

Corruption as an Empty Signifier – Politics and Political Order in Africa

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In recent years, corruption in Africa has become a key concern of development policy. Corruption is seen to be one of the main obstacles to equitable development, and much effort is being directed at improving the accountability and effectiveness of public institutions. The conceptualisation of corruption in seminal scholarly literature on politics in Africa is more ambivalent, showing how corrupt practices oscillate between the facilitation and subversion of long-term, inclusive development. However, both approaches are blind or blinkered with regard to social agency that enables political transformations. In particular, there are no studies that conceptualise corruption in terms of a potentially empowering discourse that shores up the emancipatory struggles of social groups. It is precisely these actors, spaces and process of social agency that are of key interest here. On centre stage is the inquiry into purposeful struggles for the reorganisation of the public realm. The hypothesis is, first and foremost, that contrary to conventional wisdom there are indeed social agents in Africa that seek to make and shape such spaces; and, secondly, that corruption, as a currently dominant element of the development discourse, provides ample symbolic and material resources to be appropriated for such political struggles.

Hence, this inquiry focuses on a novel angle of corruption: drawing on post-Marxist theory, it seeks to develop an understanding of corruption as an 'empty signifier' – a term which lends itself to be filled with a host of different meanings, interests and values, but through its very fuzziness provides a nodal point connecting the articulations of different social groups. In the case of 'corruption', civil society fills the term with demands for more inclusive politics, the private sector fills it with demands for more predictable policy-making, and the public sector uses it to champion particular policies. Although these articulations are framed by different and often even incompatible interests, they all coalesce around 'corruption'. In this sense, 'corruption' becomes an eminently political concept, potentially endowed with a powerful transformative capacity. Drawing on a comparative analysis of professional associations in the construction sector of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, between 2003 and 2010, this study discusses both the theoretical implications as well as the empirical evidence of the conceptualisation of corruption as an empty signifier for political order in Africa.
