



## Corruption, abuse of power and lack of trust in Sweden: Does NPM corrupt?

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### review of

Wångmar, E. (2013) *Tillit och korruption: Korruption, maktmissbruk och bristande tillit i svensk lokalpolitik 1963-2011* (*Trust and corruption: Corruption, abuse of power and lack of trust in Swedish local politics 1963-2011* [author's translation]). Stockholm: Santérus Förlag. (PB, pp. 288, 30,50€//\$35,28, ISBN 978-91-7359-064-8)

Erik Wångmar's book on corruption presents an astonishingly thorough and methodical historical analysis of five corruption cases set in the world of Swedish local politics, i.e. on a municipal level. While impressive in its laboriously scope, archival accuracy and extensive time frame, the book does not counterbalance this empirical focus with an equally rewarding theoretical analysis and development. Wångmar does, however, provide a number of thoroughly grounded insights that question fundamental tenets of Swedish corruption research – and on a larger scale – corruption research as such.

Wångmar's book is part of the research project *Tillit och korruption i lokalpolitiken* ('Trust and corruption in local[/municipal] politics') conducted between 2007 and 2012 at the Linnaeus University (2013). As the project, and the title of the book, implies the focus of Wångmar's project has been to study the position of trust vis-à-vis the notions of trust, corruption and abuse of power. Wångmar is a historian focusing on issues within political sciences. The book is intended primarily as a study of Swedish corruption cases, but its secondary purpose is as educational material on undergraduate level, but also readers outside of

academia: politicians and citizens – particularly in the municipalities discussed by Wångmar's five cases.

The objective of the book is to thoroughly investigate five major cases of corruption, abuse of power and lack of trust on a municipal level in Sweden during the years 1963 to 2011. As a contextualisation it should be noted that municipal governance is considered an important cornerstone of Swedish democracy, which prides itself of its high degree of local self-government. Wångmar's study is primarily a history project with strong elements of political science, as well as lesser components of communication studies and psychology. Economy, jurisprudence and criminology are excluded as they are considered outside the scope of his study. Considering the time scale of the study, Wångmar applies two major temporal frameworks: short-term and long-term perspective. The short-term framework focuses on the legal consequences and its effect on local politics in terms of re-election results and change of personnel. In a long-term perspective the focus is on axiomatic transitions of power balance within municipal party politics as a consequence of the corruption and/or abuse of power.

The central concepts of Wångmar's text are those provided in the subtitle: *corruption, abuse of power* and *lack of trust*. Corruption is a special case of unethical actions with multiple definitions, Wångmar claims. Primarily, corruption is an instance of breaking official codes of conduct of public offices – when the lines between public and private spheres are blurred i.e. private gain is generated from public loss. From a legal point of view corruption is something that explicitly breaks laws – but corruption must also include the public opinion of what constitutes corruption. Wångmar acknowledges that many of these definitions are not unquestioned – many countries, among them Sweden, lack legislation that specifically targets the phenomenon of corruption. A normative perspective defines corruption simply as wrongful conduct by politicians and civil servants. Nevertheless, Wångmar concludes that he prefers the legalistic definition that primarily focuses on bribery, nepotism and embezzlement.

*Abuse of power* is the second central theoretical tenet of Wångmar's study. It is stressed that this in many regards overlaps with the notion of corruption, since abuse of public power very often coincides with private profits gained from public losses. However, it is possible to abuse public power, from a legal perspective, *without* benefitting the private profits of politicians or their relatives. Examples consist of actions that illegally favours the local business community with the intention of increasing employment.

The final concept in Wångmar's framework is *lack of trust*. Wångmar posits lack of trust in politicians by citizens as a direct consequence of stated corruption and its legal consequences. Lack of trust also arises when corruption is committed but within the confines of legal actions that are nevertheless considered improper conduct by the public. Wångmar sees links to the notion of *legitimacy* – citizens accept the power structure as viable whereby citizens are subordinated a centralised political power entity regardless if they agree or don't with the political opinions of the ruling political constellations.

These three concepts *corruption*, *abuse of power* and *lack of trust*, form the central concepts of Wångmar's analysis. They are clearly defined (leaning towards a legalistic perspective) but are complemented by a focus on the political consequences of these three perspectives. The consequences are analysed mainly in terms of court decisions, changes of responsible personnel and particularly electoral effects for political parties on a municipal level. These are based on existing research and own archival research. The conclusions vary from case to case and are influenced by factors such as unemployment tendencies, national election results, population increase, positions of prosecuted (elected or civil servant) among others. In conclusion negative political consequences are evident as expected, but otherwise nothing unanticipated is presented regarding this aspect.

Furthermore, Wångmar transitions into a contextualisation of his study within the framework of *New Public Management* (NPM) and in particular its effects on corruption. It is claimed that previous research on municipal corruption in Sweden has proposed a link between NPM and increased corruption based on historical comparisons between periods before and after the general introduction of NPM in the Swedish public sector. Based on predominantly previous research on Swedish municipality corruption Wångmar concludes that dominant tenets regarding the history of Swedish corruption – particularly by the prominent political theorist Bo Rothstein who claims that reforms in Swedish municipality laws during the late 19th century contributed to the decline of corruption – are based on research that has somewhat overlooked the presence of corruption on municipal level during most parts of the 20th century. Consequently, Wångmar indicates that historical conclusions based on comparisons in correlation to the 20th century – in Rothstein's case *before* and *during*, and by many NPM researchers *during* and *after* – are in many cases to a small extent misguided. Corruption in Swedish municipalities between the municipal reforms advanced during the end of the 19th century and the onset of Wångmar's study (1963) was more prevalent than has been previously known – and mainly due to lack of politically autonomous auditing systems. Although partially based on Wångmar's own findings built on his empirical data – namely flawed municipal auditing as a

result of power abuse by politicians – the core of this argument (the underestimated prevalence of corruption between 1870 and 1960) is *not* based on his own research or the timeframe covered by his study.

As a final act, Wångmar discusses his own views on how to stifle corruption, although with the proviso that they are not based on his empirical data. His recommendations are in general primarily focused on improving the mandate of the municipal audit commissions, which as described previously is one of the primary lacunae in Swedish local anti-corruption legislation identified by Wångmar in his empirical data.

There are both positive and negative aspects with Wångmar's study. Let's start with the negative. Sometimes the empirical focus of the book might be overabundant and slightly daunting – for instance readers are amply treated with minute chronological accounts from voting protocols of municipal archives – although this might more be due to the academic style of the history field, rather than necessarily Wångmar's study. As a result of this methodological presentation approach the text as such becomes somewhat lengthy and slightly monotonous. Nevertheless, in terms of methodology Wångmar supplies an abundance of archival evidence and it is profusely adequate.

Secondly, Wångmar's study is limited by its own restricted perception of corruption as such. The study implicitly focuses on corruption research delimited by occurrences within and in relation to the *public sector*. Admittedly this constitutes the most visible form of corruption, but corruption is not exclusive to the public sector – an entire separate sphere exists of *private-to-private corruption*. Its extent is unknown and as a phenomenon goes fairly unnoticed by corruption research (with some exceptions, for instance Argandoña, 2003) – this study is no exception. Acknowledging corruption from a wider perspective would be rewarding in this study – particularly if considering the privatisation of enterprises which transfers public resources to private ownership that often follow in the wake of NPM policies. On the other hand Wångmar's study (and the wider research project that his study is part of) is focused on municipal corruption and subsequently emphasises public corruption cases. As a part of a wider discussion Wångmar also provides a short chapter on the countermeasures taken by municipalities in light of their corruption scandals.

From a positive viewpoint, in a wider perspective of corruption research, Wångmar's book provides two notable insights: the first is the questioning of the purported increase in corruption by NPM politics, and the second is a questioning of Rothstein's perspectives on Swedish (local) corruption. The first is a fairly hotly debated issue and what Wångmar does is to question what historical

data, in the case of Swedish corruption research as well as mainstream political discourses, this widely-accepted claim is based on. Wångmar does not question the NPM-induced corruption claim wholesale, but concludes that NPM cannot be fully attributed for all increases in corruption during the last decades, but rather can be considered a factor that *reinforces* corruption settings. Admittedly, privatisation or the ‘marketisation’ of public spheres involves numerous situations that increase the risk for private gain at public loss (if we subscribe to that particular definition of corruption). As regards the second insight, Wångmar concludes that Rothstein’s claims do not hold on a local/municipal level. This is a fairly bold statement as it challenges a fundamental tenet of a prominent, particularly in Sweden, political theory – at least on a local level. Rothstein’s recognised political theory (Rothstein, 2011), somewhat categorically summarised, states that *quality of government* and the *public trust* in this quality is the most decisive factor in terms of social, economic and democratic development. Rothstein theory has, in an international setting, become an advocate of sorts for the Swedish welfare model based on the social democratic stalwart cause of an extensive high quality government in society. Occasionally Rothstein’s theories are juxtaposed with Robert D. Putnam’s (2001) influential studies of contemporary democratic societies (mainly Italy and USA) where he claims that *social capital* and the role of *civic engagement* is the key decisive factor in social, economic and democratic development – hence from a dichotomising perspective an individualistic civic perspective opposite to Rothstein’s more structural and state/institution focused framework. This conclusion releases a plethora of rewarding issues for further corruption research – but with the overarching insight that corruption might be more prevalent than previously considered in developed nations despite their generally higher quality of government.

To summarise: Wångmar’s book contributes to new perspectives on Swedish municipal corruption by delivering highly detailed and historical accounts of its mechanisms on a level of local politics. It provides a thick and rich empirical study which can serve as a solid foundation for further research – particularly in the context of local politics. Nevertheless, the implications for the wider context of corruption research is provided by the contextualisation of the five corruption cases with a historical review which positions arguments concerning NPM and Rothstein’s quality of government theory.

## references

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