

CORRUPTION IN THE CITY – THE CITY IN CORRUPTION

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE FROM THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD TO 1989

The 45th international conference on urban history of the Prague City Archives, held in cooperation with the Institute of History of the Faculty of Arts of J. E. Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem and the Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences

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The phenomenon of corruption, typically associated with acts such as bribery, nepotism, clientelism, and embezzlement, has historically taken on various forms, depending on the time and social environment, and has produced various social consequences. With the gradual formation of the organisation of municipal administration (public administration) in cities, corruption became yet another situation that the urban environment was also forced to face. Public administration created opportunities for pursuing private (personal, family, or group) interests for financial or status gain, as well as for violating written and unwritten rules with the aim of increasing private influence. For cities, a significant turning point in the perception of this misconduct came in the Early Modern period with the ideas of humanism as well as the formation of Protestant confessions, which had a heavy influence on the thematisation of the moral

level of this phenomenon. For the Czech environment, this was also a period of attempts by cities, as one of the provincial estates, to intervene in nationwide politics, bringing a new dimension of corruption potential. The progressive bureaucratisation of city administration, culminating in the reorganisation of municipalities, responded to manifestations of corruption in the city administration system since the beginning of the 18th century by strongly regulating these practices. The overall approach and perception of corruption, especially at the political level, subsequently changed with the formation of civil society.

The conference should discuss corruption as a multifaceted social phenomenon affecting the urban environment from the Early Modern period to the 20th century; it should monitor the changes in its forms, but also its reflection on both the normative and informal levels, especially on the part of urban residents, which is also reflected in the semantic level of the term “corruption”. When and in what contexts was it a socially acceptable phenomenon, and when did it become an unacceptable practice, whether from a moral or normative perspective? In what contexts were corrupt practices implemented in Early Modern urban administration? What was their form and specific goals? Were they subject to any control mechanisms, and how was their form influenced by political and economic developments? However, this concerns more than just official city administrative structures. Could we identify corrupt practices in other segments of Early Modern urban society – in guilds, parishes, religious communities, or even within the broader family environment? This is about more than the relationships within these communities, but also their





collective actions. What sources offer answers to the above questions? Attention should not be primarily focused strictly on judicial sources. Some of the questions have already been partially answered by research on burgher elites or social networks, which represent an inspiring concept for the given topic that can be built on.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, when city administration (or self-rule) became an essential vehicle for the realisation of political ambitions, the conditions for corrupt practices changed, as did their forms. However, was the perception of corruption by contemporary society changing at the same time? Legislation and established control mechanisms responded to corruption. The space for corrupt practices was also being modified during

this period with regard to changes in the social system and the dominant political discourse. Since the second half of the 19th century, urban politics became a key area for significant economic investments in connection with the expansion of cities and the construction of their infrastructure, which expanded the range of corrupt practices. In what form do we encounter corruption during this period? How did patterns of corrupt behaviour in relation to city administration and self-government differ in various social systems? What space did crisis situations of wars, epidemics, or revolutionary upheavals create for corrupt behaviour in the city?

Naturally, there are many more questions related to the phenomenon of corruption in urban areas. Cities and burghers, corrupt and corrupting, are simultaneously a topic that we would like to discuss, as usual, not only in an interdisciplinary manner, but especially in a comparative context and in the broader Central European area.

Please send paper proposals along with an abstract and your short introduction by 25 April 2026 to the contact address provided below. The organisers reserve the right to make the final selection among the submitted papers. The presented papers will be printed in a monothematic volume as part of the *Documenta Pragensia* series. Foreign participants will be provided accommodations at the expense of the organisers. No conference fees are collected. The conference languages are Czech and German (or English). Simultaneous interpretation from German is provided.

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