

Jan Verwoert
Torn Together

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01/07

There is something about the word “corruption” that says so much about what it describes. Corruption. Say it like you were striking a key on a piano to hear the note. Corruption. Corruption. Now try the keys next to it. Interruption. Disruption. Rupture. Rumpus. *Rumpere* is Latin for tear, split, break. You hear the violence of the act in the sharp “p” and “t” that kill off the “u” right after it resonates. As in shut “up.” R-up-ture. R-ap-t-ure does the same. It’s derived from *rapere*, to grab, seize, and carry off. It’s as if their assonance linked the two words, so as to evoke a chain of events: what was torn and split got seized and taken to another place. A rapturous taking. Elated is he who reaps the fruits of destruction. I made that up. Then I checked. This is the original: “And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruits unto life eternal” (John 4:36). *Ra-* and *rumpere*: their likeness makes the two verbs talk to each other about the act of taking possession and skimming off profits. They speak of the violence that characterizes surplus as something torn out of the fabric of life and transported to a heaven, a castle, or a vault for safe keeping. But is that all? What about the prefix *cor*? Where does that take us? To Correction. Correspondence. Corroboration. Correlation. It goes the opposite way. Instead of evoking a split, it gives you a sense of relations being rectified, aligned, and consolidated. Crazy! Corruption is a splitting that conjoins forcefully. It is literally there in the word. If many things in life tear us apart, corruption will tear us together.

Corruption invokes the fateful nature of the social bond. By means of corruption, a community reminds its members that no one can extricate oneself from what is common. The reminder may come in the subtle form of an innuendo, a refined turn of phrase, or a modulation of accent. Or it may be as blunt as the way people act when they know they wield power. The message invariably is: you are not alone in your desire to get something, go somewhere, be someone. Your desire takes you into the circuit of *common desire*. Everybody here wants what you want. All of us are waiting. So if you wish to be treated to something, you must make amends first. Show me you can level with me and I will assist you. Give me a fair share of what I will help you to get, so we are even. You want to make money? Well, so do I. Give me some of yours and we will see what we can do. You want to cross over? Look around, everybody here does. And if I had what you will give me now, I would be on the other side already. I don’t like what I ask of you either, but since it is what I had to do to get here, I don’t see why you should be spared the ordeal. Show me we are equal and I will let you pass.



Georges de La Tour, *The Cheat with the Ace of Clubs* (detail), c. 1630–34. Oil on canvas. Photo: Kimbell Art Museum



Paris Bordone, *Two Chess Players*, (detail) 1500-1571.



Paris Bordone, *Two Chess Players*, (detail) 1500-1571.

None of these words need to be spoken. What they say is understood as a given. Whatever gift you may be expected to give is merely a concession to the given, a means to a leveling. The gift dissolves in the act of giving like a drop in water. Acts of corruption are elaborate disappearing tricks on the stage of common desire. They even out what should cause no ripples. Things go smoothly if what comes to pass happens as if it hadn't. Both parties must be allowed to save face as they emerge from the transaction. The one who pays has to do so gracefully. It would be insulting if the payment was made in a manner that made the one who gets paid off feel dependent on bribes. If saying "I want" (to get that, go there, be this) briefly lifts the "I" above water, corruption pulls it back under, into the depth of the "we want." Deep immersion into the waters of common desire creates no waves on the surface of the sea. Corruption is the event that never occurred. So it can occur again. Again and again. Indefinitely.

Whenever desires are consolidated as common, corruption will occur. The moment it dawns on everyone in a given room, city, scene, or queue that they want the same thing (free passage, recognition, a good deal, a degree), this desire is solidified as common. Then people try tricks. And/or they form institutions. Al Capone played a big part in opening soup kitchens for the hungry in Chicago. Institutions are manifestations of consolidated common desire. They have the logic of corruption built into their workings from the very start. Insofar as institutions reflect common desire, their function is to make all who enter function on one level. Corruption and bureaucracy in this sense are means to the same end. "Everyone around here has to fill out these forms." When you have mechanically entered your name and details in so many forms in a row that you stop relating to that name, date of birth, sex, and so forth as yours, you have arrived at the place where common desire pulls you below the waves and into the faceless and formless.

If you are lucky, you might meet a faceless creature down there who moves freely in this element: humor. A great leveler. At least this is how it works where I grew up, in a small Catholic town on the border between Germany and Belgium. The best way to open a conversation there is by saying something extremely stupid and funny. It proves you are a trustworthy member of a community torn together by the realization that life is profane and no one is special. Having leveled the playing field through base humor, you can then proceed to chat, do business, or go wherever you want in the conversation. As profane creatures don't make much of their faces, they don't respect borders

either. In the years of severe poverty after the war, practically everyone in the region depended on smuggling coffee and cigarettes into the country. It's an acknowledged part of regional folklore. Even a priest was involved. He had the roof of his church fixed with the profits. The church is still affectionately referred to by locals as "Santa Mocca." But humor won't always save the day. It can be as oppressive as anything else to be surrounded by funny people all the time. If you're not in the mood for leveling, chances are they will consider you an uptight hypocrite who thinks yourself to be something better (a.k.a. a Protestant). It will make you the subject of suspicion and mockery until you repent, relent, and debase yourself. It can be done when you speak the same language. And it teaches you that the presentation of the self is a matter of mercantile technique, that "I" is one among many goods to be traded with words, and that negotiations can be most free when nothing is holy and no price is set on anything in advance.

It seems that there are two opposed aspects of corruption. When it reinforces the consolidation of common desire, corruption serves to corroborate institutions. When it thrives on an affirmation of the base materiality of life and its needs, corruption can make boundaries porous and create zones of negotiation outside jurisdiction. After discussing thoughts of this kind at a conference in Tbilisi some time ago, a participant remarked that corruption in Georgia had undergone a dramatic shift in recent years, moving primarily from low to top level. The reason, he said, was that the state had realized street-level corruption entailed a dispersion of capital – it was seeping out the bottom – while top-level corruption concentrated capital and rendered it operative. So law enforcement cracked down on the low and let the high end flourish. Needless to say, some kind of credibility needs to be generated for such moves to be tolerated by the people. Conservative politicians traditionally excel in this art of presenting themselves as levelheaded wardens of common desire, meanwhile making the money rain upwards. Look at Berlusconi. He was a thief of the people. He was loved by them for robbing them, because he never hid the fact that he only did what any common man in his position would do.

The porous plays its part too. Consider Renaissance times. There was a recognizable place and style connected to the two aspects of corruption: Rome for consolidation; Venice for porousness. You can see it in the art. Rafael and Michelangelo corroborated unambiguous ideas of salvation in their pleasantly blurry, maxed-out, muscly rendering of the Vatican's doctrines. Not so in Venice. In paintings by Giovanni Bellini,

04/07

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Paris Bordone, *Two Chess Players*, (detail) 1500-1571.



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Lorenzo Lotto, and Paris Bordone, the light is clear and the interpretation of the subjects complex. The demands of power are present. But so are Enlightenment thought and heretic theologies, half-visibly inscribed in the cracks of representation. Free thoughts appear like goods traded from under the counter, or wherever things were hidden on boats to pass by port authorities. During those times, alum, a binding agent for colors and dyes, was as contentiously political a resource as oil is today. Some of the biggest alum mines were in the eastern Mediterranean, in the lands of Rome's enemy. Attempts to enforce an embargo on imports to cut off a crucial revenue stream for the east, however, kept failing. There was no way you could close Venice. The city was just too corrupt to stop trade, so the forbidden binding agent kept coming in through the city's many openings.

There is a limit to discussing corruption in terms of its ambivalent aspects, because the pain inflicted by corruption can hardly become subject to negotiation. It's the pain caused by the endless frustration of an individual's desire to break away from the weight of the common, be that in economic, social, sexual, or spiritual ways. It's the pain of knowing that your desire will write no history. Your desire will only ever be pulled back into a past where things can only return to the fate they always had. Everything's a lie. It has been ever since God lied to the prophet and the prophet lied to the priest and the priest to the man and the man to the woman and the woman to the children. Those children tear wings off flies, waiting for the moment when they can join the lineage of lies. This is tradition, not history. History starts with a break that sets things moving. So does politics. As Hannah Arendt argued, politics departs from the moment people begin something unclear and set forth into the open together. Neither history nor politics is possible when corruption levels all to the standard of desire as we have always known it. Corruption disables attempts to live desire in ways not yet fated to be. You cannot act like you could be the first to say, want, or do something. This is why the idiot is a key figure in the artistic imaginary of many cultures. The idiot is at liberty to articulate yet-unsolicited desires, because he or she cannot know the laws that tie everyone to the common fate prescribed by power, corruption, and lies.

How to be idiotic? Being foreign helps. Protected by the rites of hospitality, your ignorance may be pardoned, when, as a foreigner, you speak or act in ways so unaccustomed as to be incorruptible, so far out they can hardly be pulled back under. For who would bother to correct such a fool? Foreign idiots cannot heal the pain of desire barred from

realization. But they may still give desire a history by listening to its articulations. In the disguise of idiocy, the traveling artist, writer, or filmmaker can become a witness to the particular desires that corruption holds down. These desires emerge when, while talking to a stranger, people momentarily forget to tear themselves together and, without being willing to pay for it, say "I want."

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06/07

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Jan Verwoert is a critic and writer on contemporary art and cultural theory based in Berlin.

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