

# Reviews

## Enemies of corruption

Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória, and G. Geltner (eds.), *Anti-corruption in History: From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

Review by Tom Crook

THE COVER OF Kroeze et al.'s edited volume, *Anti-corruption in History*, features a satirical print from 1784 depicting Charles Fox, then one of the leaders of the Whig party, wielding a sword and a 'shield of truth,' and doing battle with a multi-headed hydra spewing the words 'Despotism', 'Secret Influence' and 'Duplicity'. The head that had been hissing 'Corruption' has been cut off and lies on the ground; but the message, of course, is that new heads will emerge, for such are the supernatural powers of this mythic beast from antiquity. As the editors no doubt intended, the image captures the protean capacities of 'corruption' to reinvent itself and find new means of expression, even in the face of the most ardent reformist efforts. But it might also be taken to represent the struggles endured by scholars to define 'corruption' in a way that can usefully mediate between different disciplines, and across cultures and long expanses of time. Recent decades have seen a resurgence of scholarship on the subject, yet it remains unclear whether any kind of common analytical coordinates have emerged as a result. The more corruption has been scrutinised, the more complex, multifaceted and subtly variegated it has become, in both its past and present manifestations.

*Anti-corruption in History* is part of this struggle and certainly, if quite self-consciously, it does not attempt to confront these matters directly. Instead, it joins other works in adopting what the editors describe as a 'contextual approach ... one that is sensitive to existing theories and explanatory models but is firmly grounded in rigorous historical research, [and] ... a careful consideration of changing political, economic and cultural circumstances' (p. 6). Much like Buchan and Hill's recent study, *An Intellectual History of Political Corruption* (2014), it is attentive throughout to the mutability of 'corruption' and the overlapping

idioms and currents of thought (e.g. classical, Christian, enlightenment) through which it has been posed as a moral, administrative and even all-encompassing societal problem.

But though this broadly historicist conception of corruption may not be new, there are few, if any, works that range quite so far over time and space. The only volume of comparable scope is perhaps Kreike and Jordan's edited collection *Corrupt Histories* (2004); but this is no match for Kroeze et al.'s work. Organised chronologically into five parts, it contains no fewer than twenty essays, ranging from antiquity and the medieval period (Parts I–II), through the early modern period and up to the present (Parts III–V). Save for two essays – one on medieval Eurasia, the other on the late Ottoman Empire – the volume serves up a feast of examples from across Europe, featuring democratic Athens and the Roman Republic; the kingly courts of late medieval England and Portugal; the Italian city state of Perugia; two early modern *anciens régimes* (England and Spain); the pre-1856 Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia; plus a handful of modern states, most of them broadly liberal (Britain, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands), but including the communist German Democratic Republic.

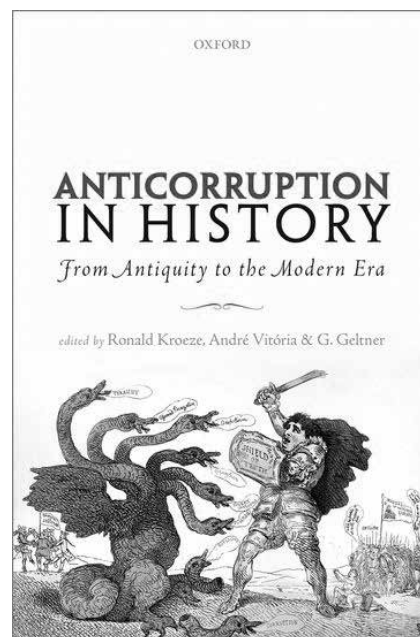
The volume thus brings into sharp relief the peculiarities of our current and, historically speaking, quite narrow and procedural definitions of 'corruption,' which centre on the abuse of public office for personal financial gain. We learn, for instance, that profiteering from public office was widely tolerated in democratic Athens; only when it was thought to undermine the interests of the city was it considered corrupt (ch. 1). Alternatively, if again at some remove from the present, for seventeenth-century puritans corruption was less a civic

pathology than a spiritual and ecclesiastical one: a matter of sin and of errors of church organisation (ch. 12).

The real historiographical contribution of the volume is the focus on anti-corruption measures. These might seem like the natural counterpart of the thing itself; but as the editors rightly insist, anti-corruption initiatives have been unduly neglected owing to the widespread assumption that they began in earnest only in the modern period, after 1800 or thereabouts, with the advent of democratic state-building and Weberian bureaucracies (pp. 5–6). Analytically, the book thus moves in two directions, on the one hand recovering the vitality of anti-corruption measures in the pre- and early modern periods, and on the other emphasising the fraught gestation and implementation of regulations that emerged as part of the modern state.

The insights are many and readers will no doubt find their own amid this rich array of case studies; but arguably the greatest service performed by this book is to bring some much needed analytical pressure to bear on the divide between the modern, post-1800 era and that which went before. This is also where the book will be of most interest to historians and scholars of liberalism, which, however we might define it, is distinguished by a commitment to open and accountable government and the enactment of public office in a disinterested fashion, above the fray of financial, personal and political interests – at least in theory.

For one thing, it is clear that modern anti-corruption campaigns owed



much of their success to earlier efforts. This is not simply in terms of inheriting established, more or less successful tropes and lines of attack; they also built on actual reforms. A case in point is Denmark, much lauded for securing a relatively pure polity as early as the mid-nineteenth century, when it adopted a liberal parliamentary constitution. And yet, ironically, the 'path to Denmark' might have proved decidedly more tortuous had it not been for the disciplined culture of public officialdom established in the previous century by Denmark's absolutist monarch (ch. 13). A relatively 'clean,' liberal culture of governance was built on decidedly non-liberal foundations.

Liberalism, of course, is also distinguished by a commitment to free markets; and though the precise amount of freedom that should extend to markets has proved a constant source of debate, liberalism has always retained a belief that economic self-interest has its place and function within a progressive society. But as some of the chapters suggest, this is also one reason why modern anti-corruption reforms have proved so ineffective, or at least failed to institute anything like regulatory clarity. Simply put, there has always been a tension between liberalism's commitment to open, public-spirited governance on the one hand, and its commitment to market-driven capitalism on the other.

Two chapters contained in the final part of the volume provide splendid examples of this. James Moore's chapter on Britain shows how public contracts with private enterprises became a significant source of anxiety – and occasionally scandal – at both local and national levels during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (ch. 18) A similarly murky interface between the worlds of business and public service is presented in Ronald Kroeze's chapter on the post-war Lockheed and Flick affairs in the Netherlands and West Germany. Both scandals were a product of public officials and politicians interacting all too complacently and freely with business people, to the point where they accepted gifts (or bribes, as critics had it); but such encounters were born of a sense that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with public office holders mixing with business people and considering their interests – and indeed there isn't; but the risks are clearly great (ch. 19).

The point is sharpened in Jen Ivo Engels' contribution – one of the more

provocative and theoretical contained in the collection – which seeks to explain what he calls the 'never-ending fight against corruption' (p. 177). As he argues, though modern definitions of corruption turn on a strict division between public and private interests, in practice this distinction has proved difficult to maintain, simply because economic interests, of various sorts, have to be managed and mediated by officials, ministers and politicians. Temptations for abuse abound; and if public office holders do not always succumb, mere contact with these interests invariably taints and smears. Certainly in the case of Britain, the shadow of corruption has always loomed large over successive governments, of whatever party-political stripe; and it could be that this is an inevitable feature of any liberal polity that seeks to combine free elections and free markets, public service with the play of private interests.

Ultimately, *Anti-corruption in History* raises more questions than it resolves. If anything, corruption emerges from this volume still more complex and multifaceted than we had previously thought – still more tenacious and hydra-headed. But posing the right kind of questions is the first step towards finding better answers; and this is certainly the case when it comes to understanding the genesis and limitations of anti-corruption efforts in the modern period, the time when liberalism came of age.

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## Lloyd George condemned

Richard Wilkinson, *Lloyd George: Statesman or Scoundrel* (IB Tauris, 2018)

Review by Alan Mumford

**T**HE CLICHÉ HAS it that you should not judge a book by its cover. In this case we are presented with a stark question in the title. But we are also given a double image of LG in profile, where the images are the same in reverse. Any uncertainty about the focus of the book may then be removed by a declaration on the inside cover: this states that Lloyd George was 'vain, cruel, capricious and dishonest, at times his notoriously corrupt nature threatened to damage the British political system.'

This powerful accusation is preceded by a more judicious statement about his impressive contribution to the welfare state. In the text Wilkinson says that Lloyd George's record as a social reformer 'was flawed' but does not illustrate this. In fact, this is characteristic of the book: fierce attacks in immoderate language are followed by some much less colourful rehearsal of some of his achievements. The question of balance is obviously crucial in assessing anyone's life, the more so in the case

of Lloyd George because he aroused in his life – and has continued to arouse in subsequent biographies – strongly different views about his achievements. However, any apparent balance achieved through these statements is also put in question by the volume of attention the author gives to particular subjects. The Marconi scandal is given two repetitive half pages. In contrast Wilkinson claims that 'historians tend to be reticent about Lloyd George's sex life.' Here we have around seven pages devoted to various infidelities, excluding in that calculation the pages he devotes to Frances Stevenson; Crosby gave eight,<sup>1</sup> Hattersley ten.<sup>2</sup> There is clearly no comparability between the impact of infidelities on Lloyd George's political life and the impact of the Marconi Affair, which placed a permanent question mark over his honesty and caused Asquith to offer an unqualified defence. While fair attention is given to Lloyd George's development of those policies now considered the origin of the welfare state, nevertheless these are still given much less