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Corruption as social exchange: the view from anthropology

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Executive Summary

In recent years, anthropology has provided innovative and insightful accounts of corruption, at the levels of practices and ideas, in different world countries. Due to the nature of anthropological fieldwork research methodology, it has not been easy for anthropologists to study corruption through direct observation. This has called for a problematisation of the phenomenon in terms of both its salience as a universal vs. relativistic phenomenon, and of the mainstream definitions of corruption itself. This contribution has attempted to solve the theoretical impasses brought about by these two issues in the discipline of anthropology.

Anthropological and ethnographic accounts of corruption in different socio-cultural settings suggest that, although a relativistic standpoint is the most likely to be encountered when studying this phenomenon, its manifestation, perceived impact onto local societies and degree of moral refusal, there exist a number or reasons why relativism is insufficient an explanation.

First, citizens of different world countries, from Latina America to Southern Europe and Africa are well aware of the general social and ethical damages of widespread corruption, this perception is not influenced by local culture. Secondly, corruption works in strikingly similar ways across the world in business and political contexts. Thirdly, thanks to the work of international organizations and non-governmental institutions there is today a universal concern about increasing or decreasing levels of citizens' perception of corruption in each country, what some anthropologists term "the industry of anti-corruption". A demonstration of this can be the fact that in a good number of countries the word "corruption" has been introduced as a neologism from English, and it is used quite differently from local and vernacular expressions.

If a relativistic approach to the theory on corruption does not work this is due to the fact that one must be able to work with different definitions and different types of corruption in order to be able to grasp its complexity and theorise it. Corruption is an extremely versatile and polyhedric phenomenon, not in the ways it works, but in the several manifestations and ideas that local people attach to it. Anthropology, due to the above-mentioned limitations of field research, has mostly dealt with "petty forms of corruption". In these forms, there is an overarching tendency, with different cultural expressions, of looking at corruption as a form of exchange, which can be more or less justifiable at each societal level. Corruption as social

exchange, with all the relative emphasis on reciprocity and gift patterns, is a view that ties this phenomenon to other existing cultural practices and social norms. Looked at this way, **petty corruption can be tolerated or even desirable in particular cultural contexts**, not because of the famous "greasing the wheel" explanation, but because these forms of social exchange are understood by local people to "attribute agency to individuals or groups of individuals", by **rendering corruption a form of reciprocal interaction between people and the organisations they represent particularly under conditions of scarcity of determinate goods, as well as of inefficient rules of access to these goods**. Understanding this approach may help policy makers to accept better the idea that slogans such as "zero tolerance of corruption", or "eradicate corruption from society" are rather empty.

By looking at how local societies and cultures can tolerate or even desire petty forms of corruption with a more open approach that accepts different working definitions and hence different human motivations it becomes possible to introduce a more holistic and on-the-ground view of this phenomenon. This, of course, need a good degree of empirical and comparative research, which is the main goal of WP4.

Introduction

Scholars and policy makers are today confronted with the fact that corruption has become one of the most pervasive notions in public debates over quality and efficacy of governance. Due to its social importance and complex nature, corruption has been studied by diverse social sciences. Thus, on the course of these last three decades, various sciences have covered various topics related to corruption such as the shifts moving from an evolutionary concern for the historical forms of corruption in the western world (Scott, 1972 ; Heidenheimer, 1989), its influence on political factions and parties (Della Porta, Vannucci 1999 ; Kawata, 2006), its functional role in political systems (Leff, 1964 ; Huntington,1968 ; Montinola, Jackman, 2002), its nexus with democracy, civil society and development (Bardhan, 1997 ; Rose Ackerman, 1999 ; Doig, Theobald, 2000 ; Johnston, 2005). Obviously, each scientific field has its own priorities in investigating corruption. For example, economists have been interested among other topics by the causes of corruption and its influence on economic development (Mauro, 1995, Svenson, 1995). Political scientists have addressed political themes such as the importance of political institutions, the regulation or freedom of press in relation to corruption (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). For example, Anderson and Tverdova showed that citizens in countries with higher levels of corruption express more negative evaluations of the performance of the political system and exhibit lower levels of trust in civil servants (2003).

One of the most striking features of the "corruption boom" in the social science is the relative absence of anthropology. A large literature review has shown that anthropological research about corruption is marginal in the specialised scientific literature (World Bank, 2006).

However, the reasons to develop our knowledge on corruption using the anthropological lens are numerous. Firstly, since the seminal work of Malinowski, various anthropologists have advocated the importance of fieldwork (1922). Levi-Strauss for example stressed the importance to understand any phenomenon from the perspective of the "indigenous" (1980). Since corruption is a social practice, the observer should carry out an inside analysis with a critical observation at ground-level implying collecting rich qualitative data (Kerby, 1991). Ethnography offers a qualitative tradition which allows an in-depth, investigation of the phenomena. The anthropological fieldwork is especially relevant when considering some criticisms that have been made of large-scale empirical research. Such large surveys correspond to cross-national research using the same definition of corruption when in fact

various cultures have different understandings of the concept and international comparative analysis is difficult. The very nature of fine-grain ethnography develops through the researcher's constant interactions with local people, and the construction of mutual trust with them makes up a significant portion of the true success of fieldwork and then explains the added-value of anthropology to study corruption.

Secondly, anthropology could be an answer to the problem of ethnocentrism and then offer the views of the victims of corruption, especially in developing countries. It is true that some research about corruption could be judgmental of other cultures. Thus, many social scientists working on corruption are often from Western-countries, criticizing the immoral action of corruption in non-Western countries. For example, in the often quoted article by Mauro (1995), the author showed that corruption lowers investment, and then economic growth. Anthropologists see this thesis as highly judgmental since the argument of Mauro could be translated as "developing countries are poor since they are not honest". Without focusing on its moral implications, anthropology could offer a rich analysis of corruption. Indeed, the third argument in favour of an anthropological query is to focus on a cultural analysis of corruption rather than a moral one. Obviously, this "added-value" of anthropology in the social sciences is linked to its theoretical priorities such as culture and social arrangements as major objects of research.

Despite various arguments in favour of an anthropological approach to corruption, there are a number of problems with which anthropologists confront in the study of corruption. First, the fieldwork about corruption raises some ethical concerns for the anthropologists. The study of such practices implies to resolve the issues related to the anonymity of informants, the use of gathered data and the role of the anthropologists as an "intruder" in the observed social reality (Atkinson, Hammersley 1983; Clifford, Marcus 1986). Secondly, although most social scientists agree on the damages of corruption, the moralization of the debate is of little help if not an obstacle in the scientific inquiry (Leff 1964; Leys, 1965; Nye, 1967). Thus, Leff posited that the widespread condemnation of corruption constituted a major obstacle to examine the concept (1964). Anthropologists have also been at unease with western-centred moralization of corruption, and this is immediately reflected by their reluctance to study the concept. Thirdly, corruption should not be seen as an immoral behaviour developed within the poor countries as straightforward result of bad governance. On the contrary, some critical

scholars (as seen below) point out that corruption may be fostered and generated by global governance, foreign aid, development projects and by global capitalism. Taking the point of view of the studied groups, anthropologists have tended to investigate it as a social phenomenon without moral evaluation. This may lead to avoid condemning any crime since it is socially accepted by the local population.

Why anthropologists are reluctant to study corruption

While the other social sciences were already struggling with worldwide denounces of corruption before it came to be equated to an incurable disease (OECD, 2005), the anthropology field stayed comparatively silent. Apart from the famous work of James Scott (1972) (an anthropologist and political scientist) the word "corruption" was almost absent from the anthropological literature. Moreover, it is only after 1995 that corruption becomes present at a highly irregular base in journal articles. The World Bank has funded a large research project to highlight the most important contributions to the field. The result of this large literature review is a "clear" silence of anthropologists regarding corruption. The World Bank review notices that anthropological studies dealing with corruption cover about 2% of the relevant scientific literature (2006).

The reasons for anthropologists' reluctance to engage with corruption research could be divided between methodological, ethical and epistemic concerns.

From the methodological point of view, anthropology has discovered the most visible manifestations of corruption but decided to remain rather silent on their wider effects (Zinn 2001). Anthropology's earlier accounts of gift-exchange processes, reciprocity, redistribution, informal economic transactions, moral economy, clientelism, nepotism, cronyism and fraudulent social networks are some of the topics in which the discipline was the pioneer rather than the latecomer. For example, the anthropological debate stemming out of the famous essay by Marcel Mauss on the gift built the foundation of social theories of reciprocity and gift exchange.

Since then, anthropology has been engaging actively with the study of all these social phenomena, because they are part of the social realities the ethnographer faces while doing fieldwork.

Due to the complex ethnographer / observed relationship, Zinn has argued that anthropology has chosen, after raising the dust on these topics, to leave the study of their consequences to other disciplines (2001). The lack of research about corruption could be explained by a feeling of responsibility on the misuse of some of the ethnographic findings, which have contributed to increase the ideological gap between a "modern", "rational" and "transparent" West and a "traditional", "irrational" and "corrupt" rest. As anthropology was the first social science to introduce the concept of ethnocentrism (Sumner, 1906), the judgment of other cultures solely by the values and standards of the researcher own culture is not acceptable for anthropologists. The risk of ethnocentrism is not the only reason for the reluctance to study further corruption that could be explained by methodological and ethical concerns of anthropologists. Starting in the 1970's, the discipline had intense reflexive debates concerning these issues. When undertaking field research, anthropologists usually discover corruption practices "accidentally". Considering this argument, Blundo divides the instances in which ethnographers analyzes corruption in four cases: personal anecdote (most of the time an accidental discovery), biographical trajectory, bureaucratic itinerary and polyphonic case study (2007: 43). The only representative of a systematic study of corruption is the last, but it is the least present in ethnographic studies. This happens because the study of the concrete practices of corruption is not an easy achievement for the fieldworker who is exposed to continuous interactions with local informants during participant observation.

This brings to the next ethical concerns. Two largest professional associations respectively in cultural (American Anthropological Association) and in social anthropology (European Association of Social Anthropologists) have clarified the deontology conditions under which fieldwork research needs to be undertaken.[1] One of the most important points of these codes concerns avoidance of exposing persons who inform the researcher to any form of personal damage, loss or accusation because of the use of fieldwork data. The anthropologists are then under a paradoxical injunction regarding fieldwork leading to discover corrupted practices. On the one hand, a force of anthropology is to carry out in depth qualitative analysis to discover in details this illicit phenomenon. On the other hand, the ethnographer cannot put into danger the people under observation. Since the ethnographer will question precisely the

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[1] See for instance http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm for the American Anthropological Association.

various behaviours, interactions, thoughts, symbols associated to corruption, he/she will be investigating with thoroughness and could possibly have enough information to put into risky position his/her respondents.

The last explanation of the anthropology reluctance is of epistemic nature. A major discussion regarding the nature of knowledge is for anthropologists to question the definition of the concept under investigation: corruption. One of the most common working definitions of corruption is *"a manipulation of powers of government or sale of government property, or both by government officials for personal use"* (Shleifer, Vishny, 1993; Jain, 1998). A similar qualification has been given by Morris *"a behaviour by a public official that deviates from public interest"* (1991) and is wieldy accepted by international institutions such as the World Bank "the abuse of public office for private gain" (World Bank, 1997 : 8). Corruption is then defined very often as the misuse of public power for private benefits (Lambsdorff, 2007). For anthropology, this well accepted definition is very problematic since it is based partly on a strong private-public dichotomy. Anthropological studies have raised abundant evidence to the point that the opposition public-private is context dependent. In the eyes of anthropologists, the public sphere is not easily defined, especially in opposition to the private one. When the ideal-type of Weber of the "public" organisation is a rational efficient bureaucracy (1922/1978), anthropologists use an ad-hoc view taking the perspective of the local people. This perspective derives from anthropological investigations on bottom-up approaches, using an inductive analytical line which constructs (or de-constructs) institutions, norms and conventions. In the anthropologic epistemology, the truth of a social reality could be discovered only when the observer (the scientist) gives voice to the observed, used his/her words, his/ her symbols, practices and discourses. For example, anthropologists and economists defined institutions as the rule of the game e.g. "the prevailing explicit and implicit behavioral norms that create appropriate incentives for desirable economic behaviors" (Rodrik, Subramanian, 2003). Nonetheless, as noted by North, institutions are the humanly-devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interactions (1990, 1991). Thus, through the everyday reality of their functioning, institutions are made up by people, through their agencies, discourses, ideas. Hence, anthropology cannot agree with a definition stating a neat distinction between private and public roles, tasks and aims. Rather than accepting the public/private dichotomy, anthropologists stress the different ways in which variant actors conceive it.

Private and public as local concepts of governance

The debate over public / private separation highlights the original view of anthropology about corruption and related topics, specifically to the analysis of governance. Focusing on the impact of corruption on economic development and governance, two main theoretical orientations have attempted to assess governance and State capacities. The first, influenced by some economists, argues that the positive State capacities are those that maintain the market efficiency, restricting State intervention to the provision of public goods. For example, Acemoglu and Verdier noticed a vicious effect in that corruption would become unavoidable as a way for the market to bypass state regulations, and even when the State intervenes to redress market failures corruption is likely to occur (2000). In general, an excessive centralization of governance inhibits development because it fosters irregular practices such as clientelism, informality and lack of transparency. This argument has been used, for instance, to explain the widespread presence of corruption in authoritarian regimes, as well as in monopolistic States, in which governmental capacities have been described as kleptocratic, rent-seeking or predatory. 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 (Sun 2004; Johnston, 2005; Varese, 2005).

The second approach, that follows some of the standpoints of institutional economy, agrees that good governance is a prerequisite for economic development, but shows that the governance capacities required for successful development are substantially different from those identified by the good governance analysis (Khan, 2006). Excessive decentralization is also bred for corruption. In the some cases, the weakness and fragmentation of the postcolonial States leaves porous interstices to the multiplication of power battlefields and actors in which corruption easily spreads. For example, Lui developed a model showing that corruption could lessen the time spent in queues and bribes could be an incentive for civil servants to accelerate the administrative process in low performing administration (1985). Authors have named these countries: "neo-patrimonial" state, or "belly State" (Blundo et al 2006). Anthropology has provided sophisticated ethnographies of the State in relation to a number of political and social phenomena and cultural practices (Sharma, Gupta 2006). Following the influence of Foucauldian interests for issues of power, knowledge, discourses and governmentality, ethnographic accounts of the role of the state in relation to corruption

have taken different standpoints (Shore, Wright, 1997, Holmes, 2000; Bellier, Wilson, 2000). These can be summarised in three perspectives: normative, hermeneutical and transactional.

The normative approach analyzes the legislative and normative functions in which corruption becomes implanted in different societal contexts. In this perspective, corruption is seen as a violation of a social norm. When sociologists have stressed the functions of norm to explain the human behaviors (Durkheim 1950; Parsons 1937), anthropologists have highlighted the diversity of social norms function in and within cultures (Geertz, 1973). In this line of argument regarding norm diversity, anthropology has built a strong critique of the western dichotomy State / Society and developed a dual perspective of the role of the State. The State is portrayed either as a weak enforcing actor of anti-corruption norms and laws or, as a legislative agent of ad-hoc norms to increase unaccountability.

In one of the most recent contributions to this approach, Nuijten and Anders have described "the secret of law", stressing the idea that the common western-centric notion of corruption, grounded on the dichotomy between public and private interests, is of little help to anthropological investigations (2007). They depart from the legal anthropological perspective that looks at law as plural, and profoundly influenced by social processes (Moore, 2000). Corruption and law are not opposites, but constitutive one another, just as legal prescription and their transgressions are not mutually exclusive. Because the possibility of transgression is always present in law, corruption is to these authors the very "secret of law", which defines fields of law's application and intervention, but meanwhile allows for its transgression in society. An approach that looks at law as the only cure against corruption, individuating in the State is misleading because law is plural. Therefore it is only through empirical sensibility for its pluralism that corruption can be successfully detected through its nuances as an alternative form of legal order (Znoj, MacNaughton, Wong, 2007).

Pardo makes a similar point but from a different angle (2004). For him, the political and legal conceptualization of corruption and of its effects within the State boundaries are marked by inherent ambiguities. Pardo, who conducted fieldwork in southern Italy, recognises 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 for a development on the morality of

corruption) as a conflicting battlefield in which socially constructed ideas of legality and illegality collide with universal claims of legitimacy. The second is to investigate the role of the State which can be both above the corrupt game, and part of it, participating "through institutional blindness to allow the interests of the elites" (2004: 6). The State may even legitimise 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. In this perspective, the State is an active participant in the process of setting the agenda for corruption and not a passive agent fighting against its effects. Law creates the sphere of legitimacy through which corruption is accepted or rejected, conceived of and exploited by those in power. Various authors have stressed this point in various settings such Hsu and Smart (2007) for the Chinese case, Corbin (2007) for Spain, Dalakoglou (2010) for Albania, Goldstein (2003) for Bolivia, Levine (2004) for Korea, Hoagh (2010) for South Africa, Blundo (2006) for Senegal, Scott (2010) for Taiwan. This anthropologist's view is in line with the work of some economists who show that law and rules could be implemented to give opportunity for corruption. Thus for Kurer, the possibility of getting bribes may be an incentive to create restrictions to economic development (1993). Some scholars argued that the restrictions are not exogenous to the system but instead "part of the built-in corrupt practices of a patron-client political system" (Bardhan, 1997). A civil servant may create distortions to have an opportunity to extort bribe (Myrdal, 1968). The whole bureaucratic system could be organized in order to force the population to use corruption. For example, de Soto showed that it took teams of researchers an average 300 days and 6 hours to obtain all permits to start a small business in Peru (1990). In such a situation for the entrepreneurs, illegal activity and corruption become the norm.

The hermeneutical perspective points at the sphere of governmentality rather than governance, individuating ground-level efforts to interpret political power. Drawing from a rich theoretical background that originates from the works of Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and recently John-Jean Comaroff and Michael Herzfeld, this perspective aims to detect the discursive function of corruption. Foucault combined two words 'governing' and mentality to create the neologism 'governmentality' to point out the interdependence between the exercise of government and mentalities shaping theses exercise. Governmentality is a 'guideline' for analysing the link between the forms of government and modes of thoughts (about governing) (Foucault, 1991). To take the word of Foucault,

governmentality is "an art of governing that finds the principles of its rationality and the specific domain of its applications in the State" (Foucault, 2007 : 364).

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 witchcraft.[2] The focus of analysis should not be whether the State has been able to set the boundaries between legality and illegality, morality and immorality, or whether the State makes use of corruption to obtain legitimacy. Anthropologists recommend focussing on the discursive practices of corruption to understand its role in governance.

This hermeneutic approach is present in Gupta's ethnography of the Indian case, one of the most refined and earliest contributions in the anthropology of corruption (1995, 2005). Gupta describes how local citizens in India use corruption as a form of discourse in order to access particular benefits that are scarcely allocated. For him, the political strategy consists of seeking information on ways to bribe properly, on the amounts of money to be paid and on under which interactional conditions bribes are needed to access services provided by State officers of local governments. This brings about the need to differentiate between two discursive uses of corruption in relation with governmentality. The first concerns the process of information seeking about whom, how and when to bribe properly. The second corresponds to public talk, i.e. the way through which ordinary citizens address corruption in their everyday and how their denouncements influence social ties of trust and solidarity (this concern will be discussed in the later part of the article).

Gupta shows that the State is connected to ordinary citizens through face-to-face relations with local officers who are able to make use of clientelistic and personal networks to perpetuate their power. This makes up a type of contradiction in the general western view of opposing State and society: corruption is the space in which the State intertwines with social

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[2] The comparison of corruption with witchcraft has been raised by a number of anthropologists (Bähre, 2005; Bubandt, 2006; Blundo, 2007; Turner, 2007; Rudnyckyj, 2009). There are two ideas underlining this use: the first is that corruption, like witchcraft, can be used as a way to re-establish a moral and symbolic order, particularly in conditions of profound institutional transformation, such as in post- or neo-colonial economies. The second refers to the secrecy of corruption practices which, like sorcery, help those who resort to them to seek access to power and hence to demystify the secrets through which state power functions.

practices, relations and even moralities. In this approach, the State may appear as much more disaggregated and decentralised than in the normative perspective. However, strategic reference to corruption in public discourses brings the State back into play, as Bailey (1969) and Boissevain (1974) indicated. The role of brokers and informed actors becomes crucial to understand how the management of information can be translated into power and influence (Scott, 1972). Some empirical research have stressed this point (Wade, 1982; Kondos, 1987; Price, 1999; Ruud, 2000, 2001; Swenta, 2009). For example, in an empirical study based on questionnaire survey conducted in Nepal, Sewanta 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 (2009). 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 effective practices.

The third perspective is transactional. Governance is not analyzed in relation to normative or hermeneutic aspects, but as an interaction between different levels of political decision-making. This approach has received comparatively smaller attention from the political science, where the administrative, normative function of the State is at the heart of the debate. Even in the collective action theory (Olson, 1971), where every actor is perceived as maximising his own interests and these interests can cumulate to foster or hamper corruption, transactional analyses of the tasks, roles and functions of the different levels of governance are a relatively new field. In this perspective corruption can be used to describe, by local actors the functioning of the bureaucratic apparatus. One should not fall into the teleological trap of considering corruption as an accepted practice by local people who cannot avoid it since everyone is expected to be corrupt likewise (Banfield, 1975). Ethnographies, particularly of African and southeast Asian contexts, have richly described situations in which local actors are well aware of the damages and moral costs of corruption (Akindele, 2005; Blundo, 2006; Mazzarella, 2006; Inokoba and Ibegu, 2011). In these societal contexts, the main problem arises from the consideration that poorly functioning bureaucracies, inefficient legal mechanisms and low wages of public servants all serve as breeders of corruption. However, stating that corruption becomes accepted as a practice in countries with weak institutional arrangements is a large simplification. Anthropological research, if less present in other fields, have abundantly demonstrated that it is when corruption becomes

banalised, as de Sardan argues, that a distorted view of the functioning of the public sector comes in place (1999). This may have the effect of blurring the separation between private and public spheres, affecting the general idea of good governance, increasing local citizens' frustration about the perceived distance from the administrative centers and instilling in individuals a shared (false) awareness that face-to-face exchanges are the norm, and even morally acceptable (de Sardan, 1999; Albro, 2007; Jones, 2010). Without going into complex analyses of state capacities, recent research findings by Rothstein and Torsello (2014) has suggested that also in pre-state societies bribery patterns were more diffused in cultures where the perception of public good was less cognitively distinguishable from the private goods. This suggests that the public-private divide is an important field of analysis for understanding local perceptions of corruption and eventually one of the field to which corruption applies more often as a corollary of bad governance, even though this divide itself is not one of the causes of corruption.

A number of ethnographic studies have showed that corruption exemplifies a failure of the State to encompass local government, or an incomplete bureaucratization process (Prato 2004; Zerilli 2005; De Vries 2007). Competition between local governments and the State becomes one potential subject of analysis in reference to different socio-cultural contexts, for instance in China (Smart and Hsu 2007), Indonesia (Bähre 2005; Bubandt 2006), Latin America (Lomnitz 1995; Goldstein 2003). For example, in his study about the effects of European Union (EU) structural transport projects in Central Eastern Europe, Torsello has 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 (2012). He has found that one fruitful way to analyze the spreading of corruption in relation with EU enlargement politics (Shore, 2005; Dracklè, 2005) is through attention to competition between State and local governments over EU funds. After experiencing a profound process of institutional transformation, Eastern Europe, has entered a similar problematic phase of alignment with EU accession requirements, and afterwards structural development policies.

The collusion of State and local government interests, and hence the transactional functions that corruption comes to acquire are ways to express the tension between fear of delocalization of central power and dissatisfaction with strong State authority. 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. Using various cases, Torsello has shown that the State is not the central focus of public denounces of corruption, 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 (2010).

The social exchange theory

The theory of social exchange has a long history in the anthropological field. The first three scientists to develop a theoretical model for exchange are Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Bronislaw Malinowski. Mauss, in his famous essay on the gift (1925) searched for the foundations of social exchange in pre-industrial societies which were, according to him, dominated by the pervasiveness of the gift, an act of "total social prestation" that contributed to bind people and create interpersonal dependence. The true "spirit" of the gift, rendered through the Maori word *hau*, was to him the essence of this dependence, the one in which exchange meant an unwritten rule that could not be broken. Lévi-Strauss, influenced by Mauss' essay (as well as by the Durkheimian positions), looked for specific forms of social exchange in different world societies, and found them in the so-called cross-cousin marriage pattern (1969). Marriage was, to the eyes of the French anthropologist, the most basic way through which small-scale societies created social ties, and these ties could be of two forms: restricted and generalized exchange. The former referred to specific patterns of marriage, such as the cross-cousin marriage, in which a group contributed a daughter and expected, at a particular time point, to receive a woman in exchange by the same group. Other cultures practiced a more generalized form of exchange, in which the pattern and direction of the marriage could be flexible (Lévi-Strauss 1953). The third approach, the one developed by Malinowski in his seminal study of Trobriand culture (1922), contrasted different forms of social exchange: those which created interdependence but based on differences of social status and political power, and those which were based on a "purer" concept of gift-giving actions, that did not mark inequalities among the exchange parties (Malinowski 1944). The novelty of Malinowski's approach was that gift-exchange was not necessarily a matter of transferring a part of the spirit of the giver, but it actually moved back and forth from a condition of amity to one of potential hostility, depending on the political and economic conditions of the exchange.

These three seminal works have generated a long debate in anthropology, which has, in broad lines, focused on three aspects: the contexts and conditions of exchange; the social embeddedness of economic exchange practices; and the reciprocity patterns. Concerning the first aspect, a good delineation is provided by Harumi Befu (1977). The Japanese anthropologist introduces a division among four aspects: socio-cultural context, the norm of reciprocity, cultural rules and strategy. Socio-cultural context refers to the environment within which a model of social exchange is constructed. One example can be Indian society, often analyzed in terms of systems in which higher and lower castes exchange goods and services (Befu 1977: 259). The second, the norm of reciprocity, is a universally recognized norm that, according to Gouldner (1960) refers to two assumptions: 1. people should help those who have helped them, and 2. people should not injure those who have helped them (*Ibidem*). Thirdly, rules of exchange refer to specific cultural rules that explain what should be given in exchange for a gift or a prestation, how this exchange should take place in terms of time, place and aesthetics. Befu provides here the well-known example of Japanese society, in which formalized rules of exchange determine all these three element in ways which are obscure to the foreign observer and giver (Hendry 1995). Finally, the strategy of exchange specifies the indeterminate part of the process, providing space for the single choice the exchange parties are making out of a range of possibilities that are culturally defined.

The extremely rich debate that in the field stemmed out of Mauss' and Malinowksi's works focused mainly one aspect of gift-giving practices, i.e. the social embeddedness of gift exchange practices. The controversial point was the idea that the pure gift might exist in socio-cultural contexts as an expression of an interest-free transaction, based on the very essence of the gift, and the opposition of this with the case of industrial societies where exchange instead of gift should have been the dominant pattern. This point has been criticized in different ways by anthropologists (see Parry 1986, Weiner 1992, Godbout and Caillé 2002) on two groundings. The first is that in order to understand the pure essence of the gift it may be useful to introduce a distinction between alienable and inalienable gifts, or patterns of exchange. Alienable gifts are by some scholars defined as forms of exchange, in which social embeddedness of the practice is at its minimum (like in industrial societies), whereas inalienable form of exchange are those in which the purity of gift, its social bounding mechanisms, are exalted (Leacock 1954). On the other hand, inalienable gift exchanges are

those that, according to Mauss, prevailed in pre-industrial societies, where every exchange had a complex form of social embeddeddness. Drawing on Marxist anthropological influences, this debate has produced a rather sterile outcome towards the end of the 1980s, since it has been absorbed by the at the time two dominant positions in economic anthropology, known as the formalist vs. the substantivist school (Halperin 1982). Towards the end of the debate, as Derrida concluded (1991), the pure gift would never exist in Maussian terms, since the very recognition of its essence as a gift (both by the giver and the taker) deprives it of its pure spirit.

The third field, of more interest to the scope of this analysis of corruption, concerns the postulation of the notion of reciprocity. Again with a very rich disciplinary tradition, reciprocity has been first systematically theorized by the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972). Sahlins has introduced the distinction between three forms of reciprocity that characterize social exchange: generalized, balanced and negative. The first two are also known as positive reciprocity and refer to patterns of exchange that are more concerned with the social form, context and the time of the restitution process than with the extent (amount or value) of the exchanged good. Generalized reciprocity depends on a more generalized, altruistic form of exchange, such as that of affection, care and nurture from parents to children. On the other hand, balanced reciprocity is determined by more precise and timely patters of social exchange in which the form and partly the content of the exchange are, to a degree of possibility, balanced. These are socio-culturally defined forms and, according to Sahlins, can prevail in different ways (or in coexistence) according to the strategies of the exchange pattern. Negative reciprocity, instead, entails a mechanism of exchange such as extortion, or barter, in which something is get out of impunity, or without a general mechanism of social interaction (Ingold 1986).

This constitutes only an extremely general and simplified characterization of the origins and development of exchange theory in anthropology, as several new trends, in particular concerning the symbolism, reflexivity and power aspects of exchange mechanism came on the agenda of the researchers in more recent times. However, for the sake of the study of corruption as a form of social exchange I believe it is important to refer to this initial theoretical framework.

Due to the aforementioned methodological and ethical constraints, anthropology has not dealt expressively with a single typology of corruption, such one differentiating between administrative, electoral, corporate corruption as other disciplines do (Jain, 1998). Anthropology has dealt with the difference in types of corruption following two directions. In the first, scholars have departed from the distinction between petty and grand corruption which allows anthropology to introduce themes and problems with which it has dealt extensively through the history of the discipline. On the one hand, petty corruption is commonly the field that ethnographers can more effectively study when they are interested in hidden morality of mutual ties of reciprocity, gift exchange and interpersonal trust. On the other hand, grand corruption has mainly remained out of ethnographic investigations for methodological reasons (the difficulty to investigate ethnographically corporate and large political scandals).

In the anthropological literature dealing with petty corruption, authors have shown a strong tendency to equate this type of corruption with other social practices about which anthropology has an established theoretical tradition, among which social exchange is dominant. Methodologically, the ethnographer may be often exposed to observation of gift and informality in economic transactions, semi-legal or illegal practices, clientelism and bribery. Nevertheless, he/she is in the troublesome position to judge whose good are serving those practices. The tendency of ethnographer is to objectivize 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 has become a famous paradigm of petty corruption studied not only by anthropology but also by management research (Xin, Pearce, 1996; Lovett, Simmons, Kali, 1999). They are practices substantiated through the widespread use of gift-exchanges in interpersonal relations where favours are granted. Yang 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 reaction to conditions of excessive state inherence in the public life (2002). 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 after the

interpenetration of public with private sphere brought about by capitalist development in the country, guanxi has lost its role of being beneficial to many, a sort of "public good", to serve only the interests of few. The consolidation of business networks and their influence in politics is what accounts 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 the elites.

Ledeneva provides an illuminating account of the cultural differences of informal practices of exchange that influence corruption practices in Russia and China, the guanxi and *blat* (Ledeneva 2008). After defining "informal practices" as people's regular strategies to manipulate or exploit formal rules by enforcing informal norms and personal obligations in formal contexts (Ledeneva 2008: 119), she moves to investigate the differences and similarities in the socio-cultural contexts in which these two notions are generated. In the Russian form, blat is viewed as the other side of a strong center that controls people's actions and agency. Blat constituted, within socialism, the mechanism that made the totalitarian regime tolerable, in that it provided the informal sphere for action from below, but in the long-run it undermined this regime. Also guanxi, a culturally recognized form of social exchange, can be perceived as a strong pattern of sociability that defines ways how different sets of actors can interact within a rigid scheme of state control. As stated by Young: The morality of reciprocity, obligation and indebtedness become in a sense the ammunition of the weak" (Yang 1994: 206). On the other hand, some of the differences among the two practices would be traceable by stressing that guanxi practices are morally informed, in that they would find origin in the traditional Confucian search for social harmony, whereas blat has its origin as a mechanism for challenging (also criminally) state power. Of course the difference is not only this, because it is the social positioning of individuals in the blat and the guanxi mechanisms which matters: in the first case, individuals are in a relationship of virtual friendship, which reminds the one of patron-client described above. In the case of guanxi, connections are justified by the Confucian virtue of connectedness, according to which individuals are not single atomized beings, but social beings inserted in nested relations (from the family all the way up to the state), without which a person (contrarily to the western philosophical tradition) is not characterizable, or, as the Japanese say, he does not have a "social face" (*hitomae*).

The problem with social exchange theory is that it may tend to overemphasize petty corruption practices and be less explanatory for larger phenomena, such as those in which private and public sectors are interested. Some anthropologists (Pardo 2004, Shore 2004, Parry 2004) have warned that the social exchange theory applied to corruption may become misused to stigmatise socio-cultural practices which become attributed at aggregate level, as characteristic of one single nation, or even of cultures. Various stereotypes could be seen in the literature such "neo-patrimonial states", the "belly state", "network cultures", "gift-exchange cultures". Anthropologists are keen to highlight the heterogeneity within a culture or a State, rather than to build a typology with stereotypes that over simplifies the social reality.

In responses to this too simplistic view resulting from a focus on a typology of corruption, other scholars have stressed the processual nature of exchange mechanisms. One example is the work by Shore where he analyzes corruption in the setting of the EU civil service (2005). 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 a significant trust (due to shared administrative norms and codes of conduct) and 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 constraints of multilateralism. However, instead of achieving a process of Europeanization, EU practices have become standardised over privileged, cronyistic types of networks which perpetuate their systemic ordering of elite systems of governance.

Another field where corruption is treated as a processual mechanism of exchange is development. Several ethnographic works have suggested that developmental aid increases both the opportunity for corruption and the public perception of widespread corruption. Discussions within the population about corruption become occasions to argue about the failure of development policies, market liberalization, decentralization and privatization (Harrison, 2010). For example in Haiti, anthropologists have noticed that in order for development policies to be successful, officials have accepted widespread corruption (Vannier, 2010). Bribes are acceptable as long as aid funds could be used more or less

efficiently (Vannier, 2010). A similar point is made by Hoag who underlines the generalised avoidance to talk about corruption in South African NGOs as part of both their efforts to maintain moral accountability in community participation, and as an emotional call for social harmony (2010).

Nonetheless, anti-corruption rhetoric may be used perversely. Ethnographies in Africa and the Indian subcontinent portray how the high degree of generalization about widespread corruption and the need for reform and policy intervention can actually mask a real need of more funding and donations to support State and local level intervention (Tanzi 1998). It is not accidental that the very political agenda of leaders, emerging elites and parties in these regions makes of the fight against corruption one stronghold, even though some of these elites are strongly corrupt. In line with other social scientists, De Sardan argues that developmental practices in postcolonial Africa have favoured the spread of corruption and of an assistentialist culture (1999). The same trend is registered in Eastern Europe and the Balkan regions (Cellarius 2002), where an umbrella of anti-corruption organizations and movements has mushroomed in the await of foreign aid and funding. In some Latin American countries corruption is not perceived as weak States unable to maintain their grip on local administrative centres and semi-official figures of intermediaries between public and private authorities, as in the African cases, but it is an integral part of the evergreen rhetoric of "modernization" and "democratization" by political leaders and their elites (Gledhill, 2004). In the case of development, the processual nature of corruption may be explained both as a function of the relationship of dependence of these States on western powers and international organizations, or as the need of local governments to follow the global trends of funding aids and adapt to powerful anti-corruption ideologies and rhetoric.

The processual approach is a promising way in which anthropologists are currently looking at corruption as a mechanism of social (and economic) exchange. In order to get out of the traditional impasse that the discipline encountered when theorizing about the dichotomy gift-exchange, formal and substance and so forth, one way has been to look at the formal vs. informal dichotomy, as the discussion on blat and guanxi has demonstrated. Framed in this perspective, and even accounting for changes in these practices, corruption still appears as a phenomenon that is deprived of its complexity, by being related to the sphere of social interaction. Exchange patterns have, as Befu underlined, their context, rules and strategies which have both universal and relativistic features. This explains the need to provide a more dynamic and spatial-temporal informed view of corruption, which is the main objective of the

processual mechanism approach. This does not mean that anthropologists have recently abandoned the social exchange theory, as this can still explain a significant part of political corruption mechanisms throughout the world. What is changed is the nature of this phenomenon, increasingly dependent on global governance issues, corporate integrity and other forms of political and white collar crimes such as tax evasion, money laundering, smuggling and trafficking. A call for the processual aspect of mechanisms of social exchange is badly needed as the old paradigms that informed the explanations of clientelism, patronage and similar practices have become too static to describe the present reality.

Conclusion

The contribution of anthropology to the study of corruption is relatively exiguous in number but rich in offering new avenues for research to other social sciences. The reasons for the problematic nexus between anthropological theory and corruption could be explained by the conjunction of diverse methodological, ethical and epistemological constrains. For example, anthropologists have avoided to investigate corruption since this study could harm their informants. The quality of the observation depends partly of the trust relationship build over time with the natives, which obviously means to avoid putting them into danger. This is specially required by most codes of conducts used by the anthropologists. Despite strong constrains, the field of anthropology has given new perspectives to the field of corruption, especially regarding: governance, the morality of corruption and public discourse.

Firstly, government capacity has been studied in conjunction to corruption through normative, hermeneutical and transactional perspectives. In a normative analysis, anthropologists shown the diversity of norms and then criticize a simplistic definition of State using the public / private dichotomy. Not only the State is plural, but also the laws are as diverse as their reality and perception. Rather to see the State and laws are instruments of the fight of corruption, anthropologists analyze them as opportunity for corruption. In the hermeneutic perspective, corruption is one way in which individuals give sense to politics and the State. The last perspective focuses on the transactions between different social bodies. Offering a dynamic view of corruption, this approach shows the negotiation between social actors, especially at the State / local government level. When the State withdraws for some public activities, some social actors could take advantage of the absence of the local governments and use corruption and discourse about it to push their personal interests.

The real strength of the ethnographic method and approach is that it can investigates a number of socio-cultural practices which, particularly in the case of petty corruption, are of difficult understanding. Through the ethnographer's observation, the discipline has been able to detect a number of practices that fall into categories as similar as those of gift, exchange, favor, prestation and debt. From this perspective, the "morality" of corruption at local level resides in its being accepted, according to some particular conditions of political institutional and market development, as a common social form of exchange. This is not to argue that less wealthy or political unstable countries are more corrupt because they prefer "informal" or "gift-like" exchange relations that are embedded in society. The nature of reciprocity and exchange makes it a universal phenomenon, as the sterile debate between the followers of the idea of the pure vs. the alienable gift has demonstrated. What social exchange theory can bring to the understanding of corruption is a more nuanced approach that looks at the following aspects with a novel perspective. First, corruption is inserted in a mechanism of exchange in which power to influence the bribee is emphasized, what is social of this is that, unlike for instance barter, the socio-cultural conditions of the exchange determine the assessment of the value of the bribe and hence the significance of corruption. Secondly, in countries where mechanisms of reciprocity are very attentively constructed because, for instance, social inequality is high, corruption as exchange may be perceived as a way to reduce social inequality that is communicable and can be dealt with by the general public. Thirdly, as Befu maintained, in every reciprocal exchange mechanism there is a universally recognized norm that concerns the degree of help entailed in the practice. In countries where corruption is generalized this universal norm may become overestimated, particularly if other mechanisms of help are missing or being weak. Finally, as the processual approach to social exchange has proved, mechanisms of interaction through the medium of corrupt deeds are today become increasingly more sophisticated, multi-sited and of difficult analytical grasping. This may lead to a reconsideration of paradigms such as that of the principal-agent, replacing them with other theoretical frameworks in which chains of gifts (Appadurai 1988) or trust-based reciprocity networks are built and reconfigured to meet the demand for a more dynamic corruption that cross-cuts the increasingly negligible difference between private and public sectors.

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Project profile

ANTICORRP is a large-scale research project funded by the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme. The full name of the project is "Anti-corruption Policies Revisited: Global Trends and European Responses to the Challenge of Corruption". The project started in March 2012 and will last for five years. The research is conducted by 21 research groups in sixteen countries.

The fundamental purpose of ANTICORRP is to investigate and explain the factors that promote or hinder the development of effective anti-corruption policies and impartial government institutions. A central issue is how policy responses can be tailored to deal effectively with various forms of corruption. Through this approach ANTICORRP seeks to advance the knowledge on how corruption can be curbed in Europe and elsewhere. Special emphasis is laid on the agency of different state and non-state actors to contribute to building good governance.

Project acronym: ANTICORRP

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