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Chapter 3: Corruption and Anti-Corruption in Prismatic Societies

Frank de Zwart

1. Introduction

Rereading Fred Riggs's *Theory of Prismatic Society* (1964) after many years for the purpose of this essay was an enervating experience. The notes I scribbled in the process contain the same combination of irritation (with esoteric language and flawed theorizing) and admiration (for the many ideas and astute observations) that so many critiques have put into words ever since the book appeared. I shall not repeat these notes here¹ but instead concentrate on one aspect of the book: Riggs strongly doubts the relevance of modern public administration principles and tools for vesting 'good governance' in developing countries. His 'theory of prismatic society' substantiates these doubts and represents a rare stance: it opposes relativism but it also discourages intervention.

As to the question 'what causes corruption?', Riggs' theory exemplifies the complexities of a comparative approach to this issue. The book can be read as a study in corruption, but Riggs avoids using that word because it invokes a moral category (see Rose-Ackerman, this volume) and Riggs is careful to judge the behavior he studies. Riggs would agree with De Graaf, Maravić, and Wagenaar when they write, in the introduction to this volume, that 'norms defining what corruption is (...) differ from society to society and from academic discipline to discipline'. But Riggs is no relativist. He is not concerned with the cultural imperialism or discursive hegemony that critical scholars ascribe to international anti-corruption drives (for examples see: De Graaf/Wagenaar/Hoenderboom, this volume). When it comes to key issues such as economic development, equality, and stability, Riggs considers modern Weberian administration superior to other forms, and clearly thinks that the former is prevalent in the West, and pending in the rest.

Riggs' explanation of that difference (which encompasses his explanation for corruption) is a text book example of the normative institutionalism that dominated social science when he wrote his main work. Basically the argument is that organizations and institutions can only work as their designers

1 For critical reviews accounting the rise and decline of the comparative public administration group (of which Fred Riggs was a prominent member), see for instance: Heady (1996), Jones (1976), Savage (1976), Siffin (1976).

intended, if they reflect a society's normative order.² Organizational principles, techniques, and procedures, in other words, are not enough to prevent corruption for if they do not resonate with a society's normative order, these institutions won't work as intended. Riggs' approach to the question 'what causes corruption', then, is to inquire why the institutions that prevent it in some places do not seem to work in others.

Riggs set out in the early 1960s to answer the pressing question why models and techniques of modern public administration that worked so well to establish orderly and relatively clean government in the West, did not produce the same results when exported and implemented in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Riggs 1964: 11-12). His answer is that the principles and techniques of modern public administration reflect the normative structure of Western, industrial societies, and indeed function to maintain that structure. Transplanted into a different normative structure, the same principles and techniques serve different functional requirements, and therefore do not work in the same way. To illustrate, administrative procedures that guarantee recruitment on the basis of merit reflect universalistic norms and function to maintain universalism. In a different normative context, however, the same procedure may also function to maintain particularism.

Riggs' work contains ample illustration of this basic idea: Things are not what they seem. Administrative institutions may look familiar (to an observer from the West) but that is deceiving because these institutions function according to a different logic.

'Certainly we shall find in (...) Asia, Africa, and Latin America today formal agencies of administration which resemble those of Europe and the United States. Yet somehow, closer inspection of these institutions convinces us that they do not work in the same way, or that they perform unusual social and political functions' (1964: 12).

This conclusion has not made Riggs popular with practically minded public administration specialists. He basically tells them that American and European administrative models and institutions can be established in other parts of the world (as they were on a large scale in the 1950s and 60s), but to make them perform as they do at home would require a normative structure that is not there. The message is to either await normative change (but Riggs also stresses throughout the book that there is no reason why this would necessarily occur) or accept a type of public administration that is less efficient and effective, and more prone to corruption than the ideal in the West.

Clearly this leaves people who are involved in administrative practice and reform empty handed. As Garth N. Jones, a former advisor on administrative

2 In this, Riggs applies an assumption in the work of Talcott Parsons to administrative behavior: Roles – *in casu* the modern bureaucrat – are only 'institutionalized when they are fully congruous with the prevailing culture patterns and are organized around expectations of conformity with morally sanctioned patterns of value-orientations shared by members of the collectivity' (Parsons/Shills 1951, quoted in Powell/DiMaggio 1991: 16).

reform in Pakistan, puts it in a review of Riggs' and other works in the same tradition: When it comes to practical matters such as trying to reform the Pakistani financial system, 'I still believe that the *U.N. Handbook* [of Public Administration] in working these kind of situations has more to offer than anything yet produced, and certainly more than anything found in these (...) books under review" (Jones: 1976: 99). But Riggs' point is exactly that the organizational forms prescribed in administration handbooks serve different functions in different contexts. The value of this idea, I agree, is not that it informs concrete steps to combat corruption. Rather, its value is to caution against the wrong steps. 'Prescriptions which are valid in one context may be harmful in another', as Riggs puts it (1964: 11).

Structural Functionalism and Prismatic Society

The basic idea in Riggs's work is that the import of foreign normative and institutional orders in traditional societies gave rise to a new type of society. This 'new' society is neither traditional, nor modern, *nor necessarily modernizing*. Riggs calls it 'prismatic society'³ and argues that its characteristics are generally misunderstood because social theory presumes that societies are either traditional, or modern, or in transition to become modern.

Riggs' theory is grounded in the classic modernization studies of Durkheim, Tönnies, and Weber, and strongly influenced by Talcott Parson's structural functionalism. Riggs characterizes societies with the help of Parson's pattern variables, especially the following three: ascription versus achievement, diffuseness versus specificity, and particularism versus universalism. Modernization, taken as a process of ongoing functional differentiation, entails an institutional (organizational) and a normative dimension. In functionalist analysis the two are closely related, however. Social structure is perceived as a system of rules, and rules are 'materialized' norms. As Talcott Parsons puts it: 'the structure of social systems in general *consists* in institutionalized patterns of normative culture (1964: 86, emphasis in original).

The underlying idea in Parsons' structural functionalism is that societies are functionally integrated wholes – stable equilibriums – in which 'endogenous variations are kept within limits compatible with the maintenance of the main structural patterns' (Ibid: 87). Riggs concentrates especially on this theory as the basis of a typology of societies. He sketches the ideal type of traditional and modern societies, using three of Parsons' pattern variables as a shortcut. 'The viewpoint adopted in this book is that a significant tendency exists for action in traditional societies to be predominantly ascriptive, par-

3 'Prismatic' metaphorically conveys the idea that in the societies Riggs talks about, social structures are functionally fused and functionally differentiated at the same time, like light inside a prism (Riggs 1964: 27-31).

ticularistic, and diffuse', whereas modern societies value achievement, universalism, and specificity (Riggs 1964: 23). And, as follows from the assumption that societies are 'functionally integrated wholes', these characteristic normative patterns are mirrored in a particular institutional structure. The classic illustration of this idea, and Riggs also uses it often, is the family (Ibid: 22). In traditional societies the family performs a diffuse range of functions: besides biological reproduction it also has educational, political, economic, and religious functions. Families in modern societies have lost most of these functions to specific educational, economic, and political institutions.

Fred Riggs' work is solidly grounded in the functionalist modernization tradition sketched above. But Riggs stresses a crucial shortcoming: The 'underlying models' implicit in the various social disciplines, he writes, assume a modern society (in political science, economics, sociology, and public administration) or a traditional society (in anthropology). In other words, social theory assumes that institutions are either functionally specific (in modern societies) or functionally diffuse (in traditional ones) while societies in between are under-theorized. The standard concept applied to such societies is 'transitional' – indicating a stage on the road towards full modernization. But Riggs stresses that 'prismatic society' is not necessarily transitional. In line with the functionalist assumption of 'stable equilibrium', he argues that societies where traditional and modern norms and institutions co-exist, have their own adaptive mechanisms and may thus persist. 'A prismatic social order might remain prismatic indefinitely. Indeed (...) it has its own equilibrating mechanisms' (Ibid: 38).

Riggs thus tries to undo the teleology inherent in the term 'transitional societies' and to conceptualize prismatic society as an ideal-type of its own (Ibid: 4).

3. Public Administration in Prismatic Societies

Interestingly, Riggs started this exercise in social theory formation for very practical reasons: as a public administration specialist he was concerned with the failure of attempts (in the 1950s and 60s) to export administrative technology from the USA and Europe to newly independent countries. According to Riggs, the reason for this failure was the misguided idea – prominent in contemporary political and administrative circles – that administrative systems can be 'separated, by discernable boundaries, from the surrounding society' (1964: x). But for public administration to be a separate system, Riggs argues, a level of functional differentiation is required that prismatic societies do not possess.

Prismatic societies characteristically contain a mix of specific and diffuse traits.

‘New market and administrative systems have *displaced* but not *replaced* the traditional systems (...). Indeed, this mixture of old and new practices, of modern ideas superimposed upon traditional ones, may be one of the distinguishing characteristics of ‘transitional societies’ (Riggs 1964: 12).

Such societies enact laws and establish procedures that, for instance, guarantee recruitment to public office on the basis of qualifications – a modern trait, signifying differentiation between ascribed status and job opportunities – but at the same time, families or kinship groups have not ‘lost’ their functions for the allocation of employment. Consequently, Riggs argues, the institutions and organizations that are familiar in modern states function quite differently when they are exported to prismatic societies.

Riggs’ theory of prismatic society can be read as a study in causes of corruption. Riggs himself uses the term ‘corruption’ only sparsely, however, which is consistent with his insistence that administrative concepts and principles that are developed for modern, differentiated societies are misleading when used in a less differentiated context. In a prismatic society, the principle of separating public and private accounts competes with equally valid principles that may discourage such separation. Riggs calls this ‘poly-normativism’, and it strikes at the heart of his thinking.

Sometimes Riggs considers poly-normativism in the standard way of ‘uneven change’ (Eisenstadt 1966) – modern norms are internalized by some while others live on by traditional norms. But he also uses it in a more psychological way, as conflicting incentives for individuals. Conflicting incentives, coming from two normative orders, cause the ‘normlessness’ (old norms are invalidated while new norms cannot be enforced) and compromised solutions that characterize prismatic administration (Riggs 1964: 181-182). ‘Prismatic men’ may endorse the equality of opportunity assumed in a merit system, for instance, while equally valuing obligations to kin and friends. The dilemma this poses is resolved in compromise: ‘In practice, the familistic and ‘merit’ systems are united in a typically prismatic form of recruitment. (...) Using the pretext of eligibility based on examination [an official] chooses from the certified those whose personal loyalty he trusts’ (Ibid: 230). Similarly Riggs discusses the conflict between ascribed and achieved hierarchy and asks by what ‘prismatic compromise’ both can be honored. The answer is in the concept of rank: ‘Rank is an overriding concern in prismatic societies. It is awarded for achievement (...) but once attained, it creates an artificial static hierarchy resembling an ascribed status system’ (Ibid: 178-179). Riggs applies the same reasoning in passages on rules versus choices (universalism versus particularism) in administrative practice. Prismatic societies overcome the conflict between these alternatives in the implementation phase: enforcement officers appear to enforce universal rules, but these rules permit a ‘wide variety of personalized choices’ (Ibid: 201).

From the perspective of prismatic administration, corruption, patronage, clientelism, and favoritism are not flaws in the system that can be corrected

by proper procedure and law. Riggs rather sees them as inherent to the system – proper procedure and law serve ‘improper’ functions. Procedures and laws that belong to one normative order can be exported into another normative order, but according to Riggs the effect is that the procedures and laws become functional to their new environment, not that they change that environment.

India’s system of personnel transfers in public administration can illustrate this point. Rules stipulate that public servants have to be relocated every three or five years so as to prevent the growth of particularistic networks inside offices, and between officers and clients. In India networks of personal relationships are commonly associated with (and often equated to) ‘corruption’.⁴ Indeed the standard reply officials give to the question why frequent personnel transfers are necessary is that they ‘prevent corruption’.⁵

However, this anti-corruption device is also well known as a source of corruption. In their implementation, transfer rules leave ample room for decision makers – top bureaucrats and politicians – to exchange favorable transfers for loyalty or a share in the income that officials earn from bribes (Chandra 2004: 129-131; De Zwart 1994; Wade 1985). Media, scholars, and officials in India have considered the transfer-trade corrupt since long, but the system is remarkably persistent. I first studied it in the late 1980s, and recent research (e.g. Iyer/Mani 2007; Kingston 2007; Rodden/Rose-Ackerman 1997; Van Gool 2008) shows that nothing much has changed since then. ‘Corruption can be routine and commonplace without being viewed as acceptable by the population that bears its costs’, Susan Rose-Ackerman writes (1999: 177), and India’s transfer-trade confirms that. The reason is not only that the transfer system serves political interests in collecting money and dispensing patronage (both crucial for political survival in India’s democracy), but also that the ‘routine’ in question is *administrative* routine. The very rules and procedures devised to promote modern bureaucracy, have been made functional for a different normative order – they ‘perform unusual social or political functions’, as Riggs puts it (1964: 12).⁶

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- 4 The idea is that ‘corruption’ is an inevitable by-product of the personal relationships that civil servants have or build over time. It includes bribe giving and taking as well as favoritism, patronage, and clientelism. Hence ‘the rule of avoidance’ and frequent transfers: the former assures that personnel are not appointed where they have many personal relations; the latter do not allow the time to build such relations (see De Zwart 1994: 62-66).
 - 5 Paul Hutchcroft (1997: 645-46) argues that academic use of the term ‘corruption’ as a container concept for rent seeking, patronage, clientelism, or any combination of these – helps to connect academic discourse with the real world politics and real political discourse. See also Johnston (2005: 20-21) who criticizes popular corruption indexes and studies based on their data, for equating corruption with bribery at the expense of studying patronage and nepotism.
 - 6 See J. P. Olivier de Sardan (1999) for a perceptive account of widespread corruption in Africa, explained in terms of modern administrative procedure that is made functional to traditional African social custom.

4. Relativism and Prismatic Society

Unlike many authors that studied similar issues after him, Riggs' critique on the export of administrative models and advice does not stem from a relativist stance. He does not argue that interference in administrative systems abroad is cultural imperialism. On the contrary, Riggs has nothing against efforts from Western countries to help developing countries build a modern Weberian bureaucracy. He only doubts that knowledge from the social sciences – and especially from the discipline of public administration – can contribute to make that happen.

Because of its inherent moral load, the study of corruption has often inspired relativist analysis, especially in cross-cultural studies. Most definitions of corruption somehow refer to 'the conduct of officials who infringe the principle of keeping their public and private concerns and accounts strictly separate', as W. F. Wertheim puts it (1970: 563). But since this 'principle' is a product of modern bureaucracy and therefore bound to time and culture, invoking it to judge behavior in times and places where it is not widely shared, is anachronism⁷ or ethnocentrism.

Relativist analysis in the 1960s and 70s was informed by modernization theory with its focus on normative change and disruption of social order. It was a 'mild' version of relativism because most authors in this tradition expected that modernity – including the normative order that accompanies it – would soon become dominant around the world. Until that moment, however, they deferred judgment. Many claim that modernization breeds corruption, Samuel Huntington wrote in 1966, but such judgment should be handled with care. Modernization is a gradual process and the usual pattern is that modern norms are first accepted by educated elite who then begin to judge their own society by these norms.

'Behavior which was acceptable and legitimate according to traditional norms becomes unacceptable and corrupt when viewed through modern eyes. Corruption in a modernizing society, is thus in part not so much the result of the deviance of behavior from accepted norms as it is the deviance of norms from the established patterns of behavior' (Huntington 2002: 254).

In similar vein, Wertheim writes that

When (...) corruption in many newly independent non-Western countries hits the headlines, sociologists should not be content with the shallow judgment that it is a portent of the imminent collapse of these countries. (...) Rather should we analyze the phenomenon within its own historical setting, taking into account social forces which brand as corruption practices which in the past may not have been experienced as such' (Wertheim 1970: 562).

7 e.g. Van Leur (1955: 287): 'A modern strict officialdom was only created with the Napoleonic state. Criticism of the integrity of eighteenth-century officials is thus *ex post facto* criticism'.

By ‘social forces’ Wertheim here means the changing normative patterns that determine modernization. About contemporary Indonesia he writes: ‘Traditional particularistic loyalties are now seen to be too narrow; but an extended ‘quasi-universalistic’ loyalty towards the Indonesian Republic is for many still too wide’ (Ibid: 578).

Today relativism as deference of judgment awaiting full modernization seems patronizing and outdated. To the extent that relativism is still important for the study of corruption, it is ‘cultural relativism’ (De Graaf/Wagenaar/Hoenderboom, this volume, discuss various examples). Cultural relativism does not imply deference of judgment but abstention from it. It entails ‘denial of universal morality’, as Rod Aya puts it (2009: 1), and to its adherents this is a matter of principle, not circumstances. ‘Placing morality beyond culture (...) is no longer possible’, Clifford Geertz writes for instance (2000: 45-46). What is virtuous or criminal varies from culture to culture, and to criminalize what others consider virtue is ‘not only gratuitous, it is cultural imperialism’, as Aya sums up the relativist position (2004: 31). Samuel Huntington puts it very short: ‘[w]hat is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest’ (quoted in Aya 2009: fn.22).

Not surprisingly, cultural relativist perspectives on corruption are strongly criticized by scholars and activists alike (Larmour 2008). The Executive Summary of the Transparency International’s *Source Book*, for instance, speaks of the ‘myth of culture’ and notes that ‘any understanding of corruption begins by dispelling the myth that corruption is a matter of ‘culture’’ (Pope 2000: xix). According to Pope, relativism does not make sense if it comes to corruption:

‘One could ask why there are laws against corruption in all countries, developed or developing, if in fact it is ‘part of their culture’? Why, too, one might inquire, have the people of the Philippines and Bangladesh mobilized against a well-armed military to bring down corrupt leaders? These events hardly square with a popular acceptance of corruption as ‘a part of culture’’ (Ibid: 8).

Pope has a point here: ‘culture’ is too deterministic a concept to apply to countries (the usual unit of comparison in corruption studies). The normative analysis in old modernization studies is better suited for the purpose. As we saw, an important idea in modernization studies is what S. N. Eisenstadt (1966) calls ‘uneven change’. Modern ideas and norms are accepted and even internalized in some circles, while others, in the same country, live by traditional norms. Moreover, the first to accept modernity are usually educated elites, and they are the people that make laws, which might answer Pope’s first question above.

The *Source Book*’s radical denial of relativism is not the last word in *Transparency International* circles, however. On its Website, in answer to the frequently asked question ‘Can corruption be seen as normal or traditional in some societies?’, Transparency International takes a milder stance:

‘The debate over cultural relativism and neo-colonialism is a contested one. Where concepts like public procurement procedures are unknown concepts, bribing public officials to secure public works contracts does not exist. Norms and values are context-bound and vary across cultures. Gift-giving is part of negotiating and relationship building in some parts of the world. But cultural relativism ends where the Swiss bank account enters the scene’.⁸

Clearly *Transparency International* also struggles with the basic problem of moral relativism: to deny it is cultural imperialism, but to accept is to ‘tolerate barbarity and atrocity in those cultures. Damned if we do and damned if we don’t – either way the prospects are bleak’ (Aya 2004: 31).

Riggs’ theory of prismatic society predates the influence of relativism in corruption studies. Riggs tried to distance himself from both the liberal expectation that developing countries were necessarily in transition to modernity, and from the cultural relativism that was salient in contemporary American anthropology (Riggs 1964: 62). There is little relativism and no apologetic tone in his expose of administration in prismatic societies. To illustrate, Riggs argues that in prismatic society, old customs lose their appeal while ethical standards borrowed from abroad are not rooted in popular understanding. Consequently,

‘A limbo develops in which men feel free to disregard both the old heavenly commandments and the new earthly ethics – they rely more on cunning, violence, or insolence to satisfy their short-run private interests. To squat, smuggle, bribe, cheat – indeed to take what one can (...) become the prevalent rules. (...) Social norms and sanctions are necessary everywhere if raw human nature is to be socialized. But in the prismatic model this sphere of ‘normlessness’ is enlarged, with far-reaching consequences’ (Ibid: 182).

5. Good Governance as a Side-Effect

In its non-relativist stance, Riggs’ work befits today’s international consensus more than its contemporaries. It is striking, Michael Johnston (2005: 17-18) writes for instance,

‘how quickly past debates over corruption – so often hung up on definitions, divided over the question of effects, and mired in a paralyzing relativism – have given way to extensive agreement (...) that corruption delays and distorts economic growth, rewards inefficiency, and short-circuits open competition’.

In contrast to Riggs’ conclusion about export of administrative models, today’s ‘agreement’ is translated, by scholars and powerful international organizations, into a ‘consensus package’ of anti-corruption reforms that ‘amount to recommendations that developing societies emulate laws and institutions found in advanced societies’ (Ibid: 21).

⁸ http://www.transparency.org/news_room/faq/corruption_faq

The rejection of relativism thus makes the issue of export and emulation of administrative institutions pertinent again.⁹ Like Riggs in the early 1960s, Johnston doubts the worth of this strategy – albeit for different reasons. Riggs argues that you cannot transplant administrative models and practices that were designed to produce ‘good governance’ in the West, into a different normative order and expect them to function in similar ways. Johnston notes that recommended countermeasures such as managerial control, greater transparency, an independent judiciary, a stronger civil society, and free media – indeed check corruption in many societies. But in those societies these institutions were the results of political contention

‘and were devised by groups seeking to protect themselves rather than as plans for good governance in society at large. (...) Historically, many societies reduced corruption in the course of contending over other, more basic issues of power and justice’ (Ibid: 21-22).

This perspective – good governance as an unintended consequence of group-interest and political contention¹⁰ – is a way out of the stalemate in which Riggs’ approach leaves anti-corruption efforts. The problem in Riggs’ theory is twofold: Riggs treats normative orders as given, and suggests that norms determine behavior. The institutions of modern administration, he argues, can only function according to the purpose in their design if this purpose reflects the normative order. Individual behavior is reduced, in this view, to enacting normative scripts while the formation of such scripts is neglected.

Riggs might have it backward, though. More recent research shows that the same pragmatic and interest-driven behavior that Riggs calls ‘normless’, produces the institutions that shape a normative order – be it often as an unintended consequence. Democracy and modern bureaucracy in Europe, for instance, were never designed for the purpose of ‘good governance’ or any other common good. We may say that people constructed democracy, Charles Tilly writes, but it can only mean that people

‘create a set of political arrangements the effects of which are democratic. [The term] construct has the misleading connotation of blueprints and carpenters, when over the last few hundred years, the actual formation and deformation of democratic regimes has more often resembled the erratic evolution of a whole city than the purposeful building of a single mansion’ (1997: 196).

Today’s outcome of this process may seem to reflect a European or Western normative order, but it emerged out of a long-term contentious process of bargaining (over a range of conflicting interests such as taxes, rights, and

9 Especially since privatization and smaller government – obviously the simplest way to reduce administrative corruption, and much in vogue in the 1990s – can only go so far and have not taken away the need for administrative reform and ‘good governance’ (see Hutchcroft 1997: 640-643).

10 Cf. Charles Tilly (1990; 1997) on the formation of modern states (and modern public administration) as side-effect of war-making efforts.

conscriptio) between contenders to central power, 'workers, peasants, and other ordinary people' (Ibid: 197).

Johnston formulates a similar thought with respect to the merit of international 'consensus packages' of anti corruption measures and reform:

'In the end both reform and systemic adaptation require vigorous political contention among groups strong enough to demand that others respect their interests, rights, and property – not just stability or administrative improvements. Too often we think of reform as a process of asking people to back off from their own interest and 'be good'. (...) But in fact reform will be most sustainable and effective when driven by self interest (...) and defended by actively contending groups' (2005: 217).

Like Riggs, then, Johnston doubts the merit of attempts to fight corruption by exporting institutions and 'teaching people to behave well'. Unlike Riggs, however, who left it at that, Johnston offers a perspective. From his work it follows that articulating group interests, stimulating politics, state formation, and bottom-up organizations can help the 'good government cause'.