

# Corruption in pre-modern societies

CHALLENGES FOR HISTORICAL  
INTERPRETATIONS

Edited by  
MARIA FILOMENA COELHO  
LEANDRO DUARTE RUST



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# Introduction

This is an unlikely book. The chapters to come deal with a topic that many would consider to be a false research problem, an uncertain subject with no cut-off points or duration. After all, a long intellectual and legal tradition dating back to the 19th century ensures that corruption was not a relevant issue before the Enlightenment and liberal modernity. Not because it was absent from life in society — *au contraire*. The practices and behaviours that Modernity recorded as corrupt, continues this tradition, were ubiquitous: clientelism, patrimonialism, nepotism, venality, as well as all sorts of abuses in the exercise of power were everywhere, they were seen as common place and even necessary to the point of being indistinguishable from everyday normality. Therefore, to discuss the history of corruption before 1800 would be to propose analyzing something too vague and indistinct, inscribed with invisible ink in the historical records. This is the capital challenge faced by the authors of this book. One of the links that unite their studies shows that ancient, medieval and colonial societies produced complex discourses on corruption, which emerge from the documents with different meanings, of which the notion of excesses and deviations in dealing with the power to govern was just one of its many facets. However, these discourses also share other themes, increasing the scope that the name of corruption reaches: the relevance of the notions of public power and the common good for these societies; the webs of social norms woven around the ideals of justice and the delegation of power; the ingenious recreation of the meanings given to tradition and the role of institutions. Such an effort implies re-examining established formulas about so-called pre-modern societies, such as the endemic confusion between public and private, the normalization of arbitrariness as a cultural trait or the emergence of anti-corruption as a movement to deny the society in question - formulas that can even be found in the process of historical knowledge itself.

In the course of the arguments gathered here, this capital challenge unfolds into others that are equally provocative about the modern understanding of corruption. One of the demands that emerges from the historical evidences — and historiography!

— is the necessity of overcoming the understanding of corruption as a question of morality, as if finding a corrupt individual were enough to unravel the tangle of social relations that led ancient, medieval and colonial people to talk about corruption and, above all, to denounce it. Casuistry is not enough. Accusations and convictions in this sense were not merely reactions to offences accumulated over the course of a biography. The attribution of the reputation of being corrupt was part of the arsenal of rhetorical weapons available to certain social groups to disqualify their competitors for government power and control of the wealth produced collectively. Engaging and strategic, the records left by corruption in pre-modern societies can hardly be seen as disinterested discourses. They are evidence of the intense struggles within elites for power to classify behaviour, practices and positions at the top of a social hierarchy. We have thus reached another characteristic shared by the studies that make up this book, another challenge: that of understanding corruption as a political phenomenon. This does not mean, of course, denying that individuals considered corrupt by their contemporaries and even by posterity had, in fact, transgressed social norms and values. It does mean realizing that there was a certain ideological fluidity, i.e. that the behaviours and actions so vehemently repudiated in one case were not cause for indignation in other circumstances; it also means realizing that the norms and values transgressed and presented as collective and consensual precepts were norms and values controlled by circles of interests; finally, it means emphasizing that notions central to discourses on corruption, such as the nickname of the virtuous or the meaning of money, could be constantly rewritten by the correlations of forces within institutions and spaces where power was concentrated. The challenge of explaining corruption politically becomes even more complex when dealing with ancient, medieval and colonial societies. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it is a question of explaining how bribery, favouritism or even co-optation were referred to in contexts permeated by relationships of personal interdependence, the logic of reciprocity, the granting of bounties, gifts and offices. Secondly, it is important to demonstrate how times steeped in Christian religiosity, with daily life dominated by the actions of religious agents, were marked by political rationality: what social reason governed perception and action in relation to corruption in contexts before Western secularization?

The historians who co-authored this book faced the challenge of answering this

fundamental question as a research group. In 2020, *De Corruptione*<sup>1</sup> was created at the History Department of the University of Brasília, with the aim of studying corruption from a political perspective. Although the initial chronological cut-off was centred on the Middle Ages, it was quickly realized that it would be advantageous to extend the period to include a pre-modern scenario. The researchers who are members of the group meet regularly to debate ideas and methodologies around the problem of corruption, and this book is the result of these thought-provoking meetings. Six of the seven chapters that make up the book were produced over the last few years in a dynamic collective dialogue, the fruits of which, in the end, reflect shared points of arrival, but — and perhaps more importantly - also theoretical and methodological doubts, modulated in an authorial way in the texts that we now present.

The book is organized with two initial chapters focusing on theoretical, methodological and historiographical reflections. The first, ‘Corruption in the Middle Ages as a research problem’, by Maria Filomena Coelho, explores the difficulties and challenges faced by those who set out to study this subject in an era commonly classified as corrupt ‘by nature’, drawing attention to the need to construct keys of analysis with a strong historical and political character to understand the role of corruption in that societal model. The second chapter, by Leandro Duarte Rust, allows us to identify the interpretative logics mobilized by scholars, derived from the great frameworks established by Western historiography, and which, in the case of corruption affecting the ecclesiastical world, is revealed in the title: ‘An *Ancien Régime* for the Papal Revolution: “corruption” as a latent philosophy of history.’ The second part of the book analyses and explores the problem of corruption in various historical contexts, in a period that goes from the High Middle Ages to the late Modern Age, covering a wide area, from Asia Minor to America. Renato Viana Boy writes the third chapter, ‘Between law and history: a study of corruption in the Byzantine Empire through Justinian's Digest (6th century)’, in which he points out the possibility of considering the legislation that typifies this sort of crime as an important instrument of imperial politics. The fourth chapter, by Charles West, has a special significance for *De Corruptione*, as it is the result of the opening conference of the II *Encontro*,<sup>2</sup> but

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<sup>1</sup> [www.decorruptione.com](http://www.decorruptione.com)

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.decorruptione.com/ii-encontro-de-corruptione-2023>. Accessed: June 20, 2024.



which, as can be seen in the text, was formulated by the author in dialogue with the group's research. His contribution highlights the interest of broadening the field of observation because when we consider 'Corruption in the Middle Ages and the Problem of Simony,' we discover a much broader scenario in which historical agents understood that deviance could happen. The text that makes up the fifth chapter, 'Lesser and corruptible: the worth of a humble man's word during the Middle Ages,' by Armando Torres, highlights how public life, as a dimension in which corruption 'occurs,' is conceived according to hierarchical social standards, umbilically connecting moralizing discourses and the political perspective on the subject. This is followed by the sixth contribution, by Alécio Nunes Fernandes, who, starting from the question 'Corruption, for whom? What the sources say, what historians see,' makes it possible to delve deeper into the legal and political intricacies of the accusations, based on the written records of a 'solid' institution such as the Holy Office in the 16th century, with special attention to the treatment of the different documentary typologies and their languages, whose specificities are often overlooked by historians. Roberta Stumpf writes the last and seventh chapter, 'Vices and virtues, money, and the execution of public office in Portuguese domains', presenting a panorama of what was understood as abuse of power and its motivations in that 18th century context, but building a cross-section from which emerges the role of wealth and money in the appointment and prosecution strategies of those in charge of managing public affairs on behalf of His Majesty.

Brasilia, 1st June 2024

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