

BOOK REVIEW

The Sociology of Corruption by Syed Hussein Alatas, Singapore, Donald Moore Press, 1968, iii + 87 pp.

Syed Hussein Alatas's treatise, *The Sociology of Corruption*, is an overall view of a very complex and not yet thoroughly studied social problem. He presents a theoretical exploration of corruption by delineating certain areas for investigation. The book is structured according to this categorization. The first section defines corruption and its attendant characteristics, and concludes with a typology. The functions of roles of corruption are then assessed and a criticism is made of those writers who see corruption as functional. In the third section, Alatas gives an explanation for the causes of corruption. He concludes with a section giving a brief recommendation for the remedy of corruption.

In this writer's opinion the main strength of the treatise lies in the second section. The other three parts are riddled with inconsistencies and vague generalities unsubstantiated by empirical data. Unfortunately, what should have been the most important section of the book is the weakest. His explanations for the factors leading to corruption are simplistic, overemphasizing personal qualities of society's leaders and underemphasizing structural factors.

Alatas defines corruption as "the subordination of public interests to private aims involving a violation of norms of duty and welfare, accompanied by secrecy, betrayal, deception and a callous disregard for any consequence suffered by the public" (p. 12). He divides corruption into three main types, bribery, extortion, and nepotism, and he claims that these types must be ascertained before the role and effects of corruption can be explained (p. 11). According to him, those writers who emphasize the functions of corruption failed to accomplish this task. But such a typology is too poorly defined to be of use. Take, for example, the assumed difference between bribery and extortion. Bribery is considered as the receipts of gifts from a client and extortion is the demand of such gifts. Presumably the crucial difference is one of "pressure"—the one form of corruption is extortive the other non-extortive. However such differences do not in reality exist except in degrees. All corruption is simultaneously extortive and voluntary: voluntary in the sense that the giver has the power not to demand services; extortive in the sense that the taker has the power to withhold services. Alatas himself does not clarify the difference by using empirical evidence. In fact the example he does furnish only confuses the issue more. On page 20 he uses a quote to provide evidence for the statement that bribing an official to obtain a contract and thereby depriving another is non-extortive but unethical, while bribing an official to approve a project without depriving another of the chance is extortive but ethical. Now, according to the principles of theory construction, a typology must function to delineate a phenomenon into further subcategories with the intention and effect of clarifying the difference. Since Alatas's typology is otherwise, the taxonomy or classification is faulty and valueless.

The second part of the treatise criticizes those who argue that corruption has a positive function in society especially to speed up development efforts in countries saddled with a sluggish bureaucracy. He argues quite cogently that even though a particular corruptive act may hasten performance it does not mean that the social effects are positive. In fact the overall effect of corruption is usually to burden society with the high social costs of keeping the administrative machinery running.

The third and fourth sections discuss causes and remedies for corruption and are the weakest parts of the book. Initially Alatas himself tries to diminish the importance of the traditional gift institution as a cause of corruption. Although the gift institution cannot explain all corruption, its importance cannot be underrated in the way it provides a conducive environment for corruption to persist through abuse. To cite the example of the traditional Malay feudal political system, the sultan and his officials may freely use their public offices for personal gain with certain attached obligations. A demarcation between public and private is unrealistic to them. The royal officials can quite freely exact from their subjects taxes, forced labor, military service, and even women. In this cultural milieu where such exactions are considered as normal the possibility of their continuing is enhanced. Of course nonpersistence could be explained by intervening variables. When mingled with the materialism that many officials inherited from the colonial rule, traditional gift institutions have made corruption an uncontrollable social disease in many newly "independent" nations. Indonesia, South Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia are outstanding examples. Syed Alatas says the low moral caliber of individual rulers is the main cause of corruption. Quoting from Wan Ah Shih and Ibun Khaldun, both ancient Asian philosophers and politicians, he argues that the root cause of corruption comes from bad rulers with a passion for luxurious living (p. 9). He concedes that other contextual factors such as educated citizenry, positive attachment to government and national progress, and efficient administration can mitigate corruption although he pays little attention to them. On the other hand, he argues that certain governmental functions, tax collection, government public projects, etc., contribute to corruption. However, Alatas adds that by themselves such services do not lead to corruption unless there is a sufficient number of corrupt individuals. On the contrary, it is not the public sector presence that invites corruption, but it is a powerful private sector aiming to maximize private interests that is responsible.

Alatas's analysis regards personal qualities as the primary causal variable. He says that the presence of honest, charismatic, and responsible leaders in a corruption fraught situation is the most important factor to mitigate corruption. "To such personalities it matters not whether they are dead or alive. Their influence is often stronger after they are dead, and their emotional appeal is deeply rooted" (p. 74). Unfortunately history does not support his hypothesis. The presence of great leaders of high moral caliber like Ghandi and Sun Yat-sen in no way reduced the rampant corruption in India and China either when they were living or dead. This is precisely because the political and economic institutions and conditions are such that they transcend and nullify the personal actions of individuals. The efforts of individuals will come to nothing until the institutional factors contributing to corruption are eradicated. This does not deny the role individuals play in solving certain social

problems. However, problems cannot be solved without altering structural variables. Infusing morality and value into a populace will not alone solve a social problem. Accepting that is equivalent to subscribing to the idea it is necessary only to teach people to love one another to rid the world of racism. Legal institutional arrangements are considered unimportant. Such ideas are basically an individualistic interpretation of history and society. They ignore and deflate the role and importance of structure in influencing individual actions and the course of social events.

Another weakness of this type of theory is its almost unlimited applicability to explain other social phenomena. For example, occurrence or nonoccurrence of most social phenomena is explained by the presence or nonpresence of good leaders. This kind of theory cannot be falsified. With an almost unlimited "explanatory power" it has little usefulness. According to Karl Popper, a scientific theory must be vulnerable, there must be things it excludes so that it can be falsified. Otherwise it is so general that it becomes empty, like the statement that "Everything that happens, happens through Providence."¹ It is more fruitful to explain social phenomena in terms of the structures and conditions that cause them. Most social problems are the logical result of certain social structures and institutions. It is the task of the theoretician to discover which particular structures cause which particular problems. Take, for instance, social inequality. This problem can be considered a direct result of the labor market and private property institutions coupled with a spirit and ideology of unlimited accumulation of wealth. The existence of such value systems invariably results in a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few from the upper class while the majority are left with little to share. If these institutions continue to exist, the attempts of even the most sincere leaders to reduce economic inequality will be either irrelevant or severely limited.

The problem of corruption is similar. Corruption can thrive only when conducive conditions and structures exist. It is more useful to discover what the conditions are and then the remedies are apparent. We are first interested in studying corruption as a social problem, not as an individual aberration. Corruption is not a social problem when limited to personal favors between a few individuals or where structural conditions do not allow it to spread to the extent that it negatively affects the achievement of social goals. In other words, the magnitude of corruption and its negative social effects are crucial.

Since corruption is defined as the abuse of public office for private gain, it should be seen as part of the more comprehensive problem of conflict between public and private interest. The hypothesis can be made that the degree of corruption is directly related to the degree of conflict between public and private interest. It is, of course, impossible to eliminate the conflict totally, but it is possible to reduce it or, even better, to reconcile it; by allowing the public to understand and accept interdependence between public and private interest.

In a totally laissez-faire society where the private interest of the individual assumes a paramount position a clash between public and private interest would, theoretically, not exist since public interest is subordinate to private. Corruption would not exist

¹ See Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Inquiry* (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

although other social evils would prevail. Complete laissez-faire though does not exist in reality. Even in the most liberal economy the existence and function of the state are accepted, and a conflict between private and public sector arises. On the one hand, a small but powerful propertied class exists whose basic interest is a continued accumulation of wealth. On the other hand, the state exists to regulate activities in society and, presumably, to protect the public interest. The relationship between the two actors is one of competition, cooperation, and attempts to control each other's power institutions. The outcome depends greatly on which particular class is able to dominate and to control, but not necessarily monopolize, state power.

This type of situation readily produces conditions adequate for corruption to grow. This can be illustrated with a few examples. Suppose the government issued a tender to the private sector for building an airport. Given an economic environment where cutthroat competition and profit maximization are sanctioned norms, it is natural, in fact imperative, that private groups bidding for the project indulge in bribery to maximize their own interest. This is good economic sense. The act of bribery is taboo and a crime in society only when the benefits received by the private parties, both receiver and giver, generate social costs that the public bears. Therefore, rules are formulated to control the incidence of corruption. But the institutional basis continues to exist, not eliminated, at best only repressed.

Take another example. In any society traffic rules are made to control the maximum load of a commercial vehicle for safety reasons. In a private or mixed economy, there is always a tendency by private owners to contravene this regulation so that they can maximize profit. They stand to gain by offering bribes to public officials to discourage implementation of the law. In a public economy there would be no basis for such an act since there would be no private owners to gain from it.

In both examples, it is clear what the institutional basis is which motivates the giver to indulge in corruption. In most analyses of corruption, as with Hussein Alatas's, little consideration is given to this factor while too much attention is devoted to immorality and greed in public officials. It is my contention that we are on the wrong track unless we adopt a more systematic and intelligent analysis of institutional factors that promote corruption and de-emphasize personal causes. This is not to deny that good, honest leaders and officials do not help in the elimination of corruption. But by themselves they will be unable to do anything significant until structural causes are eliminated.

(Lim Mah Hui)