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## The Anthropology of Corruption

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More than a decade ago, the revision of the literature on the anthropology of corruption was opportune, because corruption and anti-corruption discourses had to be placed in a wider context of globalization, global ethics and neoliberal (economic) policies. Then the volume edited by Dieter Haller and Chris Shore was published. *D.L. Zinn* (Haller & Shore, 2005: 229-241), in a short afterword about the state of art in anthropology of corruption, argues that the topic of corruption is familiar to anthropology, but is often an embarrassing and uncomfortable issue; linking remote places and different forms of incidences, and that the issue of corruption should be put in a right frame and formula by the anthropologists. Anthropologists can't agree on a single general definition of corruption, so they're more likely to "have often adopted an ad hoc perspective, taking into account the point of view of the observed", including some methodological aspects. All definitions are problematic for anthropologists, at least because the axioms and hypotheses in most definition types are problematic themselves. The dichotomy between public and private sphere is sometimes blurred by new, or very different action forms, or organizational practices; the plurality of the law ('the secret law') allows for corrupt practices to occur; the persistence of stereotypes built on corruption typologies limit the acknowledgement of social dynamics; and the central question in anthropology, the point of view of the observed, is often different from the general content of the definitions (Torsello & Venard, 2015: 35-38). "Cultural intimacy" often hides the illegal activities of very embedded and traditional groups like the Mafia in Sicily, the USA, or elsewhere. Researchers need to invest extraordinary efforts in order to study the issue, but it's not impossible to accomplish, even in a comparative manner (Schneider & Schneider, 2005: 29-47). Indeed, the perspective of the local and observational viewpoint that anthropological studies abide by, assumes that only the corruption or bribery that the locals, the social and cultural medium consider as such is valid. Very often, gifting, as a reciprocal procedure regulating social relations, is considered acceptable not only in private life but also among institutions and is not seen as part of bribery. In anthropological terms, a distinction can be made between donation and bribery. If it is an act of public gifting, where there are two different parties involved (one of them a public servant), and there are some kind of specific benefits to be obtained, even if done transparently, it is a bribe ("bureaucratic bribe"), and the involved parties themselves acknowledge it as such. Gift and bribery are relative concepts and can take many forms, especially if they are based on hidden transactions, mutual trust and informal norms. There always is a "tipping point where

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a normal gift turns into a bribe”, i.e. if organizational resources are involved in an informal transaction, they create a bribe-type action (Graycar & Jancsics, 2016).

Now, ten years later, the anthropology of corruption needs to be reconsidered in an environment where there are a series of writings and studies born since then to present the phenomenon, while a series of economists and political scientists focus on the topic and set the global framework for the anti-corruption industry. In addition, the decline of neoliberal policies was followed by the worldwide advancement of populism, which has changed alongside *Zeitgeist*, and has both set a new framework for rethinking the topic, as well as it had a weakening effect on the once stable foundations of anti-corruption policies.

*Current Anthropology* devotes a whole Supplement (in fact, a meaningful volume) to the anthropology of corruption, with the dual intention of providing a new theoretical perspective, or at least another review of the theory on the subject, and, at the same time, to illustrate through case studies not only the topic but also the various existing forms of the phenomenon.

The difficulties that usually arise in our research are related to the thematic diversity and spatial distances, which carry cultural differences, and, therefore, can hardly be given a uniform definition of the phenomenon. It is difficult for anyone who wants to categorize the clientelistic nature of the Italian party system, the corrupt elements in the administration of universities in New Zealand, along with the practice of South African ritual corruption to find a common ground.

## UNDEFINABLE CONCEPT

In addition to the case studies, Muir Sarah and Akhil Gupta's *Rethinking the Anthropology of Corruption: An Introduction to Supplement 18* is one of the most important studies in the compilation.

Any one-sided approach to corruption, inadvertently, leads to oversimplifications that ultimately brings about the failure to define the phenomenon. It does not simplify, but complicate understanding, seizing the phenomenon, arguing, and ultimately, misleading the efforts to curb it. Of course, conceptual framing and even thinking itself is in some sense a simplification of reality, but it is good practice to outline and describe the history of the analytical concepts and the steps of their creation in every social science process. The scientific procedure of the anthropology of corruption is no exception when it seeks and favors definitions that support its specific methods and interpret its research results.

The peculiarity of the anthropological investigations of corruption is that it assumes that the phenomenon reveals – as far as possible – its essence in the dynamic context that considers corruption together with the area and changes of anti-corruption procedures and anti-corruption industry. Most forms of corruption emerge from responses to the procedures that arise from political, legal and moral actions aimed at detecting, condemning, and, in other words, eradicating it. And then we didn't say “anti-corruption efforts routinely produce unintended and unwanted consequences” (S7), the handling of which complicates the dynamics of the phenomenon. Namely, in the audience's perception, for example, ignorance and incompetence may appear to be corruption, not to mention that the anti-corruption fight can often serve as

a tool for settling political scores and attacks among corrupt institutions and politicians themselves. Separately, we can only create a partial and sometimes misleading picture of the phenomenon, and corruption and anti-corruption together form a corruption/anti-corruption complex. The complex phenomenon thus conceived provides a framework for the anthropological investigation of corruption and brings new perspectives and results in strengthening the knowledge base in this field. In other words, changes in the anti-corruption industry are causing changes in the corruption field, but the other way around, changing forms of corruption require new and different procedures on the other side in the anti-corruption fight also. Acknowledging this makes — in my opinion — a major contribution to the importance of anthropological viewpoint to the theory and to other disciplines, primarily because it becomes clear in terms of the dynamics of the two sides that neither legal instruments, economic/market mechanisms, nor moral principles of resistance in themselves are able to control the phenomenon in practice. A complex and consistent political approach based on understanding and extending the mechanisms on both sides can improve the situation, which takes into account the specific dynamics of corruption/anti-corruption fields, their connection to society, to different cultures, and so on. In the spirit of this discovery, the authors write in their theoretical introduction that “the corruption/anti-corruption complex always involves socially situated judgments” and constitute a serious challenge “to specify the contexts in which those judgments are viable and the publics for whom those judgments are important” (S9) and that the essays of the Current Anthropology Supplement deal with every phase of this circle, revealing the role, the visibility and the publicity of this field.

The corruption – generally speaking – is not only one, or a series of illegal acts, not only one, or a series of unethical acts, but a “transgression” in many senses, as some introductory remarks by Sarah Muir and Akhil Gupta show us. They promise to map the very terrain of anthropology of corruption for further analysis, rather than give one comprehensive definition. The anthropological notion of corruption denotes a transgression of a) boundaries, b) bypasses the definitions, and c) prevents historical progress, i.e. the modernization in the normative sense of concepts. First, corruption is blurring the boundaries between the private and the public sphere; second it leads to the lack of analytical definition by multiple deceptive facts, and, finally, corruption resists the modernization process and undermines the correct functioning of modern institutions and civic virtues.

The main problem with the topic that anthropological research is trying to uncover is the relationship between public discourses on corruption/anti-corruption and actual related practices and their circulation. Current challenges only make exploration difficult when there are rapid and divergent institutional changes (see, for example, the Eastern European Transition), that “often create zones of legal, ethical, and practical ambiguity”. The local and national elements are at the forefront not only of politics but also of research and obscure the observation of global processes and there is also a strong need to focus on the dynamics and visibility of the corruption/anti-corruption phenomena.

The recommended procedure leads to the problem of the affective state, as the state is built or rebuilt, depending on the corruption/anti-corruption practices. The issue is based on „two contradictory sets of desires: on one hand, for the rule of law, proceduralism, and justice, and on the other hand, for modes of sociality, discretion, and intimacy that exceed the law” (S10).

Finally, the authors raise the anthropological examination of the issue of corruption/anti-corruption in relation to inequalities. Here too, it is contradictory not only to judge what constitutes corruption, but also what effects anti-corruption policies have on social inequalities. Anti-corruption practices link „displaced elites and rising middle classes” but at the same time can reinforce existing „social and political inequalities”. The anti-corruption struggle is strongly linked to the middle classes, meritocracy and the idea of professionalism, but can be linked to the interests of the working class as well (for example in India or China). An important dimension is the gendered one, „corrupt act occurs within social domains that are gendered masculine” (S11), but often race, ethnicity and nationality play an equally important role in the perception and modus operandi of the corruption/anti-corruption complex. In any case, it is important for anthropologists to understand accurately and deeply the social context in which the corruption/anti-corruption complex is formed, operated, and transformed, but this must be done through a parallel examination of the interpretive communities that belong to the context. The essays in the collection seek to explore the perspectives of interpretive communities around the world and the contexts in which the corruption/anti-corruption complex emerges.

Lack of space doesn't allow for a presentation of all the studies published in the Supplement, so I only select two that deal with two characteristic anthropological topics, one that is of particular relevance to the anthropological interpretation of corruption in Romania.

## ACADEMIC CORRUPTION

Chris Shore *How corrupt are universities? Audit culture, fraud prevention, and the Big Four accountancy firms.*

The issue of academic/university corruption is of particular relevance, especially in the context of suspicions of plagiarism surrounding doctoral theses in Romania – the issue of doctoral dissertations at the Police Academy has long been at the forefront of the media – and, recently, as many political and other leaders' academic achievements were questioned, it provided ammunition for political battles on all sides of the palette. Unfortunately, in this important study Chris Shore focuses only on the audit and fraud prevention in universities, and not on other aspects of academic corruption, that seems to be more important to Romanians, such as the corruption scandals surrounding doctoral theses. After all, academic/university corruption comes in many forms including “bribery, emblezzement, fraud, extortion, favoritism, nepotism, cronyism, ghost teachers, unauthorized tutoring, unfair promotions, misuse of public property, research misconduct, cheating and plagiarism”, Ararat Osipian cited by Shore (S95). In any case, Shore begins his text with a provocative statement and two important methodological remarks, that university bureaucracy is “organized crime” and that corruption is neither a stable nor a universal concept, since the concept of corruption itself varies cross-culturally. He also states that the anthropological interpretation of corruption/anti-corruption procedures allows for the exploration of broader social structures and cultural relations. New Zealand exemplifies university practices that outsource activities to audit and accountancy firms in the name of anti-corruption, and as soon as the companies are selected, they are already engaging in

anti-corruption business, which is itself corrupt. Outside firms encourage tax avoidance at the university and regard the procedure as not an immoral issue but an alternative economic morality. Shore warns that in this case, and in many others, these are not unique or even culturally defined transactions, but a widespread structural and systemic problem of neoliberal university administration.

There is only scarce data and studies available in Romania about the financial fairness and quality of management in Romanian universities, but they show that the problem examined by Shore, and in particular the anthropological approach, has its own topicality. According to a recent report (Mungiu-Pippidi et al., 2016), the most important Romanian universities average a score of 7 (on a scale of 10) in terms of financial correctness, but we hardly know more about the phenomenon as there are problems in this area as well. On the other hand, the details of financial corruption activities could only be brought to light by an anthropological analysis rather than a statistical one. Through what mechanisms does corruption in the university administration take place? Who are the main actors and why do the others accept financial misconduct? How can we improve the situation, change institutional behavior?, etc., all of which remain unanswered in the report.

## LEGAL CORRUPTION?

Italo Pardo *Corrupt, abusive, and legal: Italian breaches of democratic contract.*

One pertinent aspect of the anthropological viewpoint is formulated by Italo Prado, in a way that can be clearly distinguished from the definition of corruption – legal, economic and political – in the investigation of Italian legal corruption. The author claims that corruption can be captured in at least three aspects, such as illegal, legal and “borderline”, i.e. more or less legal acts. Above all, the anthropological field research and the empirical investigation of corruption can capture the last two, but the way and essence of the operation of illegal corruption is revealed through these. Although these often are not perceived in everyday life and do not appear in public discourses, illegal corruption implements all three of the above. Therefore, for example, if someone cannot be tried by a court for immunity, or dismissed (or subjected to light sentences) in a lawsuit, the public will automatically disregard the informal aspects, de facto or morally unacceptable, corruption. The subtle abuses of power (one can call it “patronalism”), and clientelistic constructions, promotion of incompetent bureaucrats, etc., are actions that undermine democracy, or at least tend to empty the democratic institutions. But, Pardo’s main conclusion is that “[l]egal corruption in public life breaks trust. Persistent legal corruption in public life may do so irreparably”. It is very important to understand how corruption erodes democracy itself, its legitimacy and the citizens’ trust that most politicians and most bureaucrats do not want to recognize or admit. In a very remarkable essay, Pardo analyzes the legal nature of Italian political parties as irregular, which destroys democracy and public confidence, from the perspective that these are activities that are not punishable by law but are illegitimate and harmful to public life. In these circumstances, it becomes clear that “Governance must be more than merely legal. It must enjoy authority and trust across society that gives it legitimacy” (S68), which is not emphasized by any other discipline.

In this sense I also argued that the public perception, in the agenda of media communication, and discourses, the Romanian state is more corrupt than the extent of real corruption. I suggested that the Romanian state is too corrupt in its own experience, in the design of interpersonal experiences, prejudices, everyday perceptions, and interactions with state institutions, in other words in a hypothetical way, at the level of potentials. The requirement of the system is that the representatives of public institutions must have what I call “corruption as form of knowledge”, in the administration “scientifically based expert knowledge has a fairly small role. In contrast, a kind of experiential knowledge, pertaining to modes of finding legal and procedural loopholes (whether creatively or intuitively) is highly valued” (Magyari, 2019: 286-287). This is contrary to the Hungarian case, as the corruption of the central government, and oligarchs does not seem to be perceived by the Hungarian public, while petty corruption in Romania is more typical and hardly found in Hungary. Why? The perception of corruption depends on the popularity of the parties and politicians in the government, and on the affective judgment of the state, on the attitude towards it.

And then we have to take into account that in Hungary, the government-media is now in absolute majority (and even four-fifths) on almost every platform, hence, on the one hand, it hides and does not reveal the corruption by the government, and on the other – if it cannot do so because it is so scandalous – corruption is presented as a ‘political program’ in the public’s interest.

Never directly, or overtly, the new style of populism supports corruption, by creating a zone of transgression, a space in which the rules are suspended, boundaries blurred, a favorable terrain for public corruption. And in extreme cases, new rules are created in favor of clients, promoting the new oligarchies, like in the case of Russia, or a series of former Soviet states, and Orbán’s Hungary.

The advantage of an anthropology of corruption is its ability to track corrupt activities, procedures, even legal but illegal transactions, in every corner of society, wherever they appear in the visible and largely invisible areas of the vast and heterogeneous corruption market. Meanwhile, it looks at the phenomenon not only from the outside but also from the perspective of the participants, either on the corrupt side or the victims of the inequalities inherent in it. It monitors the dynamics and interactions of not only corruption but also the anti-corruption industry and thus provides a more comprehensive picture of the social and cultural impact of corruption than any other discipline. While “anthropologists refuse to give a definition to the researchers (...) to use a universal definition of corruption”, the definitions of observers as well as official, legal, etc., are used in the emic approach (Torselo & Venard, 2015: 35). The anthropology of corruption research has repeatedly demonstrated that, in its specific approach, this discipline is strong, original, and credible.

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