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Robert Alan Sparling, *Political Corruption: The Underside of Civic Morality.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. xv + 250pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and acknowledgements. $59.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-5087-9.

Review by Tyson Leuchter, Birkbeck, University of London.

It is a propitious moment for corruption. Opportunities abound for the gleefully, the shamelessly, the overtly corrupt to plunge their hands into the public's cookie jars. What's more, it is also a good time--or at least, a busy time--for corruption discourse. What is and is not corruption? What kinds of political actions are legitimate or illegitimate? What kinds of behavior might perhaps raise troubling ethical concerns, but not rise to the level of formal illegality? Such are ongoing questions of public debate and political decision-making. What, after all, is the core meaning of political corruption? Can we only decide it on an ad hoc basis, subject to influence by particularistic interests, or might we be able to fill out the concept with some kind of prescriptive content? Given competing ideals of political goodness, both in our own time and across different historical contexts, can we even speak of a stable concept of corruption?

Robert Alan Sparling's timely volume *Political Corruption: The Underside of Civic Morality* aims to address such questions. It commences with a puzzle: if, as some influential interpretations have had it,[1] corruption has been the central question of political theory in the Atlantic world since roughly 1688, why has the nature of corruption itself been the object of so little attention in contemporary theory (p. viii-ix)? Sparling's response to this challenge combines political theory and historical scholarship, although the balance is rather more on the former. Sparling's work is "philosophical in its normative aim" (p. xiv), which is to say he aims less to write a history of the concept of corruption than to detail what he considers some particularly important historical crystallizations of that concept, crystallizations that might still today have some theoretical purchase. Composed of a preface, eight chapters, and a conclusion, and running to a compact 250 pages, Sparling's work thus offers a selection of historical-philosophical portraits of "some of occidental modernity's more thoughtful philosophical expositors" (p. xiii), extending from the Renaissance Holy Roman Empire to Wilhelmine Germany. The animating concern across all these portraits is "abuse of the public thing" for private gain (p. 12), though Sparling notes that the boundaries between "public" and "private" (and thus also "abuse") could shift considerably over time. Methodologically, Sparling falls within the tradition of the "Cambridge School" of intellectual history, particularly the Pocockian approach in which political thought is conceived of as the development and competition of distinct "political languages." At the same, Sparling does claim separation from this approach in certain ways, especially in his affirmation of a moral-political telos. He argues that for corruption discourse to remain coherent, it must be committed to some concrete, non-contingent form of the good regime, the good life, and human flourishing (p. xii). Sparling serially employs discourse analysis to carry out this project, calling as well for the relevance of "classical regime analysis," in which the good citizen and the good are seen as co-implicated (p. xv). The result is a collection of perceptive analyses of some of those "thoughtful philosophical expositors," as well as unexpected, though often fruitful, historical juxtapositions. At the same time, the work also suggests several topics that might have received substantially more attention, topics that might well have helped fill out the normative meaning of corruption the work aspires to delineate.

Chapter one begins by noting that corruption can appear dispiritingly omnipresent. It ranges from the petty official demanding bribes from petitioners to states and nations caught up in a global system of graft. Facing such pervasive rot, is the moralism of corruption discourse simply palliative naïveté? Sparling asserts that it is not. The commitment to political morality, to a substantive account of what a healthy regime might look like, he avers, is what gives corruption discourse its charge. This, however, raises the issue of how we are to compare theories of corruption across eras with wildly differing standards of just what corruption might be; the purchase of public office, perhaps the quintessential meaning of corruption today, was legitimate practice in Old Regime France. Sparling's solution is to point to the "ubiquity of distinctions" (p. 1). He argues that all historical contexts, from the ancient polis to the modern world of "impersonal" states (p. 1), mark out meaningful boundaries in two related areas: between the legitimate and the illegitimate regime, and between public and private. The political community existed above its individual citizens, the king had two bodies, and the Renaissance republics placed critical emphasis on the dividing line between public and private. Sparling takes the ubiquity of these distinctions, however they were specifically determined at the time, as theoretical grounding for the normative claims of corruption discourse.

The subsequent chapters see Sparling surveying several different "modes" of corruption discourse in different eras. Chapter two focuses on Erasmus and the "mirror-of-princes" tradition in the early sixteenth century (p. 22). The question here is how to craft a moral leader, a particularly pitched issue in a monarchy; if it is typically good to be the king, then, when the legitimacy of a regime depends on a single ruler's leadership, a king must also be good. Sparling highlights how Erasmus, in *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), enjoins the prince to turn to classical antiquity, in the hopes that he will develop the kind of soul that leads him to rule in the interests of the public, rather than towards his own personal, tyrannical ends. The problem Erasmus reveals, Sparling argues, is that the power inequalities constitutive of a monarchical regime make the reliability of such moral "soulcraft" dubious at best (p. 35). Moral instruction requires a situation of mutual equality, such that the teacher may confront the prince with his flaws, rather than descend into circumspection or judicious obsequiousness. But a king, by definition, has no equals within the regime. What Erasmus ultimately suggests, Sparling claims, is that no matter how persuasive any given mirror-of-princes tract may be, monarchy as a regime is nonetheless prone to corruption, because the king can find no sound, reliable means to moral improvement.

Chapter three concerns Machiavelli, perhaps the central theorist of corruption in the civic republican tradition. Time, for Machiavelli, presented inescapable dilemmas for political life; because the republic is necessarily located in historical time, "it is constantly subject to the decay that affects all temporal things. Thus, it constantly seeks to triumph over this contingent, historical world through the exercise of virtue and the constant reenactment of the founding act-

-the return to origins is a means of establishing dominion over history" (pp. 48-49). Once-stable republics thus appear doomed to collapse into faction, bribery, dependency, the perversion of the public good for private ends, and so on. Sparling notes that Machiavelli's thought can appear thoroughly paradoxical: if the republic decays over time due to a dissipation of purity and virtue, Machiavelli's proposed remedies frequently appear unremittingly impure and unvirtuous. Sparling's response is that this is due to a kind of linguistic slipperiness on Machiavelli's part: corruption discourse implies some sort of articulation of the healthy regime, of "the realized human life" (p. 47), but Machiavelli steadfastly refuses to provide any definitive answer to what the end state of a stable, peaceful, happy republic might look like. Instead, Sparling notes in a clever turn of phrase, he offers us "teleology without telos, purposiveness with but a fleeting purpose…" (p. 47). Republican virtue is to be upheld by corrupted means, including explicitly violent machismo, foreign conquest, class hostility spurred by inequality and oligarchy, public accusations, and the occasional astoundingly violent refoundation of an irremediably decrepit society. Machiavelli's political ethic is thus a "republicanism of distrust" (p. 69), in which corruption is kept in check, if it is at all, by a pervasive sense of tension and fear.

Chapter four, on the sixteenth-century French humanist Etienne de la Boétie, gives us a strikingly different picture of civic republicanism. La Boétie's driving concern was to understand how tyrannical regimes could persist: why should people will their own domination? They do so, for La Boétie, because tyranny atomizes and individualizes what should be a public, seducing individuals into reinforcing an unjust regime, thereby rendering impossible the sort of public-spiritedness that might make resistance to tyranny thinkable. Sparling observes that La Boétie's affirmative vision of the good regime is premised on a kind of radical transparency, a republicanism, this time, of friendship and trust (p. 75). As Sparling writes, for La Boétie "language is essential to our nature because it is the manner with which we become *transparent* to one another. With the capacity to express our wills, we can not only makes promises (a preoccupation of later social contractarians), but we can *know* one another" (p. 81, original emphasis). Tyranny, as well as radical inequality, corrupts this intrinsically human ability to form a society and know one another. But the price for radical transparency is high: confessional uniformity. As religion for La Boétie was central to social formation, political stability, and the development of intersubjective knowledge, religiously pluralistic societies could not reliably be tolerated (pp. 91-93).

Chapter five takes a leap of roughly two hundred years into the eighteenth century, focusing on Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke. Sometimes seen as a crafty intellectual opportunist, Sparling nonetheless argues that there is a consistency to Bolingbroke and his "conservative" or "nostalgic" discourse on corruption (p. 98): what Bolingbroke articulates are the lamentations of a declining traditional elite in the face of rapidly shifting arrangements of institutional power (p. 99). Writing in the midst of the Financial Revolution and the growth of Britain's increasingly bureaucratized fiscal-military state, Bolingbroke represented the landed, propertied elite that had hitherto dominated political life. The entry of a new elite, whose economic independence was based on liquid wealth and credit, especially government debt, onto the political stage was experienced by this older elite as a kind of corrosion of conformity, in which prior patterns of political access and practice were being viciously subverted. As Sparling notes, Bolingbroke excoriated what would later come to be seen as essential elements of good governance, such as a professionalized civil service and the dissolution of landed property requirements for entry into politics (pp. 117-118). All the same, Sparling argues that Bolingbroke really did put his finger on an important mode of corruption: radical inequality and financialized wealth could seriously threaten political stability (p. 120).

Montesquieu furnishes the basis for chapter six. Montesquieu, according to Sparling, provides an account of corruption that is at once both institutional and social-psychological (p. 121). Corruption, here, means "a shift in the affective basis of the regime away from that which turns citizens' and subjects' energies to the public good" (p. 122). Montesquieu's celebrated analysis of regimes thus links constitutional makeup and human sociability. Republics, both aristocratic and democratic, are animated by virtue, which decays when mounting inequality subverts virtue and when rule of law degenerates into a confusion of duty and arbitrary government; monarchies are motivated by noble honor, which is corrupted when the monarch seizes all power and rules according to whim rather than law or tradition; and despotism is ruled by fear. Sparling notes that despotism represents a pinnacle of "absolute" corruption (p. 122); it is definitionally corrupt, insofar as fear is inimical to natural human sociability. Avarice, too, appears as an ineluctably corrupting force, producing destabilizing inequality and terminal decadence. Moderation, for Montesquieu, is thus the path to preserving liberty, as seen in his praise of the English society, a commercial "republic under the guise of a monarchy" (p. 134). But Sparling detects a note of dangerous irony in Montesquieu's commentary on the English constitution: precisely those dangerous passions that corrupt regimes, fear and avarice, in fact abound in England. Political factionalism stirs popular fear, and a nation of shopkeepers tends to its account books religiously. And so Montesquieu too, in Sparling's account, articulates a discourse of precarious balance. The English regime may thus contain moderate degrees of fear and avarice, but it also appears pitched to lose its liberty for good, if this balance is lost.

Chapter seven provides us with an interesting juxtaposition of Robespierre and Immanuel Kant. Sparling represents Robespierre as the familiar figure of an impossibly rigorous purity. Focusing on the "coherence of his politico-ethical rigorism" (p. 148), rather than Robespierre's more grubby political stances and maneuvering, Sparling teases out the implications of that most lasting couplet of Robespierrian rhetoric: "the spring of popular government in revolution is at the same time *virtue and terror*: virtue without which terror is disastrous; terror, without which virtue is impotent" (p. 150, original emphasis). The people in the abstract were always virtuous, but real, earthly individuals and governments were always prone to corruption. They thus had to be purged, vigorously, violently, constantly. For Sparling, terror is therefore not simply an emergency measure or utilitarian deterrent, but fully inextricable from any Robespierrian conception of virtue. Kant, by contrast, was willing to accommodate some forms of human frailty, at least for a little while. Not that Kant was any less rigorous in his thinking: as his famous rejection of a right to lying in all cases, even to a murderer searching for victims, shows, his ethical thought contained a kind of "moral purism" perhaps not far removed from Robespierrian virtuous terror (p. 160). But in the sociopolitical realm, Sparling claims, Kant argued for a kind of patience for factional, contestatory debate that Robespierre could never countenance; one had to pass through the Age of Enlightenment before reaching the Enlightened Age.[2] As Sparling writes, for Kant "There is a philosophical duty to further moral progress through rational public expression, but one cannot expect, nor should one hope, to be able to overturn corrupt constitutions overnight. Kant was able to adopt a politics of radical purity without a call for the guillotine, but he could only do so because he had time on his side" (p. 165).

Departing from the discourse of virtue and civic republicanism, chapter eight focuses on Max Weber. Rationalized bureaucracy, in the Weberian sense, suggests a sphere of administration definitionally separate from political life--bureaucratic officials are meant to be impartial, rather than driven by political favor--and characterized by such features as hierarchy, technocratic governance by rule and documentation, a professional civil service staff, and so on. This rationalized bureaucracy, Sparling argues, crafts a very specific kind of subjectivity for those in it: "The separations necessary for pure, uncorrupted bureaucracy are part of a new, functionally differentiated state. They make sense in an ethically plural universe, and they depend not merely on the distinction between public and private, but, even more important, on the distinction between politics and administration" (pp. 168-169). Sparling notes a few paths to corruption in such a regime. Bribery, favor-trading, partiality, and arbitrary enforcement of rules are all easily recognizable as corrupt behavior. But Weber's overriding concern, Sparling argues, was that rationalized bureaucracy could become too autonomous from parliamentary control. If it were not subject to some sort of democratic check, Weber worried, bureaucracy was liable to expand, with more and more spheres of life administered by expert technocrats whose ethical commitments were to procedural rule-following, rather than other, more humanistic values (pp. 178-180). Thus, a de-politicized bureaucracy must be circumscribed by a healthy, democratic political life. Sparling notes that this uncorrupted form of bureaucracy contains a real tension with mass democracy: bureaucratic institutions and legal procedures are the architecture of formal legal equality at a mass level, but they also depend on an elite, technocratic staff. The elitism and impersonality inherent in Weberian bureaucracies can thus, Sparling argues, generate disquieting tension in the mass democracies they partially make possible (pp. 180-182). This apparently permanent contradiction presents a thorny problem for those who, like Sparling, recognize the corruptible potential in Weberian bureaucracy, but also affirm its potential for fairness and equitability.

Sparling concludes by restating his commitments to normative political theory in a historically contingent world: "Thinking about how we should divide the political world, preventing the public thing from being colonized or contaminated by its other is the goal of ambitious political philosophy that dares to think about the human good" (p. 189). Sparling fully acknowledges that there are widely varying conceptions of the political good--and thus of its malign twin, political corruption--across time. The task of the political theorists that form the bulk of his study has been to articulate this historically contingent meaning of corruption in its many modes. So too, it seems, should be the task of political theory going forward.

Political Corruption has much to recommend it. Sparling provides nuanced readings of canonical texts, finding surprising commonalities across varying historical contexts, while not shying away from substantial differences, particularly in how different arrangements of state power may lead to differing conceptions of political dysfunction. And he makes a compelling case for the continued robustness of these several modes of corruption discourse. The book is also written with real humor and brio; it is an all-too-rare pleasure to burst out laughing when reading an academic monograph, much less one on such an otherwise gloomy topic. This aesthetic deftness, however, is sometimes a double-edged sword. While Sparling's humor really does help, for instance, in navigating the considerable thicket of Machiavellian subtleties, it also sometimes leads him astray. Thus, in crafting an otherwise a solid joke about the famous Weberian "iron cage (*stahlharte Gehäuse*)," Sparling implies the phrase refers to rationalized bureaucracy (p. 169); but Weber here was referring to the tenacious, universalizing nature specifically of capitalism, of which rationalized bureaucracy was only a part. Sparling repeats a similar conceptual misattribution in claiming that the phrase "specialists without spirit" referred to the "nihilistic world of bureaucrats" (p. 176), but which more fully describes, for Weber, the moral psychology of capitalism, rather than bureaucracy *per se.*[3]

Sparling's work also generates other critiques, particularly those stemming from the nature of his selection criteria. He states forthrightly that "we are not pursuing a history of the concept [of political corruption] in all its literary and discursive byways, but an analysis of what I am arguing constitutes distinct and important deployments of the term that have contemporary analogues" (p. 98). While that might satisfy the question of chronological completeness--there is only so much ink in the world to be spilled, after all--it raises afresh the question of why, precisely, he has selected these specific authors and not others. Doubtless they do provide provocative and relevant modes of corruption discourse; doubtless, there are others who do so as well. Aristotle, for instance, is referenced quite frequently, but did not merit a stand-alone chapter; neither did Rousseau. Perhaps there is no dearth of scholarship on such thinkers, but then, neither is there on Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Robespierre, Kant, or Weber.[4]

Political Corruption prompts other questions of inclusion and exclusion.[5] Gender, for instance, clearly plays an important role in many of the accounts studied; republican virtue is often explicitly theorized as "masculine," while decadence and corruption may be rendered as effeminacy. But Sparling could have addressed the issue of gender more thoroughly, either by making gender a more explicit object of theoretical concern, by addressing female philosophers and thinkers more directly in the main text, or perhaps the two in combination. If an important aspect of the work is to discern what kinds of corruption discourse remain relevant today, as Sparling asserts it is, then surely at least part of that relevance would include differential access to political life, and what expanding (or contracting) that access might mean for a given regime.

Also notable is the lack of engagement with the Marxian or socialist tradition. Marx haunts the text, as it were, like a spectre. He is mentioned in passing a few times, appearing occasionally in the notes, and some Marxist language is referenced, but Marxist theory is never directly addressed. Particularly in a book in which inequality and contemporary concerns are motivating criteria for inclusion, at least some treatment of the Marxian or socialist critique of liberal society would have been appropriate. These critiques of corruption might diverge from the philosophical traditions Sparling otherwise traces, but they do provide historically important discourses on how laws, public institutions, and so on are captured by, and thus managed for, private interests. Indeed, if one of the normative aims of the book is to explore modes of corruption discourse with "contemporary analogues" in the pathologies of modern political life (p. 98), then capitalism as a whole should be addressed more forthrightly. Sparling, for instance, points to the growing marketization of ostensibly public services as one particularly contemporary means by which private interests can colonize the public thing (p. 183). And while the discourses he focuses on do speak to this issue, without a specific analysis of the shape of capitalism, their insights can appear adventitious. If Sparling's work is to have the sort of normative force he seems to desire, it must take into account the systemic forces shaping contemporary corruption, especially if relevance to contemporary corruption appears to be a key selection criterion. This is not to say that one must be committed to an explicitly Marxian or socialist stance to write about corruption in contemporary political life. It is to say, however, that an analysis of capitalism and capital should play at least some substantial role in the discourse of corruption in contemporary political life.

None of these critiques should detract from the strength of Sparling's work. *Political Corruption* makes a timely intervention into a live debate over a globally pressing issue, prompts valuable further conversation, and will be of interest to scholars of the history of political thought, democratization, bureaucratic institutions, and others. The call to combine historical and theoretical reflection on the nature of corruption across regime types lands and lands well.

NOTES

[1] Sparling refers especially, though not exclusively, to J. G. A. Pocock, particularly his *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[2] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" in H.S. Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings*, second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 58.

[3] Anthony Giddens suggests that Weber adapted this phrase from Goethe. See Anthony Giddens, "Introduction," in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), xix.

[4] Though they have certainly generated substantial scholarship, Erasmus and La Boétie are admittedly perhaps less familiar overall to the Anglophone world.

[5] Michael Behrent has struck a similar note in a recent H-Ideas review of Richard Whatmore's edited collection *Intellectual History*, observing that "gender, postcolonial, and global history" have "utterly transformed" approaches to intellectual history. See Michael C. Behrent, review of Richard Whatmore, ed., *Intellectual History, Volume I: The Philosophy of Intellectual History*. https://networks.h-net.org/node/6873/reviews/5528372/behrent-and-jelacic-and-klosko-and-matysik-and-peden-whatmore (accessed 2/25/2020).

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