



UNIVERSITY OF KONSTANZ
Research Group Sociology of Knowledge

Crime

& Culture

Crime as a Cultural Problem

The Relevance of Perceptions of Corruption to Crime Prevention. A Comparative Cultural Study in the EU-Accession States Bulgaria and Romania, the EU-Candidate States Turkey and Croatia and the EU-States Germany, Greece and United Kingdom

Dirk Tänzler

Cultures of Corruption – An Empirical Approach to the Understanding of Crime



Sixth Framework Programme of the European Commission
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SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION



RESEARCH PROJECT: CRIME AND CULTURE

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Corruption – A Cultural Lag?

Eastern and South-Eastern European societies are said to have a “culture of corruption” with roots back to the time of the socialist rule or even to the “Oriental despotism” (Wittvogel 1973). It seems as if this tradition has been overcome in the post-socialist transition. The nevertheless still existing and flourishing corruption has changed form and function. A shift from occasional petty corruption to structural large-scale corruption took place in these countries as a consequence of the modernisation of their societies. The obvious “culture of corruption” as a popular practice in everyday life disappeared and is substituted by hidden rent-seeking techniques, used by the economical and the political elite (Marschall 2006). In the context of sociological modernisation theory this phenomenon usually is interpreted as a symptom terminated to the passage from tradition to modernity and disappearing after the implementation of modern economic and political institutions (Huntington 1968, Zapf 1994).

On the other side modern Western countries like Germany and Great Britain are taken as proper societies without corruption (Transparency International 2006). This perception is true in relation to the petty corruption in everyday life. To bribe a policeman or an official with the intention not to lose or to get a licence is neither usual nor rational in these societies, because the relation between the state institutions and the people are based on trust in the proper functioning of the legal practices. But nevertheless there is hidden and endemic structural corruption, as everybody knows, in the construction industry and in the public health system for example. Here corruption is accepted. In other words: Corruption is not perceived as such, i.e. as a crime. In fact, one can say that the perception or better non-perception of corruption is a condition of its social practice.

Corruption is primarily a problem of definition that differs from time to time, from place to place, and even between social (sub-)groups of a single society. Therefore we speak of “cultures of corruption” which, in consequence, raises a problem of understanding and the necessity of a cultural approach in the scientific study of the phenomenon. To view “corruption as a cultural problem” is not merely an academic question of theorizing but of great practical relevance for the fight against this crime. The prevention policies that have been developed by the EU and implemented so far within individual member countries have in general been characterised by legislative, administrative and police force measures. These are based on a definition of corruption prevention developed in political and administrative institutions that rely on a ‘top-down’ procedure for its implementation.

Following the preceding arguments this concept of corruption seems to be insufficient both in the theoretical as well as the practical sense. To widen the scope of how to define and approach the problem an international research consortium started a comparative cultural study



on Corruption in Europe. The project proceeds from the assumption that the considerably variable perceptions of corruption, determined as they are by ‘cultural dispositions’, have significant influence on a country’s respective awareness of the problem and thereby on the success of any preventative measures. For this reason, the project purports to conduct not an inquiry into the nature of corruption ‘as such’, but rather into the perceptions of corruption held by political and administrative decision-makers in specific regions and cultures, those held by actors representing various institutions and authorities, and above all by the citizens and the media in European societies.

As a consequence, the research has a dual focus: It operates both at the formal, institutional *and* at the informal, practical level. Analysing the counter-corruption policies *and* the social-cultural contexts they work in, the researchers investigate the ‘fit’ between ‘institutionalised’ prevention measures and how these are perceived in ‘daily practice’, as well as how EU candidate countries and EU member countries as a result handle the issue of corruption. In a final step, it intends to make specific recommendations for readjusting this ‘fit’ and to investigate which role the media play within this process in each individual country. Media do not have only a ‘passive’ technical role in ‘neutrally’ transmitting information. In modern societies, media have substantial influence on the social patterns of perception and recognition, for example on the definition of problems like crime and corruption. Hence, another crucial goal of the research project is to demonstrate that the media must be recognized as a powerful instrument in combating corruption.

The Relevance of Culture

Mr. Olli Rehn, the commissioner responsible for the EU-enlargement, gave an interview in a German newspaper. Referring to Bulgaria and Romania he said: “There are serious efforts of reform (...). Corruption also is a cultural phenomenon. To eliminate it will take a long time, and, well, this will never be achieved totally” (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung from 1/28/2006; translation by the author). Mr. Rehn’s statement is as an expression of realism. Corruption is a universal problem even in the modern states of the West. What Mr. Rehn also suggests is that corruption is a much bigger problem in some regions than in others – but a problem for whom and of what kind? An example from another continent may help us to look at the subject of interest from another perspective.

One of the most recent Prime Ministers of the Philippines lost his office because he was too honest and strictly avoided all illegal behaviour. In the eyes of a Western observer, he incorporated all the liberal democratic principles modern citizens believe in as preconditions for



‘good practice’, if not, like Voltaire’s *Candide*, for the “best of all possible worlds”. In the eyes of the Philippine people and voters, this brave man appeared incompetent and immoral because he proved himself unable to look after the members of his immediate and extended family and his friends. Why should people without personal relations to this Prime Minister have trusted him, seeing as he did not behave responsibly and loyally even to his intimate relatives and companions?

In the Philippine case, the Western model of democratic institutions and political culture does not fit with the expectations and the social practice of the people in everyday life. The conflict here results from the incompatibility between, on the one hand, the paternalistic habit in a traditional system of moral reciprocity combined with substantial benefits still alive in the popular imagination and, on the other, the individualistic habit of competitive actors in a modern, functionally differentiated society based on the anonymous principle of formal legal rights as represented by the unhappy Prime Minister. Not alone the Philippines held nepotism and gift exchange for ‘good practices’. What *we* subsume under the category ‘corruption’ may be a universal type of social practice, but it also holds a different cultural meaning. In the current process of enlargement and integration, the EU acts like the Philippine Prime Minister and then wonders why people so ungratefully persist in their bad practice. This misunderstanding is the starting point of our research; our task will be to reconstruct the motives and causes behind the conflict.

Efforts to prevent corruption within the EU and in the EU candidate countries generally consist of a set of administrative measures oriented to institutionalised values and goals, put into effect by experts from the ‘top-down’. The experts do their best. Yet neither in the elementary definitions determining existing counter-corruption policies nor in their implementation are those everyday-life orientations rooted in socio-cultural contexts and conducive to corrupt behaviour taken into account. The restricted perspective from ‘top-down’ results in the limited effects of the counter-corruption policies currently being applied within the EU and its candidate states. They do not reach the ‘bottom’ at which corrupt behaviour and its social legitimation prosper and which is constituted by cultural modes of perception and reasoning on corruption. Therefore, countermeasures undertaken at a general societal level must rely on our knowledge of these modes of perception and reasoning. But we cannot develop an ‘easy’ solution where we ‘add’ some ‘forgotten’ aspects to the existing procedures because these new aspects conflict with the ‘logic’ of these procedures.

If this is true, a practical consequence of our theoretical assumption on corruption as a cultural problem is that change in the current situation presupposes a preceding change of mind. Experts must gain a better understanding of the social contexts they work in. Our cross-cultural



comparison will deliver empirically grounded conclusions about the way corruption is socially perceived and valued. Its first goal is to examine specific countries and determine which patterns of perceptions of corruption in everyday life are currently dominant.

In a further step, in co-operation with policy-makers in the field, our research aims to operationalise the knowledge gained through employing a 'bottom-up' strategy. Putting our conclusions to discussion with experts from the EU, the NGOs, and the national agencies dealing with corruption raises the potential impact of expert knowledge on corruption in a twofold way: On the one hand, it helps them gain retrospective insight into the specific shortcomings of current anti-corruption management. Indeed, it may be that aspects of corruption perception not susceptible or even resistant to administrative measures may not have been sufficiently taken into account to date. On the other hand, it provides foundations for prospective, long-term action, as it supplements existing policies with regulatory strategies that incorporate the specific contexts of the perceptions of corruption in each individual country. Very often, the experts have informal insider information, but then the institutional programs hinder them from following their better knowledge. The revelation of this 'inner-organisational' conflict and the stimulation of a discussion about it among representatives of institutions and politics is another crucial goal of the research project. The attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of a cultural approach to corruption raises the question: What is culture?

Understanding Culture and Cultural Understanding

Culture normally is understood as a sort of objects that are typically human, for example, tools. Tools are things that differentiate human beings from animals. Therefore things used by human beings are always (for monkeys only sometimes!) tools, namely tools for understanding.¹ Social objects have, as the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1950) purports, a double nature, they are sensitive things and significant symbols, or in a more dialectic language: objectivated social knowledge. Therefore, a sociologist has not simply to collect and classify cultural objects, but to understand their meaning. While using tools, human beings distance themselves from nature and create themselves as participants of a culture, i.e. a human environment not determined by natural laws and urges, but historical situations and social meaning.

In general, we do not consider 'culture' to be an additive factor, neither as an aspect nor a dimension or a subsystem of a society as in the value-system in a Parsonian sense (Parsons 1991). Therefore, we will not define it methodologically as a specific variable. To the contrary, we understand 'culture' as a holistic entity that is at the same time relative in nature. Cul-

¹ Knowledge is the man's world. Knowledge is the fundamental mode of human relation to the world. See: Tänzler 2006. This is even true for sexuality (see: Freud 1976) and food (see Lévi-Strauss 1964).



ture defines the whole world an actor lives in, but this world varies among different societies and might differ historically within a single society. In other words: Culture as a ‘whole’ is not the sum of empirical phenomena, but, metaphorically speaking, the ‘logic’ or ‘grammar’ we use to perceive and conceptualise the world of phenomena.

In an objectivistic manner ‘reality’ is naturalised, ‘reified’ and appears like an ‘object’. But, as modern philosophy since Kant assumes, ‘reality’ does not exist by itself ‘out there’ and ‘ready-made’ for my mind to perceive. Instead, it is constituted by the forms of perception and recognition and, on this basis, is constructed in the process of social interaction. A socially constructed reality is a product of culture. Thomas Luckmann defines culture as a store of knowledge shared by all those participating in a single social world (Luckmann 2002: 183). This knowledge does not *represent* the world theoretically, but – following William Isaac Thomas’ famous aperçu – *defines* problems and solutions in the everyday life of social actors, in other words it defines all the reality that is possible within this culture. As a tool to deal with practical problems, this knowledge serves to establish social order and security. In effect, it also guarantees cognitive reliability and affective confidence, as well as personal identity, and therefore enjoys high appreciation by individuals.

From the perspective of the culture of another society, this cultural ‘whole’ is evidently limited, a restricted social construction of only relative truth. But what is true for each society is also true for the single individual. An individual does not only share a culture with other members of his society, made up of a stock of common knowledge stemming from experience handed down from earlier generations. Instead, an individual possesses a single life-world, as well, a private perspective on the reality that is constituted by his authentic experiences. Phenomenologists speak of the horizon of one’s life-world as the world taken for granted (Husserl 1992: 141). On the other side of the horizon exists an open world waiting to be explored. You can shift your horizon, but when you do, you leave a familiar home and start an adventure full of risks. Cultures and life-worlds are different relevancy systems, but cultures and life-worlds also contain within them different relevancy systems, as well: People live in the reality of everyday-life, but also in the realities of religious experience and faith, of science, dream and fancy, etc. Furthermore, even so-called common knowledge is distributed unequally between different social classes, milieus, generations, genders, professions, and other social categories.

One differentiation that is crucial for our research is that between experts and laymen. This binary opposition distinguishes between two styles of perception and behaviour, characterised by monopolized, ‘holy’ special knowledge on one hand and ‘profane’ everyday knowledge on the other. Following Alfred Schutz (Schutz/Luckmann 1974), the perspectives of experts and



laymen refer to different systems of relevance and perform different cognitive styles: These two groups act in different realities. What we will try to accomplish through our empirical research project is to identify the rationalities of these actors. We seek to see if they are compatible or not and, if they are not, then discuss how to bring them together. In short: Culture is not a specific substance or aspect, but rather the *form* of social life. It is the stock of knowledge people use to construct their reality. And what social scientists do is reconstruct this knowledge from the data, which we see as cultural products, that is as manifestations of social interaction.

The Cultural Approach

We do not ask in a philosophical way *what* culture should be substantially and ideally. Instead we consider it sociologically, in other words *how* it ‘really’ works, *how* it is constructed by empirical actors under pragmatic conditions. We have already seen: On these grounds, our theory corresponds to our ‘object’. We consider social reality as an effect of something like an applied ‘everyday theory’, and this theory is nothing other than a tool to solve the problems of the human beings involved. Hence, in analogy to the pluralism of scientific discourse; we conceptualise the social world as a pluralism of perspectives.

In our project; we proceed from the observation that official representatives of social institutions perceive corruption as a phenomenon that must be countered with legal sanctions not only in the context of EU enlargement and integration,. This ‘top-down’ perspective on corruption is not false per se. But it is only relatively true. Corruption is neither a universal phenomenon grounded in the dark side of human nature, nor is it an expression of pre-modern consciousness. It is, in the sense of Michel Foucault (1996), the historical product of an expert discourse. From a legal perspective, corruption is a special kind of deviant, criminal behaviour. Seen sociologically, it is primarily a type of social relation that has a specific meaning which differs from culture to culture. What is labelled as ‘deviant’, ‘criminal’, and ‘unsocial’ in one discourse is qualified as ‘normal’, ‘moral’, and ‘social’ in another. Phenomena such as nepotism, bribery, and even blood feud (vendetta) are, neutrally described, mechanisms for achieving solidarity within and between kinship groups. Social anthropologists see them as forms of social exchange and moral reciprocity – analogue to the rule from the Old Testament: An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

There is, obviously, a strong link between our cultural approach to social reality and our empirical research method. A cultural definition of crime and corruption implies a relativist concept, relative to the different modes of perception and recognition of the phenomenon by



different social actors from different societies. However, we do not mean that it is relative in the sense of diminishing the gravity of the problem. Trying to understand even bad things does not mean that we legitimise them and give up our own normative standards. To the contrary, such a cultural comparison might even help to clarify our own normative standards as well-founded and, in consequence, to enforce our own position. But this is an empirical, and not a theoretical question. In general, we ‘operationalise’ culture in terms of perception and recognition. Culture in this sense stands for a conceptualisation of society from the subjective perspective of the social actors, from the intentions they try to realise in social action, and not from the so-called objective perspective of a theoretical observer.

The act of creating theory conceived as an explanation of phenomena by reducing these phenomena to general causes presupposes a hermeneutical interpretation of the meaning empirical actors attach to these phenomena. The empirical actors’ subjective intentions ‘as such’ are entities that a single consciousness cannot reach. However, they are expressed and communicated through social interactions and therefore are manifested in signs and symbols which carry objective meaning because they are shared throughout society. But again, this objectivity is a social construction and, insofar, a cultural fact of relative relevance that must be interpreted by the researcher.

Our research interest is, firstly, the manifest content through which determining interests are communicated, and, secondly, the latent structures of meaning contained within this communication structure. But the project will not follow an investigative procedure. It does not intend to uncover any ‘hidden truth’ and to represent unknown ‘facts’, but rather to reconstruct the strategies people use to define, legitimise, apologise for, criticise or condemn corruption.

In the end, we are not interested in the facts, the stories, that is the content of what people tell us, but rather in the *form* of their narratives and argumentations. Facts, stories, personal or professional secrets, insider information etc., are used only as illustrations and examples to make manifest the perception of and reasoning on corruption. These narrative forms could even be fictitious – or even a projection of the researcher – and they would still not diminish the usefulness of the given interview for our project. This has to do with the fact that our research is not conceived of as an impact analysis in the sense of a quantifiable target-performance comparison, but rather as a reconstruction of the *logic* of anti-corruption measures and the extent to which they are appropriate to the problem in light of the results of the empirical cross-cultural comparison.

Our research will not collect data on a defined phenomenon, but instead definitions of the phenomenon we are investigating. These definitions of the phenomenon refer back to diffe-



rent relevancy systems, which we must reconstruct in a process of open coding. The project's empirical approach proceeds from the assumption that the *bottom-up definitions* held within common-sense theories of corruption are anchored in social patterns of perception that actors apply unconsciously. For this reason, they cannot be polled in the direct method commonly used in opinion research, but rather must be *reconstructed* from administrative and other official documents and protocolled statements of those persons interviewed. Building on this insight, all our data will be subjected to a qualitative content analysis according to the principles of *Grounded Theory* methodology as developed by Anselm Strauss (1998).



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