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Author(s): A. F. Robertson

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# Misunderstanding corruption

## A.F. ROBERTSON

Sandy Robertson is an Emeritus and Research Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Honorary Professor of Social Anthropology at Edinburgh University. His e-mail address is robertson@anth.ucsb.edu.

In a recent scathing *Message to world leaders* the Royal African Society (RAS) puts 'corruption and money laundering' at the top of its list of 'the damage we do to Africa'. The World Bank reckons that a trillion dollars is paid in bribes each year around the world, and the African Union estimates that the continent loses as much as \$148 billion a year to corruption. Declaring that 'corruption may actually kill more people and wreck more lives than both drugs and terrorism', the RAS pamphlet advocates a legal crack-down in the rich 'donor' countries – but alas, legislation has proved ineffective, largely because 'corruption is not easy to investigate and prove beyond reasonable doubt'.

What is so elusive about corruption? Contributors to an interesting recent anthropological collection (Haller and Shore 2005) conclude that the topic is 'slippery and protean', 'polysemous and diffuse', 'hidden' and 'occult'. Corruption is 'both everywhere and nowhere', defies measurement, and is most evident in its denial. The widely touted remedy is greater 'transparency' – making the crime and its perpetrators more publicly apparent in the interests of 'democracy'. But confronted with the 'inexplicable pervasiveness' of the phenomenon, the best that the editors of this collection can offer is 'a tentative vision of what an anthropology of political corruption might look like'.

### Corrupt metaphors

It seems that corruption is perpetrated in a legal, fiscal, managerial and moral 'grey area' which, to the cynical observer, now seems to cover most aspects of government and business practice. Official efforts to root out corruption are in a triple bind: officialdom itself is the principal domain of corruption; corruption is covert and inherently difficult to observe; and there is no reliable objective theory to help us identify, observe and remedy vices of this sort. In social science at large corruption has most usually been regarded as a subversion of rationality – the work of rogues who seek to outsmart 'the system' for private gain. It's *unfair* because it is usually the poorest people who lose out and the most privileged who profit, often outrageously. And yet, in liberal perception, corruption is a corollary of the material freedoms we should all cherish: trying to eliminate it by tinkering with the rules of competition or good management might inhibit the strategic play on which economic progress itself depends. For their part, anthropologists have tended to interpret corruption as the collision of universal bureaucratic norms and specific cultural values, an approach which inclines to apologize for the guileless receiver or giver of gifts and blame exogenous forces like the international expansion of capital.

On one thing we seem agreed: what in modern times we have been calling *corruption* is a by-product of the formal rules that seek to separate persons from the offices they hold. The principle that you must have an office to abuse in order to be corrupt was as familiar to the Chinese administrator-philosopher Wang An Shi in the 11th century, and the Tunisian Ibn Khaldūn in the 14th century, as to Max Weber in the 20th. All three recognized that having an identity that is detachable from your body requires an institutional framework which incorporates enough social power and privilege to keep the profitable political-economic game running long enough, and on a large enough scale. And when things go wrong it's *somebody* rather than the system that gets the blame.

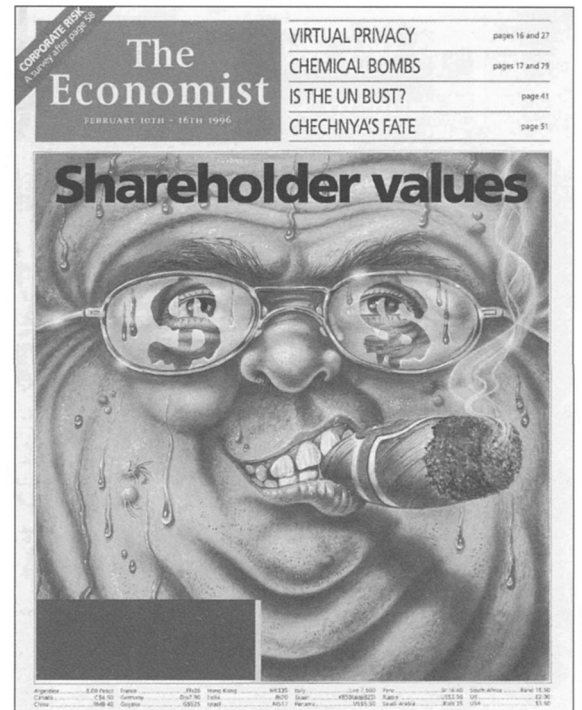


Fig. 1. How do the interests of wealthy investors influence the economies of poor countries? Front cover of *The Economist*, 10-16 February 1996.

The confusion arising from this official logic is that the body we blame has been swallowed up by metaphoric images of itself. 'Corruption' is now a usage peculiar to the bureaucratic domain, diverted from its earlier meaning of physical decomposition or putrefaction to connote 'perversion from uprightness and fidelity in the discharge of duty'.<sup>1</sup> Officials no longer talk of 'corruption' in contexts which are directly concerned with the production, maintenance, reproduction and disposal of *real* bodies. This ambiguity has been compounded by scholarly explanations which trace corruption to the *minds* of devious individuals or to the *meta-minds* of diverse 'cultures'. Cartesian thinking which privileges mind over matter loses track of the physical beings who gain and lose from the antisocial manipulation of personal identity.

It is a nuisance that, since dualist logic so radically defines how we do scholarly business, any critique is usually obliged to proceed from within the assumptions of dualism itself. Here I shall focus on the 'body' part of the moral calculus of corruption, but I want it to be as *real* a body as we can possibly imagine.

### The institutional contexts of 'corruption'

The institution which has provided the main framework for doing business, government and corruption today is the *corporation*. This is the transcendent meta-body which has been the making of modernity. *Chambers Dictionary* tells us that the corporation is 'a succession or collection of people authorized by law to act as one individual and regarded as having a separate existence from the people who are its members'. It allows real people to join forces for private gain, to mask their personal identities, dodge their liabilities and defy mortality. Moral ambivalence is intrinsic to the corporation. It is the framework in which individuals are piously held to account, and yet can get away with almost anything. 'Did you ever expect a corporation to have a conscience,' asked an 18th-century English

Lord Chancellor, 'when it has no soul to be damned, and no body to be kicked?'<sup>2</sup>

Today's corporation is no freak of nature, no historical accident. It was invented by European merchants in the 15th century, along with enough moral latitude to allow great commercial ventures to flourish, and many rogues to prosper. The earliest *Oxford English Dictionary* citation (1425) of the modern meaning of corruption as 'perversion from uprightness and fidelity in the discharge of duty' dates from this epoch. The corporation developed simultaneously as an instrument of commerce and of government, a political-economic symbiosis essential to the making of modern states in the 19th century and transnational enterprises in the 20th. Responsibilities have always shuttled back and forth between the public and private corporate domains, with the nationalizing of private enterprises (mining, transport) and the privatizing of government (prisons, public welfare).

The concentration of state power has never been an antidote to corruption, it has simply expanded and diversified the rubrics in which it occurs. Every office drudge knows that it's the 'grey area', not the rules, which actually makes bureaucracy work, for better and for worse. Cognitive dissonance about the discrepancies between the normative framework and real behaviour is the mind-set of the 'good' bureaucrat. With the rule book in hand, it's not so hard to spot misconduct, but every manager worth her salt knows that if you are over-zealous in trying to constrict pragmatic behaviour you will bring everything to a standstill. That is what whistle-blowers do, and why for all their virtuous intentions they are a menace to 'the system'. Underlings use the same tactic in their own interests – that's the principle of the 'work-to-rule' as industrial action. The bureaucratic reflex of adding *more* rules and offices to reduce the costs of pragmatic play has the comic inevitability of further expanding the opportunities for corruption. It simply raises the stakes and adds new levels to the hierarchy of officials, witness the censors in imperial China, and the proliferation of anti-fraud agencies in Europe today.

### Intellectual complicity

However much we may prize our intellectual freedom, our professional academic minds are as constrained as the bureaucrat's. Our difficulties in understanding corruption can be traced to centuries of scholarly complicity in the construction of the modern institutions (firms, bureaucracies, principles of rational self-interest) which provide the social and moral contexts in which corruption routinely occurs. The scholarly reflex has been to try to draw corruption into the normative framework, to try to make the 'unwritten rules of corruption formally evident'.<sup>3</sup> But imagining such a pragmatic vice as another rule-bound system, a sort of 'anti-bureaucracy' which may be reclaimed and manipulated by decent officials, is unlikely to see much further than the banality of broken rules.

It was the merchants who funded the first universities, and their scholarly sons who went on to build up the rationales for private and public enterprise. As Albert Hirschman has famously explained, they elaborated the ideas of rational self-interest, individual freedom, profit, contract and office which have been the making of the modern world. This is all part of the institutional fabric in which corruption occurs, and if it looks obscure we have our own optics to blame, rather than acts of God, nature, or the invisible hand of the market. This is not to suggest that the academy has any clear, concerted view of corruption to hand. Modern organization makes this unlikely: the disciplines are victim to excessively divided labour, balkanized to something approaching conceptual immobility and reduced, as Andrew Abbott has memorably highlighted, to chaotic, infinitely regressive differences of opinion.

For the scholar, the most intractable behaviours are those (theft, gambling, tipping, corruption etc.) which make pragmatic play on the moral structures within which academic reasoning is itself embedded (rights to property, obligations to pay for services, professional probity etc.). For his doctoral research in the late 1960s, Keith Hart worked as a participant-observer in an immigrant community living by its wits just over a shallow wall from the main police compound in Accra, Ghana. He was perplexed by the almost insuperable problem posed by his own astute perceptions (which were, incidentally, honed by his skills as a gambler): how could the apparently perverse *modus vivendi* in the Nima slum be translated into respectable academic terms? Much of the logic of these shady activities could indeed be accounted for in the language of investment, opportunity costs, social benefits and the like. Drawing these activities into the formal economic purview had the incidental and gratifying effect of dignifying behaviour which would otherwise seem far beyond the bourgeois pale. Nima's pimps and fences could be perceived as going about their business, in challenging circumstances, pretty much as we would. Nor were the larger implications of their dealings necessarily antisocial. They helped to keep whole economies on the move, cashing in on human sexual appetites, or recycling our TV sets out through our living room windows, over the fence and back into our living rooms.

Using economic tools to illuminate such business was a revelation, but Hart has always been dogged by the doubt that something vital is being lost, even betrayed, by making Nima conform to our intellectual expectations. His observation that hitherto invisible 'informal activities' were part of the engine of economic growth in countries like Ghana was seized on by the International Labour Organization and the World Bank to brighten the public accounts of struggling post-colonial states like Kenya. Eventually, even 'developed' countries like Italy were arguing that the volume of their 'black economies' tipped the fiscal scales in favour of their joining the European Monetary Union. They still seem oblivious to the irony that this is effectively an admission of declining state control over what are now the world's most valuable traded commodities: drugs, armaments and counterfeit goods. What credence can we give to governments that simultaneously give legitimacy to transparent criminality and continue to agitate against corruption?

The 'informal economy' continues to thrive on its inscrutability, resisting our urge to define, abstract, quantify and measure devious behaviours in the hope that we will make them more amenable to policing and policy-making. It's not just a problem of getting the right empirical data out of this area of darkness. Ironically, what defines this sector as 'informal' is not so much the activity of the villains who work out there as the inability of mainline economic and social theory to get *in* there. 'This is a cultural issue as much as an accounting issue,' declared William Powers, the Texas University law professor who investigated the

**Mwai Kibaki appoints  
an anti-corruption czar  
and fires suspect  
officials as citizens take  
up their own fight  
against graft.**

Fig. 2. The struggle against corruption: headline from the Los Angeles Times, 27 February 2003.



GOLDWYN PICTURES

Fig. 3. A still from Erich von Stroheim's nine-hour epic *Greed* (Goldwyn Pictures, 1924). McTeague stares bug-eyed at a fistful of Trina's money. She has turned her lottery winnings into gold coins and prefers to writhe on them naked rather than spend them. Having murdered Trina and fled to the desert with the gold, McTeague is tracked down by her cousin Marcus, and eventually succumbs to the pitiless sun, handcuffed to his captor's rotting corpse.

collapse of Enron. But as we all know, 'culture' is the new code word for 'unintelligible' – a mounting embarrassment for the discipline which has always regarded culture as its prime explanatory object.

### Feeling and meaning

True to its Cartesian roots, the academic reflex has been to mentalize a vice like corruption, abstracting it from the bodies of its perpetrators and victims and seeking to imagine how, either as rational perverts or cultural automata, they *think*. This is challengingly at odds with the popular perception of corruption as very much a *bodily* vice. The opportunity may be afforded by official institutions, but it is real, sentient mortals who actually do it, and are ultimately held accountable.

By some retroflexive stretch of the imagination we might imagine 'corruption' occurring in those communities beloved of anthropologists: perhaps a chief, priest or patriarch who abuses his 'office' for private gain. But in these patrimonial contexts immorality is usually identified in very direct visceral terms (gluttony, envy, pride) which signal that behaviour is *not* separable from the living, embodied persons who engage in it. Let us recall that in our own deeper history, before the Renaissance and the invention of modern mercantile morality, the body was profoundly implicated in the interpretation of behaviour. Now, in the moralizing of officialdom, the link with 'real' bodies is translated into overworked *metaphors* of life and growth. 'What is the role of a parent company? To provide strength and guidance for its family,' runs a recent *New Yorker* advertisement for Altria, the new conglomerate which seeks to provide moral cover for the tobacco giant Philip Morris.

Having turned the human body into its central metaphor, the modern corporation has lost touch with the real thing. Efficient administration is definitively a domain of the mind, and the transgression of all those real embodied persons into the official structure is an embarrassment, a moral threat. But anyone who works in a bureaucracy knows that

real bodies, with all their pleasant and unpleasant functions, are everywhere apparent: note the endless pragmatic fascination with executive toilets and dining rooms, the lascivious office parties, and the excruciating humour of the TV series *The Office*. Corruption is conceptually elusive because, as the word itself graphically suggests, it is at least as much about how people *feel about bodies* as about how they *think about rules*. The sheer physicality and body-centredness of this is very striking: while officials struggle to find palliative phrases like 'executive overcompensation' for corporate graft, ordinary people (and that includes off-duty officials) retaliate with bodily epithets of their own: to get things done you have to 'get your foot in the door', 'kiss ass', or 'grease palms'.

It is no accident that the second dictionary definition of 'corporation' is 'a belly, esp a pot belly (*colloq*)'.<sup>4</sup> Feeding is the universal metaphor for bribery and peculation. As they say cheerfully in Cameroon, 'the state is meat... people eat the state'.<sup>5</sup> From the underling's point of view, the immediate function of private or public corporations is not to build roads or run hospitals, but to feed congeries of people whose stake is an *office*, large or small, held more or less nominally by a single family member. In Malaysia, this was known as *makan gaji*, 'to eat a wage'. The right to eat, to sustain life, is the most fundamental measure of human equity, and the most persuasive justification for getting more out of 'the system' than it will formally allow. A petty official in Senegal protests: 'every family ate a cup of rice from my bribe'. The only difference – in rural Bangladesh or urban Texas – is how much is 'more'.

Perhaps the physical sources of the metaphor help explain why corruption which actually harms real bodies appalls us most: the AIDS drugs scandals, racketeering in food aid, the trafficking in children, women and body parts. However, these very real agonies only seem to have encouraged corporations to push the bodily metaphor to further extremes. The most recent piece of effrontery is their claim to *human rights*, on the very terms which national and international agencies have sought to devise to protect ordinary people from the physical predations that public and private corporations themselves have perpetrated. Taking its cue from a rash of litigation in the US, the quarrying company Lafarge took the UK Environment Minister to court in October 2000 to protest that its *human rights* had been violated because of delays in an environmental impact report. A *Guardian Weekly* editorial lamented our 'domination by bodies we created but have lost the means to control'.<sup>6</sup> Cartoonists in the financial weeklies have responded to recent corporate excesses with graphic allusions to corporal punishment rather than corporate discipline: 'white-collar crooks' in jail, in the guillotine, or in the stocks being bombarded with rotten vegetables.<sup>7</sup>

But be sure, the current mood of revenge and pious reform won't last. There are too many vested interests in the corporate status quo, and if it seems that the normative fabric can no longer sustain the onslaught of boundless personal gain, there's enough money – at least in the metropolitan coffers – to cover up the problem. The current US regime has little appetite for retribution on corporate greed, and the naked emperors quickly find their way back to the Emporio Armani. Why should poor countries clean up their act when outrageous abuses multiply daily across Europe and North America? How dare we keep pointing to Africa as the great sink-hole of corruption? What hypocrisy is this? *They are rank amateurs!*

Popular understandings, and with them popular resistance, die hard. Ordinary people in Lagos or Dallas know that bureaucracies are not staffed by normatively pure, disembodied spirits, dedicated to grander interests than themselves. They are full of people who eat and shit and

fornicate and die like all the rest of us, and when things go seriously wrong it's as ordinary, embodied mortals that they are held up to us for inspection. The corporate metaphor of the body is returned to its source, where its ill-health is perceived sensuously, *feelingfully*. In media coverage the villains of Enron now look physically shabby, and their employees, who were robbed of their pensions by 'Kenny Boy Lay' and his auditor accomplices, sport T-shirts declaring 'I got Lay-ed'.

In complaining about corruption, the public has recourse to a visceral rhetoric of the sort which academics shun. At a European Union symposium, *The Economist's* columnist 'Charlemagne' was challenged by a speaker who protested that use of the word 'greed' was 'inappropriate at an academic conference'.<sup>8</sup> I have encountered similar resistance at conferences on corruption, although 'greed' continues to ring out in media headlines (I have a large collection). The domain of the intellect is inhospitable to the *feelings* which only a real live body can communicate. Intellectual apathy is one reason why academic opinions are held in low esteem. Indeed, in common parlance the word 'academic' has come to mean 'irrelevant' ('it's all academic now,' we say, when one football team is being decisively thrashed by another).

Roy Porter's last words in his account of *Flesh in the age of reason* capture the politics of mentalism: 'The doctrine of mind over matter stood for power over the people.' Of course, almost everyone acknowledges the deficiencies of dualist thinking, but there is now far too much at stake to withdraw from its brutal simplicity. Recent anthropological attention to 'embodiment' seems promising, but it has yet to escape the mentalist tendency to reduce anything which resembles the 'real' body to symbolic schemes and culturally-specific metaphors. Ordinary people, including off-duty anthropologists, know that the bodies which are involved in corruption (or any other transaction) are real bodies, not just culturally variable schemata – figurative images which can too easily foster the assumption that other people's bodies are *inherently* different. If anthropological theory is to come to terms remedially with corruption it must get a good deal closer to the palpable, sentient human body which provides the universally available measure for the moral chicanery of an officially disembodied self.

### How should we study corruption?

On the two or three occasions in my life when I have had to bribe an official, I have been immobilized by my own ignorance and anxiety. The perplexity is not so much setting the price as knowing how to go through the physical motions. Is there a universal body language for suborning? Do you grin amiably, nod and wink, or do you contrive to look utterly impassive? If these things actually matter, how do we incorporate them into our explanations of corruption?

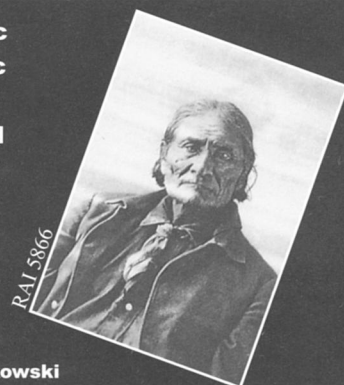
Coming to grips with real bodies is not exactly what is envisaged in the favoured anthropological research tactic of 'participant observation'. How close can we respectfully get? As petty bourgeois *ingénus* we can begin (as several contributors to Haller and Shore's collection suggest) by listening more carefully to how people *talk* about corruption, but this still keeps our subjects at arm's length. Even the grandest scams happen between real people, and if we want to know more, we have to devise new tactics for bringing them into view. If it's to the toilet or the golf club rather than the filing cabinet or the boardroom that people go for a spot of suborning or insider trading, then that's where we must pursue them. This is a tall order: today what passes for corruption *within* countries like Bangladesh, Kazakhstan or Nigeria is utterly dwarfed by the corruption initiated from *outside* these countries by competing

oil conglomerates – ExxonMobil, TotalFinaElf, Chevron Texaco and the rest. These corporations take refuge in the dubious notion that it is the receiver, not the giver of gifts who is culpable. They consciously seek out and create areas of ambivalence in which these transactions can occur, and when things go wrong it is 'the system' – theirs rather than ours – which is blamed. But every deal always and necessarily brings together separate, embodied individuals. Who, precisely, are they? According to an exposé in *Forbes* magazine the most important transactions are emphatically person-to-person deals between the CEOs of these corporations and the presidents of these countries.<sup>9</sup> But it is unlikely that Transparency International, the industry watchdog which denigrates whole countries with its 'Corruption Perceptions Index' but by policy 'does not expose individual cases', will take us to the heart of this particular iniquity.<sup>10</sup>

Keith Hart's participation in the shenanigans of Nima was vital to his understanding of 'informality', but was certainly an obstacle to publication. I fantasize about drawing up an empirical research project on corruption, say in some government office or corporate headquarters, but I know before I start that academic protocols would prevent it. In the US, and increasingly in Europe, projects are being heavily circumscribed by regulations protecting 'human subjects'. These controls (which began with medical research on real bodies, and moved on to experimental psychology and sociology) now favour anonymous, synchronic surveys, and make detailed circumstantial observations over time increasingly impractical (records identifying persons must be destroyed). Beyond the obviously lethal areas of research on children, mental health or physical disability, the regulations have made empirical study of any sort of illegal activity well nigh impossible. The effect of this intellectual protectionism, of course, is to discourage many projects at their inception and to drive others underground. Once again, in the name of maintaining our professional probity villainy goes unscathed.

I am interested in corruption both as a socially costly vice and as an epistemological puzzle. If it is the perversion of virtuous offices by delinquent bodies, we certainly have to know what these bodies are really up to. It's a shame that anthropology, which classically has worked so closely with real bodies, has not revealed more about precisely how 'corrupt' transactions are conducted, and how they are embedded in the lives of the people involved. But we also need to know much more about our own epistemological complicity in the moral calculus, and that is a challenge that goes far beyond the scope of anthropology. Discussion of corruption is now truly multi-disciplinary, but remains adrift in Cartesian ambiguities. If anthropology could stretch its empirical talents and critical imagination a bit further, maybe we could tap another nail or two into the coffin of dualist ideology. ●

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1. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

2. Usually attributed to Edward, first Baron Thurlow, Lord Chancellor 1778-92.

3. Alena Ledeneva, 'Making economies transparent'. Keynote address at the 15th Anniversary Conference on Corruption, Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, 12-13 December 2002.

4. *Chambers Dictionary*. Basile Ndjio, 'Corruption in Cameroon or the art of débrouillardise (resourcefulness)'. Paper delivered at 15th Anniversary Conference on Corruption, Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, 12-13 December 2002.

6. *Guardian Weekly*, 19 October 2000.

7. See for example *Fortune Magazine*, 18 March 2002 and *US News and World Report*, 11 March 2002.

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