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The ethnography of corruption: research themes in political anthropology

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Abstract

One striking feature of the booming literature on corruption in the social sciences is the comparatively weak role played by anthropology. A recent World Bank review notices that anthropological studies dealing with corruption cover about 2% of the relevant scientific literature. The reasons for this “silence” can be investigated through a multidimensional attention to the methodological, empirical and theoretical positions of the discipline. In this paper I argue that, although still scattered and relatively new, the ethnographic study of corruption provides original and empirically relevant contributions. This paper is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive thematic literature review that analyzes comparatively research results from ethnographic studies on corruption worldwide. The focus of the paper is on a number of themes which are relevant to all social science disciplines working in the field: the state, the relation between political power and public discourses, legitimacy, legality, social morality and cultural aspects.

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Scholars and academics may like it or not but corruption has become one of the most pervasive notions in the social scientific disciplines. This trend is well rooted in Western intellectual debates over the relationship between the state and society, the state and the market, formal and informal, legal and illegal, black (grey) and white practices. Theorization attempts have followed different shifts in the course of these last three decades, moving from an evolutionary concern for the historical forms of corruption in the western world (Scott 1972; Heidenhaimer 1989) to its influence on political factions and parties (Della Porta and Vannucci 1999; Kawata 2006), its anti-normative, functional role in political systems (Leff 1964, Huntington 1968, Montinola and Jackman 2002), its nexus with democracy, civil society and development (Bardhan 1997; Rose Ackerman 1999; Doig and Theobald 2000; Johnston 2005). In spite of the different perspectives, most of these works agree on the idea that corruption is a pervasive phenomenon of the present times. The best exemplification of this being the number of scholarly (not to mention of course strategy and policy) papers and books written on corruption in the last two decades only.

One of the most striking features of the corruption boom in the social science is the absence of anthropology. A World Bank review (2006) notices that anthropological studies dealing with corruption cover about 2% of the relevant scientific literature. The loneliness of this drop in an ocean has its own justification, as I will argue below, and more importantly, ethnographical accounts of corruption are badly needed, as not only scientists, but policy makers and think-tank organizations denounce it (Andvig 2001). For one thing, corruption is a social practice, other than a narrative (Kerby 1991), and, especially considering the recent critiques to the efficacy of large-scale, quantitative analyses, and the need to complement them with qualitative research, ethnography can play an important role in filling this gap. Having said this, there are a number of problems with which anthropologists confront in the study of corruption. First, there are basic ethical concerns that fieldworkers raise when dealing with the study of such practices, stemming out of issues such as the anonymity of informants, the use of gathered data and the role of the anthropologists as “intruder” in the social reality he is observing (see Atkinson and Hammersley 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986). Second, although most of social scientists agree on the damages of corruption, it is not always clear what corruption is about. Anthropologists have been at unease with western-centred ideas of corruption, and this is immediately reflected by their reluctance to use the

notion or even to engage with it. Third, corruption is not a genuinely endemic phenomenon, as much of the modernist literature seemed to point out some decades ago. Today there is increased awareness, both on the side of specialists and of policy makers, that corruption is fostered and generated by foreign aid, development projects, international relations and global capitalism. In increasingly blurred political arena ethnographic fieldwork is not an easy undertaking. The very nature of fine-grain ethnography develops in the constant interaction of the researcher with local inhabitants, the construction of reference points and mutual trust with groups and personal networks with whom he share a significant part of their daily lives. The ethnography of translocal places is a much thorny effort, in spite of the several (and also partly successful) attempts in recent times (Melhuus et al. 2010). Again, not only is the focus of investigation enlarged and difficult to grasp, but access to information becomes a delicate matter of difficult resolution.

In spite of all these problems there have been, at least in the last fifteen years, a steady increase in anthropologically informed works on corruption. The aim of this paper is to provide a critical review of a large part of this literature, an effort so far neglected. I do not intend to provide an all-exhaustive review, also because a number of publications are not directly dealing with corruption, and it would be problematic to enlist them thematically in this paper. My aim is to detect a number of themes which are the most recurrent in the anthropology of corruption and which, to my view, are of interest to other neighbouring disciplines such as political science, sociology and economics. These themes will be dealt with attention to the detailed (and often neglected) contributions that ethnographic studies have provided to the debate on corruption. I am convinced that failure of other disciplines to take into account anthropological literature on corruption is more to be imputed to a lack of interdisciplinary communication than to presumptions or barriers of intellectual or methodological nature.

Methodological problems

Arguably, while the other social sciences were already struggling with worldwide denounces of corruption before it came to be declared as to be one of the worst diseases of mankind (OECD 2005), anthropology stayed silent. The word “corruption” had not been used in any title of books in anthropology after James Scott’s famous contribution (1972) and until 2004. Moreover, it is only after 1995 that corruption becomes present at a highly irregular base in

titles of articles in academic journals. What are the reasons for this silence? I think there are two explanations, one of which is currently used to distance the discipline from mainstream - mainly political science and economics' -- corruption theories, i.e. the Eurocentric nature of the notion. Anthropologists dealing programmatically with corruption have all underlined that the common understanding of the notion is not easily applicable to the sociocultural contexts they have been studied since the beginning of ethnographic fieldwork in the early 20th century. Let us take us seriously the reasons for this standpoint.

One of the most common definitions of corruption is “the abuse of a public office for private benefits and gains”. This definition is problematic in its very essence for anthropology: the dichotomy private-public, informed by the Weberian rationality of the western bureaucratic machinery is context-specific. Anthropological studies of pre-capitalist societies, as well as those of postcolonial societies, have raised abundant evidence to the point that the opposition public-private is, to say the least, blurred in these societal contexts. From whatever side one wishes to take it, the public sphere is not easily defined, rationally, in opposition to the private one, where economic and political strategies, structures and representations constantly bring about the primary necessity to bridge, or to find a constant contact between the two spheres. Institutions are rules of the games also in anthropological evidence, but they are so in that they are made up by people, through their agencies, discourses, ideas which do not necessarily reproduce the kind of artificial reality present in a vacuum that the Weberian rationality called for. Hence, anthropology cannot feel at home with such a definition for the practical reason that virtually all the anthropological scholarship on non-western societies proves the incongruence of this point.

This brings to the second point, the less evident one. Anthropology has remained rather silent about corruption through the past years not because it snubbed this notion, but because it was actively engaging with other concepts that form the bread and butter of corruption. Anthropology's earlier accounts of gift exchange processes, solidarity, reciprocity, redistribution, informal economic practices and transactions, moral economy, clientelism and patronage, nepotism, cronyism, networks analyses are some of the most evident fields in which the discipline was actually the pioneer rather than the latecomer. All these fields, as has come clear today, are the lymph of corruption practices, and not only in non-western societies. Zinn (2001) has argued that anthropology has chosen, after raising the dust on these topics, to remain silent partly for fear of cultural essentializations, partly for a feeling of

responsibility on the misuse of some of its discoveries that have contributed to increase the ideological gap between a “modern”, “rational” and “transparent” West and the rest, as Sahlins famously remarked. I think the problem is slightly more complex than this.

Anthropology continues to engage actively with all these fields (exception due perhaps with clientelism and nepotism), because they are part of the social realities the ethnographer faces while doing fieldwork. The difference is that these practices and ideas are no more labels of the non-western world only: after anthropology has moved into the field classically dominated by sociology, after the end of the colonial period and the disastrous war events of the 1960s, it has discovered that many of these themes were actually, under different spoils present also in less exotic societies. Anthropology, thus, has not discovered directly corruption, because the idea is a western one, and the discipline did not have the methodological and epistemic tools to deal with it in the way other social scientific disciplines were doing. On the other hand, however, all the practices that relate to corruption today: informality, gift exchange, solidarity, bargaining of power, mutuality, as well as several symbols used to describe corruption have all been subject of anthropological investigation, in the countries where other social scientists today detect them, for at least seven decades.

Common research fields

The study of corruption is an extremely complex endeavour particularly from a methodological viewpoint. Here the difference among the disciplinary accounts of the notion becomes more evident. The two disciplines that have contributed most actively to the theorization of the notion are political science and economics. Each of the two has departed from a set of assumptions which serve to delineate the field, to build fences outside which one can no more be dealing with corruption. The complexity of this endeavour is best understood when one considers the current difficulties of governments, international organizations and anti-corruption movements to make a clear picture of the situation. In spite of the several founded research projects, international conventions, the recent cries of World Bank, United Nation, OEDC and the EU for a common act of fight against this global disease, one thing has become clear: there is no such a thing as a remedy to this disease (it is not accidental that corruption has been equated to cancer or AIDS). The most eloquent example is the work of Transparency International (TI). Anthropologist Steve Sampson has recently pointed out how TI, through its regular issues of the famous Corruption Perception

Index (CPI) has raised public awareness, shaping the way how nations and leaders should think about their responsibilities towards the world (Anving 2001). It is however, no more than that, as Sampson (2010) stresses. One may easily wonder how can the CPI be trusted when a country scoring almost regularly among the top 20 positions, Japan, is inherently corrupt in its informal, legal and semi-legal political practices so to feel the need to issue a number of official publications and manuals (among which manga) for public officers who do not know the real nature of corruption. Another observer may also wonder about the usefulness of a ranking which esteems the assessed performance of countries over the years and present a picture for some of them, for example Central Eastern European countries, which every two-three years move up and down the list losing or gaining twelve to sixteen places. Are these countries less or more corrupt? How can they be one year more, than less and then again more corrupt? Even the most attentive economist may realize with displeasure that among the top eight-economies only two (Australia and Canada) are listed in the top twelve positions, among the least corrupt nations, is this alone a sign that efficient market capitalism is not the cure for corruption? Or yet another demonstration that corruption is both dysfunctional and functional to economic performance, as the case of Italy brilliantly suggests?

If grand theories on corruption such as the modernity approach, the market efficiency approach or the democracy approach have failed, it is in micro-level and fine theoretical understanding of the notion that interdisciplinary communalities can be searched for. Even though not always recognising it, the social scientific disciplines have discovered through the years a number of fields in which their operationability intersect. I am thinking about the role of the state, the moralities of corruption and anti-corruption movements, the distinction between ideas and discourses of corruption, the difference between grand and petty corruption and the so-called cultural features of corruption. Each of these elements or fields of study presents a real challenge to the scholar who wishes to empirically test the applicability of the notion of corruption to the analyses of socio-political practices. I argue that ethnographic studies dealing more or less explicitly with corruption have been actually able to raise a number of points which have proved of significant contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon and of its consequences. This has happened, although at different extent, in all these thematic fields which will be here treated, for the sake of the review effort, separately.

The role of the state

There is scarce agreement in the mainstream literature whether the state plays a major or a minor role in relation with the diffusion of corruption in society. Some theorists argued that a strong state can be seen responsible for the presence of corruption, especially when it tends to function as a totalitarian or monopolizing agent. Putting the argument very simply, a strong degree of state control and of intrusion in social and economic institutional relations is not a deterrent to corruption. This argument has been “traditionally” used to explain the widespread presence of corruption in authoritarian regimes, as well as in monopolistic states, what economists call “kleptocracies”, “rent-seeking states” or “predatory states”. Corruption is conceived as an outcome of widespread interpenetration of the economic and political sphere, which reduces competition and increase privileges, the creation of powerful elites and cliques operating as, to use a popular term in Italian politics, castes (Sun 2004; Johnston2005b; Varese 2005).

On the other hand, a weak state is also breed for corruption. Here the African case is paramount: the dissolution of the colonial and postcolonial states is considered the historical origin of the everyday presence of corruption at all levels of social interaction. Here, again, some catchy concepts have been developed such as that of “neo-patrimonial” state, or “belly-state”. The weakness of the state structure is seen as providing porous interstices to the multiplication of power battlefields and actors . As in the strong state argument, no single solution against the phenomenon can be envisaged.

Anthropology has provided sophisticated ethnographies of the state in relation to a number of political and social phenomena and cultural practices (Sharma and Gupta 2006). Following the influence of Foucauldian interest for issues of power, knowledge , discourses and governmentality (even though sometimes neglecting government, see Holmes 2000; Wilson 2000), ethnographic accounts of the role of the state in relation to corruption have taken different standpoints. One has been to analyze the legislative functions and spaces in which the state deal with corruption in different societal contexts. This approach is evident in Pardo (2004) and in the recent book by Nuijten and Anders (2007). Nuijten and Anders have entitled their edited volume “The secret of law”, stressing the idea that the common western-informed notion of corruption as dichotomic between public and private also applies to the dichotomy state-society. In this perspective, they argue, there is no space for a positive

ethnographic contribution to the study of the notion, since it cannot be grasped by the traditional western legalistic understanding. Because the possibility of transgression is always present in law, corruption is to them the very secret of law, which defines its fields of application and intervention, but meanwhile allows for its depletion in society. Hence a normative approach to corruption, departing from a law-making state at the top is misleading because law is plural. Therefore it is only through sensibility for its pluralism that corruption can be successfully detected through its nuances as alternative form of legal order.

Pardo (2004), and within his edited book in particular the contributions by Prato, Humphrey and Sneath, Gledhill make a similar point but from a different angle. For him the conceptualization and definitions of political and legal nature on corruption are marked by inherent ambiguities. Unlike many of his colleagues (see Haller and Shore 2005 for instance) Pardo, who conducted fieldwork research in southern Italy, recognizes that anthropology is confronted with the difficult balance of historical and ethnographic variations and universal aspects. He understands that one of the main limits of the anthropology of corruption has been its cultural particularism, and proposes two roads to overcome this impasse. The first is to look at morality (see below) as a conflicting battlefield in which socially constructed ideas of legality and illegality collide with universal claims and values. The second is to investigate the role of the state which, in his view, can be above the corrupt game, or more significantly part of it, participating “through institutional blindness to allow the interests of the elites” (2004: 6). The state may even legitimize the ambitions of those corrupt politicians, who, claiming to re-attribute morality to political action, eventually make use of law making to render more opaque the borders of legality and illegality. The state is in this perspective an active participant in the process of setting the agenda for corruption and not a passive agent undergoing its effects. Law is the sphere of significance and legitimacy through which corruption is accepted or rejected, conceived of and exploited by those in power.

Shore and Haller support a second perspective of the role of the state. Following the Foucauldian tradition, corruption is one of the ways in which people make sense of politics and of the state, like a conversation, a ritual or for some even like sorcery (Bubandt 2006). The issue is not whether the state has been able to set the boundaries between what is legal and illegal, morally acceptable or not, neither whether the state makes use of corruption to obtain public (other than private) legitimacy. Here focus is on the discursive practices and strategies that render corruption a semantic of governance. This approach is present in

Gupta's ethnography of the Indian case, one of the most refined and earliest contributions in the anthropology of corruption. Gupta is interested in addressing ways how local citizens in India use corruption as a form of discourse (see below) in order to achieve access to particular benefits that are scarcely allocated. The strategy, he describes through two examples, is that of seeking information on ways to bribe properly, on the amounts of money to be paid and under which interactional conditions bribe are needed to access services provided by state officers of local governments. This is one form of discourse (information seeking) about corruption. The second is the way through which ordinary citizens address corruption in their everyday. The state is commonly denounced a "profoundly corrupt" in this public talk. In spite of this, Gupta shows that the state is approached by ordinary citizens through personal relations with local officers who are able to make use of clientelistic networks to perpetuate their power at local level. This is alone a form of contradiction in the general western view opposing state and society: corruption is the space in which the state dissolves at local level and is replaced by a plethora of socio-cultural practices and relations. This underlines that the state is much more disaggregated and decentralized than it should appear. However, constant reference to corruption in public discourses (opposed to the private practices of bribery and patron-seeking) brings the state back into play: corruption becomes the venue in which the Indian state is constructed and given meaning in public talk. This point is stressed by other works on the Indian continent, such as in Wade (1982), Kondos (1987), Price (1999) Ruud (2000, 2001). Sewanta, in an empirical study based on questionnaire survey conducted in Nepal (2009) has demonstrated how corruption is used by local citizens at discursive level to differentiate among the performance and capacities of a number of institutions from the police, to health services, the school and the post. As Gupta, he suggests that this discursive use does not necessarily lead local citizens to avoid engagement with state officials, but it actually works as a frame of reference to establish a flow of communication about best practices.

Another trend distinct in ethnographic approaches to the state considers its relation to local governments in the case of corruption. A number of scholars have pointed out that corruption exemplifies a failure of the state to successfully expand to encompass local government, or an incomplete bureaucratization process. Thus, competition between local governments and the state becomes one potential subject of analysis in reference to different sociocultural contexts. In my study about the effects of EU structural transport projects in Central Eastern

Europe, I have been confronted with the issue whether corruption has been fostered by the attempt of the state to enforce its decision-making processes at local levels, or the opposite, by the attempt of localities to seek autonomy from state intervention (Torsello 2010, 2011). Corruption has, also in these cases, emerged often in discourses about state or local power, but in a different ways compared to the ethnographies of Asian countries so far discussed. Because of the nature of the state under postsocialism, the opposition state-society is also in Central Eastern Europe a weak theoretical framework. Local practices have been directed towards the use corruption as a discursive way to express the fear of delocalization of central power. This fear is often informed more by the visible growing social inequality at local level than by a shared knowledge of a corrupt state, already present under the socialist regime. In the case studies the state is not the central focus of public corruption talk, but local governments, which have in the years preceding EU accession implemented wide decentralization administrative reforms, are believed to use corruption to remould the state. This is possible, unlike the Indian case and also the Mexican case described by Lomnitz (1995), because of the role of the EU that delegates through its complex body of policy making, authorities and competences to both state and local governments allowing for what I termed an excessive “compartmentalization of power”. Power becomes interlocked in conflicting series of strategies and discourses in which corruption is more often used by those who denounce it (civic organizations and public opinion movements) as a framework of reference to convey general issues of legality and legitimacy.

Conflicting moralities

The issue of an alleged lack of morality in those public officers who seek their own interest through bribes, gifts, favours and alike is another point of wide debate in the ethnographic approaches to corruption. As in the case of law, morality is not accepted as an homogenous underlining explanation of corruption by most anthropologists. Pardo’s book is an exception: he insists on the importance of treating corruption through the analysis of different, often conflicting moralities that reflect the hierarchies and constellations of power through which corruption is deployed. Morality, is however, always used in plural by him and the other anthropologists who emphasize, theoretically or methodologically, the relevance of the ethical approach. This stems out of the idea that there is not a single morality on the confutation of which corruption is constructed, because moral stances are in continuous transformation and very much context-specific.

This perspective seems to contradict the classical approach of western political science and political philosophy which, drawing on Aristotelian traditions, has attempted to explain how and why certain societies are able to produce accountable, “rational”, and transparent forms of government whereas others cannot (see also Rothstein and Eek 2009). Morality is of course not the only answer, but it plays a major role in building what some have called social contract, others trust, cooperation, modernity and so forth seen at the core of democratic government. Moral claims are, however, undeniably important for the study of corruption. Anthropology’s downplaying this aspect is not to be seen as intentional, but rather expression of the methodological approaches of ethnographic studies. On the one hand, the simplistic relationships that some of the northern American scholarship has through the years drawn between morality and development, social trust, social capital and civil society (Banfield 1958; Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 1995, 2000) has been theatre of long debates in anthropology, sociology and even political science (Silverman 1965; Miller 1974; Muraskin 1974; Tarrow 1996; Meloni 1997). If the ethos, in Banfieldian terms, becomes *the* answer to socio-economic problematic phenomena, among which clientelism and corruption, then there would be little need of ethnographic and empirical works on these issues. It would be sufficient to establish some measurement scales for morals and values and to apply them in different regional contexts to detect variation patterns of corruption. However, one of the most problematic aspects of corruption is that it is highly social specific a notion, and it is almost impossible to draw generalization about its moral undertones. Although tempted to do so, there is not a single way a scholar could fruitfully apply the amoral familism paradigm to contexts as different as Latin America, Eastern Europe or Africa, and within them to different regions all affected similarly by this phenomenon. This is not to support the well-known anthropological claim for particularism, but it is to underline that methodologically the ethos approach does not work. The role of the state, the local tradition of social movements, the role of identity building ties, of informal networks and practices of exchange all have different meanings which, as Yang underlines for the Chinese case (2002) spring out of different cultural backgrounds at different strategic time points.

On the other hand, if morality plays a central part in ethnographic investigations of corruption, the problem is that it is a polysemic notion. Visvanathan (2008) puts it in a nice manner when he underlines the “warm nature of corruption” against the “cold of bureaucratic rationality”. Anthropological accounts of corruption have tended, sometimes even

uncritically, to draw on the opposition between rational legalism and moral connectivism. Rational legalism is the framework in which bureaucratic, anti-corruption informed views of the social order should impose an efficient reality in which illegal practices, informality and shadow zones should be completely absent. Although none of the reviewed works explicitly makes use of this dichotomy for methodological purposes, it is present in many of these studies. This makes also a point about the distinction between grand and petty corruption, as below, but here it is necessary to understand the different social fields to which this distinction is applied.

Rivkin-Fish (2005), in a study of corruption in the Russian health care system shows that one of the functions of corrupt practices in postsocialist Russia is, unlike under socialism, not to work side-effectively to fill the gaps of the central planned economy, but to provide venues for generating mutual trust. Market economy, in her ethnography, has brought about what people feared the most: a lack of or a diminished space for social interaction, and corruption is used to fill this gap. In the study of a rural village in Slovakia, Torsello (2003) noticed a high degree of ambivalence between people practices and discourses of trust, particularly in institutions. In several cases people who had vehemently reacted against the municipal administration and the agricultural cooperative denouncing absolute mistrust in them, actually turned to these institutions for services and goods. This ambivalence was part of a set of strategies that he termed the need to “invest in social relationships”, which is a slightly different claim than Putnam’s recent distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. The morality of actions was at issue there, not the constriction of social arrangements: one could feel morally irreprehensible even if he said and did different things because the need not to lose contact with personal networks was generally to be hoped, desired and hence deemed as a value. Similarly, Rivkin-Fish describes how the gift and bribe system working in the health care sector in Russia (and common to all postsocialist Europe) has been strongly affected by the introduction of money in these transactions in recent years. Money can actually endanger the morality of corruption or, as it has been observed in several other mainly African contexts radically change it.

Oliver de Sardan (1999) in one of the most theory-oriented anthropological contributions to corruption makes use of the notion of “moral economy” to refer to the African case. To him the key for understanding the widespread diffusion of corruption in the African continent is to look at its “banalization and generalization” in everyday practices and discourses. He sees

corruption as a realm of rumour and gossip, where the political and the social become intermingled and semantically determined for the single actors. Thanks to a number of culturally constructed practices (gift giving, brokerage, solidarity networks, predatory authority and redistributive accumulation) corruption becomes banalised, as commonly accepted and esteemed practice. In these contexts, according to him, actions which refuse openly and decisively compliance with such practices are amoral, because they provide space for egoism and lack of care for the others.

A similar point is made by Hasty, in an insightful study of anti-corruption officers in Ghana (Hasty 2005). Hasty had the privilege of being a journalist other than trained as anthropologist and this disclosed to him access to a number of documents and personalities which for “common ethnographers” would have been easily out of reach. He describes the personal character and actions of an official working in anti-corruption public office who strived to maintain an image of integrity in spite of the many forms of desire that shape corruption as inherently social practices. Self-discipline is used as a counter-morality (my term) to the indulgence in these desires: the official Hasty described refused to take food and drink gifts (except for soft drinks) that are an extremely common in several African contexts, at the expenses of being seen as a bashful, asocial person who lives a retired life, and thus morally suspicious in his social environment. This behaviour is in open contradiction with the morality of corruption, in western Africa called “to chop”, or “eat”, where conviviality and participation in large and lavish banquets is seen as an almost natural consequence of the flow of material (money and wealth) and immaterial (power) desires.

From these approaches it emerges that corruption is often grounded in different, if not conflicting moralities. Not only is the polarization between public versus private good extremely problematic to most anthropologists. Also, the very idea that corruption should be deemed as amoral in an a prioristic perspective is to be rejected. The concurrence of a number of culturally determined, as well as historical (fruits of the profound institutional transformation of, for instance postsocialist societies and postcolonial states) factors and variables is to be taken into account when attempting to map these moralities and the ways they acquire public meaning.

Petty vs. processual corruption

The majority of the ethnographic works on corruption at pointed at the (more or less) hidden morality constructed on the importance of mutual ties of solidarity, gift exchange and interpersonal trust. Here it is necessary to stress that anthropological accounts have followed two directions. In the first, a number of studies have departed from the distinction between grand and petty corruption which allows anthropology to introduce themes and problems with which it has dealt extensively through the history of the discipline. Thus, petty corruption is the field which ethnographers can more effectively study, whereas major corruption deals and scandals are commonly not field of anthropological investigation for obvious methodological reasons. A second approach, however, transcends this distinction. In this approach corruption is the outcome of the conflicting influence of macro with micro forces, such as in development theory, in the process of institutional transformation and also in anti-corruption measures. This is not to state that this approach looks at grand corruption rather than at petty corruption, it rather suggests that the prevalence of a processual perspective of corruption, that looks at conflicting notions of legitimacy, of institutional change and the moral evaluations that different sets of actors attribute to such processes. I will sketch some examples of contributions in the two perspectives.

Among those scholars who have directly or indirectly dealt with petty corruption one can read an almost general tendency to equate this with the other forms of social practices about which anthropology have an established theoretical tradition. This equation is understandable from a mere methodological point of view, but problematic from an heuristic perspective. Methodologically, the ethnographer may be often exposed to observation of informality in economic transactions, semi- or illegal practices, clientelism and bribery. He is in the troublesome position to judge whose good are serving those practices. The tendency is to objectivise the meaning of those practices framing them into the sociocultural context of belonging, which lead to the above mentioned distaste of anthropologists for clear-cut categories.

One example is Yang's famous work on *guanxi* (personal connections) in China (1994). *Guanxi*, along with the notion of *blat* in Russia (Ledeneva 1998) has become a famous paradigm of petty corruption used not only by anthropologists. Yang, in a later writing (2002) reflects on the inappropriate use that some scholars have made of her interpretation of such

practices which she saw emerging in the times of the Cultural Revolution as a way to shield people from conditions of excessive state inherence in the public life. She is preoccupied to treat guanxi not as a given set of cultural practices, but as historically specific product acquiring different meanings and deployments along ethnic, class, gender and even regional dimensions. Yang reacts to the uncritical use of guanxi and its recent development *guanxixue* (the economy of personal connections), to describe corruption in China as functional to the socialist and the newly emerged capitalist economies. Her argument is that guanxi has lost its role of being beneficial to many, a sort of civil society, to serve only the interests of few after the interpenetration of public with private sphere brought about by capitalist development in the country. The consolidation of business networks and their influence in politics is what account for the loss of the initial semantic and social use of guanxi, hence petty corruption expands to become a larger process, but to the benefits of mere elitarian powers.

Similarly, Bubandt (2006) offers an ethnographic description of the changing role of corruption in delocalizing Indonesia. Indonesia, after the end of the Suharto regime, has accomplished one of the world's most dramatic processes of decentralization of power, with the creation of a number of regional and local government centres even in areas where transport and communication is still difficult. In Indonesia, as in most of south-eastern Asia, corruption is a well consolidated topic of public discourse, and the increase in preoccupation about its outcomes has been accompanied by regional reforms. Bubandt parallels corruption with witchcraft, showing that these two "occult forces" are "used as technologies to manipulate and transcend the large power of corruption, affecting the local sphere" (2006: 419). He tells the story of a local politician who, after a long negotiation for establishing a new provincial district, making use of legal and illegal means, became suddenly ill and died under unclear circumstances. The local interpretation for his (and that of two of his colleagues) death has been the use of witchcraft, connected with politics in a disruptive way, similarly to how corruption in petty local practices is used for achieving personal goals.

The problem with the petty corruption perspective in anthropology is that it can be used, often unproblematically, outside of ethnographic approaches to classify responses from below that are, otherwise, of difficult categorization. This becomes manifest in the tendencies to stigmatize sociocultural practices as widely attributed to one single nation, or even to cultures. Ideas such those of "neo-patrimonial states", the "belly state", "network cultures", "gift-exchange cultures" and many others become thus comfortable devices through which

the analyst explains what he is not able to in terms of the grand (and western-centered) models of democracy, transparency, maximization of profit, civil society. Anthropologists are right to have remained external to such debates, and this has arguably characterized their distance from the study of corruption as well. However, throwing the stone is something and hiding the hand which threw it is another thing. The difference in approaches to petty and processual corruption is a demonstration that not all anthropologists remain sceptical of the analytical use of corruption, whereas all agree on the importance to maintain a critical standpoint to the universalities of its claim.

One example of the processual approach is the work by Shore (2005) where he analyzes corruption in the setting of the EU civil service. He challenges the Weberian legal-rational model of efficient bureaucracy addressing issues of fraud, nepotism and corruption in the European Commission following the 1999 scandals. The argument is that both institutional and cultural norms matter for identifying causes of endemic corruption at EU level, but the significant thrust is that shared administrative norms and codes of conduct, as well as mechanisms of accountability are missing. Corruption is here an outcome of the process of EU integration, bringing about the need to fuse together different traditions of civil service under the notion of supranationalism. However, instead of achieving a process of Europeanization, EU practices have become standardized over privileged, cronyistic types of networks which perpetuate their systemic ordering of elitarian systems of governance.

Another field where corruption is treated as a processual force is development. A number of ethnographic works (see Harrison 2010) have suggested that in general there tends to be more perception than real practices of corruption at local level beyond the petty corruption talk (Parry 2000). One explanation to this may be that excessive concern for corruption becomes a pessimistic reflection of the failure of development policies, market liberalization, decentralization and privatization (Harrison 2010). Anti-corruption rhetoric is rendered problematic by these approaches which sees it as yet another way to justify western intervention in developing economies. Ethnographies in Africa and the Indian subcontinent portray how the high degree of generalization about widespread corruption and the outraging need for reform and policy intervention can actually mask a real need of more funding and donations to support state and local level intervention (including Ngo activities to counter measure the “corruption eruption” (Tanzi 1998). It is not accidental that the very political agenda of leaders, emerging elites and parties in these regions make of the fight against

corruption one stronghold.

De Sardan argues that developmental practices in postcolonial Africa have favoured the spread of corruption and of an assistentialist culture (1999, see also Blundo et al. 2006). A similar trend is registered in Eastern Europe and the Balkan regions, where an umbrella of anti-corruption organizations and movements has mushroomed in the await of foreign aid and funding. Similar claims have been made about Latin American country, where corruption is not perceived as systemic to weak states unable to maintain their grip on local administrative centres and semiofficial figures of intermediaries between public and private authorities, as in the African case, but it is an integral part of the evergreen rhetoric of “modernization” and “democratization” by political leaders and their elites. The processual nature of corruption is in the case of development more a function of the ongoing relationship of dependence of these states, and their local governments on western powers as well as international organizations that make of corruption their flagship.

Cultural concerns

The very idea of a culture of corruption is suspicious to most anthropologists. Apart for a few of them (Lomnitz 1995; de Sardan 1999; Shore 2005; Smart and Hsu 2007), cultural concerns about the alleged prevalence of corruption in particular social and political contexts are only marginal fields of analysis. This may seem surprising to non-anthropologists, who are used to situate the contribution of this discipline in cultural analysis. Indeed, this is to my view, shared by Harrison, one of the motives that explain the comparative scarce contribution of anthropology to the debate. The problem is not that anthropology refuses to deal with culture, but that culture has been often misappropriated by other disciplines that have drawn on oversimplifications and generalizations, such as those on national cultural traits or aggregate factors explaining corruption.

However, it would be misleading to state that culture is absent from ethnographic accounts of corruption. Most of these have constantly engaged with the idea that cultural factors, such practices and ideas, have influenced the ways how informal ties, semi- and illegal practices have been dealt with and gained meaning in societies. Perhaps one of the best examples in this direction is Lomnitz’s study of corruption in politics in Mexico (1995). Lomnitz has been one of the few anthropologist who have seriously engaged with history to reconstruct the role

of corruption as a cultural, other than political, practice. She departs from the analysis of the forms of local political power in Mexico under Spanish colonial rule to arrive to the times of national independence in 1917. The Bourbons had attempted to jeopardize the power of local and regional landlords by gaining control on the source of their influence, i.e. tax excision, through the institution of a bureaucratic apparatus depending on the crown for legitimacy and wealth. This process continued after independence, when the state faced the contradiction of having to grant local power as a way to brush up the past and needing to control it. Lomnitz shows that as a matter of fact a real process of centralization never completely took place and the state remained forced to negotiate with local authorities and elites. One of the strategies through which the state sought to maintain control of local elites was the institution of a public sphere of political discussion, which until the beginning of the 20th century was limited to rumour and gossip and did not develop in horizontal structures of civil society. The state created, through political parties, associations and other forms of collectivities, a highly ritualized order in juxtaposition of the existing local one, based on vertical, hierarchical and clientelistic structures around influential kinship groups. At this point, however, public spaces became reoccupied by these vertical structures, through the institutions of local festivals (gradually deprived of their original religious meaning) where efforts in keeping alive local identities, especially against the background of an industrialization process, became one of the most effective channels of patronage. This has, according to Lomnitz, caused a general loss of trust in the state, and the consolidation of corrupt networks on local level through the cargo-like institution of local festivals. Therefore, the ritualization of local politics, which gradually took place from the period of the national independence, left the state in a awkward position of, paradoxally, having to foster corruption and patronage to extend its power onto local venues without being able to replace those cultural practices preceding national unification which underpinned corruption.

Lomnitz, as Yang for the Chinese case, is explicit about her use of the idea of cultural practices underlining the consolidation of corruption in Mexico. She does not refer to essential cultural features of the country, or of particular regions. Culture is a product of history, under peculiar social and economic conditions, and as such is subject to change, sometimes leading to expected, others to unexpected outcomes. The question remains, is culture a fruitful explanation for understanding the recourse to corruption? Ethnographies of corruption are not explicitly suggesting an answer to this question, what they have proven so

far is that corruption practices and ideas are often rooted in more profound forms of social interaction that leave space for their deployment. This is made possible because of the concomitance of a number of factors which accompany profound institutional transformation be that in a postcolonial, postsocialist or neo-liberalist regimes. What is fundamentally relevant of these approaches to the study of corruption is that local level responses constitute developing strategies and not given sets of answers imposed top-down from a range of political choices. The political agency that corruption restitutes to people is one of the most interesting and promising fields of anthropological contribution, in spite of the attempts to reduce this field to mere stigmatization of cultures of corruption.

The power of words

In order to understand this final point it is necessary to stress that ethnographic studies of corruption have opened a new field, until recently highly neglected, that of discursive practices of corruption. Emerging out of the methodological limitations imposed by the fieldwork experience, anthropologists have faced issues of corruption often unexpectedly. In several cases ethnographers have confessed that their encounter with corruption was not intentional. Rather corruption was part of the expressive and communicative strategies of local people that the researcher could not avoid dealing with it. In this sense, as Gupta underlined it, corruption became a narrative, or at its extremes, a meta-language through which communicating anxieties, concerns and ideas of the ideal world. One should not overemphasize the discursive power of corruption, particularly under the intruding conditions of fieldwork. The presence of the ethnographer, quite often of foreign nationality, is what stimulates the verbal performance of the discussions and interviews with informants, hence overt denounces, often highly emotional, about corruption should be taken with a critical standpoint. However, a sensitive analysis of the ways in which discourses match or oppose to practices of corruption is highly contributive.

Ethnographic accounts of corruption have revealed another nature of the notion. Speaking about corruption is good, for two reasons. One is that this is a type of social practice that may contribute to build emotional ties of belonging, sharing and common identity (Zerilli 2005, Anders and Nujiten 2007). The same force of conviviality that ethnographers attribute to different forms of social interaction is sometimes observed in the case of corruption talk. Corruption talk, however, as some anthropologists have pointed out, have another important

goal, that of permitting access to information. Corruption is about the management of information, about whom to bribe, how to bribe and at what extent (the amount of bribery). Only those who gain access to these information are able to get better deals out of common practices. This fundamental problem is not resolved out of the blue, but it needs a constant negotiation and time-consuming interaction among clients or those who are in the position of paying bribes. One of the point confirmed by most of the ethnographic accounts on discursive practices of corruption is, in fact, that the briber does not ask the bribed how much he wants for his services (this may not be the case in corporate corruption though). Thus common and public discourses on corruption have the second aim of disclosing and rendering accessible, often in an indirect way, information on the successful strategies to bribe which can commonly be acquired only through prolonged social interaction.

Another aim of the discursive practices of corruption is to raise public awareness, which can be used for particular (political) goals. I have already mentioned the use of corruption in political campaigns, another aspect is the link of corruption discourses with civil society building. Torsello (2011) shows how in the new EU member states of Central Eastern Europe corruption has been deployed as a (more or less) successful strategies by environmentalist movements seeking to stir public participation in their protest campaigns against the building of highways and railways. Corruption was present in all these projects, as it increasingly is in Europe in relation to building projects. However, it did not make part of the communication topics of the environmental movements which, in the first instance, were trying to use the preservation of nature as the main argument of their struggle against EU and state policies. When corruption came out as one of the outcomes of the complex implementation process of these projects some civic organizations were ready to embrace this new discursive weapon. The outcome was that, at least in those cases where local media had already screened and presented allegations of frauds and bribery, public attention became more focussed on the protest. In a number of occasions activists had to admit, rather dismissingly, that corruption was a much powerful argument than the protection of the environment, which indeed had more profound repercussions on the local populations.

The discursive power of corruption is one of the most recent findings of anthropology in the field. It seems acceptable to affirm that there is indeed little to wonder about the stronger role that this theme will play in the near future on the debate over the cultural, national and regional differentiation of corruption. The most challenging aspect of this debate is perhaps

that public perception of corruption can be measured not only against the kind and degree of bribes taken, and how the knowledge of these bribes is shared by the general public. Conversely, the kind and degree of corruption talk can provide an insightful framework for future analyses of corruption that take seriously the qualitative aspects of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

Ethnographic contributions to the study of corruption are still exiguous in number and scattered over time and space. The reasons for these “shortcomings” depend on the methodological standpoints on which anthropological fieldwork is based, as well as on the reluctance of anthropologists to deal with paradigms developed in the western world and of often scarce applicability to those very contexts where corruption is seen to dominate. I have demonstrated, through the presentation of a number of ethnographic works on corruption, that anthropology is actually able to provide some concrete and innovative answer to the study of this phenomenon, in its socio-political and even cultural manifestations. The arising of a number of themes, from the role of the state to the discursive power of corruption, to which ethnographic accounts have produced original contribution is itself the prove that social science disciplines need to engage more seriously in interdisciplinary dialogue. Corruption may well be defined as the evil of present times, but this claim should be not taken too seriously when recognizing that most of the actions, ideas and rhetoric on which corruption is substantiated at the level of everyday practices are much older. One possible way to avoid reducing corruption to a black-box definition in the coming future is to analyze those practices that accompany the spread of corruption, such as gift and informal exchanges, as well as the strategic use of corruption talk in the light of the policy and power implications that the anti-corruption struggles require worldwide.

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