

EDITORIAL

Power Tends to Corrupt

BRIAN MARTIN

Lord Acton's often-quoted saying that "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" nicely summarises the articles in this issue. The issue was originally intended to focus on "corruption and social action," which seems like a topic on which there would be a lot to say. Perceived corruption has often been a trigger for mass action against governments and other bodies: India 1975, Fiji 1987, Yugoslavia in the 1980s and China 1989 are only a few of the numerous cases of interest.

There are many questions that can be asked about such events. Does corruption (for example among police) hinder social action? Why are certain things considered corruption by social activists and others not? What can grassroots activists do to oppose corruption? Does opposing corruption really make things better? (For example, is an honest repressive regime better than a corrupt military regime?) How can activists use corruption to struggle for more just social structures?

There is a considerable academic literature on corruption, but little of it is of interest to activists. The regularly recurring outrage against corruption has benefitted little from research, partly because the research is more oriented to other researchers than to activists. The accounts of journalists are usually more useful, but they often lack the theoretical incisiveness necessary to improve activist strategy.¹

Maduabuchi Dukor and Marie Pauline Eboh tackle the issue of corruption in Nigeria from the point of view of *social action*. The role of perceived corruption in triggering discontent is apparent, the crucial role of *students* in social mobilisation is highlighted, and the failure of riots and military coups to address the roots of the problem is shown. There is a need for more studies such as these, particularly with reference to India and other Third World States, and for the analysis to be taken further to examine the implications of corruption for social action.

Another aspect of corruption and social action is corruption in *social movements*. Three articles in this issue deal with centralisation of

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power in environmental groups. To some this can be called corruption; I prefer Lord Acton's maxim, since the key is a struggle for *power* and its consequences. The main issue here is not diversion of monies or promotion of cronies, though these do occur, but rather the temptations of power for attaining the short-term goals of the movement by actions of the environmental organisations corrupts internal democracy.

The authors of the three articles, Hazel Notion, Timothy Doyle and Lorna Salzman, are all committed environmentalists. Their critiques are aimed not at discrediting environmental groups but rather at exposing the dangers of elitism. They also seem to agree that elite environmentalists are well-meaning. It is not generally a question of opponents or evil conspirators infiltrating and subverting environmental organisations (though this is possible) but rather of well-meaning figures in environmental groups using power-brokering techniques to achieve their aims.

The issues raised in these articles are fundamental ones, often confronted in social movements but seldom written about.² The authors believe that voicing criticisms is a way to strengthen environmentalism, and that keeping quiet is simply to acquiesce in the continuing power-plays that undermine the prospects for long-term social change towards an environmentally sound society.

Their analyses are supported by other evidence. Hazel Notion writes about Greenpeace in Australia.³ Greenpeace in Seattle, USA, acted like a typical exploitative employer towards office staff in 1988, demanding that workers soliciting donations through telephone calls use high-pressure selling tactics and introducing electronic surveillance of the phoners. When the Greenpeace employees formed a union, they were sacked.⁴

Lorna Salzman's account of Friends of the Earth in the USA is supported by an analysis in the journal *Earth First!*.⁵ Yet even the organisation *Earth First!* has its own tendencies towards centralisation of power.⁶

Timothy Doyle's careful description of elites in an Australian environmental campaign had an interesting fate when he attempted to raise the issues for a wider audience. He originally wrote on this topic in 1987, and prepared a short version for the weekly Australian newspaper *Times on Sunday*, which often published investigative journalism. But rather than publishing Doyle's paper, the *Times on Sunday* assigned one of their journalists to the story, who contacted the environmental organisations involved and wrote the story.⁷ The environmental elites denied the implications of the analysis.⁸ It was a year later when evidence supporting Doyle's contention was published in the media.⁹ This evidence provided proof that there had been massive corporate donations to leading environmental organisations.

Doyle's experiences, like those of others who have protested against uses and abuses of power in social movements, show that movement organisations are not exempt from Lord Acton's dictum. □

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4. 'Seattle Greenpeace phoners organize to resist management clamp-down', *Industrial Worker*, August 1988, pp. 1, 4, and follow-up articles in November 1988 and February 1989.
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7. Ean Higgins, 'The taint of politics splits the greenies', *Times on Sunday*, 18 October 1987, p. 13.
8. Bob Burton (The Wilderness Society), letter *Times on Sunday*, 25 October 1987, p. 14. J. H. Wootten (Australian Conservation Society), *Times on Sunday*, 1 November 1987, p. 12.
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