

Beyond Anti-Corruptionism: Sociological Imagination and Comparative Study of Corruption

This article outlines and illustrates a theoretical blueprint for comparative sociology of corruption. The author argues that existing cross-national studies of corruption, influenced by the global political movement for transparency, undermine fundamental sociological principles. At the same time, truly sociological studies of corruption are unfavorable to comparisons due to their emphasis on singularity of informal economies in non-Western societies. The author argues that there are three analytical foci that can help researchers resolve the tension between ‘insensitive’ large-N and ‘overly-sensitive’ small-N studies of corruption: the principle of social embeddedness, multiplicity of rationality, and localized power implications. A comparative study of university corruption in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Belarus is used to illustrate the strengths of the proposed analytical framework.

Keywords: corruption, comparative theory, Post-Soviet Bloc, informal economies, development

Although social scientists often aspire to deliver policy-relevant insights to help effect positive social change, the relationship between social science and political action is inherently antagonistic. The very reasons why social science can offer effective policy recommendations - its empirical accuracy, methodological rigor, and conscious suppression of bias - are contingent on researchers' independence from the power struggles embedded in politics.

Comparative research on corruption, also known as corruptology, is a testimony to the importance of analytical separation between social science and politics. In the first part of this article, I argue that, currently, comparative study of corruption does not exist outside the politicized paradigm of international relations. Specifically, I show that academic corruptology is permeated with inaccurate and profoundly non-sociological assumptions of *anti-corruptionism* - the transnational movement orchestrated by international business and political elites to reduce corruption, ensure stability of non-Western markets, and increase transparency worldwide. These studies impose a Western notion of corruption on local practices of exchange, equating them to profit-driven deviations from a rational-legal bureaucratic context.

In the second part of this article, I develop and illustrate an alternative framework for a comparative study of corruption based on three sociological principles – the principle of embeddedness, multiplicity of rationality, and localized power implications. First, this approach encourages a study of corrupt exchanges in light of their real-life structural and cultural contexts. Secondly, it rejects the conventional assumption of instrumentality of economic behavior and, instead, embraces complexity and social construction of actors' rationality. Finally, this approach is attentive to the implications of

corruption for the distribution of power among local actors. I argue that this application of sociological imagination to the comparative study of corruption helps generate accurate and policy-relevant insights about its causes and consequences worldwide.

In the third part of this article, I illustrate the proposed framework with a brief discussion of a comparative sociological study of petty bureaucratic corruption in post-soviet Ukraine and Belarus. By contrasting the findings of my sociological analysis to the conclusions of current cross-national studies, I show that the three analytical principles outlined in this article generate a more nuanced and critical understanding of the effect that political and economic transition has on ordinary people's engagement in informal economy¹. I conclude by arguing that distance from the political agendas of anti-corruptionism, afforded by the sociological imagination, can help scholars generate more targeted and effective policy recommendations.

Anti-corruptionism and its impact on comparative corruptology

In Western discourse, corruption refers to the abuse of entrusted power for personal gain (Johnston 1996; Klitgaard 1988; Rose-Ackerman 1999). Since it affects the allocation of resources, undermines the status quo, and decreases the predictability of local and global markets, corruption has important implications for geopolitics and economics (Hopkin 2002; Ng 2006; Uhlenburg et al 2006). Not surprisingly, over the last two decades, corruption in non-Western societies has become a major concern for Western states and

¹ In this article, the term 'informal economy' is used to describe the informal, 'under-the-table' transactions among bureaucrats and between bureaucrats and their clients. These transactions entail exchanges of unsanctioned compensation (either immediate or delayed) for services (either legal or illegal) and undermine or explicitly contradict formal organizational goals. Informal economy, therefore, entails bribery, nepotism, kickbacks and other forms of corruption.

business elites. Anti-corruptionism is a branch of the transnational movement for transparency² and accountability that emerged in the late 1990s as a result of this preoccupation (Sampson 2005, 2010; Rose-Sender and Goodwin 2010).

Within this movement, anti-corruption initiatives of local governments, NGOs, and grass roots organizations are subject to transnational coordination via conditional aid from the World Bank and the IMF, political pressure from Western governments, and membership in the European Union, NATO, and other international treaties (Stapenhurst and Kupndeh 1999; Kennedy 1999; Sampson 2005; Hindess 2005; Blake and Morris 2009). This movement for the so-called ethical globalization (Robinson 2003-2004) is motivated by the belief that corruption undermines democracy by reducing citizens' trust in the government and feelings of personal efficacy, increasing social inequality and poverty, and inhibiting political competition (Gray and Kaufman 1998; Gupta et al 2002; Bowser 2001; Uslaner 2003).

Despite this emphasis on democracy and social equality, anti-corruptionism is, first and foremost, an economic movement, deeply rooted in neoliberal ideology (Brown and Cloke 2004; Robinson 2003-2004; Sampson 2005; Hankivsky 2006). A basic tenet of neoliberalism is the belief that self-regulating markets maximize social good. In global markets, neoliberalism condemns any impediments to freely competitive exchanges that

² In policy and academic discourse, transparency usually means “the release of information about institutions that is relevant for evaluating those institutions” (Lindstedt and Naurin 2010). In this article, I take a broader approach to the notion of transparency. In addition to organizational openness to scrutiny and evaluation, I use this term to mean general compliance with formal law and official regulations by organizations and their members. In this sense, transparency is synonymous to the notions of formality (social interactions that resonate with the letter and the spirit of formal regulations) and legality (compliance with law and enactment of legal understandings).

arise either from national governments or other socio-cultural forces that defy the principles of supply-and-demand (Harvey 2005; Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Blake and Morris 2009: 8). Since corruption offsets market dynamics by injecting an element of unpredictability, anti-corruptionism reflects the preoccupation of Western leaders with the security of their investments and their access to markets in non-Western societies.

Anti-corruptionism has had a major impact on academic research by generating unprecedented amounts of cross-national data on corruption, originally intended to mark the danger zones for international business (Sampford 2006; Davis et al 2012; Kaufmann et al 2002; Doig et al 2005). Most of these data come in the form of easily comparable numeric indicators compiled by international organizations like the World Bank, Business International, Transparency International (TI), and Political Risk Services. These indicators are typically single-digit numbers (usually, with one decimal point), assigned to each country annually or biannually on the basis of interviews and surveys of local and Western experts and businesses (Treisman 2007; Knack 2006; TI 2012; The World Bank 2012).

Given the difficulty of collecting systematic data on corruption across countries and time periods (Morris and Blake 2009), scholars eagerly embraced these international indicators despite their well-documented reductionism, spotty coverage, inconsistency of sources, and so on³ (see Galtung 2006 and Knack 2006 for an overview). Most cross-national corruptologists explore associations between these indicators of countries' corruption levels and their political and economic characteristics, such as poverty and

³ In 1997, Lancaster and Montinola, for instance, published a piece in *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, in which they extolled the promise of discoveries to be made by cross-national analyses of corruption indicators and encouraged researchers to use them as data.

unemployment rates, government size, public salaries, freedom of press, strength and duration of democracy, and many others. These studies are usually based on regression analyses of corruption indices on the one hand and various indicators of economic and political performance, such as GDP, Economist and Freedom House democracy indices, Freedom of Press Index, Economic Freedom of the World Index, on the other. Perhaps not surprisingly, they find that corruption is positively associated with economic underperformance and non-democratic governance. These studies include but are not limited to Ades and DiTella (1997), Tanzi (1998), Treisman (2000), Sandholdtz and Koetze (2000), Moninola and Jackman (2002), Paldam (2002), Fisman and Gatti (2002), Park (2003), Brunetti and Weder (2003), Herzfeld and Weiss (2003), Montaldi and Roe (2003), Ali and Isse (2003), Chowdhury (2004), Xin and Rudel (2004), Sung (2004), Shen and Williamson (2005), Jong-Sung and Khagram (2005), Lambsdorff (2005), Lalountas et al (2011), and so on⁴.

These studies are similar in their methods and in their conclusions. In his 2007 overview piece, Treisman summarizes their findings: “Perceived corruption [...] is lower

⁴ Let’s consider some of these studies in more detail. Sandholdtz and Koetze (2000), for instance, use multivariate regression analyses of the TICPI on political and economic indicators to conclude that corruption is lower in societies with higher income levels, weaker state control of the economy, stronger democratic norms, and a larger share of Protestants. Another study, published by Herzfeld and Weiss in 2003, relies on three distinct measures of corruption –the TICPI, the International Country Risk Guide, and the Institute for Management Development’s World Competitiveness Yearbook. Through a series of econometric analyses, the authors also find that corruption declines as per capita income rises, democracy matures, and as political rights and civil liberties increase. Complementing these findings, Jong-Sung and Khagram (2005) use two-stage least squares tests and both, the World Bank Control of Corruption Index and the TICPI for 129 countries, to establish that income inequality is just as strong a predictor of corruption as low economic development. They also find a strong interactional effect between income and inequality and levels of democracy.

in economically developed, long-established liberal democracies, with a free and widely read press, a high share of women in government, and a history of openness to trade. It is higher in countries that depend on fuel exports or have intrusive business regulations and unpredictable inflation. These factors explain up to 90% of the cross-national variation” (p. 2012).

In the next section, I argue that while these studies have made an important breakthrough in scholarly knowledge about causes and consequences of corruption worldwide, they are based on several assumptions that contradict foundational sociological principles and inhibit the building of comparative sociological theories of corruption. By way of solution, I suggest three focal points for comparative sociological corruptology and illustrate the strength of the proposed approach with a study of university corruption in Ukraine and Belarus.

Problematic assumptions of current comparative corruptology

1. Corruption is a deviation from a rational-legal bureaucratic context

The first problem of current cross-national studies of corruption stems from their reliance on numeric indicators of corruption. By using these data, researchers are bound to accept the definition of corruption that strips informal economic practices of their contextual complexity (Davis et al 2012). For instance, TI’s definition of corruption - “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (TI 2012) – presumes that informal exchanges happen within a Weberian rational-legal bureaucracy, characterized by a hierarchical division of labor and an unambiguous distinction between public and private spheres. Under this

model, the public sphere operates according to codified, 'rational', and socially beneficial rules, standing in stark contrast to the private sphere, guided by kinship duties, emotions, beliefs, and traditions (Bendix 1962; Gerth and Mills 1991; Brown and Cloke 2004; Lowell 2005).

This conceptualization of bureaucracy is fundamentally Western as it is based on modes of social organization that are foreign to most non-Western societies. In fact, many are characterized by under-defined and flexible boundaries between private and public spheres and a spillover of kin obligations, spirituality, and other 'private' rationales into public domains (Caiden and Caiden 1977; Callaghy 1987; Theobald 1993; Lewis 2002; Mouzelis 2003).

Given this definitional assumption, the indicators of corruption essentially reflect the extent to which everyday economies of different societies deviate from the Western 'standard'. It is thus not surprising that they tend to also be positively associated with deviation from other political and economic characteristics of Western liberal democracies, such as high GDP, low income inequality, free press, independent judiciary, and so on. As a result, conclusions of most cross-national studies of corruption risk circularity: they find that corruption, defined as a deviation from Western principles of economic and political organization, is high in societies that do not share these principles (Galtung 2006: 110).

While this criticism can be applied to most cross-country studies that rely on numeric indicators, it is particularly salient in case of corruption, which is defined relative to its context (i.e. as a deviation from a rational-legal bureaucratic model). In other words, while certain social characteristics of nations, such as poverty, electoral

freedoms, or economic development, can be easily operationalized, measured, and compared more or less directly across countries, corruption has to be studied in light of its unique structural and cultural contexts before it can be compared across societies.

2. Corruption is motivated by instrumental calculus

The second unjustified assumption that underlies cross-national studies of corruption relates to the motivation of its perpetrators. As a primarily economic movement, anti-corruptionism embraces a utilitarian model of action that assumes that behavioral choices reflect actors' cost-and-benefit calculus. In the words of March and Olsen (1994), this conception of rationality reflects the logics of consequence whereby actors behave in ways that maximizes their benefit. This 'amoral calculator model' suggests that people break legal and ethical codes for the sake of material benefits and personal power (Vaughan 1998).

Sociological research shows that the assumption of instrumental rationality does not hold up upon a closer empirical examination of most extra-legal behavior (Edelman 2002; Edelman and Suchman 1996; Zaloznaya 2012). Instead, studies suggest that social actors often observe or break laws because they believe certain behaviors are expected of them within specific contexts, such as peer groups, neighborhoods, or organizations (Millberg and Clark 1988; Grasmick et al 1991, Baker and Faulkner 1993, etc.). Thus, in March and Olsen's (1994) words, illegality is often based on logics of appropriateness⁵ rather than logics of consequence. Such behavior reflects shared

⁵ March and Olsen define logics of appropriateness as follows: "a perspective that sees human action as driven by rules of appropriate or exemplary behavior, organized into institutions. Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and

definitions and ‘established ways of doing things’ rather than cost-and-benefit considerations (Sutherland 1998; Vaughan 1998; Zaloznaya 2012, etc.).

3. Corruption is bad and absence of corruption is good

Lastly, cross-national scholarship on corruption assumes that corruption is always undesirable (Sampson 2005; Bracking 2011). In fact, anti-corruptionism discourse links transparency to democracy and modernity, and corruption - to backwardness and social injustice. Corruption is construed as a self-interested deviation from an optimal bureaucratic order, detrimental to the moral fabric of a society. This moralistic discourse spills over into cross-national studies of corruption, which, in the words of Zerilli, are permeated with “the rhetoric of deficiency” that treats societies with vibrant informal economies as pathological and lacking in ethical virtues (2005: 83).

While corruption has many adverse consequences⁶, informal economies often also have important positive implications for local actors. Sociologists show that they may offer opportunities for self-expression and resistance to oppressive governments, increase efficiency of dysfunctional institutions, and even generate networks for the mobilization of civil society (Grossman 1977; Yang 1994; Ledeneva 1998). For instance, Grossman finds that informal economies of the Soviet Union functioned as “a partial substitute to the missing market mechanism” by decreasing “rigidity, delays, inefficiency, disequilibria, and inconsistencies” of the planned economy (1980: 101). Similarly, in communist China, *guanxixue* or informal system of gift-giving and favors “unleashes

legitimate. Actors seek to fulfill the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions” (1994: 2).

⁶ See Bardhan (1997) for an overview.

[...] counter techniques of power” by generating personal relations that allow citizens to step outside of the homogenizing class-status categories. Through guanxixue, they engage in an oppositional action against the state that controls its subjects through normalization and de-personalization” (Yang 1994: 191-2005). These complex power dynamics are obscured by current comparative analyses.

Connected to this condemnation of informal economic activity is unconditional acceptance of transparency and formal rule following as an optimal social order. Since neoliberal conception of corruption implies disintegration of a perfect state (Johnston 1996), anti-corruptionist discourse assumes that the status quo represents this utopian condition. Consequently, corruptology treats rule following - or reenactment of established power relations - as a universal goal. Absence of corruption is equated to modernity and efficiency, and portrayed as a means of advancement along a presumably a linear developmental trajectory toward economic prosperity and democracy (see Mizstal 2001 for an overview).

Yet, just like rule breaking, transparency is contextual, dynamic, and imbued with multiple meanings. Thus, when transparency is based on logics of appropriateness, actors follow rules because they ‘feel right’ and resonate with their previous experiences. In contrast, when transparency is based on logics of consequence, actors follow formal rules even though their inclination is to act differently.

Such strategic transparency can be illustrated with the example of Singapore, which ranks at the top of TI’s non-corrupt list, alongside Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway (TI 2012). Despite this seemingly desirable position, Singapore’s anti-corruption policy relies heavily on authoritarian and repressive methods. Singapore’s de-facto one-

party government, dominated by the People's Action Party, imposes excessive penalties for corruption, and detains suspects without reasonable proof (Quah 1995). Since the fear of punishment is, in all likelihood, more salient to the decision-making of Singaporeans than logics of appropriateness, absence of corruption in Singaporean bureaucracies is different from the transparency of Swedish organizations, despite their similar scores on corruption indicators.

Beyond the dominant paradigm: other comparative research on corruption

Notably, some comparative studies of corruption exist outside the dominant indicator-based paradigm. Rooted in comparative politics, these studies rely primarily on quantitative methods, and, sometimes, on anecdotal evidence and existing literature, to explore the relationship between political and economic change and corruption. For instance, Kang (2002) looks at corruption in South Korea and the Philippines. Once again, he conceptualizes corruption, rent seeking, and 'money politics' through a rational choice principal-agent model. He argues that in both countries, the strength of the state and the business sector has determined the rates and patterns of corruption. He also shows how political decisions have interacted with 'money politics' to generate the two countries' different economic outcomes.

Another example is Correa's 1985 study, which uses a statistical comparison of corruption in the US and 17 Latin American countries as an illustration of a public choice model of corruption, according to which profit-oriented bureaucrats engage in corruption as much as their monopoly over services allows them to. Manzetti and Wilson (2009) also compare several Latin American countries. They explore the consequences that

corruption has for popular support of the government and democratic institutions, using statistical analyses of the World Values Survey data. Finally, Yan Sung (1999), in contrast, uses a review of relevant literature and secondary data to link corruption in Russia and China to their distinct trajectories of economic development.⁷

These small-N (or smaller-N) comparisons by political scientists make an important step toward understanding corruption in light of its actual socio-political contexts and elucidating the mechanisms whereby corruption is linked to its causes and outcomes. Yet, similar to large-N studies of the dominant paradigm, they fall short of sociological standards of analysis. Once again, they are rooted in the rational-choice framework and assume the deviant nature of corruption, its negative implications, and the instrumentality of its perpetrators. Since these studies do not explore the decision-making processes of local actors empirically, they are not very sensitive to the culturally specific context, social construction of rationality, and local power implications of informal exchanges.

Sociological response: single-country case studies

While many sociologists have pointed out problematic foundations of cross-national studies of corruption, up to date, the sociological response to dominant comparative corruptology has not been constructive. As a rule, sociological studies of corruption focus on single country cases and tend toward deconstruction and cultural relativism, precluding any systematic cross-national comparison.

⁷ This is not an exhaustive list of such comparative studies. Other examples include, but, again, are not limited to Panday 2001, Seligson 2002, Quah 1982, Waterbury 1976, and Taagepera 2002.

Thus, some sociologically-minded scholars reject the dominant universalist assumptions of good governance based on transparency in favor of in-depth, culturally-sensitive and non-judgmental analyses of informal economies in non-Western societies (Bracking 2011). Their work usually takes the form of case studies based on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and historical analysis. It appears in anthropology journals, monographs, and edited volumes on corruption (Ledeneva 1998; Yang 1994; Karatnycky 2002; Rivkin-Fish 2005; Vasile 2009, etc.). Scholars in this camp write about complex patterns of on-the-ground economies, the meanings that they carry for various social actors, and their social implications within specific institutional contexts.

For instance, Ledeneva explores complex delayed-reciprocity (or *blat*) based economies of favors whereby Soviet citizens distributed and accessed consumer goods and services during the periods of artificial scarcity generated by planned socialist economy (1998). Yang also examines the intricate informal norms guiding exchanges of goods in the communist China. Her rich account describes the informal markets underpinning social relationships in China and the implications they carry for family honor and social status of participants (1994). Humphrey (2002) and Rivkin-Fish (2005), then, analyze the transformation of these economies after the fall of socialism.

Other extensive ethnographic and qualitative analyses of corruption in single countries include the work of Smith in Nigeria, Wade's (1982) and Vittal's (2003) research in India, Gould's work in Zaire (1970), Ruhii's writing on Kenya (1999), Santoro's (2004) research on Argentina, and many other studies. These studies by-pass the problematic assumptions that comparative corruptologists adopt from anti-

corruptionism by putting emphasis on cultural multiplicity and contextual complexity of rule-breaking.

At the same time, these studies do not offer feasible alternative frameworks for cross-country comparisons (Alatas 1980; Gardiner 2002). Lancaster and Montinola call these studies ‘ideographic’ and argue that they actually impede rather than facilitate large-N empirical testing of potentially generalizable hypotheses (1997: 186). In the words of Sarah Hodgkinson, they are “liable to relativise the phenomenon to the extent that it becomes impossible to compare cases over time and space” (1997: 7).

In many ways, the non-sociological assumptions of cross-national studies help mold complex social processes that constitute corruption into measurable and easily-comparable variables. Sociologists who avoid these assumptions generate more accurate and empirically rich accounts of informal economic practices in different contexts. Yet, their accounts are unwieldy, burdened with complexity, and, as a result, lacking in common points of comparisons (Blake and Morris 2009: 17).

Three principles of comparative sociology of corruption

To summarize the argument so far, cross-national indicator-based analyses of corruption undermine fundamental sociological principles while the studies that apply sociological imagination to the analysis of corruption are, generally, unfavorable to comparisons due to their emphasis on singularity of informal economies in non-Western societies.

In the rest of this article, I suggest a solution for this tension between ‘insensitive’ large-N and ‘overly-sensitive’ small-N studies of corruption. I argue that sociological approach to corruption does not make cross-national comparisons impossible

and corruptologists do not have to choose between the depth of grounded sociological inquiry and breadth of cross-national comparisons.

Specifically, I argue that there are three analytical foci that researchers need to preserve in their comparative work in order to avoid neoliberal assumptions and maintain sociological imagination – the focus on social embeddedness of corruption, on its power implications, and on the multiplicity of rationality of its perpetrators. At the same time, these focal points make the comparison between highly localized and unique practices possible as they provide ‘common denominators’ or axes along which comparisons can be carried out. By identifying these principles and translating them into concrete research questions, I spell out a theoretical blueprint for comparative sociology of corruption.

1. The principle of embeddedness: how does context shape corruption?

This principle of sociological comparison addresses the assumption that corruption is a deviation from a rational-legal bureaucratic order, currently permeating comparative corruptology. De-contextualization that happens when scholars place local practices into an imagined Western-like context is profoundly non-sociological as it overlooks social pressures that arise from group dynamics, local norms, and unique structural constraints embedding corruption. This decontextualization is typical of the neoclassical economics that underlies anticorruptionism. According to Granovetter, “classical and neoclassical economics [...] disallow by hypothesis any impact of social structure and social relations...” (1985: 483).

In contrast, the foundational principle of sociological analysis consists in uncovering the social forces that tacitly and explicitly shape social action (Bottomore and

Nisbet 1978; Elias 18-25; Giddens 1987). Sociologists shed light on causes and consequences of various processes by studying them within and in relation to their structural and cultural contexts. From a sociological standpoint, these environments generate incentive structures for actors, normalize certain behavioral patterns, create expectations, and discourage non-compliance. Sociologists argue that networks that embed social action shape its form and content, rendering it different from actions of atomized individuals (Moody and White 2003; Beckert 2003). The embeddedness argument, specifically, “stresses the role of concrete personal relations and structures of such relations” in shaping economic action (Granovetter 1985: 490).

Comparative studies of corruption from a sociological perspective would, therefore, focus on how the contexts of corrupt practices generate the need for exchanges, affect their dynamics, and imbue them with meaning. Instead of assuming the presence of rational-legal bureaucracies, these studies would empirically explore the nature of seemingly corrupt practices vis-à-vis their actual political, organizational, and group contexts. Avoiding direct cross-national comparisons, scholars would compare informal exchanges in light of their meanings and connotations within their local environments.

At the same time, this focus could facilitate cross-country comparisons of unique practices that corruption entails. Sociologists could proceed by specifying several levels of context analysis and collect data on these levels for each country case. By defining informal behaviors through their relationship to their actual environments, scholars would avoid imposing Western definitions on non-Western practices, and, at the same time, carry out comparisons that are impossible without a definition. In other words, this focus offers sociologists a better analytical access to illicit practices themselves and identifies a

common denominator for an effective comparison.

2. The principle of multiplicity of rationality: why do/ don't actors participate in corruption?

The assumption of instrumental rationality adopted by current cross-national studies of corruption is also a product of atomized individualist model of action that underlies neoclassical economics and anti-corruptionism. Sociologists have always been skeptical of this 'undersocialized' conception of decision-making. Starting with the foundational writings of Marx Weber, the discipline of sociology has been preoccupied with the topic of rationality and with the processes of its social construction (Stinchcombe 1986; Redner 1986; Macy and Flache 1995). In fact, economic sociologists have documented the social bases of market rationality, demonstrating that even economic choices are structured by group dynamics, status aspirations, and other non-instrumental considerations (Zey 1992; Green and Shapiro 1994; Gergen 1998).

A comparative study of corruption from a sociological perspective would, therefore, embrace the multiplicity of rationality behind informal economies. These studies would not assume that corruption reflects strategic, individual-level calculus but would, instead, explore actors' rationality empirically through a grounded analysis, attentive to shared cultural meanings and localized incentives.

March and Olsen's (1994) distinction between logics of consequence and logics of appropriateness could offer a useful analytical tool to differentiate between instrumental corruption that current comparative corruptology presumes to be the only possible kind, and corruption that reflects normalized interactional patterns. The focus on

actors' motivation could provide another focal point to reduce the complexity of a truly sociological comparison of informal exchange practices.

In addition to generating non-reductionist analytical categories, the distinction between normalized, 'appropriate' corruption and strategic, instrumental corruption, would allow sociologists to identify the roots of corruption in either incentive structures (in case of corruption based on logics of consequence) or local cultures of peer groups, organizations, and other communities (in case of corruption based on logics of appropriateness).

3. Principle of localized power implications: what does corruption (or its absence) offer local actors?

The third principle of sociological comparison helps eliminate moralistic undertones of cross-national corruptology and refocus the inquiry on the actual connotations of corruption for local actors. The discipline of sociology in general, and its conflict and critical streaks in particular, have always been attentive to imbalances in power associated with various social processes. From the Marxian conceptualization of social relations in terms of power struggle for means of production to Bourdieuan theory of fields as spaces of contestation of power, sociological imagination has always rendered visible the causes and consequences of power differentials (Marx and Engels 2010; Bourdieu 1986). Sociologists unveil these dynamics in relation to a variety of social phenomena, including construction of knowledge (Smith 1990), education (Apple 1996), markets (Lie 1997), law (Bourdieu 1986), geopolitics (Quijano 2000), and others. To date, corruption is not among these topics.

To avoid the neoliberal trap of assuming the desirability of rule-following, scholars need to explore the economies of exchange in terms of their consequences for actual participants rather than for Western investors and politicians. Critical and data-driven analyses of power relations obscured by ‘transparency—as-a-universal-good’ rhetoric, attentive to the long and short-term social implications of corruption, could constitute a powerful sociological response to current cross-national corruptology.

This principle of comparison would orient the analysis toward the social consequences of corruption, or absence thereof, for actors involved in illicit activity as well as agents of the state, organizational stakeholders, and the general public. Such inquiry would be attentive to economic consequences and shifts in political power, associated with corruption, opportunities for resistance that it provides, and the subversion or reinforcement of status quo that it entails.

At the same time, the comparison of power implications behind corrupt practices could streamline the complexity of sociological analyses of corruption in different societies. It could help researchers situate corrupt processes in relation to the state, organizations, and other stakeholders that are the same in different societies, providing yet another point of comparison or contrast. Moreover, this analytical focus could help Western researchers, operating within the hegemonic neoliberal paradigm that equates the absence of corruption with democracy and human rights, to think about functions and consequences of corruption more critically.

The study of bureaucratic corruption in transitional societies: comparison of Ukraine and Belarus

I illustrate the analytical strength of the proposed framework with a comparative study of bureaucratic corruption in two countries transitioning from socialism. Ukraine and Belarus are two former Soviet Republics that have gained political independence in 1991 and have pursued independent trajectories of political and economic development since then. For almost a decade, Transparency International has ranked both countries in the 20% percentile of the most corrupt countries in the world (See Appendix Table 1).

Cross-national studies of corruption suggest that the prolonged period of transition has plunged these countries into the state of economic recession and increased institutional inefficiency, associated with high levels of corruption. They show that Ukraine and Belarus exhibit a range of social characteristics that are believed to cause corruption, such as poverty, high unemployment, low public salaries, lack of effective law enforcement, and so on (Treisman 2000; Rijkkeghem and Weder 2001; Fisman and Gatti 2002; etc.). Other studies in this paradigm show that high prevalence of corruption in these countries further contributes to their economic underperformance, high inequality rates, and weakness of democratic institutions (see Bardhan 1997 for an overview). To sum up, the somewhat intuitive conclusions of current cross-national studies of corruption in ‘developing countries’ (including Ukraine and Belarus) spell out a vicious cycle whereby transition generates economic instability and institutional breakdown that cause corruption, which then contributes to further economic recession and institutional dysfunction.

These studies arouse two sets of concerns. First, given the assumptions they adopt from anti-corruptionism, it is not clear what the associations revealed by their regressions mean beyond the obvious fact that non-capitalist and non-democratic societies lack

rational-legal bureaucracies. Secondly, these studies do not answer sociological questions about the mechanisms whereby different structural and cultural characteristics of transitional societies translate into citizens' decisions to resort to behaviors that resemble corruption and what power implications these behaviors have for local actors.

By applying the theoretical framework outlined in this article to Ukraine and Belarus, I show that a sociological study guided by the principles of embeddedness, multiplicity of rationality, and localized power implications can shed light on causes, dynamics, and consequences of corruption that are obscured by current cross-national studies. This illustration is based on an ethnographic study of university corruption in Ukraine and Belarus that I carried out in the period between 2006 and 2011. It draws on six months of participant-observation in four local universities, interviews with university actors and experts on the topic of educational corruption, and analysis of informal online discussion forums (see Appendix for a more detailed discussion of methodology).

1. Bureaucratic corruption in Ukrainian and Belarusian universities

My data suggest that, despite their similar TICPI rankings, higher educational organizations of these two countries are characterized by strikingly different rates and patterns of informal exchanges. While Ukrainian universities are permeated with numerous illicit monetary transactions and gifts between students and university employees, corruption in Belarusian universities is limited to enrollment, hiring, and retention related 'favours' that low-level officials provide for higher-standing officials. I will now discuss each country in more detail.

Ukrainian universities have complex, dynamic, and highly variegated informal economies. They entail transactions between students, parents, instructors, and administrators that follow a number of scenarios, such as ‘fake tutoring’, assistance in admissions and preparation of assignments, and direct purchase of grades and credentials (i.e. certificates and diplomas).

For instance, students may compensate instructors for individual tutoring that implicitly guarantees extra assistance during exams, they may ‘order’ prepared tests and lab assignments from professors or independent agencies, or ‘purchase’ a variety of certifications and diplomas from university administrations, independent businesses specializing in fake documents, or the Ministry of Education. Payments in such transactions take form of money, gifts, in-kind favors, or implicit promises of reciprocity in the future. Often, they are carried out via institutionalized mechanisms, such as ‘price lists’ that outline the prices of different grades for different subjects and designated intermediaries who pass informal payments between students/parents and instructors/administrators. Several scholars have documented most of these corruption mechanisms in their studies (Stetar et al 2005; Osipian 2007, 2008, 2009a,b; Silova and Bray 2006; Zaloznaya 2012).

During my fieldwork, I was able to directly observe and participate in such exchanges. Most of my interview respondents reported either personal engagement in or indirect knowledge of informal exchanges in universities. Online university forums also abounded with discussions of the ‘how-to’ of bribery and purchase of assignments.

In contrast to these vibrant informal economies of Ukrainian universities, Belarusian universities are characterized by few under-the-table exchanges between

students, parents, and instructors. Thus, none of my student and parent interviewees reported giving bribes or knowing about exchanges between other students and instructors. None of the Belarusian online forums mentioned horizontal exchanges⁸ in universities. Instead, my data suggest that in Belarusian universities corruption is limited to vertical exchanges⁹ among instructors, administrators, and politically influential people outside universities.

Usually, higher-standing officials or ‘important people’ who are not affiliated with universities request certain favors of lower-standing officials and instructors. Such requests often deal with inclusion or exclusion decisions – admitting a certain student protégé or hiring a relative of someone ‘important’, retaining or giving a passing grade to a failing student who has ‘protection’, or expelling or firing someone affiliated with political opposition. As a rule, compensation for such favors is less tangible than corruption spoils in Ukrainian universities. While some instructors and administrators get promoted or develop friendly relationships with their bosses in return for such ‘assistance’, most interviewees suggested that these favors are ‘a part of the job duties’ that they must carry out to keep their positions.

Thus, despite Ukraine and Belarus’s similar TI scores, my data show that petty corruption in street-level bureaucracies of the two countries takes notably different forms. While Ukrainian universities are permeated with horizontal informal exchanges between university students and employees, Belarusian universities appear to be relatively ‘clean’.

⁸ The term horizontal corruption refers to exchanges between bureaucrats and their clients.

⁹ The term vertical corruption refers to exchanges between higher and lower-standing bureaucrats.

In them, small-scale corruption entails favors between lower and higher officials that usually deals with inclusion or retention decisions and is understood as a part of the job.

2. Multiplicity of rationality: why do/ don't actors participate in corruption?

Once again, in contrast to the assumption of similarity between these two countries in current cross-national corruptology, my data suggest that actors' rationality for engaging in informal economies does not always reflect logics of consequence and differs across the two countries.

Interviews and observations in Ukrainian universities suggest that many local students and parents do not participate in informal exchanges in pursuit of specific ends. Rather, most bring bribes and presents to fulfill perceived expectations of instructors and comply with established ways of comportment in their organizations. For these respondents, informal payments are either a replication of what they think other students do or a response to what they perceive as instructors' demands. Thus, most interviewees told me that they decided to bring bribes and presents based on the hearsay and gossip about 'how things work', the reputation of instructors, and conversations with their classmates, upperclassmen, and parents of other students. In other words, students and parents learn these appropriate behavioral patterns through their exposure to informal cultures of their universities. Besides few exceptions, most students were not asked for bribes directly.

For most Ukrainian professors and lecturers, informal engagement is also a matter of 'fitting in' and 'playing by the rules' in their workplace. Many interviewees who reported corrupt behavior also believed that all or most of their colleagues participated in informal transactions. These instructors insisted that personal engagement in informality was

expected of them by their colleagues and students, and that their avoidance of corruption would be considered odd and even ridiculed by others. Thus, my data reveal that petty corruption in Ukrainian universities entails compliance with rather than deviation from an established behavioral pattern. In contrast to decontextualized and instrumental understanding of corruption as an outcome of ‘amoral calculation’, these data suggest that economic informality is deeply rooted in organizational cultures and reflects shared logics of appropriateness, normalized within them.

The patterns of petty corruption in Belarusian universities, in contrast, reflect the logics of consequence of ordinary citizens. Interviews with Belarusian professors suggest that they abstain from informal transactions with students not because they find corruption inappropriate but because they fear retaliation from their supervisors and worry about keeping their jobs. Vertical corruption that entails inclusion-related favors also happens due to the bureaucrats’ fear of making authorities unhappy and desire to keep their jobs or advance professionally.

My interviews and observations suggest that Belarusian universities have highly integrated and cohesive hierarchical chains of employees whereby higher-standing officials closely monitor and control their immediate subordinates. This oversight is carried out via elaborate bureaucratic accountability requirements and encouraged through a rewards-and-punishments system whereby one’s salary and promotions depend on performance and rule compliance of one’s subordinates. Thus, my data reveal that department chairs and deans subject instructors to strict reporting requirements that include mandatory written accounts of their everyday instructional, administrative, and research activity. These consolidated hierarchical chains and burdensome requirements

limit instructors' discretion in admissions, retention, and grading decisions. Belarusian instructors insist that, given the lack of 'unsupervised' space in their professional lives, informal exchanges with students are hard to carry out and potentially dangerous. In such organizational contexts, vertical corruption, requested by administrative supervisors, is the only possible type of informality.

Belarusian students also attest to the lack of discretionary space for informal exchanges due to strong pressures and various controls imposed by the government. For instance, students are required to take classes in the "Ideology of Belarusian State", enroll in the pro-government youth organization called Belarusian Republican Youth Union, and attend various pro-presidential political events (Rich 2003; Zaloznaya and Hagan 2012). Belarusian Ministry of Education controls students' voting patterns and monitors their geographic mobility, limiting their foreign travel through complicated registration requirements. Non-compliance with governmental requirements results in formal reprimands, expulsion, and even imprisonment. In such environment, students limit any informal activity that may be construed as undermining the will of the government.

Ethnographic and interview data, therefore, reveal that this lack of discretionary space explains the absence of horizontal and presence of vertical corruption in Belarusian universities. In such context, ordinary Belarusians' logics of consequence take primacy over their logics of appropriateness.

To sum up, the analytical attention to social construction of actors' rationality for exchanges that appear to correspond to the Western notion of corruption reveals that the assumption of instrumentality does not hold across all country cases. In Ukraine, university corruption is based on the logics of appropriateness rather than logics of

consequence. Through their exposure to informal university cultures, ordinary Ukrainians learn that informal exchanges are a ‘normal’ way to get by. Moreover, even though Belarusian instructors engage in vertical corruption on the basis of instrumental calculus, their instrumentality differs from the amoral calculator model whereby a corrupt agent breaks rational-legal bureaucratic order to achieve additional unsanctioned benefits. Instead, they feel pressured to resort to corruption as the only way to keep their jobs. Their choices, at least as they perceive them, are not between regular and additional benefits but between losses and regular benefits.

As discussed previously, the analytical attention to actors’ rationality behind corrupt behavior is important because it allows to better identify the social roots of corruption. Thus, informality based on logics of appropriateness, such as corruption in Ukrainian universities, stems from organizational and small-group cultures and should be explained in terms of their historical emergence and normalization. In contrast, instrumental corruption and transparency, such as presence of vertical and absence of horizontal exchanges in Belarusian universities, needs to be explained in terms of meso and macro-level roots of actors’ incentive structures.

3. Embeddedness: how does context shape corruption?

In order to explore the effect of different trajectories of transition from socialism on bureaucratic corruption, this section links informal economic landscapes of the two countries to changes in their socio-political circumstances since the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Specifically, in case of Belarus, I analyze the absence of horizontal and presence of vertical corruption in higher education in light of universities’ changing role

under the authoritarian leadership of President Lukashenka. In case of Ukraine, I link the rise of university cultures of corruption to the country's recent turbulent political and economic liberalization. I will now explore each country in turn.

Since the fall of the Soviet regime, Ukraine has oscillated between Pro-Western and Pro-Russian paths of political development. From the West-oriented first President Kravchuk to his pro-Russian successor President Kuchma to the nationalist pro-Western President Yuschenko and back to pro-Russian President Yanukovich, the political history of independent Ukraine is characterized by wavering, inconsistency, and incomplete reforms (Wolczuk 2000; Sasse 2001; Barrington and Herron 2004; Karatnycky 2005). While no one administration has implemented a comprehensive reform of the educational sector, each has introduced and then failed to fund and oversee at least some changes in higher education (Kendjuhov 2008).

The lack of consistency in university governance generated ambiguity regarding the proper ways to organize the educational process (Fimyar 2010). For instance, in his discussion of the implementation of standardized admissions exams in 2007, Osipian notes "miscommunications between the Ministries, unclear regulations and structural frameworks for implementing the reform" (2009b: 112-113). Many others describe the chaotic adoption of changes mandated by the Pan-European Bologna educational standardization agreement, characterized by ill-fitting prescriptions, unclear guidelines for the implementation, and conflicting demands on faculty and students (Petrov 2009; Kovtun and Stick 2009; Goodman 2010).

At the same time, the institutional breakdown and chaos of transition undermined the effectiveness of external and internal controls in most Ukrainian organizations, including

universities (Gallina 2006). Many scholars of the region have documented the weakness of Ukrainian institutions that could, potentially, generate pressures for transparency by increasing the chances of detection and punishment of deviant bureaucrats and their clients (Sidenko and Kuziakiv 2003; Tiffin 2006; Smallbone et al 2010).

For instance, Protsyk and Wilson (2003) and Way (2005) argue that political competition in present-day Ukraine is riddled with corruption and patronage, Aslund (2000) laments the country's insufficient economic competition, while Beck and Chistyakova (2004) and Solomon and Foglesong (2000) document the ineffectiveness of local police, and Popova (2010) stresses the lack of judicial independence.

In the absence of functional law enforcement and bureaucratic accountability pressures in post-Soviet Ukraine, the ambiguity associated with chaotic and incomplete higher education reforms generated ample opportunities for students and professors to engage in corruption.

My observations in Ukrainian universities testify to chaotic and inconsistent implementation of changes in the curriculum and instructional methods. Interviews with university actors also reveal the lack of clarity about employees' and students' responsibilities and absence of effective controls and rule-enforcement mechanisms. It is within these emergent spaces of bureaucratic discretion that the logics of unbridled profit-making of 'wild capitalism' took root and turned into unwritten rules of conduct in many Ukrainian universities.

At the same time, the evolution of Ukrainian universities, nominally (and poorly) controlled by the government, has lagged behind the changes in the country's rapidly liberalizing economy (Paul 1998; Koshmanova 2006). While new professions, new

modes of doing business, and new organizational structures sprung up throughout the country (Bridgewater 1999; Bazylevich 2011; Aidis et al 2007), the outdated and partially-modernized curriculum and instructional methods of Ukrainian universities could no longer serve the employment needs of the evolving economy and prepare students for the changed labor market (Round et al 2008; Pasechnik 2009).

My data suggest that the resulting lack of economic integration of Ukrainian universities contributes to their institutional identity crisis and generates distorted incentives for university actors. My interviews reveal that professional lives of many university graduates do not build on their university specializations. Thus, many Ukrainian students reported attending universities simply because ‘everybody else did it’ and few believed that university degrees, albeit necessary, are sufficient for getting entry-level jobs (in contrast to connections and experience, for instance). Most respondents, therefore, felt that it did not really matter how they obtained their diplomas – either legitimately by studying or illegitimately by ‘buying’. Given the lack of incentives to study, many students choose to buy their grades and diplomas.

In contrast to the Ukrainian higher educational institutions, Belarusian universities are subjected to highly consolidated governance and oversight from the autocratic government of President Lukashenka. Elected shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, Lukashenka paid surprisingly little attention to universities in the early years of his presidency (McMahon 1997; Allison et al 2005). Uninhibited by excessive regulation, universities grew, changed, and liberalized during the 1990s. New private universities opened throughout the country, academic freedoms were extended across educational institutions, and steps were made toward joining the Bologna Agreement (Ministry of

Education of the Republic of Belarus 2004). In the context of little regulation, informal economic relations spread through most colleges and universities.

The period of openness ended in the early 2000s when President Lukashenka realized that his noninvolvement in higher education was risky, as the liberalization of universities generated a pro-democratic sentiment among the country's youth. During the presidential elections of 2001, university students showed low support for Lukashenka's candidacy¹⁰. At the same time, Belarusian oppositional youth groups grew, developed elaborate organizational structures in support of oppositional candidates, and organized numerous peaceful protests (Bekkerman 2005; Malady Front 2011).

In response to the mobilization of oppositional youth, Lukashenka embarked on a crusade to limit university freedoms. The President closed down independent private institutions and replaced top administrators of older public universities with regime loyalists (Maksimiuk 2004). His team implemented stringent controls to limit the discretion of university members so that they could no longer freely travel abroad, collaborate with Western universities, or participate in demonstrations (Silitski 2005: 92). The leadership introduced the mandatory subject "Ideology of Belarusian State", into university curriculum and activated the Belarusian Republican Youth Movement, charged with the task of controlling students' 'morale' and voting (Bekkerman 2005; Rich 2003).

Moreover, Lukashenka's administration re-introduced the Soviet practice of *raspredelenie* (redistribution), whereby university graduates are assigned to their first job, which usually takes them outside the capital city of Minsk and away from politically

¹⁰ Independent experts suggest that the approval level of university students was estimated to be as low as 5% (Nohlen and Stöver 2010).

active circles during their most active years (Eke and Kuzio 2000; Zaloznaya and Hagan 2012).

My data suggest that Lukashenka's retaliation decreased both, opportunities and need for horizontal corruption in Belarusian universities. The spaces of bureaucratic discretion in universities shrank in response to tightened hierarchies of employees, rise in mandatory bureaucratic procedures, and the stasis resulting from discontinued reforms and innovation. Furthermore, repressions and persecution of oppositional activists generated a climate that discouraged any informal activity on the part of university members. At the same time, *raspredelenie* reinforced the link between higher education and the job market, making corrupt offerings unnecessary in the eyes of university students who get jobs through this program, whether or not they pay under-the-table.

Thus, my interviews reveal that Belarusian university actors do not consider horizontal exchanges feasible in their organizations. Most suggested that there was no way to get away with corruption, while students also insisted that they saw no need to 'throw away' their money. For instructors, the only kind of digression from the rules that was feasible in this context of control and fear was vertical corruption whereby informality was requested by their supervisors and was interpreted as their professional obligation.

4. Localized power implications: what does corruption (or its absence) offer local actors?

Although, from the neoliberal point of view, the presence of horizontal informality in Ukraine and its virtual absence in Belarus bodes well for the latter, a sociological

comparative analysis suggests otherwise. Of course, petty informal exchanges between Ukrainian students and instructors contribute to the devaluation of academic credentials and lack of meritocracy in the country's higher education, most likely causing social inequality to rise and the economy to stagger. At the same time, these exchanges have a number of positive implications for the ability of ordinary people to deal with institutional disintegration and non-linear political and economic development of Ukraine in the post-Soviet era. Thus, university corruption allows students to 'streamline' the outdated and chaotic curriculum and minimize the ambiguity associated with rapid institutional change. For under-compensated instructors, it also offers an additional source of income. In many ways, then, university corruption in Ukraine constitutes an agentic coping mechanism in the context of structural disadvantage.

In Belarus, in contrast, absence of horizontal corruption and presence of vertical informality, despite the neoliberal assumptions, is not a sign of democratic values and functional institutions. Rather, the informal economic landscape of Belarusian universities reflects the repressive governance style of the Belarusian leader. Thus, ordinary citizens abstain from horizontal corruption for the fear of punishment rather than as a result of their civic consciousness and ethical or moral beliefs. This finding suggests that the lack of such informality reflects the logics of consequence and is therefore significantly less desirable than it might appear at first sight. In fact, presence of vertical and absence of horizontal corruption indicates governmental abuses of basic rights and suppression of fundamental freedoms of ordinary Belarusians.

Discussion

This illustration of the sociological comparative framework on corruption reveals its analytical strengths vis-à-vis the currently dominant comparative corruptology. As of now, comparative studies of corruption in transitional economies contend that these countries have the highest levels of corruption (compared to mature democracies and authoritarian regimes) as a result of poverty, absence of legitimate avenues of social achievement, lowered trust in institutions, and so on (see Bardhan 1997 for an overview). A sociological study of Ukrainian and Belarusian universities, however, suggests that this view is only partially accurate.

The incorporation of three proposed principles of comparison – the principle of embeddedness, multiplicity of rationality, and localized power implications – allows to strip comparative study of corruption of the inaccurate assumptions of instrumentality, rational-legal context, and undesirability of corruption. A sociological study, instead, reveals that different trajectories of political and economic transition from socialism are associated with different informal economic landscapes.

Weak leadership and frequent regime change, for instance, appear to generate shared systems of meaning that normalize corruption by creating ambiguity in regards to the proper organizational processes and disconnect between different institutional sectors (i.e. higher education and labor market). Thus, in Ukraine, political oscillation between more and less democratic patterns of governance gave rise to organizational cultures of corruption in many¹¹ local universities.

¹¹ My data show that not all Ukrainian universities are characterized by organizational cultures of corruption. Some, instead, have local cultural environments that discourage corruption. Non-corrupt colleges and universities generally include skill-based specialized institutes, such as art schools, universities that have ‘Westernized’ their curriculum and that prepare students for graduate studies abroad or for employment in

In contrast, renewed authoritarianism appears to result in the eradication of spaces of bureaucratic discretion and emergence of fear-based informal economies in some institutional sectors¹² where those who hold political power ‘order’ corruption from their subordinates, while the latter are not able to engage in informality for their own benefit. Thus, in Belarusian universities, autocratic political oppression generated a fear-based absence of horizontal corruption and proliferation of vertical corruption ‘required’ of ordinary citizens by their superiors.

This illustration reveals that despite their similar socio-historical profiles and scores on corruption indicators, these post-Socialist countries have distinct corruption landscapes. It sheds light on the mechanisms whereby these countries’ macro-level political and economic processes shape meso-level organizational cultures and structures, which, in their turn, affect the micro-level behavioral choices of ordinary citizens. All things considered, such comparative sociological analysis complements the broad conclusions of current comparative corruptology, revealing that different types of policy interventions are likely to be needed to fight corruption in post-Socialist countries that follow distinct trajectories of socio-political development.

Corruption from a comparative sociological perspective: why bother?

foreign companies, and the least prestigious departments and institutions that have a difficult time attracting students. For members of these institutions, the incentive structures are generally aligned with a meritocratic educational process. They experience no cultural pressure to engage in corruption. See Zaloznaya (2012) on more about this variation.

¹² My data suggest that these dynamics might be specific to higher educational institutions in Belarus. Other street-level bureaucracies, such as hospitals and utility offices, which have not experienced consolidated controls and repressions from autocratic leadership, appear to be filled with small-scale corruption. See Zaloznaya and Hagan (2012) on more about this variation.

For over two decades corruption has been at the forefront of international politics as an important cause and consequence of global inequality. The non-involvement of sociologists in debates surrounding corruption is surprising, given the intellectual preoccupation of the discipline with the issues of social justice, equality, and power. This non-involvement is particularly unfortunate since the emphasis of sociological tradition on the social embeddedness and cultural multiplicity of behavior could provide some much needed distance between the politics of anti-corruptionism and the scholarly work on exchange economies in non-Western contexts.

A comparative sociology of corruption can further the policy-relevant knowledge about economies of exchange in a number of different ways. It can help evaluate on-the-ground implications of different anti-corruption initiatives under various contextual conditions, separate negative and positive effects of informal economies to inform a more culturally-sensitive policy, and reveal the relative importance of different political and economic determinants of rule-following and rule-breaking.

Thus, when it comes to the distance between academic research and policy, more may actually mean less. Non-partisan and critical insights from sociological studies could translate into highly effective policy recommendations and offset overly broad and sometimes inaccurate understandings of causes and consequences of corruption generated within the politicized paradigm of cross-national corruptology.

By unveiling the meanings and functions of exchange economies in non-Western contexts, comparative sociological studies of corruption could help re-focus the policy efforts from attacking the imagined criminality of non-Western populations to supporting the emergence of the political and economic conditions under which everyday economies

of exchange do not have adverse economic and human rights outcomes for ordinary citizens.

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