, though virtuous, refrained from applying through fear.” (Machiavelli, 1970, pp. 161-162)

In the corrupted city filled with people with too much and too little power, a once good institution degenerates so that the powerful apply for positions they are not suited for and the virtuous dare not apply out of fear. As Pocock emphasizes, an individual enmeshed within a corrupt social tissue cannot live in any meaningful way, and therefore cannot see himself as a free and equal citizen. He cannot develop his virtue by identifying his own interests with the common good. Whereas those with too much power become deluded by arrogance and ambition, by their regard for their own particular fate, the powerless become fearful and servile. They are forced to constantly track the interests of those particular persons above them, and are therefore not able to act according to their

moral compass.⁴ The result is the degeneration, or, more precisely, the subversion of a governmental form: the procedure through which consuls and other magistrates are chosen.

One can ask, however, whether Machiavelli actually insists on giving the intersubjective scale causal precedence. Many formulations in *Discourses* point instead to a kind of interdependence between the three levels. “Così come gli buoni costume, per mantenersi, hanno bisogno delle leggi; così le leggi, per osservarsi, hanno bisogno di buoni costume,” (“just as for the maintenance of good customs laws are required, so if laws are to be observed there is need of good customs”) Machiavelli writes in a discussion of the impossibility of rectifying “una città corrottissima” (1997, p. 245; Machiavelli, 1970, p. 160). In other instances it seems that the degeneration of individual morality is named as a cause of corruption rather than its consequence. This seems to be the case, for instance, in Machiavelli’s discussions of luxury. It would be more precise, then, to think of the three scales as interdependent. It is possible for imbalances in the institutional structure of a polity or corrupt moral norms to produce social inequality, and thus corrupt the social tissue.

There is also something slightly misleading in Pocock’s formulation at the end of my quote. Superficially, its meaning is clear: just as civic virtue is an index of the ability to cope with secular change, corruption produces an inability to withstand change, an inability to be in command of one’s own fate. But that the subject of this inability is “political man” is simultaneously a fruitful and a not very precise suggestion. For even though Machiavelli doesn’t exactly ignore the subjective experience of life within a corrupt state – the ending of *Discourses* I.10 is as much an indictment of corruption as it is an indictment of tyranny – his main focus in *Discourses* is upon how to establish and maintain a free republic in secular time. Corruption, understood as a kind of rot in the tissue of society, is only discussed in order to analyze such a republic’s material condition of possibility. In fact, rather than making all constitutional forms unstable – which is what Pocock with an allusion to Polybius suggests: corruption is “the degenerative tendency to which all particular forms of government are prone” – in *Discourses* corruption is uniquely connected with the transition from republic to

4 This aspect of not being free is only hinted at by Philip Pettit in his first major discussion of freedom as non-domination (see Pettit, 1997, p. 61), but is explicitly spelled out in his later restatement of his position in the essay “Connecting the Dots”. He also makes it clear why this becomes visible through a definition of freedom and its opposite as non-domination and domination: it is often in order to *avoid* interference that the powerless are forced to track the interests of the powerful (Pettit, 2006, p. 306).

monarchy or tyranny. In *Discourses* I.55 Machiavelli writes that the provinces of Naples, the Papal States, the Romagna, and Lombardy are inherently corrupt, both because the inhabitants are prone to idle luxury, and because many powerful nobles have retainers and other people who are beholden to them. Therefore, they are “al tutto inimico d’ogni civiltà” (“entirely inimical to any form of civic government”):

“La ragione è questa, che dove è tanto la materia corrotta che le leggi non bastano a frenarla, vi bisogna ordinare insieme con quelle maggior forza; la quale è una mano regia che con la Potenza assoluta ed eccessiva ponga freno alla eccessiva ambizione e corruttela de’ potenti.” (Machiavelli, 1997, p. 311)

“The reason for this is that, where the material is so corrupt, laws do not suffice to keep it in hand; it is necessary to have, besides laws, a superior force, such as appertains to a monarch, who has such absolute and overwhelming power that he can restrain excesses due to ambition and the corrupt practices of the powerful.” (Machiavelli, 1970, p. 246)

Absolute monarchy, where one man rules beyond any law, seems to be the adequate political form to a corrupt societal tissue, where men are not equal, but everyone is enmeshed in particular relations of inequality. But would such a monarchy be stable? Would it be able to cope with the contingencies of secular time? A possible answer is given in a short discussion from *Discourses* I.17. The subject is, again, whether a corrupt people can establish a free republic:

“E debbesi presopporre per cosa verissima, come che quell principe con tutta la sua stirpe si spenga, mai non si può ridurre libera; anzi conviene che l’un principe spenga l’altro; e senza creazione d’uno nuovo signore non si posa mai, se già la bontà d’uno, insieme con la virtù, non la tenesse libera; ma durerà tanto quella libertà, quanto durerà la vita di quello.” (Machiavelli, 1997, p. 243)

“It should be assumed, then, as a basic and established principle, that to a state which has been under a prince and has become corrupt, freedom cannot be restored even if the prince and the whole of his stock be wiped out. On the contrary, what will happen is that one prince will wipe out another, and without the creation of a new lord it will never settle down unless indeed the goodness of some one man, conjoined with virtue, should keep it free. Such freedom, however, will last only as long as he lives.” (Machiavelli, 1970, pp. 157-158)

As the adequate form of a corrupted societal tissue, absolute monarchy – or tyranny – seems to rise from its own the ashes. In that sense, it is both constantly changing and strangely stable. If nothing else, passages like these show how far from Polybius Machiavelli’s conception of the relationship between corruption and political decay really is.

But, even though the introduction of “political man” seems misleading, it is also potentially fruitful. The experience of life as a subject within a corrupt society might only be passed in glancing by Machiavelli, but it could be developed in ways that not only point to questions of fearfulness and arrogance, but also to questions of temporality. This is one of the semantic developments which happened in early eighteenth century England.

ENGLAND, FINANCE, CORRUPTION

It is well known that a republican concept of corruption played an important role for the political opposition against the English monarchy in the decades after the Glorious Revolution. There has been relative scarcity, however, in actual analyses of what corruption meant in the polemical texts of the period. Even though it is generally acknowledged to be used as part of an attack against a specific set of governmental practices and institutional innovations, for some reason it is also generally assumed that grumblings about societal or political corruption in early eighteenth century English texts are part of a more or less nostalgic attack against the transformation of eighteenth century England into a wealthy, but socially differentiated, commercial society.⁵

5 This is the case in what is still the most thorough examination of the use of corruption in post-interregnum English republicanism, chapter 12-14 in J.G.A. Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment*. Pocock emphasizes that corruption is used to criticize the consequences of the establishment of the national debt and the emergence of “paper credit” as a regular feature of society, and also emphasizes that it is connected to an analysis of how paper credit allows the executive to bribe members of parliament. But at the same time he repeatedly connects corruption to attacks upon a commercial society where cultural and social differentiation threatens archaic republican virtue. The germ of this – in my view, misunderstood – reading is found in his analysis of Machiavelli’s attacks upon the professional army (Pocock 1975, p. 200). But Machiavelli does not criticize the professional soldier simply because he is an index of societal specialization – in that case he might as well have attacked professional cloth-makers – he finds him problematic because the army is the ultimate source of political power

I want to challenge this last part of the argument. Drawing on an often explicitly Machiavellian vocabulary, these texts should instead be seen as attempts to diagnose the political problems inherent in, and the societal consequences of, what John Brewer (1989) coined the birth of the English “fiscal-military state” (see also Scott, 2000). As such, subtle, but important changes in their use of “corruption” can be traced. Corruption was still understood as decay in the societal tissue. The interplay between institutional form, intersubjective relations of dependency, and moral degradation was repeatedly stressed. But even though eighteenth century English writers still used corruption to diagnose how private relations of dependency subverted the political constitution and the nation’s ability to act forcefully, at the same time the concept gradually disconnected itself from tyranny and absolute monarchy as political forms. In fact, it was no longer used to analyze the movement from one constitutional form to the other. Instead, it was used to describe the consequences of a new type of power that had to do with the economic heft of the state apparatus. It was used to discuss how the administration of taxation, the establishment of salaried positions within the army, and the establishment of the national debt led to a kind of imbalance between the parts of England’s mixed constitution, and also to a deformation of the relationship between citizen and government. It became, one could say, a key term in the diagnosis of societal life in a nation where the citizens were dependent upon a state which is almost, but never quite, modern. At the same time, the texts increasingly glanced at the subjective experience of societal corruption. Ironically, Pocock’s “political man,” who was not very prominent in Machiavelli, is found in these later texts.

Since questions about state finances and military power were closely connected in the late seventeenth century, it comes as no surprise that references to corruption show up in pamphlets from the 1670s, 1680s, and 1690s whose main focus is the absolutist threat inherent in the establishment of a standing army under monarchic command. It is perhaps more surprising that there is scarcely any difference in the arguments of these pamphlets before and after the Glorious Revolution. In texts such as Andrew Marvell’s *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* (1677), Algernon Sidney’s *Discourses Concerning Government* (1681), Robert Molesworth’s *An Account of Denmark as it was in 1692* (1694), John Trenchard’s *An Argument, Shewing that a Standing Army is Inconsistent with A Free Government, and absolutely destructive to the Constitution of the English Monarchy* (1997), and in Andrew Fletcher’s *A Dis-*

(See also M. M. Goldsmith, 1991; Nicholson, 1996; Pocock, 1971, esp. page 93; Worden, 1991, 1994).

course of Government with Relation to Militias (1698) the analysis of what Pocock has called corruption by the executive is wholly subservient to the fear that an English monarch will use the power of a standing army to change the English constitution (Pocock 1975, p. 420). Only intermittently, the army and the court are seen, not as the institutions of sovereign power, but rather as institutions that grant the monarch too much economic influence over his parliament and his subjects.

This changes with Charles Davenant's two satirical pamphlets, *The True Picture of a Modern Whig* from the summer of 1701 – which was quickly printed in 6 editions – and *Tom Double Return'd out of the Country: Or, the True Picture of a Modern Whig, set forth in a Second Dialogue* from 1702.⁶ According to these pamphlets, the English constitution was not threatened by a standing army, but by a set of new financial instruments invented to administer the public debt. This debt exploded after the Glorious Revolution, mainly because William III engaged England in a protracted and costly war against France, leading to a tripling of governmental expenditure in the decades following the revolution, sharp rises in taxation, and the introduction of new types of financial instruments to borrow money (Brewer 1989; Dickson 1967; see also Harris 2007, p. 491). After 1688, the English parliament borrowed money through state lotteries and the selling of annuities, both of which produced paper credit, which could be resold thus creating a market for “paper money.” The security for these papers lay in the revenue from future taxation, effectively forcing the hand of later parliaments. Furthermore, in 1694, the Bank of England was established in order to lend money to the English government. From 1695 to 1700 a group of Whig noblemen, Davenant's “modern Whigs” – who had been active in the ousting of James II, but had now, as they held positions at William III's court, become much less beholden to the principles of pre-revolution Whiggism – dominated the cabinet of William III.

Tom Double, the very energetic anti-hero of Davenant's two satirical pamphlets – his interlocutor Mr. Whiglove is mainly there to ask questions and listen, both are called “under-spur-leathers to the late Ministry” on the title page of *A*

6 Though not as well known as many of the other neo-Machiavellian writers in seventeenth and eighteenth century England, Davenant was one of the leading political and economic thinkers of his day. According to Pocock (1975, p. 436cc) economic activity – trade – was seen by Davenant as something that both strengthened and corrupted the political nation; Pocock does not, however discuss what corruption meant for Davenant. Kustaa Multamäki (1997, p. 67cc) insists on the continuity between Davenant's and Machiavelli's concepts of corruption. He does not examine the semantic changes occurring in Davenant's pamphlets.

True Picture of a Modern Whig – willingly admits to have been part of every corrupt practice of the government since the revolution. He has sold positions at court for money, clipped money as a collector of taxes, attempted to buy an election in order to become member of parliament, and was and is deeply involved in the buying and selling of governmental papers of credit. Through these, he boasts, the whole of London – but not the countryside, alas – has been corrupted. They have invested in governmental debt and are now committed to defending the policies of the modern Whigs:

“[R]esolving, as we always did, to play a corrupt Game, it was highly necessary for us to form to our Selves a Strength that at all times might protect us in the Thefts and Depredations we propos’d to make upon the Publick; and could we have braver or bolder Troops to Fight in our Defence, than as it were an Army of Men with their Pockets full of Bank-Bills, Bank Stock, Malt and Lottery Tickets, Exchequer Bills, *East India* Stock, and who bore in their Hands Tallies instead of Staves and Truncheons?” – “having dipt London so deply in all these Loans; for the great Affection our Friends bear to their Tallies, Stocks, and Riches of the like kind in which they abound, subjects ‘em entirely to our direction, and makes ‘em have no more concern for the *Publick* of England, than they have for the Publick of *Japan*.” (Davenant, 1701, pp. 39, 42. See also Davenant, 1702, page 26.)

The economic dependence of those who invest in government debt forces them to track the interest of those in power, and not the interests of the nation. But since the people are also members of the electorate, and thus not entirely powerless – formally, they decide who should sit in parliament – it is necessary for the corrupt politicians to court them and track their interests, too.⁷ Enmeshed in corrupt, interpersonal relations, not only are the powerless dependent on the powerful, but the powerful turn out to be dependent upon the powerless, as well, thus not only unwilling to, but in a sense also unable to, follow the laws of the country or, for that matter, take regard of the common good. They are also unable to control their own fate, something that might have to do with the fact that Davenant wrote at a moment where the Whig “cabal” had just been ousted from power. In fact, most of *The True Picture of a Modern Whig* and *Tom Double Return’d*

7 See Davenant 1701, p. 34: “Every little Scoundrel got an Estate. We suffer’d ‘em to drink up the People’s Blood till they were out of Breath, and till their Eyes grew Red. In short, all Men cheated to what degree they pleas’d, which was wink’d at in hopes to make and secure a Party. Therefore all the busy Proling Fellows both in Town and Country, who hope to advance themselves, wish to see our Noble Friends restor’d to their former Power.”

out of the Country lets Tom account for the different strategies he and the other modern Whigs have used to keep their power and what they will do to regain it. But while Mr. Whiglove at the end of *The True Picture of a Modern Whig* seems to despair, Tom Double simply accepts that the future is out of their control:

“[L]eave the rest to Providence: Many things may happen to relieve us, some great Calamity may befall the nation; you shall see us lift up our Heads once more upon any fatal and publick Disaster.” (Davenant, 1701, p. 58)

According to Tom Double, one strategy to regain power would be the abolishment of parliament and the introduction of absolute monarchy. However, in Davenant’s two pamphlets the professional soldier and a standing army are not in themselves depicted as a threat to the English constitution. On the contrary, the soldiers are “brave Fellows and love their Country” (Davenant, 1701, p. 52), and are thus subject to Tom Double’s scorn and pity – and a source for further profiteering, since the English government were habitually unable to pay its arrears in specie. “Poor silly Rogues! their Honour forsooth led ‘em to fight for England abroad, but I play’d a much wiser Game, by joining with those who in the mean while were plundering their Country at home,” as he declares (Davenant, 1701, p. 31, see also 29, 36). But just as Tom Double inverts the logic of public credit – one shouldn’t increase public debt in order to finance wars, one should start wars in order to increase public debt, he argues (Davenant, 1701, p. 11) – he inverts the relationship between arbitrary government and corruption. Corruption is no longer a precondition for arbitrary government, arbitrary government is a means to continue the possibility of corrupt profiteering. It is, in fact, only because England is not yet wholly corrupted – according to Davenant, the countryside has not yet been entirely penetrated by the corrupt practices of the modern Whigs – that it might be necessary to have parliament dissolved and let the monarch rule “by his own will, and with a Standing-Army” (Davenant, 1701, p. 43).

In his polemic and highly entertaining pamphlets, Davenant argues that the expansion of the post-revolutionary English government and its new financial instruments corrupted the English polity. But his argument also produced subtle changes in the meaning of corruption. It made the connection between corruption and tyranny purely contingent: were it possible to corrupt the English countryside, there would be no need for arbitrary government. Furthermore, the individual consequences of living enmeshed in corrupt relations begin to change. Corruption seems not just to make the powerless but everyone dependent upon some particular other, thus forcing them to track the particular interests of

someone else. Corruption's moral threat to the powerful is thus no longer arrogance and ambition, but the prospect of making them unfree. Machiavelli repeatedly asserted that a good monarch, at least for a time, could counteract the effects of a corrupt societal tissue. According the logic of Davenant, this is no longer a possibility. Finally, life enmeshed within a corrupt social tissue is not just characterized by moral degradation, but also by a certain kind of temporality. Even though Tom Double is energetic and nimble, he and his kind are utterly unable to control their own fate. What in Machiavelli seemed the fate of a corrupt political community – its inability to sustain itself in secular time – is now seen as an aspect of subjective life within the corrupt polity.

Many of these changes are also found in the polemical texts of the very vocal opposition against Robert Walpole, who functioned as England's first "prime minister" in the 1720s and 1730s. As is well known, Walpole kept himself at power by using the economic resources of government to gain allies and manage parliament (Black, 2001). Even though he also kept England out of major wars and politically stable, a number of contemporary pamphlets, periodical essays – the most important was *The Craftsman* – and a series of literary satires by John Gay, Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, and Alexander Pope consistently described him as the orchestrator of a fundamentally corrupt society (Goldgar, 1976; Nicholson, 1994). At the same time these literary satires were at pains to portray life within the corrupt polity as utterly controlled by the contingencies of fortune, darkly suggesting how the English people not only willingly debased itself – "See all our Nobles begging to be slaves! / See all our Fools aspiring to be knaves!" as Alexander Pope wrote in his "Epilogue to the Satires, Dialogue I" (1737), a poem where the moral code of London is declared to be that "Not to be corrupted is the shame" – but was also, as is seen in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and in Henry Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*, driven through life by contingent, almost random events.

This aspect is visible in, but not the primary concern of, Lord Bolingbroke's *A Dissertation upon Parties*, which was published as a series of letters in *The Craftsman* from October 1733 to January 1734 and again in the fall of 1734.⁸

8 There is an unfortunate tendency to dismiss Bolingbroke's writings as overly strategic, suffused with nostalgia and/or derivative of earlier writers in the English, republican tradition (See Kramnick 1968; Burt 1992; Skinner 2002). Only Burt emphasizes any semantic changes within Bolingbroke's republican vocabulary. Bolingbroke narrows the meaning of virtue down to mean support for the existing constitution, which are defended by Bolingbroke himself and his fellow patriots, Burt asserts (Burt 1992, p. 90). Accordingly, corruption simply means support for Walpole's government. It is

Instead, Bolingbroke develops the dissociation of corruption and tyranny which Davenant's text had begun. Throughout the nineteen letters, Bolingbroke structures his argument by a distinction between two types of governmental overreach. Before 1688, Bolingbroke writes, political conflict in England stood between those who defended the liberty of the citizens expressed – among other things – through parliament, and those who defended the royal prerogative and divine authority. This battle regarding political sovereignty and constitutional form, its expression open disagreement, implicitly assumed that the basis of political power was military and physical force. Now, however, the conflict stands between those who support the current English constitution, and those who argue that it is necessary for the smooth functioning of the political nation that the government manages parliament as well as possible (Bolingbroke, 1997, p. 95, 186). Hence, the main threat to the English constitution is the economic power of the government – Bolingbroke bluntly dismisses the threat of a standing army as irrelevant for contemporary English politics (Bolingbroke, 1997, page 93) – and governmental overreach does not result in open conflict, but rather in political and social corruption.

“In a word, they began to see that the foundations were laid of giving a great power to the crown indirectly, as the prerogative, which they had formerly dreaded, could give directly, and of establishing universal corruption,” Bolingbroke writes – “they” designating patriots who formerly fought the prerogative, and were now part of the opposition against Walpole (Bolingbroke, 1997, p. 173). This indirect power is founded upon the institutional inventions in the decades following the Glorious Revolution. Walpole's power derives from his management of governmental debt, which not only allows government to grow larger, thus creating more salaried positions and other funds with which to corrupt representatives in parliament and other politically important people, but also changes the nature of England's larger economy, burdening tradesmen and farmers with high taxes while letting those who place their fortunes in the papers of public credit earn vast amounts of money. The price for this, however, is their dependency upon the government, a dependency which makes them utterly unable to control their own fate: “The main springs that turn, or may turn, the artificial wheel of credit, and make the paper estates that are fastened to it, rise or

not important for my reading of Bolingbroke's text to judge whether he was sincere or insincere in presenting his argument, but I do think Burt's misrepresents the argument of *A Dissertation upon Parties*, which pivots around the fact that corruption is a type of threat the existing English constitution has no safeguards against.

fall, lurk behind the veil of the treasury”, as Bolingbroke writes (Bolingbroke, 1997, p. 182).

But, like Davenant, Bolingbroke never argues that corruption will in itself lead to a change in the constitutional form of the nation. He does not even hint at the fact that it would weaken the government’s ability to act forcefully. Instead his two final letters continually slip into a kind of subjunctive mode, where the crown becomes ever more powerful and thus ever more able to manage parliament either by bribing the electorate or giving salaried positions to members of parliament, and where the twin threats of overtaxation and financial speculation lead to an ever more corrupt social tissue. It is clear that this is a threat to the English constitution, but it is not clear that this threat should be understood as the threat of constitutional change. In a somewhat confused earlier passage, Bolingbroke describes the political consequences of corruption as something which is both like and unlike tyranny:

“[F]or a prince, or his minister, to become our tyrant, there is no need to abolish Parliaments; there is no need that he who is master of one part of the legislature, should endeavour to abolish the other two, when he can use, upon every occasion, the united strength of the whole; there is no need he should be a tyrant in the gross, when he can be so in detail, nor in name, when he can be so in effect; that for Parliaments to establish tyranny, there is no need therefore to repeal Magna Carta, or any other of the great supports of our liberty. It is enough, if they put themselves corruptly and servilely under the influence of such a prince, or such a minister.” (Bolingbroke, 1997, p. 95)

Corruption by the executive leads to a political situation which is effectively tyrannical, but is not tyranny as a constitutional form. When parliament has been corrupted, when it willingly puts itself under the influence – makes itself dependent upon – “a prince, or such a minister,” the crown can effectively reign supreme. But the formal protections of liberty are not destroyed: Parliament is not dissolved, the Magna Carta is not repealed. With Davenant, the relationship between tyranny and corruption had become contingent; with Bolingbroke it is as if corruption is the name of a different kind of unfreedom, one for which he has no name, but is yet not quite like tyranny. This is so because Bolingbroke’s tyranny of corruption is a form of dominion the subjects willingly submit to. Parliament willingly submits to the overtures of Walpole, the people willingly submit to the overtures of economic reward through investments in governmental bonds. As Bolingbroke writes in his first letter: “He that is corrupted, co-operates with he that corrupts. He runs to his arms at the first beckon; or, in order sometimes to raise the price, he meets him but half way” (Bolingbroke, 1997, p. 3).

But it is also so because corruption no longer bears any relation to changes in constitutional form, such as it did in Machiavelli. Instead, “universal corruption” is the name of a potentially permanent tension between the political form and the societal tissue of a polity which according to Bolingbroke is particular to the modern fiscal-military state. It diagnoses a governmental form which becomes stronger and more stable the more corrupt its citizens become. And it diagnoses the historical situation where we are formally free, Bolingbroke argues, if not materially so.

CODA

It is entirely possible to argue that Bolingbroke’s and Davenant’s polemical diagnoses are guided by short-sighted, polemical interests or are inadequate descriptions of the changes of eighteenth century England. But taken as a semantic figure, their diagnosis of societal corruption does not function as an attack upon commercial society or social differentiation, as it has often been read. In fact, questions of commerce are rarely mentioned in Davenant’s pamphlets or *A Dissertation upon Parties*; luxury is only mentioned in passing and is wholly subsumed by an analysis of the consequences of the establishment of the fiscal-military state; the problem of corruption is never that different social groups develop their own, particular perspective upon society. Put more generally, their – and the republican – use of corruption as a critical diagnosis simply does not relate to some degradation of the subject inherent in trade. Nor does it relate to any idea of *homo economicus*, to any idea of capitalism’s inherently degrading instrumental rationality. On the contrary, it presupposes that man is a political being – to be more precise, it presupposes what Phillip Pettit has called a “holist social ontology”. On this basis it designates the interplay between institutional imbalance, interpersonal relations of dependence, and subjective moral degradation. This degradation takes on the form of having to continually track the interest of some particular other, to let oneself be dominated by him or her, thus being unable to take regard for the common good. In eighteenth century England, it furthermore takes on the connotation of not being able to control one’s own fate, and to designate the state of being materially unfree, a mode of societal and subjective unfreedom emanating not from constitutional form, but from the structure of the social tissue of the polity, which undermines the freedom supposedly secured by constitutional form.

In this sense the concept of corruption might be worth retrieving today.

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