



The Erotics *of* Corruption

Law, Scandal, and Political Perversion

Ruth A. Miller

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Introduction

This is a book about political corruption. I would like to begin, however, in a different place, with a discussion of late twentieth-century Internet pornography. Websites devoted to pornographic material became increasingly sophisticated throughout the 1990s and into the following decade, producing visual, audio, animated, and “live action” narratives, often “interactive,” of bondage, fetishism, bestiality, schoolgirl intercourse, “virgin rape,” and a variety of other situational sexual fantasies. Entering the words “sex” and “torture” into a search engine produces thousands of pornographic bondage sites. Among them are the following two: in the first, a young, unprotected woman is picked up on an urban street. She is drugged, thrown into the back of a van, and when she wakes up she is in a dark, cement cell. After remaining in isolation, she is taken to a torture chamber where she is threatened with a knife and told she must be obedient. When she resists, she is stripped naked, her hands are tied behind her back, and she is raped by three anonymous guards until she passes out. In the next scene, she wakes up in her cell, still naked and still tied up. The narrative continues without a great deal of variation for three further chapters.

In the second, a school-age, barely pubescent girl is sold into sexual slavery. She is first “displayed in [one of] row after row of zoo-like animal cages.” When she resists having sex with her captors, she is

dragged into a torture chamber in a dark alley used for breaking in new girls. She [is] locked in a narrow windowless room without food or water. On the fourth day, one of the madam’s thugs wrestle[s] her to the floor and bang[s] her head against the concrete until she pass[es] out. When she awak[ens], she [is] naked; a rattan cane smeared with pureed red chili peppers shoved into her vagina.

One of the more obvious lessons to be learned from these two examples is that, as many sites as there are, Internet pornography is not replete with new and innovative narrative lines. But the point of pornography is of course not to innovate; it is instead to reinforce—to add slight or subtle variation to sexual fantasies that are on some level comforting to the consumer.¹

A less obvious issue is the motivation behind producing these stories. Why would these narratives in particular be marketable, and who especially would buy them? Perhaps the best way to get at answers to these questions is to look at the self-presentation of the sites that sell them. The first is a site devoted to animated “celebrity porn.”² The young woman at the center of the story is a pop singer, and interspersed with the comic-book images of her sexual humiliation are tabloid photographs of her in similarly embarrassing situations. The story that I have summarized is actually a “free preview” of the site, and for access to further chapters or other celebrity narratives, the subscriber has to pay \$9.99 per month.

The second story comes from the website of a nonprofit human rights organization, and concerns the role that political corruption plays in the spread of AIDS and prostitution.³ On the one hand, the images produced on the website are not as graphic as those on the celebrity porn site. But, on the other, the written narratives are far more detailed and the subscriber gets unlimited free access. An argument could be made that despite the similarity in presentation and storyline, the goals of the two sites are fundamentally different—the one to provoke a reaction and the other to provoke a reaction for a good cause. But the question of marketability remains: why would these unquestionably similar narratives serve such morally disparate aims?

Karen Halttunen has already convincingly demonstrated the link between humanitarianism and what she calls “the pornography of pain” in the post-Enlightenment period.⁴ It is not my purpose to rehash her argument. Instead, I will attempt over the following pages to show that the “anti-corruption” narrative especially—an example of which we see in the second story—moves beyond even the usual spectacle of pain or humiliation that is so central to human rights activism. It is not just the eye-catching or spine-tingling anecdotes of innocence ground down by overwhelming (political) violence that we see in anticorruption narratives. The very vocabulary of the “anticorruption struggle” is itself pornographic—creating a space in which lawless chaos and sexual chaos are one and the same thing.

There is indeed a repeated return in this literature to tropes explored in eighteenth-, nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century pornography. A paper presented at the Tenth International Anti-Corruption Conference held in Prague in October 2001, for example, describes political corruption as a situation in which “the fangs of lawlessness and abuse of

power bite dangerously on the vulnerable sector.”⁵ Equally evocative, a publication on the website of the anticorruption NGO, Transparency International, describes political corruption in the Czech Republic as a situation in which the police “would set their sights on a particular individual, and through artful blends of threat and seduction, of extortion and bribery, they would endeavour to get that person over to their side.”⁶ If nothing else, the strange frequency with which the word “incest” appears in descriptions of corrupt behavior or corrupt bureaucratic structures is telling.⁷

The following chapter will go into more detail about the vocabulary of corruption and its political ramifications. For now it suffices to say that this book is founded on the premise that the frequency with which words like “impotence” and “potency,”⁸ “penetration” and “transparency,”⁹ “seduction” and “resistance,”¹⁰ “incest” and “unbridled passion”¹¹ appear in the anticorruption literature of aid agencies such as the World Bank, NGOs such as Transparency International, and academic gatherings such as the Anti-Corruption Conferences is not arbitrary. As corruption has been defined over the past decade as one of the most insidious “threats to democracy,” the sexualized nature of this threat has become central to the rhetoric. Corruption narratives are not just pornographic, they are erotic—the very essence of corruption, its inherent disorder, has become sexual and sexually threatening.

Corruption, Democracy, and the Colony

In the 1990s, the menace that corruption apparently posed to “developing” democracies grew to such a degree that nearly every international aid organization devoted a department, an office, or at least a conference to combating it.¹² The academic literature on corruption likewise burgeoned over this period, leading scholars of the subject to designate the 1990s and their academic activity during this time as the “corruption eruption.”¹³ Although this mania for defining, analyzing, and combating corruption came to a peak in the 1990s, however, the turn of the twenty-first century was not the only moment in the modern period that such an obsession with the issue arose. Throughout the previous two centuries, the bureaucratic or financial deviance that is the hallmark of corruption literature was gradually becoming a subject of increasingly intense—even prurient—interest. The major British anticorruption bills came into force in 1889, 1906, and 1916, for example, and then again between 2001 and 2005—periods that also saw what one scholar has called, first, an “acceleration of mass cultural media,”¹⁴ and, second, a fetishization of this culture, “hypersensitive to the sexuality of things.”¹⁵

Although there is a great deal of talk about the domestic private, the bureaucratic public, and undesirable interaction between the two in the work of anticorruption specialists, therefore, I want to suggest in this book that they are operating in an analytical framework quite far removed from the universe of rational bureaucracy that they claim to be representing. Indeed, rather than, or in the process of, analyzing political structures for the sake of smooth bureaucratic function, they are also narrating stories of inappropriately intimate political, financial, and eventually sexual relationships.

Moreover, they are situating these stories squarely within colonial or postcolonial frameworks. It is true that most analysts are careful to avoid accusations of intolerance by arguing that corruption exists everywhere and that their goal is not to target solely colonized or postcolonial states. But the fact remains that whereas in Western Europe and North America we hear about scandal—anomalous, unnatural misbehavior that has been unmasked, that is cathartic and largely a reinforcement of the normality of self-described Western governance¹⁶—outside of these areas we hear about corruption—usually systemic, and always hidden, seductive, or monstrous. The corruption narrative in the African, Asian, or South American context is thus one in which the apparent failure of governments and functionaries to distinguish between the public and private takes on far more complex connotations.

I will indeed argue that the centering of corruption as a simultaneously legal and sexual threat to democracy writ large—a threat originating within and exploding out of colonized areas—occurs primarily when hegemonic structures are being challenged and when the response to this challenge is couched in a rhetoric of liberalism. The result, I will suggest, is a situation in which colonies or postcolonies become exceptional as theorists such as Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe understand the term—areas that exist outside of the law while nonetheless constrained within legal discourse.¹⁷ To the extent that law and liberalism are mobilized against corruption in the colonies, in other words, these colonies become sites of hyperbolic legal rhetoric while still remaining outside of the law. In the end, this spectacle of lawless violence turns colonies into settings in which the desires of those at the imperial center¹⁸ can be played out safely removed from, but intriguingly still not quite outside of, familiar political structures.

The corruption narrative as a modern phenomenon is thus necessarily also a colonial one, developed within imperial structures and referencing unique, post-eighteenth-century imperial truths. Indeed, the basic defining characteristic of the “corrupt relationship”—the inappropriate overlap between public and private desires—could not have existed without the equally basic defining characteristic of modern imperial politics: the empha-

sis on separate public and private spheres. Literature on nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism in fact returns with frequency to this distinction, although most scholars who study sexuality and empire tend to emphasize the gendered nature of the dichotomy—critiquing in particular the rhetoric of the “feminine” private sphere and the “masculine” public one. What I will suggest in this book is an additional approach to the public/private paradigm, situated in what I see as the relationship between legal (or extralegal) space and pornographic space in narratives of corruption. I would indeed argue that the public/private distinction is not simply a gendered one, but also a sexualized one, with the public representing law or order and the private representing erotic disorder.

This leads us in turn back to the paradox of imperial knowledge and power. Although much literature on nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism begins with the imagined separation of the public and private spheres, this literature continues almost immediately with the further point that this separation is, again, *imagined*—the private anything but. As Michel Foucault has argued with respect to modern political structures in general, for example, it was precisely the (public) process of defining the intimate that produced and extended disciplinary power networks over the course of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ As Laura Briggs has noted, this relationship between the private/intimate and the public/political became, if anything, more pronounced in colonial situations: the private or the intimate playing such a prominent role in British political expansion, for example, that the entire military was organized around it.²⁰ Ann Stoler has similarly seen the presence of European women and the ideology of domestic purity that surrounded them in Dutch colonies as fundamental to a “realignment in both racial and class politics.”²¹ It was, she notes, the very public politics (or biopolitics) of race and empire that served to create a private, domestic, “European” space within the colony, in which white women could exercise their civilizing, purifying influence.²² The two spheres were thus both categorically separate—private from public as well as white from nonwhite—and also completely overlapped.

It therefore became both necessary *and* anathema to the colonial civilizing mission that the public/private distinction be broken down. The colony could not be reformed *without* an interpenetration of public and private—regulation reliant on the exposure and/or exhibition of domestic or sexual space—but it could not be protected from corruption *with* one. Thus, in the same way that the overlapping political and intimate, masculine and feminine, public and domestic indicated both the potential for, and the impossibility of, civilizing colonial space, so, too, did the overlapping legal and erotic. As the corruption narrative developed, it thus intersected repeatedly with the narratives of gender, sexuality, disease, and

cleanliness that are at the heart of imperial identity formation.²³ Political corruption, like disease, dirtiness, and deviant sexuality (or often *as* disease, dirtiness, and deviant sexuality), likewise originated in colonial space, exploded out of it, infected those around it, and was fundamental to determining who could be defined legally and who could not.

A Vocabulary of Corruption

I would like to spend some time now examining a few specific examples of the broader trends that I previously noted—the placement of corruption into the colonies, the potential for corruption to infect those at the imperial center, and the key role played by the corruption narrative in imperial and neo-imperial identity formation. Again, first and foremost, the corruption narrative situates the corrupt relationship in the same space as so many other inappropriate or illicit desires: outside and in the colonies. By the twentieth century, indeed, corruption as deviant behavior was reported as growing, festering, and then bursting out of colonized, often tropical, and always unhealthy areas with startling frequency. Firmly situated in colonial political philosophy, a familiar fixture in a three-century-old rhetoric of civilization and savagery, it was both indigenous and unnatural, in need of exploration and unknowable.

Time also largely ceased to matter in discussions of the issue. Analysts in 1999 and 2000, for instance, could refer to “jungle[s] of nepotism and temptation,”²⁴ and could state with confidence that “corruption is a jungle and there is an urgent need for an authoritative guide to the flora and fauna.”²⁵ Nearly half a century earlier, in 1957, a journalist for the *Economist* could argue in a remarkably similar vein that corruption occurred in areas where “the long arm of Victorian imperial reform failed to reach . . . [where] power has been given back to dependent peoples long before they have abandoned what is conveniently known as ‘the custom of the country’”—a sentiment reproduced without apparent irony in a reprint of the article twenty years later.²⁶ In a less poetic vein, an analyst in 1997 could use as the starting point of his argument the simple fact that “in the Third World the extent of corruption was—it scarcely remains—a . . . well kept secret. Here corruption in the loosest sense is indigenous, much older than European contact or colonisation.”²⁷ The question of whose secret it was and who was responsible for exposing that secret is an issue for the next chapter. It suffices to say for now that, throughout the twentieth century, the poetic and political geography of corruption placed it squarely, without much deliberation, and without any real change in tone, into the colonial and post-colonial world.²⁸

This is not to say that more recent corruption analysts—especially those writing in the 1990s—have not become conscious of the need to avoid neo-imperial rhetoric or, for that matter, outright racism, in identifying and describing corrupt practices and governments. There have been attempts to redefine corruption as a “global” rather than a “Third World” issue, for instance, and there have been similar attempts to produce more sophisticated definitions of corruption than those that motivated earlier writing.

One of the more interesting results of this repositioning is the growing work on scandal. Scandal is usually described in these studies as “corruption revealed,”²⁹ and, unlike corruption itself, it is usually seen as something healthy. Unsurprisingly, scandal has consequently come to be placed almost exclusively in Western Europe and North America, often in strange contradistinction to the corruption that plagues states outside of these areas.³⁰ Although analyzing scandal has been one means of retreating from the stark dichotomies of the earlier anticorruption literature, therefore, it largely reinforces the assumptions that inspired it.

A search for “scandal” in the ABC-Clio database of scholarly publications returns 496 results, of which 30 percent refer to areas outside of Western Europe and North American, while 70 percent are to states within these regions. In these articles, the uneasy relationship between scandal and corruption plays out in a variety of ways. Historically, for instance, one scholar notes that scandal “did not necessarily corrupt eighteenth century [British] politics with trivial issues; in fact, scandal opened up politics by revealing corruption and making political debate accessible to a wider audience,”³¹ while another seemingly brings this point to its logical conclusion: “the importance in scandal is not the corruption itself, but the procedural corruption that follows in ‘covering it up’. . . . [P]olitical scandal is only possible in liberal democracies . . . because of the belief in the ‘rule of law.’”³²

By maintaining that both scandal and corruption exist “everywhere,” that “even” England has its Profumo affair,³³ that the United States has its Watergate,³⁴ that France has its Rainbow Warrior,³⁵ that the purpose of anticorruption literature and activism is not to target solely colonized or postcolonial states, academics and analysts manage to remove themselves from the vaguely embarrassing stance taken by mid-century writers. But by simultaneously invoking the rhetoric of liberalism, by insisting that scandal but not corruption has to do with public debate, with popular access to political power, with, above all, the “rule of law,” by assuming that scandal is part and parcel of the normal functioning of healthy (“Western”) democracies, these analysts are also reinforcing earlier imperial positions.

On the one hand, scandal and corruption are inextricably linked—the two cannot exist independently. On the other, what is important about scandal (in Western Europe and North America) is not “the corruption itself,” but procedural perceptions. Similarly, although scandal helped to reveal corruption within, for example, eighteenth-century British politics, it did “not necessarily corrupt” the British political system. In other words, placing scandal in Western Europe and North America denies the importance or even the existence of any “pervasive” corruption alongside of it. Likewise, denying the possibility of scandal outside of these areas allows for the existence of a hidden, latent corruption in colonized or postcolonial countries that, given the absence of “organs of exposure,” can never be sufficiently revealed. The rhetoric of the Western European or North American government especially as a liberal, democratic one thereby creates a situation in which it is the duty of the public to enjoy scandal, to seek out corruption, but in which real corruption still exists only in the colonized world.

The corruption that Western European and North American scandals reveal almost always has some connection to countries elsewhere. In a 1999 book on *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, for instance, French President Jacques Chirac is portrayed as “brandishing a confidential report on the criminalization of politics in Africa . . . [stating that] the French government had to make a clean break with heads of state who were prevaricating in the face of change, and who were corrupt and autocratic.”³⁶ Similarly, the French “Elf Scandals” were largely to do with rent seeking in former French colonies,³⁷ where, it seems, “clearly African oil money had a corrupting effect on the French and their European business partners. It also has an effect on the Africans involved, not so much corrupting them as providing large amounts of money to pre-existing power circles.”³⁸

In Italy, “corrupt” politicians were linked both to apparently neo-fascist Masonic groups and to the illegal flow of arms and toxic waste to Somalia, “reveal[ing] the [inappropriate political] influence wielded by the P2 Masonic lodge in Mogadishu, together with that of the Italian chemical industry, anxious to find a dumping ground for its toxic waste through the intermediation of members of the Honourable Society.”³⁹

Although it is something of an open secret that prisons in the United States are not bastions of rational punishment, the early twenty-first-century U.S. press was far more concerned with the scandal that was torture in Iraq than the scandal that was torture “at home.”⁴⁰ Moreover, the most agonizing question surrounding this issue became the extent to which Iraq had “corrupted” U.S. soldiers.⁴¹ Finally, even Christine Keeler, the personality at the center of the English Profumo affair, apparently “attracted police attention [only] when two West Indian (jilted) lovers assaulted her on separate occasions.”⁴²

In other words, the democratic organs of the liberal state that make scandal—the revelation of corruption—possible are not actually focused on the liberal state at all, but on the “outside.” They are not interested in discussing corruption “inside,” nor do they (as a result) aid in the fostering of public debate or popular political access. Instead they narrate stories of external corruption and pinpoint the various ways in which those “inside” are under threat, or already infected by, these practices. “The French and their European business partners” are capable of being corrupted by “African oil money.” Africans are immune, presumably because corruption is part of their nature—hidden and incapable of scandalous revelation. Torture is antithetical to the liberal rhetoric of human rights. But the salient question in the Iraqi torture scandal was the extent to which young Americans were infected by inappropriate (Iraqi) attitudes toward power. The dichotomy between scandal and corruption produced in both activist and nonactivist literature thereby restates and reinforces the idea that corruption is solely a colonial or postcolonial affair.

A second means of seeming to move away from the intolerance of the earlier writing on corruption is to use perception indices rather than objective criteria in measuring it. Just as the scandal/corruption dichotomy further entrenched corruption within colonial space, however, this turn to perception likewise emphasizes the central role played by corruption rhetoric in imperial identity formation. Transparency International, for example, is most widely known for its annual Corruption Perceptions Index. Rather than engaging in the coercive and presumably culturally insensitive act of developing an external model of clean governance and then applying that model to various countries, Transparency International instead conducts polls. One of the most recent Corruption Perceptions Index, for example, is described by the NGO as “a poll of polls, reflecting the perceptions of business people, academics and risk analysts, both resident and non-resident. First launched in 1995, this year’s CPI [Corruption Perceptions Index] draws on 17 surveys from 13 independent institutions.”⁴³

The CPI, in other words, is a *spectacle* of identity formation.⁴⁴ Its very tolerance is wed to the fact that identifying corruption, vilifying it, and combating it are purely discursive exercises. The question that is being asked is a question of perception and self-perception, of, in a basic way, identity. “Experts”—businesspeople, academics, and risk analysts—are invited to define the activities of various populations, designate them as corrupt or clean, according to their own rhetorical understanding of who these populations are. The result, unsurprisingly, is to reinforce the neo-imperial understanding of who “we” all are.

Despite the repeated insistence, for example, that “today’s CPI demonstrates that it is not only poor countries where corruption thrives. . . .

[L]evels of corruption are worryingly high in European countries such as Greece and Italy,”⁴⁵ the numbers make the dichotomy clear. Of the top twenty-five perceived cleanest countries, only four—Singapore, Hong Kong, Chile, and Israel—are in Africa, Asia, or South America. Of the twenty-five most corrupt countries, not one is in the self-described West. So the “jungle of temptation” thrives even (and especially) when we approach these issues from an enlightened perspective.

Why should this be? In part, it is the obvious fact that perceptions are formed by power. The rhetoric of the imperial relationship—of what makes some places more prone to infection and infecting, of what areas are safe and what areas are not—is alive, well, and unquestioned. The linkage, for example, between “oil-rich” areas and their attendant corruption, of the extent to which oil as a resource rather than, say, natural gas or for that matter automobiles, produces inappropriate and often violent relationships is reinforced in the 2003 CPI.⁴⁶ Although oil-rich Norway ranks as the eighth “cleanest” country on the list, for example, a full paragraph and a half of the short introduction to the index are devoted to describing the unfortunate relationship between oil wealth and corruption.⁴⁷

But Norway is rarely described or perceived as oil rich. “Oil rich” is something that African, Asian, and South American countries are—Nigeria, Angola, Iraq, Indonesia, and Kazakhstan, for example, numbers 132, 124, 113, 122, and 100 on the list, with 133 being the most corrupt. Oil wealth is something that does not go into open public bureaucratic institutions, but “instead disappears on expensive vanity projects or into the secret offshore bank accounts of politicians and public officials”⁴⁸ Oil wealth is not like the wealth that comes from exporting timber, operating systems, or pharmaceuticals, wealth that is used in a transparent manner. It is associated with both corruption and violence—it describes countries emphatically on the wrong end of the CPI.

Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, much like the scandal/corruption dichotomy, thus merely reinforces the—in fact—perceptions accentuated by the earlier anticorruption literature. It makes possible, even, simple restatements of these mid-century positions. A scholar using the CPI to analyze corruption in the United States—ranked number eighteen—for example, argues that “Transparency International regularly ranks the United States somewhere in the middle of its scales. Intuitively, this ranking seems accurate, as the United States is the melting pot of most world cultures and would embody an average of the most and least corrupt.”⁴⁹

In other words, it is not just that corruption occurs in Africa, Asia, and South America. Those of African, Asian, and South American descent—even when they live in a clean country like the United States—

are predisposed to it. It is indigenous in every sense of the word. And if people of African, Asian, or South American descent had not “melted” into the United States, it would rank as high as homogenous, clean, number one Finland on the 2003 CPI.

In a similar manner, a 1990 book review of Robert Klitgaard’s *Controlling Corruption* concludes as follows:

Klitgaard returned from Equatorial Guinea in 1988, after having spent the better part of two years trying to administer a World Bank structural adjustment loan. It is also fair to say that he returned sadder but ruefully wise, having found that the best of intentions were no match for the wiles of those who deliberately or not stymied his (and others’) attempts to reform the Equatorial Guinean system. He set down his experiences in an engaging but sobering book, *Tropical Gangsters*. Perhaps *Controlling Corruption* and *Tropical Gangsters* should be read consecutively, the former as analysis and prescription, the latter as self-critique.⁵⁰

There are very few contexts in which a seemingly serious discussion of wily Africans frustrating the plans of well well-intentioned Western administrators out to improve their countries would fly in the contemporary context. Since the turn of the twentieth century, however, the corruption narrative has been unapologetically and explicitly colonial. It is not simply that corruption is situated outside of Europe and North America, or that discussions of it contain unquestionably racist overtones. The corruption narrative is and was about imperial power, knowledge, and identity formation. Klitgaard learned not just who the Equatorial Guineans were, but who he was. Transparency International is not just about identification, but about self-identification—about a seemingly voluntary self-positioning within a hierarchy of cleanliness. The scandal/corruption dichotomy does not just allow for discussions of political deviance on a supposedly global scale; it reinforces the imperial rhetoric of the liberal civilizing mission.

Theoretical Framework

I will be relying a great deal in this book on work that addresses law, colonialism, and the erotic or the pornographic. In particular, I will highlight the intersections between and among these three categories, and, even more so, the extent to which these areas of intersection have been defined as areas outside of the law—as spaces of legal exception or political indistinction.⁵¹

Although my primary interest is the rhetorical force of corruption, therefore—that half-legal, half-sexual threat to democracy and the rule of law—I will also be commenting more broadly on both the erotic nature of the state of exception and specific colonial or postcolonial manifestations of it. When I argue that analyses of corruption evoke erotic or pornographic tropes, and that these narrative devices in turn help to carve out exceptional spaces of lawless violence, I will thus be drawing on the work of a number of scholars who have already discussed similar themes in other contexts. What I would like to do now is take a few paragraphs to sketch in general outline some of these approaches to law, colonialism, and the erotic, and to address the ways in which they will serve as a framework for my argument over the following chapters.

One of the more fundamental points that will recur throughout this book is that narratives of corruption define and carve out exceptional space. To that extent, I will be engaging at some length with theorists such as Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe, who have addressed the state of exception and—both explicitly and implicitly—its spatial manifestations. Agamben’s analysis of biopolitics, for example—of the politicization of biological life—lends itself easily to a spatial reading. Indeed, a key aspect of his argument in both *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception* is his assertion that the paradigmatic space of modern sovereignty is the Nazi camp—a legally defined lawless space in which the conclusion to biopolitical democracy is reached. The camp, he argues, is the most overt example of biopolitical or exceptional space—a space in which “every fiction of a nexus between violence and law disappears and there is nothing but a zone of anomie, in which violence without any juridical form acts.”⁵² It is likewise in this arena, he continues, that the biopolitical potential of a legal/not-legal focus on what he calls “bare life” is realized, and in which, every minute, biological detail of an inmate’s existence is regulated, registered, ordered, and takes on increasingly powerful meaning.⁵³

Achille Mbembe similarly focuses on the biopolitical—and eventually necropolitical—nature of exceptional space, and on the important role played by legal rhetoric in defining it; but he shifts his focus away from the camp and toward the colony. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, Mbembe emphasizes the extent to which “space was . . . the raw material of sovereignty and the violence it carried with it.”⁵⁴ Sovereignty, he continues, “meant occupation, and occupation relegated the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood.”⁵⁵ Mbembe likewise points out that this space has been defined by Europeans as, above all, lawless—that “in modern political thought and European political practice and imagining, the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally of the exercise of a power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*).”⁵⁶ This explicitly spatial understanding of the state of

exception is in many ways reinforced by the work of scholars such as Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman when they note, for example, that

a new political geography of the world has emerged in the last two decades, in which whole areas are marked off as “violence-prone areas,” suggesting that the more traditional spatial divisions, comprising metropolitan centers and peripheral colonies, or superpowers and satellite states, are now linguistically obsolete.⁵⁷

Although Das and Kleinman do not speak the specific language of colonialism or exceptionalism, what they are describing is not essentially different from Agamben’s analysis of biopolitical space and Mbembe’s analysis of its necropolitical variant.

For my purposes, what is key in the work of all four scholars is the way in which each situates these spaces of lawless violence *within* legal structures and the way in which each thus understands this violence as, in some way, a product of politics. In Agamben’s analysis, these spaces are defined by the minute (intimate) regulation of biology or bare life—by a relentless biopolitical violence. In Mbembe’s analysis, they are defined by a violence done to identity—by the relegation of the colonized to an indefinable position between subject and object. According to Das and Kleinman, they are spaces characterized by the violence of the everyday, by the hyperbolically political nature of daily life in the “violence-prone area.” What I want to suggest in my own analysis is that they are likewise spaces determined by narratives of corruption—that “corruption-prone” is not in any obvious way different from “violence-prone,” and that indeed one important function of the corruption literature is to define, delimit, and detach arenas of lawless or exceptional violence from spaces of supposed law and order.

An equally important aspect of my argument is that it is the erotic or pornographic nature of the corruption narrative that, first, makes these spatial designations possible, and, second, renders the violence that occurs within them emphatically biopolitical. What I would like to do now, therefore, is to look in more detail at three theories of pornography and the erotic in order to explain how I see them intersecting with the theories of exceptional space that I outlined earlier. Although the erotic and the pornographic are for the most part distinct—or even mutually contradictory—concepts, I want to suggest over the following pages that they do share some similarities that link them quite closely to the state of exception, and therefore to the corruption narrative.

The first of these characteristics is that each in a different way involves the simultaneous disordering and regulating of the bodily, the biological, or

the intimate. The second is that each—although perhaps pornography more than the erotic—involves a process of segregating, enframing, and neutralizing as a means of producing desire. And the third is that each privileges bodily or biological narrative or testimony over verbal or linguistic narrative or testimony. To the extent, therefore, that exceptional space is by definition indistinct or disordered even while it is relentlessly regulated, to the extent that it is a space that segregates while defining and neutralizing, and to the extent that it is a space in which bare life is the only meaningful means of narration, it is likewise, by definition, erotic or pornographic space. As I will suggest over the next four chapters, it is thus exactly to the extent that the corruption narrative *is* erotic or pornographic that it *therefore* serves to carve out exceptional space.

I will look in more detail at theories of the erotic and the pornographic in later pages—especially in chapters two and three. For now, however, I would like to address in broad outline some of the scholars whose analyses will serve as a framework for my arguments in these sections. The first of these is Georges Bataille, the political force of whose work on death, embodiment, and sensuality has already been discussed in detail elsewhere.⁵⁸ I would thus like to highlight only one aspect of his argument on the erotic now—namely, the connection he forges among intimacy, eroticism and social disorder, between biological and political decay. “The business of eroticism,” states Bataille,

is to destroy the self-contained character of the participants as they are in their normal lives. Stripping naked is a decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized individuality. . . . [E]roticism always entails the breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence.⁵⁹

According to Bataille, in other words, one defining characteristic of the erotic is the way in which it disintegrates established boundaries, borders, and patterns—the way in which a state of bodily disarray reflects or highlights the potential for political or social disarray. The erotic therefore represents, quite basically, not just biological, not just political, but *biopolitical* disorder.

At the same time, however, as theorists of the pornographic such as Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Linda Williams have noted, this disorder has a regulatory quality about it that in many ways ties it explicitly and paradoxically back to these same established political and social structures.⁶⁰ Solomon-Godeau, for example, points out the importance of segregating, enframing, and debasing the body *parts* representative of “difference” even as the boundaries and borders of the body as a whole disappear. She writes that

the enormous production of pornographic imagery attests to the impulse to master and possess the object of desire while debasing it and neutralizing its power and threat. . . . [P]ornography emphatically exhibits the physical sign of . . . difference, even to the extent of making the woman’s genitals the subject of the image. But any potential threat is neutralized by the debased situation of the woman thus portrayed and the miniaturization and immobilization inherent in photographic representation.⁶¹

Williams meanwhile discusses the repetitive, highly ordered visual cues that signal, first, the creation of separate, violent spaces in sadomasochistic film pornography, and, second, the equally well-ordered, if “inarticulate,” body language that indicates the “reality” of the sex or the death that is being portrayed within these spaces.

With regard to the former, for example, she notes that one common trope in violent pornography is the moment at which a girl (the “real girl”) who is initially portrayed as a spectator of fictional sexual violence is suddenly trapped within this fictional narrative—the moment at which she is caught on film (or, more recently, the object of the webcam or cell phone) herself.⁶² Williams argues that this transition from “fiction” to “reality” operates “to convince some viewers that if what they had seen before was fake violence belonging to the genre of horror, what they [a]re seeing now [i]s real (hard core) violence belonging to the genre of pornography.”⁶³ It is, in other words, a well-worn narrative device in violent pornography for fictional space, where anything can happen, to entrap or to enclose “the real girl” or “real space” supposedly protected by rules or law—to suggest, that is, lawless violence operating within lawful structures. Moreover, as Williams argues in a second study of film excess in general, the narratives that occur in this space do so not via linguistic articulation or speech, but via body language or “uncontrollable convulsions.”⁶⁴ “Aurally,” she notes, “excess is marked by recourse not to the coded articulation of language, but to inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama.”⁶⁵

Both Solomon-Godeau and Williams, in other words, describe the same disintegration of bodily boundaries and attendant disintegration of social, political, or legal boundaries that Bataille does. All three suggest the chaotic, disordered, and indistinct nature of erotic or pornographic space. But Solomon-Godeau and Williams likewise note the paradoxically regulated nature of this space—the extent to which it could not exist and could not operate without the support of the systems that it apparently throws into turmoil. Like exceptional space, therefore, pornographic space is a zone of anomie, a space where anything can happen, but it is a space that is explicitly defined by law and legal structures. Like exceptional space, pornographic space is an arena in which every minute aspect of an individual's biological or bodily process is enframed, discussed, and segregated—in which power and dominance are not political but biopolitical. Finally, like exceptional space, pornographic space is populated by figures who can speak only via body language, whose verbal testimony is meaningless but whose bodily convulsions are translated into statements of the most crucial importance.

The only difference between the two is that pornographic space apparently produces desire, whereas exceptional space apparently does not. But it is here that I think my analysis of political corruption will prove useful. What I would like to suggest over the following pages, indeed, is not just that the rhetoric of corruption or corrupt intimacy has helped to carve out exceptional space; nor do I want to argue solely that this rhetoric invokes well-worn erotic and pornographic themes; rather, I hope to bring together the erotic and the exceptional—to pinpoint one arena in which erotic and pornographic narratives have served *directly* to produce a state of exception. To that extent, I will argue that exceptional space is as productive of desire as erotic space—that in fact the erotic nature of the corruption discourse is what has made it such a key component of recent neocolonial expansion. With that in mind, I will devote the following chapters of this book to addressing the ways in which corruption narratives have relied on these erotic and pornographic tropes, first, to carve out exceptional space, second, to displace this space onto colonies and post-colonies, third, to populate this space, and finally to condemn it.

An Overview

The first chapter of this book, “Political Corruption as Sexual Deviance,” consists of an extensive literature review. Making use of political speeches, the websites of international organizations such as Transparency International and the World Bank, newspaper articles, academic analyses, and

morality tales, it highlights the overlap between discussions of sexual deviance and discussions of political deviance from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this section, I show that, with their emphasis on intimacy, infantile sexuality, illness, monstrosity, self-destructive abandon, and confession as cure, modern narratives of political corruption have left the realm of bureaucratic decay to enter the realm of erotic disorder. In the process, the tensions between conflicting liberal metaphors of family-as-state and body-as-state have both emphasized the legal and biological boundaries within which proper citizens must interact while at the same time breaking down these boundaries in a spectacular pornographic display.

The second chapter, “Celebrating the Corrupt Leader,” begins with a discussion of the videotaped torture, death, and celebration of Liberian president Samuel Doe. Indebted particularly to Linda Williams’s theoretical work on pornography⁶⁶ and Catherine Mills’s work on nonverbal testimony in lawless space, this section analyzes the ways in which the corrupt leader is portrayed and presented as an object of consumption for global audiences. It focuses in particular on the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II, who reigned from 1876 to 1908, and the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, who ruled from 1979 to 2003. Although these two leaders were separated by more than a century, this section demonstrates that their narratives and the ways in which they have been marketed for a global audience have been identical. Just as Samuel Doe is remembered now almost exclusively as the star of one of the best-selling snuff films in history, Abdülhamid and Saddam Hussein were likewise transformed over their reigns from political leaders into “porn stars.” Their fleshiness, sexuality, and in particular their inability to produce an articulate self-narrative that could compete with narratives of law and liberalism were all key components to their celebration. Their use of body doubles, for instance, was rearticulated as an assault on the legal right of habeas corpus, and their evasion of the gaze of the public as an attempt to circumvent the gaze of the law. Placed into the same exceptional space occupied by the “real girl” of sadomasochistic pornography, the corrupt leader both on the run and after his eventual capture came to be known almost exclusively via body language or inarticulate physical signs, rather than via the spoken or written legal word that distinguishes the legitimate political leader.

The third chapter, “Condemning the Corrupt System,” examines corruption of the more “systemic” form. Rather than looking at the corrupt leader who is by definition a celebrated—and indeed hyperbolic—individual, the corrupt functionary is nameless, as are his or her victims. Framed within a discussion of the Pasolini film *Salo* and its indictment of “fascist corruption,” this chapter attempts to account for the strange overlap between narratives of corruption and narratives of totalitarianism.

Looking in particular at the relationship between the appropriate, noncorrupt dehumanization idealized in the liberal bureaucracy and the inappropriate, corrupt dehumanization that occurs in the totalitarian bureaucracy, it suggests that the (only) difference between the two lies in the former's focus on abstract, legal norms and the latter's focus on concrete, biological norms. Whereas the collective manifested in the former has to do with citizenship or specialization—embodied, for instance, in the production of a passport photo—in the latter it has to do with blood and property, quite literally embodied in nepotism, bribery, or torture. At the same time, I argue, the line between the two systems is not as distinct as it might appear. The chapter thus concludes by arguing that the postcolonial (corrupt) “torture nation” is, for example, very much a part of (noncorrupt) rational legal structures, while the momentarily famous (corrupt) photographs taken in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison are inextricably linked to the likewise momentarily famous (noncorrupt) Iraqi constitution.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this introductory section by addressing one contradiction that is at the heart of my discussion of political corruption and that will reassert itself with some frequency throughout the next four chapters: there is a vast divide between the empirical, social-scientific methodologies favored by almost every scholar writing in the corruption field, and my own methodology reliant primarily on political philosophy and literary analysis. In many ways, it would seem that these two approaches are completely irrelevant to one another, and that this book is therefore destined from the beginning to fail. Analysts attached to anti-corruption NGOs are unlikely to be interested in a discussion of rhetoric or narrative, and political theorists usually engage with ideas or issues that transcend the daily crises linked to empirical data and its verification. At the same time, however, as the literature review in the next chapter should make clear, I think that these two approaches are not as unrelated as they might at first appear. Anticorruption literature lends itself easily to literary analysis—so easily that it raises questions about the self-imposed roles taken on by anticorruption advocates. Indeed, when data collection occurs in aid of a broader philosophy of state formation, it is necessarily entering the realm of both rhetoric and narrative—and to the extent, therefore, that anticorruption advocates see themselves as humanitarians *or* internationalists, they are in fact already in a conversation with political philosophers and literary theorists.