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KIRJA-ARVOSTELU

Miriam Rönqvist

Engels on Corruption

ABSTRAKTI / ABSTRACT

Kirja-arvio käsittelee johtavan saksalaisen korruptiotutkija Jens Ivo Engelsin kahta laajaa tutkimusta. Arviossa Engelsin havainnot yhdistetään Suomen lähihistorian kuuluisimpaan ”lautakasajupakkaan” eli silloisen pääministeri Matti Vanhasen tapaukseen vuodelta 2009.

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Artikkeli kuuluu Jyväskylän yliopistossa toteutettavan Suomen Akatemian rahoittaman projektin In search of corruption and bad governance practices: Swedish and Finnish experiences, ca 1614–1917 (CorGo) tuotoksiin.

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Figure 1. Engels, Jens Ivo, *The History of Corruption: From the Early Modern Period to the 20th Century* (*Die Geschichte der Korruption. Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*. S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2014, 423 pages)



Figure 2. Engels, Jens Ivo, *Is Everything Merely Bought? Corruption in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1949* (*Alles nur gekauft? Korruption in der Bundesrepublik seit 1949*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 2019, 399 pages)

In 2009, the Finnish press reported that the Center Party politician and Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen was resigning due to medical and private reasons. However, it occurred as the party's image was suffering following reports of undeclared campaign funding, and later accusations by the media that focused on Vanhanen personally. Investigative journalists claimed that the Prime Minister had accepted gifts in form of construction material for his private home. The outraged politician countered that these accusations bore no truth and in turn an investigation of the media outlet ensued. The claim was never tried in court. Nevertheless, Vanhanen was lastingly affected by the allegations.¹

It is precisely this particular air of suspicion that Jens Ivo Engels, historian and professor at Technische Universität Darmstadt, diagnoses as one of the catalysts of modern corruption criticism. Engels is one of Germany's foremost experts on the history of corruption and has published numerous works on the topic, among others *The History of Corruption: From the Early Modern Period to the 20th Century* (S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2014) and *Is Everything Merely Bought? Corruption in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1949* (Wbg Theiss, Darmstadt, 2019). In combination, both works encompass more than 500 years with the aforementioned ranging from the 16th century to the 20th century (with some cursory pointers towards cases of political micropolitics in the 2000s and 2010s when the book was published) and the second ranging from 1949 to the 2010s. Regarding both the chronology and underlying themes, Engels' second book follows up organically by focusing on the time after World War II and the newly founded Republic of Germany, and after 1989 the united Republic of Germany. Naturally, both works differ from each other in several ways, not only because the historian states at the outset of *Is Everything Merely Bought?*

This book is no history of 'corruption' since 1945. Buying of votes, bribery, entanglement, patronage, micropolitics, backroom deals and the covert practices of power are not the object of this study. At least not directly: It focuses on debates and scandals that deal with these phenomena.²

Another main difference certainly is the geographical scope. Whereas the *History of Corruption* (2014) comprises a broader European perspective with the main focus on Germany, Great Britain and France and to a lesser degree Spain and Italy, the focus is put on Germany in *Is Everything Merely Bought* (2019). Nevertheless, German events are contextualized within an international framework.

The starting point of the *History of Corruption* (2014) is the early modern period in which absolute monarchs relied on favoured ministers (*Günstlingsminister*) and mistresses as part of their courts. From there, the focus moves forward in time as Engels follows cases of corruption, or rather micropolitics, to the French Revolution and its moral aspiration to rid the country of corrupt and decadent practices. It extends to the fight against "old corruption" in Great Britain, against the patrons of the *Caciquismo* in Spain and the *trasformismo* in Italy before finally targeting the period of radicalisation between the World Wars. As is shown, the national socialists portrayed the Weimar Republic as a state ridden with corrupt practices. Engels' *History of Corruption* is simultaneously a history of corruption criticism (*Korruptionskritik*). Thus, the historian does not tire to remind the reader of the difference between actual cases of corruption (practices) and the interpretation of said events. Methodologically, Engels attempts to follow this dividing line even if the depiction of practices and interpretations are unbalanced in favour of the latter. This might be one of the reasons for the aforementioned proclamation in the later book (2019) which is not supposed to be read as a 'history of corruption' but explicitly focuses on the debates accompanying these cases.

Returning to the *History of Corruption* Engels views the French Revolution as a caesura, ending the premodern general perception of corruption. In the early modern period, practices of micropolitics did not automatically have the negative connotation that marks the modern era until today. Prior to this, peoples' evaluation depended on the political actors' motives, agendas and reasoning – if motivated by

the common good, the actors' deeds could be considered legitimate. Condemned were practices that were conducted secretly and that were exclusively motivated by self-interest. This distinction disappeared in the modern interpretation that lifted up a moral standard which forbade politicians to act egoistically. Consequently, the perception of corruption remained a child of its own time, adapting and changing according to the moral compass of corruption criticism. According to Engels, it should be borne in mind, however, that corruption criticism could prevalently serve a purpose beyond the revelation of indecent political conduct. Often, it was instrumentalised in order to discredit political opponents. Furthermore, corruption criticism frequently originated within the political elite itself – those members accusing the corrupt system were ultimately the ones benefitting from it. As indicated above, Engels finds two operating terms especially beneficial for his oeuvre: micropolitics (*Mikropolitik* cf. Engels 2014, 28-35) and 'Normenkonkurrenz' (behavioural norms in competition, cf. Engels 2014, 71-75). The first concept encompasses practices such as favours and gift-giving, patronage, network-building, etc. while not carrying the automatic negative value-judgement the term 'corruption' conveys. The latter, 'Normenkonkurrenz', which he links primarily to the early modern period highlights the manner in which conflicting and ambiguous norms could co-exist simultaneously.

It is illustrated as well that corruption criticism in the media can have problematic dimensions, e.g. relating to current events in the 2000s such as the depiction of mass demonstrations in Thailand in 2006 and 2013/2014 (2014, p. 367). Engels indicates conclusively that the critics of exaggerated anti-corruption campaigns have pointed out that these potentially have a de-politicising impact. This means that if political conflicts are reduced to a criticism of corruption by means of discourse, the political dimension disappears in favour of a moral one. Ultimately, this manner of discussion will not be able to solve political conflicts. To sum up, the modern corruption debate is centered around moral, the distinction between private and public-political, the aim to draw lines and to categorize, the attempt to avoid 'Normenkonkurrenz' and micropolitics, the fear of financial actors intervening with politics, the conception of global centres and peripheries and the opposition between moral regress and political progress (2014, p. 370). Present day corruption criticism has furthermore a global dimension because NGOs such as *Transparency International* have come into existence. In both of his works, Engels illustrates the metaphors that mark the corruption discourse. On one hand, good political practices are described as transparent and clean, corruption on the other hand is alluded to with adjectives such as opaque, muddy, and dirty. That this metaphorical discourse extends to the North as well becomes evident in combination with the case of Matti Vanhanen described above. According to an article published on 24th of September 2009 "the opposition considers Matti Vanhanen so compromised due to the campaign funding scandal that only his resignation could clean the democracy".³

As stated above, Engels articulates the futile attempt to strongly separate spheres for the sake of transparency in today's modern lives in 2014 and 2019. It stands to reason that this has been further amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020: as people mostly work from home and their multiple roles and professional and private identities are bound to overlap constantly, the juxtaposition of private and public-political will be rendered virtually non-existent.

As Engels mentions initially in the *History of Corruption* the systematic research on corruption in Germany is still largely a research desideratum, especially since debates on corruption seem to be entirely absent after 1945. In addition to that, he opens up for future research that apart from politics comprises for instance the financial world or the world of sports. All of which the historian focuses on in *Is Everything Merely Bought?* (2019). The starting point of Engels' study is the German people's apparent gloomy outlook on the degree of corruption in politics. Political actors are viewed as more or less susceptible to corrupt practices. An assumption that in turn influences the discourse on corruption. By systematically analysing

the debates that followed cases of corruption and the role of the different actors that partook of and shaped the discourse (e.g. the media) Engels succeeds in tracing this mentality back to its origin. One of the central conclusions he draws is an appeal for a pragmatic and less morally judgmental outlook on the corruption discourse, something he formulates in his *History of Corruption* as well.

Engels' works are highly relevant because they are not limited to explaining corruption or micropolitics as historical phenomena or limit themselves to a description of historical events but rather aim to render the reader sensitive for the interpretations, mechanisms and criticisms that form our perception of politics in general and debates on corruption in the media in particular. In times of 'fake news' and populist politics, world leaders can present themselves as outspoken 'men of the people' who gain popularity not in the least because of their self-proclaimed image as prophets of truth, often discrediting political adversaries with the help of alleged revelations of unfit political practices. Thus, they feed into the people's general mistrust of untransparent political practices and, on the far end of this spectrum, conspiracy theories. Engels demonstrates that both, a general deep-rooted mistrust regarding political practices, and the medial depiction that seems to feed into this sentiment, did not come into existence in a vacuum. Instead, both have an interconnected and long history that not only shapes our perception of what corruption and micropolitics are today, but the medial debate as well. In this respect, both works encourage the reader to scrutinise the manner in which we follow and interpret news, not only regarding corruption, but in general.

The history of corruption criticism can maybe encourage a greater sensitivity regarding the question who criticises corruption and why, instead of assuming improvidently that when there is smoke there is fire. Even when the allegations prove justified it cannot be disregarded that whistle-blowers, journalists, anti-corruption agencies and scandalists have concrete and self-serving interests. This is incidentally especially important when these motives are honourable.⁴

The content and information in both books are comprehensive: While the first encompasses numerous international cases from the early modern period to the 20th century, the second details German cases meticulously and within a larger context of international developments. Were it not for the compelling language, following the detailed analyses could prove rather challenging. Instead, Engels succeeds in depicting a plethora of events and complicated debates, shifting between different actors and countries while keeping the reader engaged. The humoristic undertones that occasionally shine through his style never belittle historical actors or portray them in a condescending matter. Both works remain very much scientific analyses despite the fact that they are a pleasure to read.

¹ <https://svenska.yle.fi/a/7-455692>

² “Dieses Buch ist keine Geschichte ‚der Korruption‘ seit 1945. Stimmenkauf, Bestechung, Verfilzung, Patronage, Mikropolitik, Hinterzimmergespräche und die verschwiegenen Praktiken der Macht sind nicht Gegenstand dieser Untersuchung. Jedenfalls sind sie es nicht direkt: Es wird um Debatten und Skandale gehen, die sich mit diesen Phänomenen beschäftigen.” Engels, Jens Ivo, *Alles nur gekauft?* P. 12.

³ “Oppositionen anser att Matti Vanhanen är så komprometterad av valfinansieringsskandalen att bara hans avgång kan rena demokratin.” Published 24th of September, 2009. Blässar, Eva, “Oppositionen kräver Vanhanens avgång“ <https://svenska.yle.fi/a/7-344486>

⁴ “Vielleicht kann die Geschichte der Korruptionskritik dazu anregen, sensibler für die Frage zu sein, wer warum Korruption kritisiert, statt reflexhaft davon auszugehen, dass dort, wo Rauch aufsteigt, ein Feuer sein muss. Selbst wenn die Vorwürfe gerechtfertigt sind, schließt das keineswegs aus, dass Whistleblower, Journalisten, Antikorruptionsagenturen und Skandalierer konkrete eigennützige Motive verfolgen. Dies ist im Übrigen auch dann wichtig, wenn diese Motive ehrenwert sind.” Engels, Jens Ivo, *Die Geschichte der Korruption. Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis in s20. Jahrhundert.* Frankfurt am Main 2014, p.372.