

# Law, Democracy and Political Corruption from a Legal-Anthropological: A Commentary on Corruption from Political Anthropology (2024)



Book Review

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## Derecho, democracia y corrupción política desde el enfoque jurídico-antropológico: un comentario a *La corrupción desde la Antropología Política* (2024)

This commentary constitutes an approach and reflection on the book *Corruption from Political Anthropology: a transcultural study of Spain and the Dominican Republic* (2024), published by the McGraw-Hill Publishing House by the lawyer and anthropologist Marcos Iglesias Carrera, professor of the Universidad de Salamanca (Spain).

Dicha obra se inscribe en un campo aún incipiente dentro de la antropología política: la comprensión de la corrupción como fenómeno culturalmente enraizado o, en la terminología polanyiana, “incrustado” (*embeddedness*) (Polanyi, 2001).

This work is situated within a still emerging field in political anthropology: the understanding of corruption as a culturally rooted phenomenon or, in Polanyian terminology, “*embeddedness*” (Polanyi, 2001).

Faced with economic approaches and traditional regulations, Iglesias Carrera adopts an *emic* perspective, which rescues the subjective experience of the social actors involved, highlighting how certain behaviors legally classified as illegal are internalized as socially legitimate or even necessary for the normal functioning of society.

With a robust and well-documented theoretical foundation, the work engages with classics such as Scott (1972), Foster (1965), Ackerman (1978, 1999), Klitgaard (1988), or Cartier-Bresson (1997), and articulates these contributions with more recent conceptualizations, such as those of Torsello (2015), on the ethnography of corruption.

One of its strong points is the incorporation of Foster's (1965) concept of “limited good,” which allows understanding corruption as an informal mechanism of redistribution in societies where resources and opportunities are perceived as scarce. This culturalist reading intersects with more critical reflections on ethnocentrism (Sumner, 1906) and the limitations of legalistic positivism.

Moreover, the use of applied anthropology as a conceptual framework to propose realistic lines of intervention stands out. This perspective not only diagnoses but also proposes mechanisms

### Cite as

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for cultural transformation, aligning with the contemporary current of critical anthropology oriented toward social action.

A central finding is the difference in citizen perception of corruption: while in Spain there remains a certain expectation of institutional integrity, in the Dominican Republic a nearly fatalistic cultural acceptance of the phenomenon predominates. Thus, it is argued that these perceptions are deeply mediated by historical trajectories, institutional structures, and differentiated normative frameworks.

Another major contribution of Iglesias Carrera's work to the field of political culture is its capacity to denaturalize the symbolic structures that legitimize corrupt practices as part of the everyday functioning of public institutions. From this perspective, corruption is not limited to an administrative or legal phenomenon, but is configured as a cultural device operating within logics of reciprocity, clientelism, and patrimonialism embedded in the political subjectivities of the citizenry. The author also shows how certain illicit behaviors acquire an informal normative dimension, supported by an implicit consensus that responds more to cultural patterns than to legal frameworks. This reading coincides with approaches that understand political culture as a system of shared beliefs, attitudes, and values that guide political behavior and, in contexts of institutional weakness, may tend toward tolerance of corrupt actions.

Likewise, the work contributes to enriching the debate on political culture by demonstrating how citizen perceptions regarding corruption are conditioned by historical processes, power structures, and local narratives about authority and legality. Through a comparative ethnographic methodology between Spain and the Dominican Republic, the author shows that the legitimacy of institutions does not depend exclusively on their normative architecture, but on their capacity to generate culturally situated trust. In this way, the work dialogues with neo-institutionalist approaches, which warn of the need to incorporate cultural variables to explain the differentiated forms of acceptance or resistance to corruption in democratic frameworks.

Similarly, it is evidenced that corruption, far from being a mere deviation of conduct, can become a system of informal interaction with social legitimacy, especially when formal structures are seen as inefficient or unreachable.

Finally, the work concludes that the fight against corruption requires not only legal and institutional reforms but a transformation of local political cultures. It calls for complementarity between legal-political and anthropological approaches and vindicates the importance of ethnographic fieldwork as a tool to understand and transform the everyday practices of public management

While the analysis could be enriched with a deeper problematization of gender dimensions, social class, or territory (urban vs. rural), Iglesias Carrera's work—derived from several years of research in these two countries—positions itself as a major contribution both to the corpus of studies on the sociocultural phenomenon of corruption and to the development of applied political and legal anthropology. Its approach, based on the anthropological lens (Peacock, 2001) and its capacity to generate applicable knowledge, makes it an essential reference for researchers and professionals in the legal and social sciences interested in significant phenomena such as governance, institutional legitimacy, and, above all, the culture of corruption.

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