



Ronald Kroeze, André Vitoria, and Guy Geltner (eds.), *Anticorruption in History. From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 446 pp., ISBN 9780198809975).

This volume bundles essays that address the history of corruption from Antiquity to the present day. The different chapters presented in the volume are the result of research that was conducted under the umbrella of the interdisciplinary ANTICORRP project, which clusters twenty research groups (of inter alia historians, political scientists and public policy scholars) from fifteen EU countries. This project seeks to analyse corruption from an historical perspective, also in order to track the developmental characteristics of successful anticorruption strategies. The main vantage points of the book, and of the historians who wrote the chapters, can be linked to intellectual and political history. As a result, throughout the chapters corruption is brought into connection with state building and power struggles: the theories and discourses that stand close to these topics are often referred to. Several authors add nuances to the ‘modernity thesis’ on corruption. This thesis holds that only from the Enlightenment onwards corruption came to acquire its present-day meaning of a criminal offense in the public sphere, whereas before that time the concept was mostly used in a moral sense. The essays in this volume disentangle and assess the teleological assumptions packed within the ‘modernity thesis’: they zoom in on the contextual implications of the rhetorical use of notions such as ‘corruption’ and clearly demonstrate that anticorruption campaigns or low corruption rates were not always the product of the rise of the administrative state or a proxy of democracy. Guy Geltner, for example, shows that audit procedures in late-medieval Perugia were as regularly practised in the communal as well as in the *signoria* era. James Kennedy and Ronald Kroeze point to the conclusion that in the Kingdom of the Netherlands governing by elites did not prevent the continued application of high moral standards for public officers. Common assumptions are challenged. Andreas Bågenholm for example demonstrates that early nineteenth-century Sweden provides arguments for anticorruption strategies and officers as being an integral part of state building mechanisms, rather than responses to widespread corruption.

Many essays, including the ones by André Vitoria and John Watts, highlight aspects of politicisation. In the later Middle Ages, in France, England and Portugal, anticorruption laws and trials were more common when the political clout of monarchs was under attack. Several chapters read as illustrations of the diverse use and contents of such notions as treason,

embezzlement, bribery and patronage. Valentina Arena argues that in Roman times a one-time gift could be considered a *liberalitas*. Such a donation was in breach with the *fides* that structured political ties between citizens and their rulers. However, regular payments were regarded as normal practices of patronage relating to this same *fides*. For Abbasid and Ummayyad Iraq, Maaïke van Berkel points to a comparable distinction between allowable, unconditional gifts and bribery, which was concerned with conditional donations.

One conclusion that runs through the book states that allegations of corruption are to be situated in a grey zone. They often related to practices that were officially condemned but which in practice were – often implicitly – considered acceptable (see, for example, the chapters by John Watts and Jens Ivo Engels). Whereas for the medieval and early modern period moralising approaches have been considered as evidence of the abovementioned ‘modernity thesis’, many essays clearly demonstrate that the ambivalence of grey zones and the accompanying frictions between morals and law that come along with it existed throughout all periods addressed in the volume. Most authors in the volume proffer the view that practices such as patronage but also of embezzlement could be condoned, even with legal rules in place that prohibited them (see for example the chapter by Francisco Andújar Castillo, Antonio Feros and Pilar Ponce Leiva on early modern Spain).

The anticorruption efforts that are studied in the essays are diverse. Ronald Kroeze’s chapter on the Lockheed and Flick-affairs takes into account the implementation of anticorruption laws, but for other chapters the reader sometimes wonders how many cases were exposed and/or brought to the courts in the periods and countries analysed. Another minor point of critique is the lack of links between the theme of corruption and other topics such as financial scandals (collapses of banks, white-collar crime) and state-sponsored trade (except for the Dutch East India Company, which is briefly mentioned in the chapter by James Kennedy and Ronald Kroeze). The John Law scandal and the South Sea Bubble, both involving public-private co-operations, are not mentioned in the book. One wonders to what extent a comparison of corruption in the public sphere with similar problems in these areas would reinforce the abovementioned ‘grey zone idea’, as well as the blend of ethics, politicization and law. All in all, the analytical and conceptual rigour of the volume’s chapters is high. This book provides a profound and rich historical analysis of a topical problem.

Dave De Ruyscher, Vrije Universiteit Brussel