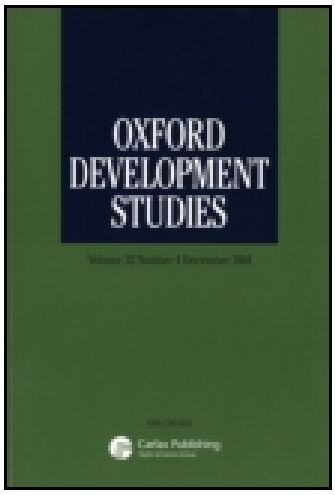

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Elizabeth Harrison [a]

[a] Department of Anthropology , University of Sussex , Sussex House, Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK
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Unpacking the Anti-corruption Agenda: Dilemmas for Anthropologists

ELIZABETH HARRISON*

ABSTRACT *This paper explores the dilemmas involved in an anthropological examination of both corruption and the international anti-corruption agenda, arguing that the two must be seen as closely related. The dilemma for anthropologists is that in either unpacking the "meaning" of corruption at a local level, or deconstructing the anti-corruption agenda, the realities of power involved in the attribution of corruption may be overlooked. It is concluded that, to a large extent, the solution lies in the ethnographic focus. Rather than simply examining meanings at a local level, or the international discourse, it is important to see how particular accounts of corruption develop and are translated from international to national and local policy contexts.*

1. Introduction

The fight against corruption has gained an increasingly high profile within international development. For example, in DFID's (2002) reorganization of its policy division, a dedicated "anti-corruption" team was established. In general, the increase in writing on the subject in the last 10 years has been dramatic, both in academic literature and in popular rhetoric. International anti-corruption conferences take place on at least an annual basis, and there are several web sites devoted entirely to the control of corruption.[1] The internet has made the quantity of comment and analysis on the subject almost unmanageably huge. The recent report of the Commission for Africa (2005) gives central prominence to the control of corruption in its recommendations. To a certain extent, this increased prominence is linked to corruption scandals in the USA and Europe (e.g. Enron, Worldcom and BCCI); but more frequently, corruption in developing countries is seen as a stand-alone obstacle to development.

There is, however, a disjunction between concern with corruption, the sense and claims of crisis, and our understanding of how people actually experience corruption. This was a point made by Parry (2000) in a discussion of the "crisis of corruption" in India, in which he argued that the crisis is as much imagined as real. He suggested that, to a large extent, it reflects the widespread acceptance of particular norms and values of bureaucratic practice, rather than their rejection. A study of seven southern African countries found that perceptions of corruption are in fact only very weakly linked to actual experience (cited in Hodess *et al.*, 2001). In Botswana, for instance, perceptions of corruption were 40 times higher than reported experience. In both of these examples, the discrepancy is between talk

*Elizabeth Harrison, Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, Sussex House, Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK.

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about so-called "petty" corruption and people's experience of it. The picture is arguably much less blurred when it comes to "grand" and political corruption; but in much anti-corruption work, this distinction becomes lost in the catch-all term "corruption".

In the main, anthropologists have not engaged with either corruption or the anti-corruption agenda.[2] According to Transparency International's *Global Corruption Report* (Hodess *et al.*, 2001), only 2% of corruption research takes an ethnographic approach. The majority of research and writing on corruption comes from the disciplines of economics and political science; but because corruption is by its nature difficult both to define and to measure, to some extent its meaning will vary according to the perspective and context of the definer. Surely here is an important role for anthropology? While political scientists and economists busy themselves with aggregate accounts in which the meaning of corruption is largely taken for granted, anthropologists could throw light on the processes of meaning-creation, and on their relationships to social networks and power.

This paper is concerned with what such anthropological work could or should look like, and the ethical problems posed by anthropological concern with corruption and the anti-corruption agenda. My concerns arise in two main areas. First, the ethnographic challenges in researching behaviour that is often, but not always, seen in a negative light, and that is generally illegal. Second, and more important, is the question of whether a deconstruction of anti-corruption thinking carries its own ethical dilemmas. A possible anthropological critique of anti-corruption agendas is that they fail to account for localized understandings of the meaning of corruption. In the tradition of much anthropology of development in the last 10 years, especially that strongly influenced by Escobar, international anti-corruption concern could also be seen as a discourse in which "corruption" is created as a problem that reflects the disciplining agendas of northern powers.[3] Corruption discourse can be seen as a tool that may tell us less about a specific action than about the value system of the person doing the labelling. As Polzer (2001, p. 12) put it for the World Bank: "Because of the othering character of the discourse, the Bank takes the position of expert and champion of the 'good' simply by expressing the inferiority of corrupt systems".

In Escobar's (1995) discussion of the "problematization of poverty" by the World Bank, however, we are left with a worrying uncertainty about the "reality" of poverty for those experiencing it.[4] In a similar way, does a deconstruction of the anti-corruption agenda divert attention away from the real problems of corruption for those who experience it most acutely? There is an uneasy tension between an appreciation of the fact that the meaning of "corruption" may vary and the harsh realities of being unable to get access to electricity, land, or a job, without a bribe. So the question is: Where should the focus of attention in an anthropological concern with corruption lie? On understanding corrupt practices that are "real" and harmful, but in doing this, possibly contributing to the general pathologization? Or on the discourses of international development, but, in so doing, undermining the importance of corruption for those who suffer most from it?

In this paper, I aim to provide a preliminary exploration of how anthropologists have and could respond to the latest growth area in international development. This turns out to be more difficult than a deconstruction of "participation" or "empowerment" (for example), precisely because of the kinds of conundrum mentioned above. Corruption is by definition bad, not something to aspire to, and its effects may be extremely harmful for some people. However poorly defined participation and empowerment may be, they are positive objectives. Critiquing their use in the language and practices of development

generally has a subtext of getting closer to the *ideal* of what they might be. This is not the case for corruption.

My arguments are, like much writing on corruption, based on an examination of the literature, rather than fieldwork findings, and are therefore partial. Perhaps this in itself reflects the difficulty of the subject. I begin by outlining the nature of the international debate over corruption, particularly the criticisms that have emerged from within political science. I then go on to explore the anthropological contributions to this, focusing on insights concerning state/civil society distinctions, the nature of "gift giving" and networks, and the discursive construction of accounts of corruption. In engaging more closely with the problems mentioned above, I conclude that, to a large extent, the solution lies in the ethnographic focus. Rather than simply examining the meaning of corruption at a local level, *or* deconstructing the international discourse, it is important to see how particular accounts of corruption develop and are translated from international to national and local policy agendas.

2. The Crisis of Corruption: A Global Pandemic or More Normalizing Discourse?

While "corruption" may have been a subject of intellectual engagement since at least the time of Aristotle,[5] it is only since the mid-1990s that it has become prominent in the realm of international development. In the last 5 years or so, most international development agencies, both bilateral and multilateral, have brought corruption to the forefront of their policy discussions. The non-governmental organization Transparency International (TI) was formed in 1993 by the former World Bank Regional Director for East Africa, Peter Eigen. He criticized the Bank's official rejection of "politics" because of its economic mandate.[6] Transparency International has since become the most prominent anti-corruption campaigning group and source of statistical evidence of the nature and extent of corruption. By 1996, the President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, had made it a subject of legitimate Bank concern by announcing that Africa was suffering from the "cancer of corruption". Interestingly, metaphors of illness and disease have been common in much writing about corruption, especially for sub-Saharan Africa: "Corruption in Africa has reached cancerous proportions. In fact so pervasive is this phenomenon in the region that it has been labelled the 'AIDS of democracy'" (Hope & Chikulo, 2000, p. 17).

The growth of the anti-corruption agenda follows on from, and can be seen as being broadly related to, the concern with governance that dominated the development paradigm of the 1990s. Some commentators (e.g. Schmitz, 1995; Szeftel, 1998) argued that this in turn reflects a wish among donors, especially the Bank, to find an explanation and a solution to the apparent failure of policies of structural adjustment. Accordingly, attention to corruption has gone hand in hand with policies of market liberalization, decentralization and privatization. For Africa especially, where the state has been seen as the greatest force for corruption, there is a concern both to reduce state power and to increase the role of civil society organizations; this is not only in addressing corruption, but in many other spheres as well (e.g. agricultural extension and health provision). Increasing concern with corruption originated in the West. However, for development agencies the gaze tends to remain on those countries that are the target of their interventions. It is also worth noting that concern with corruption is at least, if not more, vociferously expressed in those countries where it is portrayed as being worst—again particularly in Africa, but also the Indian subcontinent. Some (e.g. Mwenda, 2003) have suggested that this is more rhetorical

than real, merely reflecting a wish to please donors. However, there is no doubt that there is also genuine concern that corruption is undermining development and the democratic process.

There has been considerable (and ongoing) debate over the definition and measurement of corruption, although this has taken place more in academic publications than in campaigning organizations, such as TI, or international donors. Some (e.g. Johnston, 1998) have suggested that the debate is a tired one, but its enduring importance lies in the fact that, as Sajo (1998, p. 28) noted, "The problem with contemporary corruption is that its definition almost always reflects the moral opprobrium of outsiders". This matters for my purposes because, as I argue later, the issue of who does the defining of corruption (and how) is a key one.

The English word "corruption" does not have a simple correspondent in most languages. However, its use brings connotations of decay and dysfunction. A key distinction that is often made is between "grand" or "political" corruption, which is seen to operate at the highest levels of government, and "bureaucratic" or "petty" corruption, which is corruption at the implementation end of politics, the encounters between street-level bureaucrats and the public. It is this "petty" corruption that is often seen to be the most insidious and difficult to address, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and it is with the treatment of this that I am particularly concerned in this paper. In the distinction, the key thing is the level at which corruption takes place, rather than the quantities of goods and money involved. In both cases, corruption may also cover the gaining of political power and privilege as much as material goods or money. In its inception, TI focused almost entirely on so-called "grand" corruption, but more recently it has come to the position that "petty" corruption is just an extension of the same continuum, and should be addressed as well (Galtung & Pope, 1999).

In the measurement of corruption at an international level, the distinction between grand and petty corruption tends to disappear. A range of indicators is currently in use, but the most well known and widely quoted of these is the corruption perception index (*CPI*) created by TI. This measure brings together a range of different indexes, and assesses the degree to which public officials are believed to take part in corrupt practices. It includes 99 countries and is based on 17 different polls and surveys, drawing information from "experts" such as business leaders and journalists. The *CPI* has been widely criticized on a number of grounds (Szeftel, 1998; Galtung & Pope, 1999; Andvig *et al.*, p. 2000; Galtung, 2005). It is only a measure of "perceptions", not the extent of corruption; there is no sense of what the "extent" would mean—Frequency of corrupt transactions or amount of bribes paid? It does not distinguish between different forms of corruption. Despite these obvious problems, the *CPI* has a degree of recognition that serves to perpetuate the sense of crisis in developing countries, the majority of which fall in the "most corrupt" sections of the index. As Parry (2000, p. 30) recounted, the measure is ubiquitous and powerful. In discussion with friends, white-collar workers at a steel plant in India, it emerged that India was the ninth most corrupt country in the 1996 TI *CPI*. "'Only ninth!' The reaction was immediate and incredulous. 'Not even best at that?' 'Beaten by Pakistan, I suppose?' 'Could it really get worse?'"

Until recently, most definitions of corruption have carried with them the notion that it is a problem principally of state–civil society relationships. The working definition for most international agencies and TI was "the abuse of public power for private profit". Thus, corruption between private sector actors was excluded. Definitions of corruption are now

changing, particularly in the light of corporate scandals in the West, so that definitions covering "the abuse of entrusted power for private benefit" are used. However, for developing countries, the focus remains very much on the relationship between representatives of the state and those they are meant to be serving. It is this aspect of current thinking about corruption that has been the target of the most sustained criticism from a range of political scientists, who argue that the Weberian notions of bureaucratic rationality from which it is derived are inappropriate and fail to describe many non-western contexts. This is particularly the case for Africa. A number of political scientists have focused their attention on the nature of state–civil society relations, and most importantly on the fact that such a distinction needs very careful determination (Howell & Pearce, 2002; Kasfir, 1998; Mbaku, 1998).

Critical perspectives suggest that African politics are characterized as "... a reflection of the way in which traditional institutions and cultural values respond to and appropriate the institutional arrangements of a modern state" (Szeftel, 1998, p. 235). Associated with analysis of the way "tradition" permeates the African polity is the idea that the modern state is somehow alien, that the fact there is a lack of ethic of public service reflects a broader absence of a notion of the public domain. In such a critical view, the model of corruption used by donors to describe Africa is a European one, and hence inappropriate. Trying to teach and support ethical behaviour (through conferences, sanctions and public pressure) is accordingly futile. Rather than the state being outside civil society, it is seen as being "captured" by it (Chabal & Daloz, 1999, p. 23). Chabal and Daloz (1999, p. xviii) described this as the "political instrumentalisation of disorder"—the process whereby actors "maximise their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty and even sometimes even chaos which characterises most African polities". The notion of "state capture" is also very important in World Bank studies of corruption and central to its anti-corruption agenda.

Munyae & Mulinge (1999) argued for an historical perspective, rooting current social problems directly in colonialism. They suggested that corruption is "a by-product of traits of fraudulent anti-social behaviour deriving from British, French, and other colonial rulers" (Munyae & Mulinge, 1999, p. 62). These include the imposition of taxes and hence monetization of many new areas, and the British divide and rule policy that sowed the seeds for later nepotism. Szeftel (2000) also argued that in order to understand the nature of the contemporary African state, it is essential to analyse its colonial roots. Governance reforms, he argued, are based on often crude, ahistorical assumptions, which fail to locate the origins of corruption in earlier post-independence political structures or resort to simplifying and vague cultural characteristics, such as the cult of the "big man", or the "politics of the belly".

Szeftel (1998) also suggested that the governance agenda has fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the state in Africa, and its attendant reforms have actually created the conditions under which corruption can flourish. He argued that the emphasis given to support to civil society is misplaced. Rather, reforms that have led to a reduction in the oversight and regulatory functions of the state have themselves prepared the ground for further corruption. Meanwhile, privatization itself creates plenty of opportunities for accumulation. The problem is that donors proceed from the ideological notion that corruption is the product of growing state intervention, without realizing that a smaller state is not necessarily a stronger one.

Recently, the ideological aspects of the anti-corruption agenda more widely have also been the subject of critical research (e.g. Hindess, 2004). Focusing on TI, Hindess argued

that there is more to the growth of international and national anti-corruption concern than a simple response to the perceived problem of corruption. Rather, he suggested that such activities and the measures taken to address corruption might be seen as a "broader neo-liberal program of normalisation" (Hindess, 2004, p. 1).

On the other hand, there is a range of political science perspectives that engage with the "neo-patrimonial" and predatory nature state, particularly in Africa, in a way that is partly supportive of anti-corruption rhetoric, and suggests the need for greater engagement with civil society. For example, in a recent book, Hyden (2000) argued that the "institutional hallmark" of African politics since independence is "neo-patrimonialism", where people rule according to personal power and prestige. In this account the term "neo-patrimonialism" is used largely descriptively, with little ethnographic depth or historical sense of how such a state of affairs emerged. Such neo-patrimonialism is, however, presented as a strong argument for intervention:

> Because there is nowadays a broad consensus in international circles that the neo-patrimonialist system of rule does not help African countries solve their social and economic problems—and because an increasing number of Africans themselves realise this—the moral claim by African leaders that state sovereignty must not be violated … no longer carries much weight.
>
> (Hyden, 2000, p. 26)

Similarly, Bayart (1993) has argued that corruption is woven into the fabric of the state in much of Africa. His description of politics in Cameroon as the "politics of the belly" has found widespread acceptance among anti-corruption campaigners looking for explanations of African corruption in the "nature of things African". As Ifeka (2001) has pointed out, donors share much of the vision that has been put forward by scholars (particularly Mahmood Mamdani (1996)) who emphasize the divided nature of African society—between a progressive modernity and the pressures of "traditional" rural society ruled by custom and norms.

3. Anthropological Offerings: Ethnographies of Corruption and Discursive Deconstruction

In their critique of supposed state–civil society relationships, political science engagements with anti-corruption agendas have much overlap with anthropologists. Indeed, the argument that public service is an essentially western concept, and therefore an inappropriate imposition, is common to many anthropological discussions. But there are important differences too, and these partially arise from the issues of describing and measuring corruption discussed earlier. As Qizilbash (2001) has noted, there is no value-free way of defining corruption, which gives rise to the issue of whose values and norms are privileged in any analysis. Corruption can be seen not so much as an objective practice existing in a vacuum, but as a social act whose meaning needs to be understood with reference to social relationships (Andvig *et al.*, 2000). Part of the problem with the definition of corruption as abuse of public office is the fact that people will be predisposed to accept different things as corruption. The ability to define an act as corrupt or to partake in "corrupt" activity reflects power, something that is seldom made explicit in international

anti-corruption rhetoric. As Haller & Shore (2005, p. 17) put it: "We should not lose sight of the fact that transactions of bribery and corruption always take place in power relationships that invariably stratify, marginalize and exclude". It is in the deeper comprehension of the nuances behind such definitions that much anthropological insight is thought to lie. As noted, there has been very little anthropological work dealing specifically with corruption, but what there has been falls into two main areas: the deconstruction of conceptions of the bureaucratic and analysis of alternative systems of exchange and solidarity; and the analysis of the discourse of corruption itself. Of the former, much owes a legacy to the earlier work of Mauss (1925) and Sahlins (1972) for gift giving and Barth (1978) and Epstein (1961) for solidarity networks.

Much discussion of corruption is thus in terms of the language of norms or "logics" (Olivier de Sardan, 1999). So, for example, Leys (1965) claimed that norms and duties associated with public office are simply not well articulated in the West African context, and, as a result, what to a western observer appears as corrupt may not be so locally. Thus, it can be argued that giving gifts to public officials is normal practice. Olivier de Sardan (1999) has presented similar arguments for the same area, but this time in terms of what he calls "logics": the logics of negotiation, gift giving, solidarity, predatory authority and redistributive accumulation. He suggested that with general monetization, many earlier practices of "gift giving" (e.g. the "*kola*" of Sahelian countries) have become much more akin to corruption—or at least the line is very hard to draw. Africa is characterized as "over-monetized", and the monetarization of everyday relationships as a source of great pressure. Olivier de Sardan emphasized the routine nature of corruption, and the fact that, to many of its perpetrators, what is seen as corruption is in fact legitimate action. This is despite the fact that the stigmatization of corruption is a central part of all discourses; "corruption is as frequently denounced in words as it is practised in fact" (Olivier de Sardan, 1999, p. 250).

Olivier de Sardan's analysis is a rare engagement with conceptions of corruption in Africa.[7] He was careful to argue that corruption is not "intrinsic" to African culture, although normative pressures are important. However, his account is not based on direct ethnography and has a rather deterministic quality. It is unclear to what extent the "logics" he describes are amenable to change and how they interact with other "modernizing" logics. Determining the meaning of corruption for those who experience it is perhaps richer when it comes to material from South and East Asia, discussed later in this paper.

In his work with "rickshaw wallas" in Nepal, Kondos (1987) showed how the word "favouritism" is seen by westerners to be equivalent to corruption, but for those involved, it is about obligations to family and friends. For China, Yang (1989, 1994) analysed in detail a set of practices known as *guanxi*, which means "social relationships" or "social connection". Within this, gift giving is seen as an essential and often obligatory part of social relationships, which stretches to such things as obtaining a job or education. However, there is a fine line to be drawn between this and bribery, so that "the art of guanxi cannot be reduced to a modern western notion of corruption because the personalistic qualities of obligation, indebtedness, and reciprocity are just as important as transactions in material benefit" (Yang, 1994, p. 108).

The richest ethnographic work on corruption comes from India (e.g. Ruud, 2000; Price, 1999; Parry, 2000; Gupta, 1995, 2005). In West Bengal, Ruud (2000) argued that the networking that people engage in as part of their survival strategies is not only culturally acceptable, but is also a cultural practice with its own rules, dramas, winners and losers.

People dedicate much time and effort to maintaining networks of contacts and friendships, and reciprocity is crucial. It is impossible to insulate the state from "corruption" because there is such spill-over between the realm of the state and the nature of practices that are embedded in daily life. Ruud criticized the use of the term "corruption" by western academia and media for its ethnocentrism and failure to understand the importance of moral imperatives to help one's kin. However, in so doing, he was arguably resorting to culturalist explanations that imply that people also have no sense of moral difference between such obligations and what others may see as corrupt. Again, there is a danger that anthropological accounts are left in a position that "real" corruption is excused as gift giving. It is a difficult line to draw.

For South India, Price (1999) argued that some kinds of corruption are the function of beliefs and practices with historical antecedents, and that social segmentary structures play major roles in influencing people's ideas about the nature of political domains. For example, the concept of *dharma* contains the notion that people have a right to a "micro-domain of action", and that patrons have moral obligations to develop this in subordinates. Accordingly, high-level officials have occasionally been unwilling to wield authority to discipline their subordinates, thus undermining the impact of bureaucratic reforms.

Gupta's (1995) view of the operation of "the state" at the local level in North India has some similarities with this. He explored in detail the everyday practices of bureaucratic encounters in three detailed case studies, arguing that in discourses of corruption, the boundary between state and non-state is in fact very blurred. Gupta also pointed to the performative dimensions of what are accepted practices, but also may be seen as bribes. He gave the example of a pair of state officials in lowly, but important, positions, because of their control over access to land. They exploited the inexperience of two rural men, who were unable to respond "correctly" in their attempt to pay a bribe. In not knowing the correct amount to pay and being publicly humiliated, the young men put the officials in an even stronger position to extort a higher bribe the next time round.

Parry's (2000) work on the "crisis of corruption" in India has already been mentioned. He wrote about the experience of low-level and routine corruption among people living in the industrial town that has grown up around the Bhilai steel plant in Madhya Pradesh. He found that, although people talk frequently about the problem of corruption, and the fact that it is impossible to get a job without a bribe, very few of his informants said they had got their own job through the use of money; and this is despite the fact that they were happy to talk about giving and taking bribes in other contexts. Parry's explanation lies in what he sees as the widespread internalization of certain values, particularly those of universalistic bureaucratic norms. "Corruption has seemed to get worse and worse not (only) because it has, but also because it subverts a set of values to which people are increasingly committed" (Parry, 2000, p. 53).

4. Problems of Ethnography and the Ethnographic Focus

The anthropological work discussed earlier presents complex views of corruption, indicating that it is not so easy to "read" from observed behaviour as may be assumed from much anti-corruption campaigning; but there is a number of possible problems here, as noted above. First, there is the practical ethnographic dilemma of how to research morally condemned or illegal behaviour. This is not seen to be a problem by all. For example, Blundo & de Olivier de Sardan (2000) argued that anthropology is particularly well

equipped to deal with clandestine and concealed practices with strong moral undertones such as corruption. Participant observation and other indirect field methods are especially appropriate for uncovering such activities. According to Andvig *et al.* (2000, p. 68): "... people's everyday discourses are rich in anecdotes, confessions and accusations, through which both substantiations and assessments on corrupt practices can be obtained".

But is it as simple as this? Accusations of corruption may be only loosely related to corrupt practice, and may equally reflect existing power. This is a subject that has been touched upon in relation to the research ethics of fieldwork in other areas of illegality or opprobrium, for example football hooliganism[8] (Armstrong, 2002); but most discussions of ethics in anthropology concern the ethics of conducting research rather than of researching unethical behaviour as such.[9] More broadly, the anthropology of the social construction of moralities (and how to go about studying them empirically) is beginning to make linkages between anthropology and moral philosophy (e.g. Howell, 1997). However, such problems have not been the focus of much writing engaging directly with the issue of corruption. An exception is Paul Stirling's work from the 1960s, in which he discussed the difficulties of publishing accounts of illegality, including corruption (Stirling, 1968). Using material from southern Italy, he argued that impartiality in public office is not seen to be a virtue, and that the evasion or ignoring of laws and regulations for personal reasons is part of the social structure. There are clearly similarities here with some of the anthropological accounts of "corruption" discussed above. Stirling's position is that to ignore such practices is to provide an incomplete account, but to try to write about them is practically difficult; the prevalence of accusations does not establish their truth and attempts to unearth definite evidence often fail. In addition, if one were to establish certainty, it is not possible to publish the evidence without potentially harming or unduly embarrassing informants. His solution was to maintain discussion at a level of generality, and not to use case analysis. But does this then reduce the persuasiveness of the account? Is this why crude statistics such as the *CPI* maintain their force—because they are apparently more concrete?

Second, as suggested in the Introduction, is there a danger here in that in presenting arguments of cultural diversity, a relativist position may be developed in which corrupt behaviour is excused as gift giving and the realities of power relationships at a local level are overlooked? This is not a position that most of the authors mentioned earlier would be happy with, but is a serious challenge for ethnographic work looking at the meaning of corruption. As a (political scientist) friend and colleague said to me recently, "Oh, you anthropologists, I don't understand what you are going on about ... Don't you see that corruption is BAD, BAD, BAD!" What about where corruption harms people?

In solution to both of these dilemmas, one approach could be to develop the point I made above; that the way people *talk* about corruption in itself reflects power. Whether an act is defined as corrupt or not will be influenced by the age, gender and social position of the definer. Legitimate behaviour is not so simply because some people accept it as such, but claims to legitimacy are usually closely tied with ability to exercise authority—they do not exist in a social vacuum. It is therefore important that, in trying to understand corruption, the focus should be on how the ways that people talk about corruption are related to these various social factors. In this way, research is no longer about "corruption" but about "accounts of corruption". Indeed, this may mean couching research not in terms of corruption at all, but in terms of bureaucratic encounters more generally: how people experience and respond to state representatives, in which "corruption" may emerge as one

aspect. But such accounts of "corruption" are not unrelated or free-floating; the key task is then to understand how they are related to the material and social conditions within which they arise. Who says what is corrupt and what is not? Who is interested in enforcing anti-corruption measures and why?

In Gupta's case study, discussed earlier, he noted the frustration of the two young men who were excluded from the "practice" of bribe giving: "When villagers complained about the corruption of state officials, therefore, they were not just voicing their exclusion from government services because they were costly . . . More importantly, they were expressing frustration because they lacked the cultural capital required to negotiate deftly for those services" (Gupta, 1995, p. 381). Corrupt practices are thus seen as being rooted in particular social conventions into which some people are included and others excluded, in this case as a function of age, but it could be according to other characteristics. Gender, for example, is one area in which discussion of corruption and anti-corruption has tended to focus on essentializing questions of whether women are "naturally" more or less corrupt than men (Dollar *et al.*, 2001). Less attention has been paid to how relations of gender shape both the opportunities for corrupt practice *and* the ability to define a particular set of actions as corrupt or otherwise. Similarly, class may be an important dimension of such processes of inclusion and exclusion. Zinn quoted James Scott when he argued, "Much of what we consider as corruption is simply the 'uninstitutionalised' influence of wealth in a political system" (Scott, 1972, pp. ix, 33, in Zinn, 2005, p. 238). This may well be true but, equally, the issue of identity for those who define particular acts as corrupt or not is also important.

There is a last question of whether, by focusing on localized understandings of corruption, insufficient attention is given to the ways in which they are informed by international discourses, and indeed the extent to which such discourses say as much about donor agendas as they do about corruption. Gupta's (1995) work again provides some pointers in this direction. He argued that the methodological problem of how to apply ethnographic method into understanding the workings of a translocal institution is a crucial one. While the international discourse of corruption is indeed mediated by local bureaucrats, and it is important to focus on their "everyday practices", it cannot be understood entirely by staying within the bounded area of (in his case) a sub-district township. Gupta's solution was also to examine representation of the state in India through newspapers. He saw newspapers as "cultural texts" and contrasted the English language national dailies with vernacular Hindi newspapers, the former focusing much more strongly on concerns about corruption in the higher levels of government. He argued that: "Instead of attempting to search for the local level or grassroots conception of the state as if it encapsulated its own reality and treating 'the local' as an unproblematic and coherent spatial unit, we must pay attention to the 'multiply mediated' contexts through which the state comes to be constructed" (Gupta, 1995, p. 377). However, what he did not do was examine the evolution of the discourse of corruption internationally—how national discourses are in turn a reflection of and, possibly, response to, such international discourse. To develop the point regarding how discourses of corruption operate in concrete empirical contexts, it is important therefore that the empirical context is not just the "local" or even the national.

To an extent, parallels can be found here with research that has examined the evolution and use of international development rhetoric in different sites. For example, Stacey Leigh Pigg (1992) discussed how the notion of *bikas* (development) has specific local meanings

in Nepal. These constitute a re-articulation of international terminology that reflects both the accommodation of local and foreign language and a degree of opportunism. People talk about *bikas* in ways that fit both with their aspirations for a better life and with externally induced ideas about what that life *is*, or should be. I found similar processes at work in rural Zambia, where notions of "community", "gender equity" and "participation" could be traced to their articulation in internationally funded development projects (Harrison, 1997).

5. Focusing on the Anti-corruption Agenda

In response to an earlier paper I presented on the subject of corruption,[10] some commentators questioned whether, by continuing to direct attention at the problem of corruption and anti-corruption in developing countries (mostly Africa in my case), I was misplacing the focus. Was I paying insufficient attention to the way that the anti-corruption agenda has developed as an invention of richer countries in order to control poorer ones? Clearly in discussing corruption in Africa or Asia, it is easy to help promulgate, however unintentionally, the sense that the problem is "out there"; and while there is not much ethnographic exploration of accounts of corruption in developing countries, there is even less that deconstructs the anti-corruption agenda itself.

There are exceptions. One is the current work by Hindess, mentioned earlier. Another is the paper by Polzer (2001), which engages in analysis of the World Bank discourse on corruption. The paper succeeds eloquently in showing how Bank discourse is rooted in particular stereotypes and dichotomies—concerning the nature of crisis and continuity, the lack of historical perspective, the role of the state, the division between political and economic and public and private spheres. Unlike other anthropological offerings on corruption, Polzer does not tie the discursive analysis to the realm of experience: the institutional functioning of the Bank that shapes the discourse, or the effects of this discourse on the Bank's "clients". This is a shortcoming she herself notes. The problem for this analysis, and for any that tries to look at relationships between policy discourses and actions, is that such linkages cannot be simply read from documentation. Rather, an attempt needs to be made to trace the relationship between what may appear to be very similar discourses in very different contexts. It is not as if the Bank's stance on corruption is rejected or seen as simple conditionality among its "partners". Indeed, anti-corruption activity is a global phenomenon and it is important not to underplay the importance of anti-corruption work in different local contexts. However, the extent to which this reflects the spread of a hegemonic discourse or a justifiable response to "real" corruption still requires examination.

Recent work by Steven Sampson (2005) has begun to outline what such a research agenda might look like. Focusing on the "world of anti-corruption", illustrated in particular by TI and the annual International Anti-corruption Conferences, he argued that anti-corruption activities are "part of a general trend towards global ethics and moral justification in human affairs" (Sampson, 2005, p. 104). In the "world of anti-corruption", ideas about morally appropriate behaviour are generated at the top (in agencies like TI) and spread locally—in his case to anti-corruption practices and rhetoric in Romania. Sampson suggested that the ideas and practices of the "anti-corruption community" in the Balkans are intimately tied to those of agencies like TI. However, this does not take place

in a simple way, as the struggles for resources and legitimacy implied in Balkan "anti-corruptionism" are also the result of the specific history and politics of the region.

6. Conclusion

The analysis presented thus far is incomplete but it presents a sense of where anthropological engagement with corruption might go in the future. Corruption matters to all sorts of people, but it matters in different ways and for different reasons. As yet, there has been no attempt to trace ethnographically the ways in which corruption is important to (say) DFID governance advisors, and how this varies from or is internalized by their counterparts in (say) Lusaka or Delhi or the politicians and bureaucrats they are meant to be working with. These forms of interaction, translation and interpretation are all potentially fruitful subjects for ethnographic enquiry; and such enquiry need not be a distraction from the fact that corruption is *both* a normative concept *and* a set of practices that help some people and seriously harm others.

At the beginning of this paper I posed two key problems in finding ways to think and write about the latest priority for international development. First, do arguments for nuance and more complex understanding of the meaning of corruption divert attention away from where corruption is real and hurts people? Second, does a focus on local meanings of corruption lead to insufficient attention to the way that the anti-corruption agenda may say less about corruption and more about the discursive power or international agencies? Underpinning both of these are the ethnographic issues associated with researching morally condemned behaviour and the highly contextual nature of attributions of morality. From the literature, it is clear that there is ample space and need for more complex accounts of corruption. Without them we are left with discussions that present incomplete and normative pictures of the "problem of corruption". At the same time, though, such nuanced discussion need not lead to a relativism that can effectively excuse the acts in which the more powerful assert such power over the less powerful. To avoid such relativism, analysis has to be carefully situated in the social relationships within which corruption is talked about and defined. This means gaining an understanding of how different people are differently positioned to claim that a particular practice is corrupt, or indeed to partake in corrupt activity. Relations of class and gender may be particularly relevant.

With regard to the second problem, examining the discourse of those promulgating the anti-corruption agenda is clearly important as well; and this should be more than simply documentary analysis, it should also include ethnographic engagement with the constraints and incentives for those involved in developing the agenda. In practical terms, what this means is research that engages with questions of who is talking about corruption, in what contexts, and how this is related to practice. Who is engaged in anti-corruption activity and why? How does this in turn relate to what they know about the concrete experiences of corruption, particularly at the so-called petty level? Taken alone, though, such an analysis is still limited. What is missing is an understanding of the processes of translation, in which international discourses are re-articulated in national and local agendas. This is where the question of ethnographic focus becomes most challenging. As Gupta (1995) noted, one cannot expect to find visible transnational dimensions to every grassroots encounter. What happens at the grassroots is mediated in complex ways by linkages such as development projects, media representations, and so on. Nevertheless, an attempt at such an examination is arguably where the anthropological engagement with corruption needs to go next.

Notes

[1] For example, the OECD, DFID and World Bank have their own anti-corruption web sites, ANCORR is an online information source on materials about corruption, Transparency International has its own portal for anti-corruption information, called CORIS, and the Utstein group of donors has an online information source for research on corruption.

[2] At the time of going to press, the collection *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives* (Haller & Shore, 2005) was published. This book examines corruption in a range of different contexts, from post-soviet Russia and Eastern Europe, to the Mafia and the world of anti-corruption itself. It addresses a number of the ethical and methodological questions addressed in this paper.

[3] This is a position that has been advanced in a recent critique of World Bank anti-corruption discourse (Polzer, 2001).

[4] Jackson (1997) discussed the possible slide towards an unacceptable relativism that arguments put forward by "postists" such as Escobar imply.

[5] Euben (1989) outlined the evolution of thinking about corruption from Aristotle to the present time. In classical Athens, the primary concern was with political corruption.

[6] The Bank's Articles of Confederation exclude the "political" from its mandate (Galtung & Pope, 1999). However, Polzer (2001) argued that corruption has become acceptable because it is defined as an economic concept.

[7] Other discussions of African corruption by anthropologists do exist, but still tend to take the meaning of corruption as given (e.g. Smith, 1964; Greenstone, 1966; Jordan Smith, 2001).

[8] Although obviously a key difference here is that probably not even football hooligans would argue for the moral correctness of their actions. Again, the issue with corruption is that definitional issues are crucial.

[9] So, for example, a special issue of *Anthropology in Action* (vol. 9, no. 2) concentrates on the challenges for anthropology of both audit culture and an increased awareness of ethical issues, especially those relating to health and medicine.

[10] To the SOAS anthropology seminar, November 2000.

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