

The Review of Politics 85 (2023), 241–258.

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A Symposium on Emanuela Ceva and Maria Paola Ferretti's *Political Corruption: The Internal Enemy of Public Institutions*

Chiara Destri, Alice el-Wakil, and Paul M. Heywood, with a response by Emanuela Ceva and Maria Paola Ferretti

Emanuela Ceva and Maria Paola Ferretti: *Political Corruption: The Internal Enemy of Public Institutions*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 232.)

Introduction

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doi:10.1017/S0034670522001048

Political corruption is routinely associated with a variety of instances of abuse of public power that either derive from a vicious trait of individual character of some officeholder or develop within dysfunctional institutional mechanisms. By discussing corruption and anticorruption as matters of a public ethics of office, our book analyzes and assesses the common root of individual and institutional manifestations of corruption in public institutions. This common normative root is discussed as a relationally wrongful practice that consists in an unaccountable use of the power of office.

We conceptualize public institutions as systems of interrelated roles, occupied by persons, the officeholders. The good functioning of a public institution depends on every officeholder exercising their power of office coherently with their mandate. Political corruption occurs whenever public officeholders act in their institutional capacity but use their power of office

for the pursuit of an agenda whose rationale may not be vindicated as coherent with the terms of that power mandate. This understanding of political corruption cuts across a wide range of occurrences of institutional malpractice or individual misconduct, including bribery, clientelism, embezzlement, and nepotism.

Our book shows how political corruption is the Trojan horse that threatens the working of public institutions from within via the officeholders' interrelated action. Although some public institutions may be more vulnerable than others to this threat, we show that no institution can be immune to political corruption, no matter how well designed its formal rules, mechanisms, and procedures may be. This kind of threat can never be ruled out by means of procedural regulatory interventions or reforms; it requires the officeholders' vigilant engagement to counterbalance the constant endogenous risk of failing their institution. This claim speaks to the importance of understanding political corruption from within public institutional action and constitutes the analytical and normative core of the book.

The characterization of political corruption as a matter of public ethics is not intended to serve as yet another diagnostic tool to monitor and perhaps sanction the officeholders' conduct from the outside, or even as a standard of moralized behavior with which officeholders should comply. Instead, framing political corruption in the context of a public ethics of office shifts the responsibility to the officeholders. Public officeholders are called, as a group of interrelated agents, to take responsibility for institutional action and dysfunctions; to engage in a critical and self-reflective way with their conduct and its rationale.

By reappraising anticorruption through the lenses of such a public ethics of office, we question the potential of many current top-down initiatives primarily intended to disincentivize corruption and punish corrupt officeholders. Our book shows how these approaches are partial because they only target certain instances of political corruption, such as cases of unlawful action or where the officeholders' relative causal responsibilities can be clearly assigned. By bringing the limits of such approaches to the fore, our book offers a novel argument for empowering public officeholders to sustain and bring about valuable change in their institutional environment.