

Cultures of Corruption

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Corruption: “a form of [dishonesty](#) or criminal activity undertaken by a person or organization entrusted with a position of authority, often to acquire illicit benefit” (Wikipedia).

Corruption in America fills the news. Everywhere we turn in the media, we are confronted with yet another revelation of theft, lies, deceit, bribery — and often at a level of organization and a scale of involvement that makes the Mafia look penny ante by comparison.

Why do so many people, especially within the corridors of power and atop institutional pillars of authority, plus legions of minions lower down on the rungs of the power ladder, routinely act in ways that are not just shady but downright reprehensible? How is this possible? Are these people simply monsters with no conscience? Or are more complex and subtle factors involved in such personal debasement, moral degradation, and harm to others?

Human beings are social animals. How others regard us is often more important to us than how we regard ourselves. Our sense of right and wrong is shaped in part (and sometimes in large part) by what we see in the culture around us, particularly within the social circles of friends, acquaintances, and business associates in which we move.

There have been times in American history where major business companies felt and acted with at least some sense of social responsibility. In the 1950s, you got a job with a corporation and could reasonably count on lifetime employment, company-paid health care, a decent pension, and a gold watch upon retirement. Businesses attempted to function as extended social families. The job might suck, but your financial future was secure. All that is now gone.

Neoliberalism has become the reigning philosophy of the business sector — money is all that matters, greed is good, and unfettered self-interest is perfectly OK. In other words, social ethics are for chumps. Maximizing profit is the only goal, to be achieved in part by externalizing all possible costs, which amounts to a refusal to take responsibility. Similarly, if the practices and policies of a business are harmful to the general welfare, too bad. The people will just have to suck it up and suffer that cost.

In the past, companies sometimes acted with concern for the welfare of stakeholders — employees, customers, and the public. Now, the sole motivation of most corporations is enriching the owners (i.e., shareholders). Stakeholder interests and social responsibilities are managed by “public relations,” which is too often little more than mass-mind-manipulation through false or misleading narratives, spin, and image control.

CEOs and other corporate executives command obscenely high financial compensation, but what about paying a living wage to employees? Screw that. Organized labor has been systematically dismantled over the past 60 years. Why? Because labor unions are corrupt? Well, sometimes they were (which is what Republicans would have us believe), but that’s not the reason business wanted to get rid of unions. Collective bargaining is largely a thing of the past because neoliberalism holds that workers are nothing more than another cost of doing business, so lowering or eliminating the cost of labor is an approved strategy. If a business could literally pay its employees nothing — zero — that would be OK.

These cultures of corruption give tens of millions of people permission to be jerks, yet allow them to sleep soundly in their beds at night, without any pangs of conscience. I mean, if everybody you know acts the same way, it must be OK, right?

Some individuals are career con artists, rotten apples in the barrel who were cheaters and sociopaths from the get-go. They weren’t seduced to become despicable human beings by social permission. Millions of others, however, do not start out as hustlers. They show no obvious early pathology, and none of the feral narcissism of criminal superstars. These people fall from grace gradually, succumbing to dishonesty in small increments, urged to do so by cultures of corruption.

Is anyone really surprised when yet another scandal is vomited up like a social hairball? Only insofar as hypocrisy holds sway. Like Claude Rains’ character, Major Renault, in the film *Casablanca*, we are “*shocked* — *SHOCKED!*” to discover such widespread malfeasance, whether we’re complicit or have been just turning a blind eye to the wrongdoings. Really, though, the social swamp has been cooking up its toxic stew — my apologies to nature for impugning the positive fertility of actual swamps — nearly in plain sight, with only the thinnest veneer of falsely appropriate behavior, and sometimes not even that.

Corruption has always been with us and is not going away. Attempts to root out or discourage it ebb and flow over time — periods of zeal for reform alternate with phases of hypocrisy or cynicism — but efforts to eradicate corruption never succeed. Vulnerability to corruption is part of human nature. We are all fallible, and even the most seemingly incorruptible among us may succumb to temptation in a moment of weakness.

Cultures of corruption, however, don't require that "moment of weakness." Their pressure to circumvent, stretch, or break the law is consistent and cumulative. Being socially surrounded by bad behavior that is tacitly deemed "normal" dramatically increases the chances of such behavior eventually spreading throughout the group.

Does it work the other way as well? Does a culture that honors virtue and integrity produce honesty and fair dealing? Yes and no. A society cannot insure virtuous behavior merely by promoting the idea of virtue. Lip service is not enough. Virtue must be recognized and rewarded in real terms. Conversely, it's not sufficient to merely discourage vice. Vice be must revealed, publicized, and condemned, so that those who do not play by the rules suffer real consequences. This works most effectively in small kinship groups, where everyone knows who is honest and who is corrupt. In our mass society, based as it is on interaction with strangers and reliance on superficial appearances to assess trustworthiness, people can easily pose as virtuous while actively pursuing vice. You can't judge a book by its cover.

A moderately level playing field is essential to keep corruption at bay. If too many people feel that they don't have even a fighting chance to prosper in society, virtue shrinks and corruption expands. Part of what's happened in America is that the game has been rigged to favor some over others and the few over the many.

Cultures of corruption take root and grow when public faith wanes in institutions and the authority they represent. The situation we have now in America is widespread mistrust of institutions, especially government. That's what made Donald Trump President. However misguided his supporters may have been (and remain), they were fed up with "politics as usual," with good reason. They wanted a change, and that's what we got — sadly, a change for the worse.

I don't know what it will take to make this better.