Corruption and Hosophobia

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between corruption and purity. It draws on research on corruption in political science and research on hosophobia (fear of the impure) in organization studies. The paper presents a theory of corruption based on failure of separation between the public and the private, and discusses rules of separation, which are crucial for upholding the illusion of public purity. However, this theory of corruption is complemented by the concept of hosophobia to show how organizations have a dual relationship to corruption. Drawing on two Swedish cases, the paper intends to show hosophobia in the everyday functioning of an organization, and how occasional cleansing procedures might take place.

Keywords

Corruption, ideology, rules of separation, purity

Introduction

The concept of 'organization' is, we argue, rooted in the possibility and necessity to keep chaos, contingency, disorder, defilement, and irrational principles at bay...Rather than accepting reality as it is, the very idea of organization seems to imply that it is possible for us to stay in a kind of otherwordly, Platonic space where clarity, transparency, and health reign supreme (Kaulingfreks and ten Bos 2005, 88).

Fairly recently, purity and hygiene have been discussed in relationship to organizations, along with the complex relationship between purity and contamination (Kaulingfreks and ten Bos 2005a, 2005b, ten Bos, 2004, 2005, ten Bos and Kaulingfreks 2001). Kaulingfreks and ten Bos have introduced the concept of hosophobia, meaning "a fear of dirt or a fear of the impure." (Kaulingfreks and ten Bos 2005, 85) They argue that organizations fear dirt, disorder, and defilement, but at the same time thrive on them. This implies that organizations have a more complex relationship to dirt and contamination than just merely elimination. In this sense, hosophobia means fear of the impure but, at the same time, a fascination or need for the dirty.

This paper discusses the relationship between purity and organizations by examining the concept of corruption. This has been described as a cancer (Wolfensohn 1998), virus (Kantor, in Kaikati, Sullivan, Virgo, Carr, & Virgo 2000, 216), and disease (Klitgaard 1988, 7). It has also been compared to terrorism (Smith 2002) and death (Transparency International 2005).

Peter Bratsis is one of the few researchers who has explicitly discussed corruption and purity. In his article The Construction of Corruption, or Rules of Separation and Illusions of Purity in Bourgeois Societies and in chapter 3 of his book Everyday Life and the State, he presents corruption as a lack of order and purity. The article also introduces his theory on corruption. By introducing a political scientist's theories into the field of business ethics, one could claim that the paper tangentially addresses a lacuna in business ethics research. In other words, business ethics rarely uses political theory or acknowledges its fundamentally political character (Jones et al. 2005, p. 6-7). It could be important to point out that Bratsis bases his understanding of purity on the concept of rules of separation. Therefore this paper can also be seen as contributing to the literature on codes of conduct.

This paper will first present Bratsis' understanding of corruption, which is influenced by Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, and Karl Marx. Bratsis argues that corruption is a symptom of the public fetish, and that rules of separation create and maintain the spectacle of a pure separation between the public and private registers of politics, society and life. According to Bratsis, rules of separation save the organization from corruption. Second, the paper will discuss two examples from Sweden of rules of separation (one an everyday practice, and the second a scandal). The paper will present a nuanced view on organizations' relationship to purity and dirt by drawing on the concept of hosophobia.

Corruption: A theoretical perspective

Bratsis notes that corruption is almost always defined as a relationship between the public and the private (for a review of definitions, see Lennerfors 2008, 362-366). For example, in the well-known World Bank definition, corruption is described as "the misuse of public office for private gain." Bratsis investigates the historical roots of this idea of corruption as a separation between the public and the private. He provides a history of corruption and relates it to particular social structures. He is inspired by Slavoj Žižek, who draws on Sohn-Rethel, who in turn draws on Marx's analysis of the commodity form. Marx gave a history of the transcendental subject that scholars held to be eternal, and showed that the transcendental subject is related to a specific social reality. How can the commodity form give us an insight into the constitution of the transcendental subject? It can provide us with:

A kind of matrix enabling us to generate all other forms of the 'fetishistic in-

version': it is as if the dialectics of the commodity-form presents us with a pure - distilled, so to speak - version of a mechanism offering us a key to the theoretical understanding of phenomena which, at first sight, have nothing whatsoever to do with the field of political economy (law, religion and so on). (Žižek 1994, 300-301)

The self-constituted transcendental subject, which can abstract itself from its local, cultural milieu, is based on something already existing in the market practice. The key word is abstraction. The exchange of commodities expresses two forms of abstractions: one from the changing character of the commodity during exchange; and one from the concrete, empirically sensible nature of the commodity. The subject is confronted with the unpleasant fact that its constitution is based on an "inner-worldly, 'pathological' (in the Kantian meaning of the word) phenomenon" (Žižek 1994, 301).

Similarly to the assumption that the transcendental subject is eternal, there is an assumption that the public/private split is universal and eternal (for a critique, see Rose-Ackerman 1999 and Haller & Shore 2005). However, Bratsis argues that the meanings of public and private are inherently tied to very modern political pathologies.

> The split of the political body into the concrete and the abstract, the private and the public, the citizen and the public servant, is thus a constitutive characteristic of the modern state and gives it historical specificity as a political form. (Bratsis 2006, 32)

Bratsis draws on Žižek's claim that "the truth is out there" to point out that our understanding of corruption as the separation between the public and the private is accompanied by the rise of the modern state. He argues:

> The main difference between the ancient and the abandoned, failed, and impossible modern attempt to secure the common good is that in the case of the modern era it is assumed that citizens can abstract themselves from their own particular interests and 'act as if' they were simply 'public servants' and not 'private citizens' (Bratsis 2006, 29)
>
> Citizens are and should be guided by self-interest; public servants, conversely, should be capable of passing judgment on these particular interests in an objective and impartial way so as to deduce what the general interest is. It is assumed that embodied in the person of George Bush are two individuals: one is selfish and replete with passions, economic interests, personal obligations, and so forth; the other is full of virtue and committed to the 'common good.' In other words, when Bush enters the Oval Office there is a magical transformation from private citizen to public servant, a transformation that allows for the negation of private interests within the corporate body of the state apparatuses. Interests are the stuff of 'private' citizens, who are fully expected to act according to them. The same person as public servant, conversely, is an individual abstracted from material life, an individual who is most capable of being virtuous and not acting according to his own interests. (Bratsis 2006, 29-30)

These two bodies bear similarities and are probably related to the commodity form and capitalist exchange, as well as the rise of the modern state (Bratsis 2006, see also Lennerfors 2010).

Even though the "two bodies" doctrine can be dismissed in a cynical fashion, Žižek claims that the belief is still upheld in practice for society to properly function. Material belief might sound strange to those not familiar with Žižek, but the idea is simple. Even though we know that the separation of public and private does not work, in practice, we act as if it is possible to do so. Regarding the exchange process, Žižek claims:

> The social effectivity of the exchange process is a kind of reality which is possible only on condition that the individuals

partaking in it are not aware of its proper logic; that is, a kind of reality whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants – if we come to 'know too much', to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself. This is probably the fundamental dimension of 'ideology': ideology is not simply a 'false consciousness', an illusory representation of reality; it is, rather, this reality itself which is already to be conceived as 'ideological' – 'ideological' is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence – that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals 'do not know what they are doing'. 'Ideological' is not the 'false consciousness' of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by 'false consciousness'. (Žižek 1994, 305)

This raises several questions. Do we really know that a strict separation into private and public does not work? If so, how do we create this illusion of a strict separation between the two in order for our society to function? How do we still believe in the separation, even though we know that it does not work?

Covering up the impossibility of symbolizing the Real: Rules of separation

To answer the question posed in the preceding part, this paper will turn to Jacques Lacan, who inspired Žižek. Lacan argued that all symbolizations are bound to fail, because the underlying Real (our beastly nature of desire and drive) is constantly reminding is that it is contradictory and cannot be symbolized. The things we try to describe and symbolize reappear in different forms.

A good example of this is the Freudian reappearance of repressed thoughts in jokes, dreams, or aggression. A more philosophical example that Žižek discusses is Hegelian dialectics. Žižek claims that Hegelian dialectics is the perfect example of the failure of symbolization, as there will always be an antithesis. If the failure of symbolization is translated to the split between public and private, there is never any successful separation between these two spheres of life. There is never a clear-cut division between the private and the public. The public body is bound to be pierced by private interests, not the least because humans have just one body, not two. This repressed core reappears in corruption.

Bratsis argues that the society strictly adheres to the apparent separation of public and private. This apparent separation is created by something called rules of separation. This notion was developed by anthropologist Mary Douglas (2002). She is well-known for having re-considered the clean and unclean animals in the book of Leviticus. She argues that animals' cleanliness and dirt bears no relationship to cleanliness and dirt inherent in the objective underlying reality. Instead, it is the categorizations that are kept clean. Similarly, the major issue for modern corruption fighters is not really to separate the public from the private, but rather to avoid breaching rules of separation. Drawing on the impossibility of symbolizing the Real, Bratsis claims that the normal is defined as a situation where rules of separation are not breached. He explains:

> As Canguilhem first argued in The Normal and the Pathological, and as Foucault demonstrated in his various histories of the practices of normalization (especially Madness and Civilization), the question is not simply one of how the normal is constituted but how the normal is constituted by way of the production of the pathological. The 'normal' in the case of corruption, just as it is in the case of physiological diseases and mental disorders, is largely a negative category, normal is that

which is not pathological. And how do we know what is pathological? There are rules that inform us of what is pathological. The term normal itself derives from the Latin term norma, rule. The normal is that which conforms to the rule. Conforming to the rule when it comes to political corruption thus refers to not transgressing the rules that regulate the purity of the public and private. If breaking these rules is constitutive of the pathological, corruption, then following the rules can be nothing but the normal, good and desirable. If we are to understand how the normal is constituted, we must be able to identify those rules that define the pathological and upon whose presence the presumed purity of the public depends. (Bratsis 2003, 22)

And,

Given the impossibility of removing 'private interests' from either the real bodies of public servants or from the actual substance of bourgeois politics, a series of rules and practices are instituted in order to purge the realm of appearances from acts that challenge the categorization of society as divided into two mutually exclusive registers, the public and private. (Bratsis 2003, 33)

Even though there are no abstract, pure public or private bodies, society might believe the purity of these bodies are maintained if the rules of separation are not breached. Instead of focusing on the real issue of the public/private separation, breaches are considered transgressions of the dichotomy and thus, corruption.

Bratsis asks why there is a specific value, for example, relating to gifts while in office (potential bribes). Without this value, there would not be any way society could understand what is corrupt and what is not.

A basic principle that underpins much of the content of these rules is that public servants must not engage in behaviors that are too overt and obvious in their illustration of how the concrete 'private' body of the public servant conflicts with the presumed purity and objectivity of their abstract 'public' body. (Bratsis 2003, 30)

The examples Bratsis uses contain rather clear rules of separation. In hosophobia and its relationship between purity and organization, the correct functioning of the organization's "hygiene machine" is clear rules of separation (ten Bos and Kaulingfreks 2001). By providing clear-cut rules about what is normal and abnormal, the organization achieves order and might possibly be conceived as a Platonic space where irrationality and defilement is kept at bay. (Kaulingfreks and ten Bos 2005)

In response to Bratsis' analysis that rules of separation create public purity, this paper will draw on earlier research on Swedish organizations with a more ambiguous relationship to purity and dirt. The paper will contribute to understanding corruption and hosophobia, with the support of empirical studies. The first example is the Swedish Road Administration (SRA), where corruption has not been exposed. The second example is Systembolaget, where a corruption scandal was unveiled. By presenting these cases, this paper will add to an understanding of the context for how rules of separation function, and also indicate some mechanisms that complement and support these rules.

The SRA and everyday practice

The Swedish Road Administration (SRA), where interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2007, is the responsible authority for building and maintaining the Swedish state roads (Lennerfors 2008). Because the organization is dematerialized, it relies on suppliers for everything from project planning, to construction and maintenance. Since it is a public organization with the need to procure services from the private sector, the problem of corruption is a concern.

At the SRA, respondents argue that there are clear rules, but almost all disagree on the exact content of these rules. Many managers state there are guidelines distributed from the Swedish National Audit Office, but employees themselves have to decide on their limit. A head of the project management department at the SRA came close to expressing the idea of corruption as any transgression of the public/private split. Even though there are rules of separation, he believes that these are only failed symbolizations:

Project Manager: "If there are monetary limits, these are recommendations, because it is zero that is the actual limit."
Researcher: "But you don't have a rule of thumb, that 200-300 SEK is ok?"
Project Manager: "No, nothing like that. Well, there are some guidelines but they are probably worth nothing if something like that happens [somebody gets accused of taking bribes, for example], because then zero is the limit."

This captures the futility of clearly defining the bribe and staying out of the grey zone. Setting the limit to zero might be good for upholding the illusion of purity, but it conflicts with employees' practical work situations.

Project Manager: "If you want to make it easy for oneself as the SRA has done, you have said that it's [the limit is] zero, then you have made it god damn easy for yourself. Now the thing is that we [the project managers] spend time together with people, there are people around us, and in a relation between people it's included that you sometimes eat together....And if you go out, say that you go out and have dinner with a contractor, or a construction manager, consultant or something like that, you have passed the limit since it has nothing to do with work...If you have a construction meeting which gets long, it's so bloody difficult to catalogize, it's not possible to discern. If you have a construction meeting during the day, you have no time to eat lunch, and everybody is hungry, it takes a longer time, you eat dinner in the evening. If someone eats that dinner on the account of the contractor, I don't judge that person."

This project manager states that the SRA should formulate a more lenient policy that corresponds to employees' actual work situation. However, the one-sided focus on rules of separations is not enough. Even though the rules of separation might stipulate that anything received is considered corrupt, the empirical material shows that gifts are allowed as long as no legal-organizational process is initiated against any SRA employee. In everyday situations, employees use their judgment and formulate their own (reasonable) policies on receiving gifts. However, when something happens, the rule that will not tolerate any corruption is enforced. The director-general of the SRA, expresses the effectiveness of not clearly formulating rules:

Director-general, SRA: "We had another discussion the other day, about ethics and how much to formulate. And I think that it's sometimes counterproductive to formulate yourself too much…]n writing…I mean, that about which nothing is written, is that allowed then [just because it is not in writing]? Ethical foundations and such things…is something that should permeate the organization. So it's not easy to say."

Vagueness might therefore be complementary to the rules at the SRA. National culture may explain vagueness seen in the policies of the SRA. The Swedish management style is seen as vague and imprecise (Edström & Jönsson 1998; Holmberg & Åkerblom 2001; Jönsson 1995). As has been stated above, this leads to employees having freedom for judgment. On the other

hand, the organization might be a ticking bomb, since everybody is probably breaking the rules by accepting something. From the employees' perspective, the double standard of allowing for individual judgment, while stipulating that nothing is allowed, might put them in a precarious situation. Indeed, this might be the mechanism by which "rotten apples" are created.

Relating this example to hosophobia, managers and employees alike are aware of the need for an underside of the rules. Just following the rules is impractical, cumbersome, and sometimes even outright impossible. This is hosophobia at work, where purity and dirt are both needed simultaneously. The point is not that everybody believes that the organization is free from corruption. While the company must show that it is free from corruption, there is constantly an underside of the rules needed for the organization to work properly. When something happens, the organization can turn into a state of exception where cleansing occurs, and it loses one of its faces.

The scandal at Systembolaget

This part discusses the rules on gift-giving, drawing on the Swedish alcohol retail monopoly, Systembolaget, where a bribery scandal was exposed in 2003. This paper draws on archive studies of investigation material and analysis of media coverage from 2003 to 2008. The case against Systembolaget employees concerned, inter alia, bonuses for selling specific products, invitations to trips, and so on. This case study shows what happens when a legal process is initiated.

When initiating the process, it was decided that the monetary limit for prosecution was 3,000 SEK. Certainly, nobody knew about this limit before it was set. The limit covered gifts received between 2000 and 2002, which could imply that an employee who had received sales bonuses of 1,000 SEK a year could be brought to justice. Some employees at Systembolaget were shocked, since it was considered acceptable to receive gifts and product samples. The gift-receiving "policy has been a paper product that has played a non-existent role," according to defense lawyer Pontus Peyron. (www.tv4.se, 26/1-2006) Another lawyer defending one of the accused store managers stated that all store managers had told that it was fully acceptable to receive product samples. (www.tv4, 26/1-2006) One of the defendants was very disappointed with Systembolaget:

> I'm very embittered at Systembolaget. Most of us have worked there since their early twenties and have built up their whole career at Systembolaget." (TV4 – 26/1-2006)

The Systembolaget case is probably similar to the SRA case in that individuals were allowed to use their common sense to judge which gifts were or were not acceptable. However, such vagueness only works until something happens. In a letter to the public on Systembolaget's webpage, company president Anitra Steen states:

> Systembolaget will only remain as long as you have confidence in us. We promise to turn every stone around to find possible shortcomings and take measure to cope with them, so that nothing like this happens again. I understand that the bribing imbroglio made you doubt us. But I am convinced that one who recognizes its problems, and take measures against them, remains strong. To hide one's problems is no alternative. It would be to betray Systembolaget's mission towards you as a client. (www.systembolaget.se)

What measures were taken? New rules and policies were created. Responding to questions posed by Sveriges Radio (SR), Steen discussed the new rules of separation:

SR: But don't these rules already exist and haven't they existed for a long time?

> Steen: Yes, they do. Our policies and frameworks regulating the relation to suppliers have been in place for a long time. They are clear. But because of what happened, we have looked them over once again.

> SR: Why haven't the rules been adhered to?

> Steen: Well, that is a question that you could ask yourself, and a question that you should probably ask the people who are prosecuted. (SR Web radio, 27 September 2004)

What we can see in this case more than in the SRA case is that upper management stresses the importance of clear rules. However, this is the discourse in a state of exception when something has happened. In the everyday workings of the organization, more freedom is probably allowed for autonomy and not strictly adhering to clear rules. After corruption has been uncovered, the hosophobic nature of organization is temporarily suspended. Clarity and cleansing become paramount, but when this is done, the organization probably turns back to some form of hosophobia.

Hosophobia and occasional cleansing

In the cases of the SRA and Systembolaget, rules of separation play a minor role in everyday business. While some have referred to the rules as just a "paper product" and some as "too strict to be of practical relevance," all respondents interviewed considered the rules' existence to be important. This existence seems more important than the rules' content and function. It might be stated that they function as a silent but powerful law. This resounds rather well with Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue, where he stresses the need for virtues for everyday action, and a morality of laws that allow for excluding from the community people who have committed serious crimes (MacIntyre 1984, 150-153, 174).

What is remarkable is how employees' individual judgments are reconciled with the strict rules. In the everyday business world, the strict rules are clearly compatible with a more fuzzy reality where individuals make decisions based on their understanding of the situation and are allowed to act more or less as free agents. Not all individuals break the law or go against the code of conduct. Rather, many ambiguous practices take place, which some might consider "too much" and others might consider perfectly legitimate. This vagueness, or ambiguity, is shady because it cannot be directly stated whether or not it is legitimate.

Hosophobia describes the normal state of organizational functioning. Just because hosophobia is common, or natural, doesn't mean that *any* ambiguous practices are allowed. As in the Systembolaget case, it became obvious how rules are mobilized when some employees were too careless in relying on their own judgment. The store managers were prosecuted.

This was when the distinction between the pure organization (the pure public body) and the deviant and contaminated wrongdoers manifested itself. In this case, a wedge was driven between the public and the private, the organization was split into two, and those elements judged as dirty (e.g., individuals who accepted favors worth more than 3,000 SEK from 2002 to 2004) were removed.

A cleansing process starts, where the organization often survives, while the contaminated elements (i.e., the corrupt employees) are removed or relocated. This mechanism upholds the organization's honesty, while, at the same time, putting employees in a quite precarious situation. It is plausible that after this cleansing period, the organization goes back to its hoso-

phobic state, both repelling and inviting corruption at the same time. Comparing the SRA and Systembolaget cases, the insight is that separation and cleansing only occasionally occurs.

To sum up the discussion, these two cases highlight what Kaulingfreks and ten Bos refer to as the paradox of hosophobia, namely that the organization is "always attracted by what it wants to keep at bay. It needs contamination to sustain itself." (Kaulingfreks and ten Bos 2005, 91) One might follow their line of thought by stating that the organization thrives on corruption in its everyday functioning. Following Bratsis' argument, employees will enter into the organization with their own private interests. Organizations are constantly leading a double life, both being in a state of complete purity and corruption.

Contributions and concluding thoughts

By reading Bratsis and Žižek, Kaulingfreks and ten Bos, this paper has hopefully added to an understanding of corruption, rules of separation, and hosophobia. The theoretical framework helps explain that the complete eradication of corruption is impossible. It might indeed be necessary to think that corruption is almost nonexistent in order to promote social effectiveness. By upholding the illusion of the purity of the public sphere, we can live our lives as always. However, if we really think about it, we might come to the conclusion that it is hard for people to separate their public and private lives.

When it comes to contributions to different fields of research, the issue becomes tricky. Corruption is as such a boundary-spanning phenomenon, ranging from philosophical to anthropological issues, to issues of practicality. Furthermore, bringing in scholars such as Bratsis, who are themselves not in the field, inevitably leads to confusion about contributions.

Apart from an understanding of corruption, this paper also contributes to understanding the issue of purity in organizations. Using the concept of hosophobia, this paper argues that organizations need both purity and corruption to function. The issue of purity, related to rules of separation, can be used in the field of business ethics to discuss codes of conduct and other rules of ethics. While codes of conduct are often seen as window dressing, there have been a few recent attempts to discuss how codes relate to so-called "ethics of practice." (Clegg et al. 2007, Helin et al. 2011) While this may just be a reproduction of the descriptive side in the old normative-descriptive divide, these attempts may also be seen as a recuperative way of thoroughly

investigating how pure codes relate to messy and dirty practice. While some in the normative tradition of studies on codes of conduct claim that it is desirable for people in the organization to follow codes, this paper might throw light on the inherent difficulty in doing so because of the difficulty of symbolizing. Moreover, a discussion of different forms of hosophobia and the different ways in which practice relates to rules might be fruitful. There are many different ways of relating to rules, and it would be interesting to look into how different people relate on a micro-level to the rules, or indeed the law. (see Helin et al. 2011)

Another direction for future research is to empirically investigate other ways in which purity is maintained and corruption is excluded in public and private organizations. One of these tendencies might be the technologization of organizations. Earlier research has shown how the perfect procurement process is created, eliminating incompetence, corruption and error (Lennerfors 2007). However, if the procurement process design is corrupt, for example, in order to favor one company over another, it can be concluded that purity is being created rather than corruption being eradicated. In the popular press and in some preliminary investigation, technologization, or more specifically the introduction of IT systems to stifle corruption, has been discussed. (see Vaccaro and Madsen 2009) Indeed, Systembolaget's Steen explained how an IT system would have stifled opportunities for corrupt behavior. This will be a subject for future research, but it is possible that there are the same tendencies of creating an illusion of purity, rather than fighting corruption. At the same time, it might be the case that people are aware of the limits of the technological system for really stifling corruption.

Furthermore, while Bratsis mostly writes about the Anglo-American context, and this paper has drawn on examples from the Swedish context, it would be fruitful to understand the construction of the public sphere's (im)purity in countries with so called predatory or semi-predatory states. How can one draw the line between a situation which exists in the empirical material used in this paper and a clean public sphere when corruption is everywhere and there is an absence of a perfect, pure, and clean backdrop? The theoretical framework suggests that it could be the very fantasy of purity that keeps the detrimental effects of corruption at bay in Western countries, while such a fantasy is lacking in other places of the world.

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